Engaging the Upper Valley through Social Media

The Upper Valley Land Trust
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Socy 11: Research Methods

LITERATURE REVIEW

Founded in 1985, the Upper Valley Land Trust (UVLT) provides conservation leadership, tools and expertise to permanently protect the working farms, forests, wildlife habitat, water resources, trails and scenic landscapes that surround residential areas and commercial centers in the Upper Valley area. The organization wants to understand how social media impacts awareness, volunteering, and donations, but has only recently started occupying social media platforms. The Upper Valley Land Trust Facebook Group currently has 1,549 Facebook likes and 1,526 Facebook followers.

The sociological research on social media as it relates to volunteering, or even social media in its entirety, is very limited due to the recent emergence of social media in modern society. Very few studies have been conducted on this specific subject and as a result, much of the literature we have reviewed is tangentially, rather than directly, related to our research question. Though focused study on social media and volunteering is limited, topics such as altruism, volunteering, and social networks can provide much valuable insight into the topic through inference and logical transfer of these concepts onto an online setting. By examining the research on subjects more peripheral to the impact of social media on volunteering and progressing to topics immediately related to this question throughout the literature review, we attempt to provide a systemically narrowing focus on volunteering through social media. This approach not only allows us to contribute to a void in the literature but also links established sociological concepts to new areas of study and presents viable avenues for future study. Additionally, this research can help the ULVT to increase their returns from their existing social media platforms and possibly pursue new methods of utilizing their online presence. This will

allow them to raise volunteering levels and further their goals of preserving and protecting the environment of the upper valley for future generations.

Altruism

Altruistic behavior can be defined as actions for the benefit of others that provide no gain, or are even detrimental, to the actor; it is the broadest concept within which our subject of research can be considered. While there have been arguments made claiming altruism is motivated by self-interest, the better supported and prevailing theories credit a mixture of genuine selflessness, norms, and societal mechanisms as the factors that produce altruism in individuals (Piliavin and Charng 1990). Simpson and Willer (2015) identify norms, behavioral regularities backed by social or material sanctions, as a powerful force in generating altruism as an individual's perception of what is "expected" is sufficiently powerful to prompt them into altruistic activities. These norms are produced and enforced primarily through communication (Ostrom 2000), which is relevant to our research as social media is essentially a means of mass communication and interaction. Social pressure and personal requests, defined as specific appeals from an acquaintance as opposed an open invitation from an organization, are cited as major factors in encouraging participation in altruistic activities such as blood donation, charity, and volunteering. Personal requests through a medium such as Facebook could be requesting an individual to like the UVLT page or inviting another user to a UVLT event through the social networking platform; encouraging these types of behaviors from their "followers" would increase engagement and awareness of UVLT activity. Sensitivity to social norms is a crucial aspect of an altruistic individual; someone who is more conscious of social norms will be more likely to be generous or participate in altruistic activities, especially when under observation or in a public setting (Cialdini 1981; see also Zarbatny et al. 1985). Individuals are conscious of

their reputations when considering altruistic behaviors and the approval or disapproval of their social networks influences their decisions. While social pressure and personal requests might not be perfectly replicable in online interaction, there is the potential for these methods of fostering altruism to be implemented in social media management.

Social Networks

It is important to understand the theories surrounding social networks when considering the function of their new manifestation in the online world. Social networks are also an integral feature in the theoretical research surrounding altruism and volunteering; a large social network and membership in multiple organizations are positively correlated to volunteering (Wilson 2000). This is because large social networks, often facilitated by organizational membership, result in higher levels of socialization, which has been shown to increase an individual's likelihood of participating altruistic activities like volunteering. Socialization is the frequency with which an individual interacts with others and higher levels of socialization lead to a greater feeling of responsibility towards the community. Even being married or being a parent, results in higher rates volunteering which can be attributed to the higher levels of socialization associated with marital and parental status (Simpson and Willer 2015). By focusing on these more socialized demographics in our research we can identify groups that are more likely to respond to social media and have a propensity for volunteer work, providing a basis for where the UVLT should focus their efforts.

Volunteering

Volunteering is described as more commitment than spontaneous aid but less obligation than care given to family and friends. There are several factors that have been identified as indicators of a likely volunteer: "family loading (burden of family responsibilities), awareness of

Nonprofits, sense of social responsibility, and empathy" (Lee and Chang 2007). In addition to personal attributes that indicate a higher likelihood of volunteering, several demographics have been distinguished as "high-volunteering". Females are more likely to volunteer, however as both groups age the amount of women who volunteer drops while men who volunteer increases, though the number of women volunteers is still higher in total. Middle aged people have the highest rate of volunteering of all ages and married couples with children are more likely to volunteer than those single or childless. Prior volunteering experience is the most significant predictor of future volunteer work though the circumstances surrounding that experience, whether it was compulsory, positive or negative, affect these rates (Wilson 2000). A positive volunteering experience with an organization leads to a higher likelihood of recommending that organization to others as well (Wilson 2000). These findings can help the UVLT concentrate their social media outreach on demographics more likely to volunteer and provide insight into how and why volunteers might recruit new volunteers. Additionally, volunteering has been shown to provide benefits in happiness and life satisfaction higher than those found in the non-volunteering counterparts (Wilson 2000). The UVLT can use this knowledge to encourage volunteering by emphasizing the personal benefits individual gains from the experience in their social media content. Coincidence between an individual's values and the values of the organization she is volunteering for are critical to volunteer satisfaction, retention, and future participation (Wilson 2000; see also Holden 1997). Based on this research, the UVLT would benefit more from attracting volunteers who are truly invested in the values of the organization than individuals who are not particularly concerned with their goals.

Social Media

Social media is part of the new "Web 2.0" that has emerged in 21st century, differentiated from old media in that it is focused on engagement with users rather than display, as websites and email are (Ngai 2015). This change of focus is important because it allows organizations to tap into a user's full social network through communication and sharing content. Many of the concepts from sociological research have been shown to extend into the realm of social media; as discussed in the review of altruism and volunteering, personal requests from a known acquaintance through social media are more likely to be accepted than an appeal from an organization (Saxton and Wang 2013). People are influenced into donating and volunteering for causes because of the public nature of social media where there is visible evidence of participation; when they see others have donated they are compelled to do so as well, feeling that they must contribute their part and not wanting to be seen as selfish. When they can confirm their charitable gesture over social media they signal their virtuosity to their peers and protect their reputation within their social network (Saxton and Chang 2013). Social media sites like Facebook are "small-donations" platforms that attract donation through a different process than traditional media. Users are more likely to donate because of the "social media affect", the processes described above, than the "economic effect", the conventional model used to explain motivations for donation, which entails weighing the cost-benefit of monetary donation. Thus, "attention grabbing" campaigns, focused on popular issues or shocking information, are the most successful in exploiting the tendency for "impulse donation" of individuals online (Saxton and Chang 2013). The UVLT can leverage these finding to produce content that is more effective in prompting donation and participation as well as encourage engagement from their followers.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The literature has demonstrated that specific demographics volunteer more often than others, that social networks influence volunteering, and that social media has played a role in increasing volunteer and donations rates for non-profit organizations. The UVLT is looking to increase their volunteers and wants to know whether or not social media can help produce meaningful engagement. The existing literature lacks specific demographic information about individuals who volunteer in the Upper Valley and information about their social networks. In addition, the literature does not focus on the specific content that is presented by non-profits on social media cites and how this impacts volunteering. In order to bridge the gap between the literature and to meet the needs of the UVLT, the study will explore the following questions: How do an individual's demographic, an individual's social network, and the content posted by the UVLT on Facebook impact willingness to volunteer? To answer these questions, a study has been created to learn more about the individuals of the Upper Valley in terms of demographics, volunteering habits, and how social media content impacts these habits.

METHODS

Survey Method

In order to address the research questions, an online survey will be administered. The study will be quantitative, meaning that it will provide the numerical data to illustrate a relationship between variables. A survey is the most appropriate method because it will allow the UVLT to describe a population while also investigating the relationship between the variables. Thus, this survey, which is in Appendix A, will be both a descriptive and explanatory survey in order to answer our research question and understand how the literature relates to the Upper Valley. Descriptive surveys provide information about the characteristics of a population and an

explanatory survey tries to explain a cause and effect relationship between variables (Dixon, Singleton, and Straits 2016). Therefore, an online survey will help complete the goals of the research, which is to better understand the characteristics of potential volunteers and to understand the relationship between social media content and willingness to volunteer.

Online surveys have several advantages. One advantage is that online surveys are time efficient. This is important for the UVLT because the organization is small, with only 11 people on staff, this will allow the organization to gather information without taking away from other activities their staff is doing. Another advantage of using a survey, is that the UVLT will be able to have a large number of participants with no additional cost. There are also disadvantages associated with conducting an online survey. One disadvantage is that online surveys tend to have lower response rates compared to other methods such face to face interviews and telephone surveys.

There are other methods that could have been chosen to study the research question. For example, paper and pencil surveys could have been administered in order to pull from a large sample of people. However, this method yields a large nonresponse rate. In addition, the goal of the survey is to understand how participants social media use affects their activity with the UVLT and with a paper and pencil survey, there may be a large number of respondents that do not use social media. Another type of method that could have been used is face to face interviews because it allows you to ask participants different type of question and it allows all the questions to be clarified. Unfortunately, for the UVLT, face to face interviews would take too much time. Additionally, while the amount of information garnered from an interview can be valuable, the quantitative data from a large population will be more useful to the UVLT in applying the findings to their social media activities and appealing to a big audience.

Independent and Dependent Variables

The independent variables are the demographics, the social networks, and the content preferences of the individuals. To gather the demographics of the participants, the survey will ask several questions about individual gender, race, age, and income. In terms of social network, this will be operationalized by whether or not the individuals have friends who have volunteered for the UVLT or whether or not they have friends who like the UVLT on Facebook. Lastly, content preferences will be considered anything that the ULVT posts on Facebook that the individual likes to see. The dependent variable is the individual's willingness to volunteer for the UVLT. An individual's willingness to volunteer will be defined as whether or not they are considering volunteering for the UVLT. These variables have been chosen in order to directly address the three research questions.

The study will be suggesting a corollary relationship between the three independent variables and the dependent variable. This is sufficient for the purpose of this study because the corollary relationship will provide UVLT a better understanding who they should tailor their social media to and how they should promote the organization on Facebook. A causal relationship cannot be determined through this study because this study is cross-sectional, meaning that data will only be collected at one point in time. This is the best option for the study because the ultimate goal is to help the UVLT right now. In order to demonstrate causality, the UVLT could do a panel study in which data is collected multiple times to demonstrate how the population has changed. A panel study would allow the three criteria of causality to be met. The criteria are association, direction of influence, and nonspuriousness. To demonstrate association, a study would have a change in one variable is accompanied by the change in another variable. In order to prove direction of influence, a study would illustrate the independent variable occurs

first before the dependent variable. Lastly, a study would demonstrate nonspuriousness, which ensures the random assignment of treatment to participants in a study.

The research will take a deductive approach. In other words, the study stems from information in past literature in which a hypothesis was formed and now the study is going to collect data about the topic. Past literature has demonstrated specific demographics tend to volunteer more, people volunteer more when their peers volunteer, and that social media can be utilized to increase volunteering. From this information, we developed a hypothesis. The hypothesis is that if an organization's social media content aligns with individual's preference, it will increase their willingness to volunteer. The idea is that if an individual's preferences align with the content posted, they will look at the content more, becoming more engaged. This engagement should trigger them to get involved in real life. The survey results will provide a better understanding about the types of content individuals prefer and whether or not seeing this preferred content impacts their volunteering habits.

Sampling Technique and Participants

The participants of the study will be individuals who like the UVLT on Facebook. It will be a non-probability sample, specifically using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows the participants to be chosen based on a specific characteristic which, in this case, is liking the UVLT on Facebook. The survey will be posted on the Facebook page for the individuals who like the page to take the survey. The goal is to get potential respondents, who already use social media and have expressed interest in the organization, to fill out the survey. The individuals who like the Facebook group is the target population because the UVLT wants to learn more about how to better utilize their current social media platforms. In addition, using the Facebook group as our target population will help us understand what their content preferences are and therefore,

give the UVLT insight into what content is not only appealing to them but persuasive in getting them to volunteer. This will be a way to get people from their Facebook page to be more active in the organization in real life. In addition, this will be a convenient way for the UVLT to administer the survey without having to exhaust resources or time.

Using purposive sampling will cause the study to have some coverage error. Coverage error occurs when the sampling frame does not match the target population (Dixon et al. 2016). The sampling frame are individuals who take the survey and as stated above, the target population is all individuals who like the Facebook group. The study will have coverage error because people who actively view the page or see the post of the UVLT may already be very interested and invested in the organization. The coverage error will cause lower generalizability, meaning the respondents don't match or represent the population. Thus, the results will not represent the average person in the Facebook's preferences, demographics, or social network. However, the coverage error and low generalizability will not hurt the overall goal of the study.

Participants will see the survey posted on the UVLT's Facebook page. In the post, the UVLT will ask people to take the survey in order to help them improve their Facebook content and explain the time commitment, which should be approximately 15 minutes. A sample post is posted below in Appendix B. In order to secure participation and to limit coverage error, there will be an incentive. Anyone who participates will have the opportunity to enter a raffle for a chance to win a gift card. All of the data will be collected whenever the UVLT decides to post the survey on Facebook.

The study should have fairly high levels of reliability. Reliability is determined by whether or not the variables are operationalized consistently, thus causing the findings to be repeatable (Dixon et al. 2016). The demographic and social network questions should produce

the same results if tested again for the same group of individuals because these questions are direct and objective. The question about content preferences are not as highly reliable because what people like or enjoy seeing may be constantly changing and is subjective. In terms of validity, which is how well the operational definitions and the concepts are measured in the study, the survey should have high validity because the questions were written in order to extract the specific information about the independent and dependent variables. In addition, within many of the questions, the operational definitions are used in order to ensure that the participants understand the question and the survey produces the anticipated information.

Analyzing and Interpreting Results

The community partner will use the results to understand how the independent variables, demographics, social networks, and content preferences, impact individual's motivation to volunteer. Specifically, they will be able to extract information what kind of content the members want to see and to understand whether or not content matters for motivating people to volunteer. Using this information, they can post information on the Facebook page that aligns with the majority of the participants preferences. In addition, the demographics and social network questions will provide information about who volunteers and whether or not their peers volunteer. This provides the UVLT with an opportunity to craft all marketing efforts towards these individuals. For example, the UVLT could promote events that involve groups of people doing volunteer work in order to promote friend groups to get involved. This information should allow the UVLT to answer all three of the research questions.

The results should demonstrate that older, married, and female individuals are the most likely to have volunteered. In addition, the results should also demonstrate that if the individual's friends or peers volunteer, they are more likely to have volunteered. Lastly, the results should

show that individuals express that they would be more willing to volunteer if the UVLT posted content aligned with their content preferences. In addition, there will be a comment section on the survey, which may prompt individuals to talk about their suggestions for improving the Facebook page.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study will be administered in a manner to ensure that all three of the ethical principles of the *Belmont Report* are met. The first ethical principle is respect for persons which provides that individuals are treated as independent individuals with the ability to choose what they do and what happens to them. In order to ensure respect for persons, an informed consent form, which is in Appendix C, will be included at the beginning of our survey so that individuals have decide on their own whether or not they want to participate. They will also have the option to click out of the survey at any time. The second ethical principle of the *Belmont Report* is beneficence, which requires all researchers to secure the well-being of participants which means maximizing any possible benefits and limiting all potential harms (Dixon et al. 2016). To maintain beneficence, the questions on our survey are not controversial or sensitive and should not impact a participant's well-being. Lastly, the third ethical principle of the *Belmont Report* is preserving justice, which means that all benefits and burdens should be fairly distributed among the participants (Dixon et al. 2016). In other words, all of the potential harms or benefits of a study should not be isolated to one group of participants. This study will preserve justice for the participants of the survey by providing the same survey to all participants. Any potential benefits and burdens will be evenly distributed among participants.

The other main ethical consideration that must be addressed is confidentiality of the participants. In terms of confidentiality, the data collected will not be shared or used for any

other reason without the permission of the participants (Dixon et al. 2016). The UVLT will have to keep all data in a secure location and may not use it for any other reasons besides this study. In terms of a secured location, the UVLT could keep the data on a separate hard drive or locked in a filing cabinet. The study will not secure anonymity because individuals may enter their email addresses to enter the raffle. However, anonymity is not a concern because the topic of the survey is not controversial.

FEASBILITY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Upper Valley Land Trust is a non-profit organization that focuses on conserving land, water resources, and historic properties throughout 45 towns in New Hampshire and Vermont (Upper Valley Land Trust). The work that the Upper Valley does is extremely important for protecting local ecosystems and keeping local water sources clean. In addition, the UVLT provides the people of the Upper Valley with parks and trails for recreational use. Volunteers are very important for the UVLT and they actively look for volunteers in order to conduct outreach within the community, help regulate their land holdings, and to find new lands. Through this study, the organization should be able to increase their volunteer numbers. The more volunteers that the UVLT has, the more it can expand its efforts. Therefore, this study is important in helping the UVLT increase their number of volunteers.

The design of the study was specifically chosen to in order to be easy and feasible for the UVLT to implement. With only 11 employees, the online survey allows one person to manage the project which limits the time that the project takes away from the organization's main work. In addition, the survey provides them with a convenient way to ask their members more about themselves, about what types of content they want to see and about the types of content that will motivate them. The UVLT should be able to analyze the data quickly in order to answer the

research question. This will allow them to immediately change what is posted on their Facebook page and craft their posting based on the results.

The research is also important because there is a gap in the literature about how social media content impacts individuals' willingness to engage. Although the literature brings attention to social media's impacts, in general, on non-profit organization, there are no specifics about content. The research will determine whether posting more preferred content makes people more engaged. In addition, none of the literature about who volunteers or how individual's peers impact their volunteer rates are studies specifically about the Upper Valley. The research will ensure that the past literature about volunteering can be related to the individuals currently liking the Facebook page.

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APPENDIX A

Survey

1) How did you find out about the Upper Valley Land Trust? _____
2) Have often do you volunteer for the Upper Valley Land Trust?
    a) Once a week
    b) Once a month
    c) Once a year
    d) Never
3) Check all that apply. Why did you like the Upper Valley Land Trust on Facebook?
    ____I am an active volunteer
    ____I care about preserving land in the Upper Valley
    ____I recognized their symbol
    ____I support what the Upper Valley Land Trust does for the community
    ____Other: _____
4) How often do you check the Upper Valley Land Trust Facebook page?
    a) Daily
    b) Weekly
    c) Monthly
    d) Annually
    e) Never
    f) Other: _____
5) Check all that apply. Why do you check the Upper Valley Land Trust Facebook page?
    ____For general information about the organization
    ____To get information about events
    ____To learn how to get involved
    ____To learn more about the goals
    ____Other: _____
6) How often do you read articles posted by the UVLT on Facebook?
    a) Once a day
    b) Once a week
    c) Once a month
    d) Once a year
    e) Never
7) How many people do you know that have volunteered for the Upper Valley Land Trust?
    a) None
    b) Very few
    c) Some
    d) Many
    e) All

8) How many people do you know that like the Upper Valley Land Trust on Facebook?
   a) None
   b) Very few
   c) Some
   d) Many
   e) All
9) What type of content would you like to see on the UVLT page?
   a) News articles about the environment
   b) Information about national land trust issues
   c) Pictures of the Upper Valley land
   d) Other_____
10) What information on the Facebook page would motivate you to get involved?
    a) Information about volunteering opportunities
    b) Information about the importance of protecting the environment
    c) Upcoming event details
    d) General information about the organization
    e) Other: _____
11) If the content on the page was interesting to you, would it increase your willingness to volunteer?
    a) No
    b) Probably not
    c) Maybe
    d) Probably
    e) Yes
    f) Other: _____
12) What is your age? _____
13) What is your annual income
    a) Under $25,000
    b) $25,000-$49,999
    c) 50,000$-$100,000
    d) Over $100,000
14) What is your marital status?
    a) Single
    b) Married
    c) Widowed
    d) Divorced
    e) Separated
15) What is your race/ethnicity? _____
16) What is your gender?
    a) Female

b) Male
c) Other (Specify)

If you have additional comments please leave below.

(Optional) Enter your email address to enter the raffle: _____

APPENDIX B

<div align="center">Facebook Post</div>

Dear Community,

      We would really appreciate it if you would take 15 minutes to complete the survey below. We are trying to improve our presence on social media in order to help grow our organization. Social media can help promote volunteering and engagement which will ensure that we are able to continue to do our job for the community. Plus, if you take the survey, you can enter your email address in the comment section in order to enter a raffle for a gift card! We really appreciate your time and commitment in helping better the Upper Valley Land Trust.

APPENDIX C

Consent form

<u>CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH</u>

3/10/2017

Engaging the Upper Valley Through Social Media
Upper Valley Land Trust

You are being asked to take part in a <u>research study</u>. Taking part in research is <u>voluntary.</u>

<u>What is the purpose of this study?</u>
The purpose of the study is to understand how social media impacts an individual's awareness and willingness to get involved with a non-profit organization.

<u>What does this study involve?</u>
Your participation in this study may last up to 15 minutes. It involves taking a 16-question survey about your volunteering habits, your social media use, and the Upper Valley Land Trust.

<u>If you take part in this study, what activities will be done only for research purposes?</u>
The data will only be used to understand the relationship between social media and volunteering. The organization will only use the data to improve their social media capabilities.

<u>Will you benefit from taking part in this study?</u>
You will not personally benefit from being in this research study.

<u>What are the risks involved with being enrolled in this study?</u>
There are some risks to anonymity if you put an email address in order to enter the raffle. However, the information asked on the survey is not controversial.

<u>How will your privacy be protected?</u>
The information collected as data for this study includes:
- Volunteer habits
- Social Media Habits
- Information about your social network
- Your opinion about the Upper Valley Land Trust

The data in this survey will be maintained until the organization decides to stop analyzing the information. The data will not be used for another study and not be shared with outside individuals.

We are careful to protect the identities of the people in this study. We also keep the information collected for this study secure and confidential. All of the data will be secured on computers protected by passwords and will not be accessible to outside individuals. No publication or public presentation about the research described above will reveal your identity without another authorization from you.

Will you be paid to take part in this study?
You may enter your email address at the end of the survey in the chance of winning a gift card. However, if you do not win the gift card, you will not be paid.

Whom should you call with questions about this study?
If you have questions about this study or concerns about a research related problem or injury, you can call the Upper Valley Land Trust at 603-643-6626 during normal business hours.

CONSENT
I have read the above information about *Engaging the Upper Valley through Social Media.* I agree to take part in this study.

_____
Participant's Signature and Date   PRINTED NAME

_____
Researcher or Designee Signature and Date   PRINTED NAME