AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE FACTORS AFFECTING ONLINE BENEVOLENT COMMENT

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ABSTRACT
Information Technology (IT) has influenced the overall living of people and promoted South Korea into an IT powerhouse. However, with the growth of IT, the influence not only from a positive aspect but from a negative is becoming intense. Especially, considering cyberbullying, a systematic abuse of power which takes place by means of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the damage level is being expanded and thus it is being raised as a social problem. To tackle this problem, the research uncovers the factors that have an influence on ‘Benevolent Comment’, a subset of online prosocial behavior offering a favorable and a positive comment toward others in the Internet forums. By using a qualitative approach of the 57 interviews, seven driving factors (self-presentation/image enhancement, pleasure/feeling worthwhile/satisfaction, social contribution, companionship/emotional support, reputation, monetary reward, and reciprocity) and two inhibiting factors affecting benevolent comment (social anxiety and time/effort) were discovered as the factors affecting online benevolent comment. The research has its theoretical contribution to analyzing benevolent comment as online prosocial behavior and suggesting driving/inhibiting factors influencing an act of posting a benevolent comment online. The study has its practical implication for developing a campaign/program for shaping a positive online culture.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Online Prosocial Behavior, Benevolent Comment

1. INTRODUCTION

South Korea has entered into the information age where most of people use the Internet with the help of the rapid growth and advance of Information Technology (IT) taken place after 2000s. Specifically, after the year of 2009, when the development of Smartphone and wireless Internet was carried out in full scale, it turned out that over 77% of people above age 3 use wire-wireless Internet more than once a month (Statistics Korea, 2012). Also, in 2010, the domestic Internet penetration rate reached 96.8%, recording the highest figure among OECD member nations (OECD, 2011).

Currently, there is a trend that both the growth and the side effect of IT are increasing. The side effect of IT is largely classified into cyber aggression and cyber crime, followed by cyber addiction or the exposure of personal information, and so forth. Being distinguished from a broader concept of cyber aggression that presumes a one off act, there exists cyberbullying, which includes two specific criteria of repetition and imbalance of power (Slonje et al., 2013). Unlike aggression, bullying happens due to the malicious intent of a perpetrator to hurt a weaker party and thus involves the feature of the power imbalance in essence (Kwan and Skoric, 2013). Based on these features, cyberbullying is defined as a systematic abuse of
power which happens by means of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Slonje et al., 2013).

Cyberbullying has brought about a vast amount of damage throughout the globe until recently. In New Zealand, a third of students aged 12-19 said that they had experienced cyberbullying, 53.7% of which considered it distressing (Fenaughty and Harré, 2013). In Singapore, among Facebook users aged 13-17, 59.4% of them underwent at least one type of bullying and 28.5% suffered from the victimization experience of receiving nasty comments on Facebook (Kwan and Skoric, 2013). In the US state of Florida, a 12-year-old girl named Rebecca Sedwick committed suicide after being suffered from cyberbullying. It turned out that about 15 girls including the two perpetrators – a 14-year-old girl and a 12-year-old girl – arrested had bullied her for months through online message boards and texts.¹ In South Korea, posting nasty comments online is at an extremely serious level. According to the research on the situation of posting nasty comments online and the damage triggered by it, 23.9% of the Internet users have posted nasty comments and 54.4% have suffered from those comments (Korea Internet & Security Agency, 2012).

With these side effects of cyberspace being intensified at home and abroad, the necessity of studying diverse sectors is rising in order to solve those matters. However, the studies progressed so far focus on offering a conceptual definition for or categorizing forms of cyberbullying or nasty comments, and looking into the current situation regarding them (Abu-Nimeh et al., 2011; Aoyama and Talbert, 2010; Kwan and Skoric, 2013). This research goes beyond understanding the problematic phenomenon of the side effects of cyberspace and makes an attempt to approach the phenomenon from a perspective of improving it. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the factors that facilitate or inhibit posting ‘Benevolent Comment’ in the online context to alleviate the side effects of cyberspace. This study has its theoretical implication since it is the first study regarding online ‘Benevolent Comment.’ In addition, from a practical viewpoint, this study aims to provide help in developing an ethical program or a campaign for users and coming up with a guideline for managing and operating an online community in shaping a positive online culture.

II. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Cyberbullying and online benevolent comment

The phenomenon of cyberbullying can be comprehended referring to an incident occurred back in the 1960s. In 1964, in a residential area in New York, a woman in her 20s named Katherine Genovese was killed by a robber.² While being attacked, she shouted out for help. However, all of the 38 apartment residents living nearby who heard her voice and witnessed the scene did not help her in person or report to the police while the crime was being lasted for about 35 minutes. Later it has been said that the psychological phenomenon the witnesses showed can be defined as ‘Genovese Syndrome’ or ‘Bystander Effect.’ With this case occurred, reflective thinking was permeated into the society and the necessity of helping and providing an altruistic behavior for others was raised.

In the same vein, when cyberbullying happens, a number of users can witness the scene. However, many times, people merely look on the cybervictims suffering from cyberbullying, and this is in line with Genovese Syndrome. In 2007, a South Korean female singer killed herself by severely suffering from nasty comments. This aroused the shared reflection among

¹ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/15/florida-cyberbullying-rebecca-sedwick-two-girls-arrested
² http://www2.southeastern.edu/Academics/Faculty/scraig/gansberg.html
the Internet users, and a movement called ‘Sunfull Movement’ took place in order to vitalize ‘Sunfull’, which indicates ‘good comments’ used as an antonym of nasty comments, a new word combining the Chinese character ‘Sun’ standing for ‘Good’ with the Korean word ‘Full’ for ‘Reply.’ The Sunfull Movement is a campaign that encourages the Internet users to use good words and actions in an online environment to counter cyberbullying. Established in 2007, the headquarters of the Sunfull Movement, based on the record at this time, Jan 2014, have secured about over 109,000 in gathering signatures for enhancing the perception of posting ‘Sunfull’ among the Internet users and the amount of ‘Sunfull’ has reached over 5.13 million through the headquarters. This movement not only offers a voluntary service but an organized form of a tutoring program for posting a benevolent comment by assigning the tutors to elementary, middle and high schools nationwide. Besides, its scale is becoming more and more expanded with the help of strategic alliances among universities, government agencies, companies, and celebrities.

This study, instead of the rather ambiguous term ‘Sunfull’, uses the concept ‘Benevolent Comment.’ Here, ‘Benevolent Comment’ is a form of prosocial behavior, differentiating from anti-social behavior exposed by means of posting nasty comments and non-social behavior represented by refusing to take part in online communication or looking on nasty comments (Bar-Tal, 1976; Barton, 1986).

**Online prosocial behavior**
The concept of prosocial behavior means an individual’s social responsiveness for benefiting others (Barton, 1986) and it involves a series of behaviors that can bring about positive outcomes for society (Bar-Tal, 1976), including sympathy, charity, donating, exchange, kindness, altruism, sharing, helping, and so on. Extended from this concept, online prosocial behavior is an idea that has applied offline prosocial behavior in an online context and it can be defined as a voluntary behavior intended to benefit others, including an individual and a group (Bar-Tal, 1976; Mussen and Eisenberg, 1977).

Sproull, et al. (2005) classified subsets of online prosocial behavior as follows. First, an activity of a monetary contribution through an online charity or donating unused computer resources of a personal computer for analyzing massive data can be suggested as a form of online prosocial behavior. Another form can be sharing software and code for developing open source software (Osterloh and Rota, 2007) or sharing one’s capacity and talent through providing free mentoring services and sharing learning materials for students who need help through an online learning community. In addition, Kim et al. (2013) found the motivation factors for online prosocial behavior by examining the act of producing and sharing the subtitles of American dramas, and Bock et al. (2005) and Kankanhalli et al. (2005) studied about online knowledge sharing behavior. Moreover, donating time and effort into organizing and operating a voluntary online discussion group and giving emotional support by sharing information within a group can be referred to as another form of online prosocial behavior. Table 1 shows the previous studies on online prosocial behavior. Most of them are about the activity of sharing material resources, knowledge, capacity, etc.

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4 [http://www.sunfull.or.kr](http://www.sunfull.or.kr)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>OPB type</th>
<th>Research objective</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kim et al. (2013)</td>
<td>The activity of making the subtitles for American dramas</td>
<td>To examine the motivation for making the subtitles for American dramas via FGI toward subtitle makers and literature review</td>
<td>It turned out that a subtitle maker’s intrinsic motivation factors such as self-satisfaction, engagement, pleasure, responsibility, empathy are more important.</td>
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<td>Yew (2011)</td>
<td>Online music sharing (ccMixter)</td>
<td>To analyze prosocial sharing activity via Social Performance Framework and design a system facilitating prosocial sharing activity</td>
<td>Through social network analysis, it turned out that a core group of members is responsible for much of the sharing and the remixing activity in ccMixter and through qualitative research, it is shown that 24 members of the group are motivated to contribute and share due to the impact of the norms created socially transparent by the website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osterloh and Rota (2007)</td>
<td>Open source software (OSS) development</td>
<td>To analyze open source software as a collective invention model</td>
<td>The study found the benefit factors as the motivators for contributing to OSS (e.g. Benefits from extended functionality, reputation, enjoyment, and prosocial motives), social dilemma, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasko and Faraj (2000)</td>
<td>Knowledge sharing in electronic communities of practice</td>
<td>To analyze why the users participate in an online professional community and help others</td>
<td>The results showed that the intrinsic motivation such as the users’ feeling pleasure in participating itself, helping others, and feeling satisfaction is vital.</td>
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</table>

Note: Online Prosocial Behavior (OPB)

Hence, this study attempts to newly suggest a concept, posting a benevolent comment, as a subtype of online prosocial behavior. Besides, ‘Benevolent Comment’ as a form of online prosocial behavior is defined as an act of voluntarily providing information or emotional support such as encouragement, compliment, consolation, and so forth via posts or comments to benefit or help an individual or a group within an online community (Bar-Tal, 1976; Mussen and Eisenberg, 1977; Sproull et al., 2005).

### III. EXPLORATORY STUDY

#### Research method

We establish an act of posting a benevolent comment on the Internet forums as a subtype of online prosocial behavior and attempt to analyze the factors promoting or inhibiting it. A qualitative approach is on the basis of a phenomenological or an interpretive approach, and provides a situational understanding by grasping the relationship of various aspects with an elaborate description of a phenomenon (Hwang et al., 2004). Also, a qualitative research has its strength in the fact that it can offer a detailed and a rich understanding and suggest a new outcome that has not yet been discovered. Thus, this research, an exploratory study regarding
online comment which belongs to a novel context of research, uses an interview methodology to promote an understanding about a phenomenon first, and analyze newly discovered factors. The interview procedure was constructed in four steps in sequence: set up a plan to interview (Planning), find and recruit interviewees (Recruiting), conduct the interview with recording and observing it (Moderating), and analyze the interview result (Analysis).

First of all, the interview consisted of open-ended questionnaires for exploring the driving and inhibiting factors for posting a benevolent comment on the Internet forums. The interview respondents were 60 in total, consisting of those who use the Internet forums and are aged from above 13 to below 60. Among them, 3 responses carelessly answered were excluded and accordingly 57 responses were used for analysis. The gender distribution of the responses shows 45.6% of male and 54.4% of female. The age distribution reveals that 6 are between 14 and 19 (10.5%), 22 are between 20 and 29 (38.6%), 18 are between 30 and 39 (31.6%), 6 are between 40 and 49 (10.5%), and 5 are 50 and older (8.7%); thus, the respondents from the 20s to 30s occupy the largest percentage. The occupation is composed of as follows: 21 for a student (36.8%), 16 for an office job (28.1%), 13 for a specialized job (22.8%), 4 for a housewife (7.0%), 3 for other types of occupation (5.3%).

For the purpose of getting various opinions of the interview respondents, the interview was carried out in a comfortable atmosphere. Besides, since gathering short answers by asking yes/no questions or direct questions was not what this study had intended to, we utilized an in-depth interview. Finally, we analyzed the collected interview data in three stages and attempted to guarantee the validity of the coding results in the course of analysis. The first stage of analysis was taking content analysis that the researcher categorizes a series of types based on the keywords extracted from each of the responses. Next, peer review that two other researchers examine the content of the interview and the result of categorizing keywords was held. Lastly, the researcher, with the reflection of the previous stage of peer review, drew and interpreted the final result of the analysis.

Data analysis and results
The coding results summing up the kind of driving and inhibiting factors that the interviewees have experienced by posting a benevolent comment on the Internet forums are described in Table 2. The most preferred answer chosen by 41 respondents was that they can express their thoughts and ideas with a benevolent comment, and thus enhance their image in an online community. The responses illustrating this factor are as follows: ‘I can reveal the situations highly related to me or the topics that I am interested in by posting a benevolent comment on Daum Agora (one of the Internet forums in South Korea)’ (27 years old, a graduate student); ‘The term ‘Angel Commenter’ is used for calling those who post benevolent comments on others’ posts during inactive times’ (26 years old, a college student).

Next, 34 respondents replied that they feel psychological driving factors including pleasure, feeling worthwhile, satisfaction, and so forth through a benevolent comment. The responses regarding this factor are suggested as follows: ‘I feel worthwhile because my comment may cheer someone up’ (18 years old, a high school student); ‘I think that it is pleasant for each other to post a benevolent comment in brief like ‘It was very helpful for me’ and ‘Thank you for your information’ when seeing a good quality of information, rather than just passing by’ (49 years old, a housewife).

Moreover, social driving factors involved in a socio-psychological aspect were discovered. Especially, 17 respondents answered that purifying the negative parts of the Internet forums and contributing to others in an online community are possible through a benevolent comment.
The responses regarding this factor are as follows: ‘I believe that a benevolent comment can actualize society’s good and set an overall atmosphere that others are willing to positively sympathize with’ (32 years old, an office worker); ‘When people give a compliment to those who have done good things in the Internet forums, there will appear another group of people who also do good things and take more care of the surrounding people. Those who have posted a benevolent comment will live more earnestly by receiving a compliment and those who have read the kind of warm comments will also live more diligently with their hearts being moved by those comments’ (18 years old, a high school student).

The other 16 people replied that emotional support, a sense of belonging, companionship, and so forth can be conveyed to them via a benevolent comment. The responses related to this factor are represented as follows: ‘I believe that the comments suggesting logical evidence or accurate information can gain sympathy from others’ (31 years old, an office worker); ‘When I post a comment that can cheer up and console someone who has posted about a negative event, I feel close to and sympathy toward him/her’ (35 years old, a graduate student).

Lastly, external driving factors like reputation, monetary reward, and reciprocity attracted only a few respondents. The responses further elaborating this factor are: ‘I can gain points by posting a benevolent comment’ (27 years old, an office worker); ‘I can earn money by taking part in part-time jobs for posting a good comment for an enterprise’ (23 years old, a college student).

When it comes to the inhibiting factors, the coding results show that only 3 people among the total respondents replied that time and effort are involved in those factors. This indirectly infers the fact that the amount of time or effort needed when posting online comments is not as much as the users actually recognize. This study could newly find social anxiety as another key inhibiting factor of posting comments except for time and effort. Social anxiety is the users’ socio-psychological inhibiting factor not used often in the context of online community. The responses depicting this factor are suggested as follows: ‘I do not want to be in trouble by posting a comment because I can be uselessly blamed and, if it get worse, my personal information can be disclosed’ (29 years old, an office worker); ‘Even though I want to keep others from posting a nasty comment on someone who has already given a huge amount of nasty comments, I just cannot do it since I can also be the target of being blamed’ (18 years old, a high school student).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Response example</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driving category</td>
<td>Self-presentation /Image enhancement</td>
<td>I can reveal myself by presenting my thoughts through a benevolent comment.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I feel like I have become a kind or a righteous person when posting a benevolent comment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pleasure /Feeling worthwhile /Satisfaction</td>
<td>I feel the pleasure of helping others by posting a benevolent comment.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I feel that I have done something good and feel worthwhile when posting a benevolent comment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I feel pleasure and satisfaction by actualizing altruism per se by posting a benevolent comment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social contribution</td>
<td></td>
<td>An atmosphere of the Internet forums with many nasty comments can be purified by benevolent comments.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I feel as if I am contributing by sharing my information via a benevolent comment.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Companionship/Emotional support
I can feel like I belong to an online community where I write a benevolent comment.
I can form sympathy and companionship through a benevolent comment.
I can feel the emotional support from a benevolent comment.

Reputation
I can gain reputation in an online community by means of posting a benevolent comment.

Monetary reward
I can accumulate points or mileage by posting a benevolent comment.
I can earn money by working part-time posting a benevolent comment.

Reciprocity
When facing problematic situations like receiving nasty comments or cyberbullying, others’ benevolent comments can help me.
When I need information, others will leave it for me.

Inhibiting category
Social anxiety
Nasty comments like ‘You are pretending to be nice’, ‘Don’t be pretentious’, ‘You look like a part-timer’, etc are posted below my comment.
I am being blocked by reactions like ‘Just stand still’, ‘Who the heck are you’, etc.
I cannot show the real me since my real name is shown.
I feel uncomfortable since I do not really mean it.
I feel especially reluctant to post comments on the posts dealing with politically sensitive issues.

Time/Effort
I need much time to write a comment.
I feel tiresome to log in and write a comment.

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion of findings
This study has discovered the driving and inhibiting factors of posting a benevolent comment online, especially on the Internet forums. First, the largest number of the respondents regarded self-presentation or image enhancement as the driving factor of online benevolent comment. Posting a benevolent comment allows them to represent their own thoughts and ideas, leading to revealing their own selves. Besides, they can improve their image by becoming an ‘Angel Commenter’ who posts a benevolent comment on others’ posts during inactive times. Second, 34 of the respondents answered that they feel pleasure, worthwhile, satisfaction when posting a benevolent comment online, and this works as the significant driving factor of performing online prosocial behavior such as posting a benevolent comment. Third, social contribution ranked as the next crucial factor of online benevolent comment. The coding results showed that purifying the Internet forums filled with a number of nasty comments and fulfilling one’s altruistic behavior were regarded as functions of posting a benevolent comment that satisfy the driving factor of social contribution. Fourth, the driving factor of forming companionship or feeling emotional support was subsequently revealed with the difference of only one person when compared to the number of the respondents supported the third factor. The remnants of the driving factors that affect online benevolent comment consisted of gaining a reputation, earning money, and being reciprocal. When it comes to the inhibiting factors, which hamper
the interviewees from posting a benevolent comment, social anxiety was considered the key factor that discourages them from posting the kind of comments. Other commenters in the Internet forums criticize those who post a benevolent comment since they think that they are pretending to be nice; thus, people trying to post a benevolent comment online are somewhat hesitant to perform the kind of online prosocial behavior and afraid of the possibility of becoming a victim of a witch-hunt. Comparatively, the amount of time or effort consumed when posting a benevolent comment online was regarded less significant when compared to social anxiety.

**Limitations and future research direction**

While this study employed an exploratory study based on the interview in understanding and extracting the factors affecting an act of posting an online benevolent comment, there are some limitations which need to be considered. First, an examination through a quantitative method like survey needs to be conducted to enhance the objectivity of the factors that this study has found. This research has drawn each factor on the basis of the responses of the 57 interviewees; hence it has its limitation for generalizing the results on the whole. Therefore, the future studies may further go through an additional verification with a measurement tool that secures reliability and validity. Second, this research has unveiled seven driving factors and only two inhibiting factors which affect an act of posting a benevolent comment online; thus the future studies are expected to further discover other possible factors, the inhibiting factors in particular to promote a balanced analysis on the factors affecting online benevolent comment, and develop the research model based on them. Finally, since an exploratory study was utilized in this research, the future studies need to develop the findings of this research by applying a theoretical basis such as social exchange theory which discusses the benefit and cost factors and suggests that those factors will give impact to the real behavior and intention of an actor (Kankanhalli et al., 2005, Molm, 1997).

**Implications for research and practice**

This study suggests several implications for research. First, as the first to study about online benevolent comment, this study has attempted to newly define ‘Benevolent Comment’ and examine the influence factor through the concept of online prosocial behavior as a solution for cyberbullying, which goes beyond the previous studies only looking into the phenomenon and cause of the matter (Abu-Nimeh et al., 2011; Aoyama and Talbert, 2010; Kwan and Skoric, 2013). Second, through the 57 interviews, this study has found a set of the factors facilitating or suppressing an act of posting a benevolent comment. This exploratory study will be a good foundation for the future studies that attempt to develop the conceptual framework regarding what drives and inhibits an act of posting an online benevolent comment. Lastly, by means of a qualitative approach, this study has newly found the driving and inhibiting factors affecting posting an online benevolent comment, such as social contribution and social anxiety, which have been undiscovered. When utilizing an empirical research, these factors will help extract new and diverse relationships between variables.

This study also renders several practical implications for promoting a benevolent comment in the Internet forums. First, this study meets the social situation of this time that the side effects caused by online anti-social behavior such as nasty comments and cyberbullying are being intensified and the necessity of a self-purified behavior is being requested. In particular, there has been an attempt driven by the headquarters of the Sunfull Movement to solve the side effects produced in cyberspace. But the discussion on its influence and direction for the
development lacks. Thus, we expect that, with this study, the study of the education program or campaign for the Internet users to form a mature online culture will become more extensive. Second, it is possible to prepare specific strategies in order to manage comments online and policies for promoting a benevolent comment on the basis of this study implying that not only an individual driving factor (e.g. feeling pleasure, worthwhile, and satisfaction) but also an organizational driving factor (e.g. A desire for social contribution) motivates the users’ act of posting a benevolent comment in the Internet forums. To enhance pleasure, increasing one’s satisfaction and engagement by making him/her accomplish a sort of mission through posting a benevolent comment seems vital. On the other hand, to enhance social contribution through posting a benevolent comment, it is necessary to visually show how one’s activity of posting comments contributes to the overall community by measuring and revealing the benevolent comment index within the Internet forums. Lastly, this study shows an important managerial implication regarding the domestic online setting that has entered into so-called ‘post online real-name policy’ that presumes complete anonymity after abolishing restrictive identification system. The underlying context of the study, the Internet forums, is where one can restrictedly reveal oneself through a nickname. Thus, the driving factors including social contribution and pleasure which suggest that it is possible to fulfill online prosocial behavior only by the self-perception of the users, without revealing oneself and getting approvals or responses from others, are noticeable in the upcoming era of ‘post online real-name policy.’ Therefore, in the era of ‘post online real-name policy,’ rather than implementing compulsory real-name system, and censoring and controlling the posts, enhancing the users’ perception needs to be preceded to manage the changed online setting.

REFERENCES