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Online leadership in social media sites

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# Introduction

Facebook communities, as spaces where everyone can equally express their opinions, feelings, ask and receive information (Gazit 2019), are becoming increasingly popular as online social discussions groups within the leading social media site (Perrin and Anderson 2019). Facebook communities allow people sharing a common interest to receive social support and experiential information (Bronstein 2014; Rubenstein 2015, 1426). A decade ago, students used to join Facebook communities to obtain information about campus activities, socialize with friends and find entertainment (Park, Kee and Valenzuela 2009, 732). Today, 1.4 billion people on Facebook use these communities every month and around 200 million Facebook groups have been deemed "meaningful" by the company (Holmes, 2018).

The leaders of these communities function as centralized gatekeepers (Al-Rawi 2019, 565), responsible for the information flow and community boundaries (Johnson, Safadi and Faraj 2015, 180) and have an enormous influence on the community's sustainability (Lee, *et al.* 2019, 314).

While some studies have started to acknowledge these leaders' important role in the social media, very little is known about their identity. Moreover, studies rarely relate to the leaders of Facebook communities, which become central squares of virtual community gatherings. This study, focusing on the leaders who initiate and manage Facebook communities, seeks to enhance the understanding of their personality traits, online and offline activities.

**Theoretical framework**

Understanding the online community leaders is important, as not only are they responsible for the community's participation rules, limits, and members’ identity (Weinberg 2014, 97-102), but they also "play a critical role in bringing people closer together." (Facebook newsroom 2018). The leaders are very central in the networks and dynamically lead the forum discussions (Colladon and Vagaggini 2017, 1295). Previous research on online leadership behavior has begun revealing this unique area of study (Al-Rawi 2019, 566; Farzan and Jonassaint 2017, 3762). Although somewhat paralleling the behavior of face-to-face group leaders, online leaders’ behavior is largely shaped by the lack of physical, geographical and time constraints (McKenna and Green 2002, 122). Recent studies have shown that these leaders can play an important role as 'connective leaders' in periods of social unrest (Poell *et al*. 2016, 999), protect members' privacy as appropriate flow of personal information (Sanfilippo and Strandburg 2019, 14) and have a significant impact on the shared content (Colladon and Vagaggini 2017, 1296). However, despite the apparent emergence of social media leadership (Kahai, Avolio and Sosik 2017, 301), little is known as to what constitutes effective or influential leadership online (Riquelme and González-Cantergiani 2016, 958). This is especially true in the unique platform of Facebook, where every user can open and manage a group without any prior management knowledge or professional training.

## Personality Characteristics in Social Networks

This study aims to explore Facebook community leaders from a personality perspective. Leadership endorsement and effectiveness are based on whether the users' actions in the network are capable to affect the actions of other users in the network (Riquelme and González-Cantergiani 2016, 960). Yet, as far as we know, there is no research showing the personality characteristics of Facebook community leaders. Overseeing the information flow in the community, the leaders' personality characteristics may be crucial to their leadership effectiveness (Farrell 2017, 437) and is particularly interesting to examine according to the Big5 personality theory (McCrae and John 1992, 175-207). Over the years, studies have shown how the Big5 personality characteristics are related to individuals' online behavior A study covering social media groups around the world concluded that agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism were positive predictors of social media usage (Gil de-Zúñiga, *et al*. 2017, 547). Individuals who display a higher level of openness engage more in virtual discussion groups (Gazit *et al*. 2018; Gazit, Aharony and Amichai-Hamburger 2019). Extroverted individuals engage more in social media sites (Bronstein *et al*. 2016, 806; Aharony, 2016, 374). However, in online support communities, where leaders use the support functions (Paskewitz and Beck 2018, 467), it may not be of great importance for community leaders to be as extroverted as are leaders of other community types.

While the Big5 personality theory was widely used to predict social media engagement, the research of online leaders' personality is very limited. Studies found that users with a high level of openness were more likely to be opinion leaders and asked for information in online tourism services (Song, Cho, and Kim 2017, 21) and managers of WhatsApp groups (Gazit and Aharony 2018, 402).

In light of the literature cited above and the central role of Facebook communities in the social media environment, we raise the following hypotheses:

H1: Facebook community leaders will be more extroverted than other Internet users.

H2: Leaders of Facebook support communities will be more introverted than leaders of other types of communities.

H3: Facebook community leaders will be more open than other Internet users.

H4: Facebook community leaders will be higher in agreeableness than other Internet users.

H5: Facebook community leaders will be more conscious than other Internet users.

H6: Facebook community leaders will be less neurotics than other Internet users.

H7: Facebook community leaders will be more active online and offline than other Internet users.

# Methodology

The research sample included 188 participants, half of them Facebook community leaders (n = 94) and half other Internet users (n = 94). The Facebook community leaders were invited to answer an online survey through posts on two main community walls of Facebook community leaders in Israel: [Facebook Community Leadership Circles: Israel](https://www.facebook.com/groups/CLC.TelAviv/) and [Community Forward](https://www.facebook.com/groups/communityforward/). This was carried out with the cooperation of their administrators. Among the 94 leaders completing the survey, 64 were women (68%) and 30 were men (32%). The other Internet users were randomly sampled, employing an online survey administered by a survey company. This representative sample of Israeli Internet users maintained the same number and proportion of women and men, 68% and 32% respectively.

Researchers used an online survey with five sections: 1) Demographic questions; 2) Questions about the Facebook community (for leaders only); 3) Online activity; 4) Offline activity; 5) The Big Five questionnaire.

# Research Results

In order to examine the differences in personality traits and offline and online activities between Facebook community leaders and other Internet users, one-way MANCOVA tests were conducted, with age as a covariate variable. The results are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1: Mean, SD, M.est and F values of the personality traits and activity types by group (N = 188)*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Facebook leaders (*n* = 94) | Internet users (*n* = 94) |  |  |  |
|  |  | *M* | *SD* | *M.est* | *M* | *SD* | *M.est* | *F* | *p* | *ηp*² |
| Personality traits | Extroversion | 4.58 | 0.89 | 4.56 | 3.97 | 0.72 | 4.00 | 15.93\*\*\* | .000 | .08 |
|  | Neuroticism | 2.57 | 0.91 | 2.60 | 3.02 | 0.86 | 2.98 | 6.32\* | .013 | .03 |
|  | Agreeableness | 4.87 | 0.70 | 4.78 | 4.60 | 0.71 | 4.69 | .59 | .44 | .00 |
|  | Consciousness | 4.65 | 0.70 | 4.58 | 4.68 | 0.71 | 4.75 | 1.83 | .177 | .01 |
|  | Openness | 4.97 | 0.65 | 4.95 | 4.13 | 0.75 | 4.14 | 44.58\*\*\* | .000 | .19 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Activity | Offline | 3.95 | 1.13 | 3.89 | 2.98 | 1.07 | 3.03 | 20.37\*\*\* | .000 | .10 |
|  | Online | 5.18 | 0.84 | 5.13 | 3.98 | 1.49 | 4.02 | 27.92\*\*\* | .000 | .13 |

\**p* < .05, \*\*\**p* < .001; *M.est* = Mean after controlling age

As Table 1 shows, Facebook community leaders exhibit greater extroversion, openness to experience, offline and online activity than do other Internet users. Facebook community leaders are also significantly lower in neuroticism.

In addition, we found significant differences in extroversion, *F* (1,89) = 3.87, *p* = .024; *ηp²* = .08 and online activity, *F* (1,89) = 6.74, *p* = .002; *ηp²* = .13 among leaders of different Facebook communities. Sheffe post-hoc tests show that leaders of support Facebook communities are less extroverted and active online than are leaders of other types of communities.

# Discussion and conclusion

In accordance with H1 - H3, Facebook community leaders were found to be more extroverted and open than were other Internet users and leaders of support communities were more introverted than leaders of other communities. These findings are supported by previous studies finding higher levels of extroversion among offline community leaders (Deinert *et al*. 2015, 1108) and among WhatsApp group managers (Gazit and Aharony 2018, 402) while introvert leaders offer quiet support and stability to their followers (Stephens-Craig, Kuofie, and Dool 2015, 68) and may fit better to support communities.

No difference was found between Facebook community leaders and other Internet users with respect to agreeableness and consciousness, thus invalidating H4 and H5. These findings suggest that while agreeableness and consciousness may play an important role for offline leaders (Deinert *et al*. 2015, 1109) the virtual environment does not necessarily need leaders to demonstrate these attributes.

Findings also showed that Facebook community leaders were less neurotic than other Internet users, validating H6. Neurotic types might be panicky towards their followers (Antonakis *Ashkanasy, and Dasborough* 2009, 250), while leadership calls for the ability to work well with people (Farrell 2017, 437), which require higher emotional stability.

Our finding that Facebook community leaders were more active online and offline than other Internet users (H7), thus enhances the understanding of their active personalities and important role in the social media environment.

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