

THE INFLUENCE OF SHARED IDENTITY AND DIGITAL RECOGNITION ON VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL CREATIVE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract. *This study analyzes the influence of shared identity and digital recognition on volunteer engagement within digital creative communities, encompassing graphic design, photography, videography/content creation, and illustration/digital art. Using a quantitative survey method, questionnaires were distributed to 100 active members of digital creative communities, and data were analyzed using multiple linear regression with SPSS. The results show that shared identity has a positive and significant effect on volunteer engagement ($\beta = 0.521$; $t = 4.752$; $p = 0.000$), and digital recognition also has a positive and significant effect on volunteer engagement ($\beta = 0.379$; $t = 3.452$; $p = 0.001$). Simultaneously, both variables significantly affect volunteer engagement ($F = 160.162$; $p = 0.000$), explaining 76.8% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.768$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.763$), while the remaining 23.2% is explained by other factors outside this research model. Shared identity was found to contribute a more dominant influence than digital recognition. These findings indicate that both a sense of shared identity and the digital recognition received by members play an important role in driving volunteer engagement, with shared identity emerging as the most influential factor. The practical implication is that digital creative community managers should strengthen collective identity and belonging among members while continuing to optimize digital recognition systems, such as badges, featured content, or public appreciation, to enhance participation and volunteer engagement.*

Keywords: *Digital Creative Community; Digital Recognition; Shared Identity; Volunteer Engagement*

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital creative communities — encompassing graphic design, photography, videography, content creation, and digital illustration — have grown rapidly as spaces where individuals voluntarily contribute time, skill, and creative effort without formal compensation. These communities rely heavily on member-driven participation, making volunteer engagement a critical factor for their sustainability and growth. Engagement itself has long been conceptualized as the degree to which individuals invest their physical, cognitive, and emotional selves into a role, a psychological state first articulated in the context of workplace behavior and later extended to broader participatory settings where people employ and express themselves more fully when psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability are present (Kahn, 1990).

Unlike traditional volunteering contexts, engagement in digital creative communities is shaped by online-specific dynamics, particularly a shared sense of belonging among members and recognition mechanisms embedded within digital platforms. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership,

which in turn motivates behaviors that benefit the group. Applied to digital communities, a strong shared identity is theorized to foster deeper commitment and voluntary participation. At the same time, digital recognition — manifested through badges, featured content, or public appreciation — functions as a form of social reinforcement consistent with Social Exchange Theory, which posits that social interactions are governed by reciprocal exchanges of rewards, wherein receiving a benefit creates an implicit obligation to reciprocate (Blau, 1964).

Despite this theoretical grounding, empirical research examining volunteer engagement specifically within digital creative communities remains limited. Existing studies on digital recognition have largely focused on gamification in educational or knowledge-sharing platforms, while studies on shared identity have concentrated on brand communities or general virtual communities, leaving their combined influence on volunteer engagement within creative digital contexts comparatively underexplored. This creates a gap between the theoretical assumption that identity and recognition jointly reinforce engagement, and the limited empirical evidence testing this assumption specifically within creative digital communities, where informal, voluntary, and skill-based contributions are especially prevalent.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines the influence of shared identity and digital recognition on volunteer engagement among members of digital creative communities. Specifically, this study investigates: (1) the effect of shared identity on volunteer engagement, (2) the effect of digital recognition on volunteer engagement, and (3) the simultaneous effect of both variables on volunteer engagement. This study employs a quantitative approach using a survey method to test these relationships empirically. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by extending the application of Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory to digital creative contexts, and practically, by providing insights for community managers seeking to strengthen member participation through identity-building and recognition strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Volunteer Engagement

Engagement has been conceptualized as the extent to which individuals invest themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in a role, with full engagement occurring when people experience their work or activity as meaningful, psychologically safe, and personally available (Kahn, 1990). Although originally developed in an organizational context, this conceptualization has since been extended to voluntary and participatory settings, where engagement reflects a member's willingness to contribute time, effort, and skill without formal obligation.

In online communities specifically, engagement is not limited to passive consumption of content but includes active contribution, such as posting, commenting, collaborating on projects, and mentoring other members — behavior that can vary widely even among members who share the same sense of community, ranging from daily active participation to more passive “lurking.” This variation suggests that engagement in digital communities is shaped by factors beyond mere membership, pointing toward the relevance of psychological and social mechanisms such as shared identity and recognition in explaining why some members contribute more actively than others.

2.2 Shared Identity

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains that individuals partly define themselves through the social groups to which they belong, and this group-based self-concept motivates behavior that supports the group's goals and welfare. Members who identify strongly with a group tend to internalize its norms and are more willing to act in ways that benefit fellow members.

Applied to online contexts, prior research indicates that community members can develop attachment based on a common identity — a sense of commitment to the community's shared

purpose or topic — separate from attachment to individual members. This form of identity-based attachment has been found to strengthen when members work interdependently toward a shared task, a dynamic evident in collaborative online communities (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). Similarly, studies on interest-based virtual communities have found that social identity functions as a motivator for participation, with identification driving members' engagement behavior within community settings organized around shared cultural or creative interests. These findings support the relevance of shared identity as a predictor of volunteer engagement in digital creative communities, where members are bound by common creative interests such as design, photography, or illustration rather than formal organizational ties.

More recent studies have extended the application of Social Identity Theory specifically to digital settings. Social identity has been shown to drive customer engagement behaviors around cultural and creative products within online communities (Zhang & Li, 2022), a context closely aligned with the present study's focus on digital creative communities. Other work has examined participation motives in small, niche online communities, finding that members' commitment persists even at a small scale, driven in part by identity-based belonging rather than the size or growth of the community (Hwang & Foote, 2021). Theoretical development has also moved beyond the original offline formulation of Tajfel and Turner (1979): online users have been found to creatively and strategically exploit social media affordances — such as hashtags, profile customization, and shared narratives — to construct and reinforce collective identity (Lüders, Dinkelberg, & Quayle, 2022), while more recent theorizing has proposed a dedicated social identity framework for digital identity that accounts for features unique to online platforms (Bingley, Worthy, Wiles, & Haslam, 2026). Consistent with this body of work, large-scale empirical evidence from social media further shows that the strength of group identity expressed in online content is systematically associated with the level of engagement it receives (Kyrychenko, Brik, van der Linden, & Roozenbeek, 2024).

2.3 Digital Recognition

Digital recognition refers to platform-embedded mechanisms — such as badges, featured content, likes, or public acknowledgment — that signal appreciation or validation of a member's contribution. Its theoretical basis draws on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which holds that social interaction is governed by reciprocal exchange, and that receiving a benefit from others creates an implicit obligation to reciprocate through continued positive behavior. In digital communities, recognition functions as a symbolic reward that reinforces the exchange relationship between the individual and the community, encouraging further contribution.

Empirical evidence from gamification research broadly supports this mechanism. A large-scale deployment of badges as incentives in a massive open online course (MOOC) found that making badges more salient produced measurable increases in forum engagement (Anderson, Huttenlocher, Kleinberg, & Leskovec, 2014). A separate field experiment on an international peer-to-peer trading platform found that although simply implementing a badge system did not automatically raise overall usage activity, users who actively monitored their own badges and those of other members showed increased engagement with the service (Hamari, 2013). More broadly, a systematic literature review of empirical gamification studies found that gamification generally produces positive effects on user motivation and behavior, although the strength of these effects depends heavily on the context in which gamification is implemented and on the characteristics of the users themselves (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). More recent evidence continues to support this pattern in online learning contexts: points and badges have been found to differentially shape learners' skill, emotional, participation, and performance engagement, underscoring that recognition mechanisms operate through multiple, partly distinct engagement pathways rather than a single undifferentiated effect (Meng, Zhao, Pan, Pan, & Bonk, 2024). While much of this evidence originates from educational and commercial platforms rather than creative communities specifically, it provides a reasonable theoretical and empirical

basis for expecting digital recognition to similarly influence volunteer engagement among members of digital creative communities.

2.4 Relationship Between Variables and Hypothesis Development

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that both shared identity and digital recognition operate as independent, theoretically distinct drivers of engagement: shared identity operates through a member's internalized group-based self-concept (Social Identity Theory), while digital recognition operates through an externally reinforced reward-exchange mechanism (Social Exchange Theory). Although prior studies have examined each construct separately — shared identity primarily within brand and interest-based communities, and digital recognition primarily within gamified educational or commercial platforms — few studies have tested their joint, simultaneous influence on volunteer engagement specifically within digital creative communities. Based on this theoretical and empirical foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Shared identity has a significant positive effect on volunteer engagement in digital creative communities.

H2: Digital recognition has a significant positive effect on volunteer engagement in digital creative communities.

H3: Shared identity and digital recognition simultaneously have a significant positive effect on volunteer engagement in digital creative communities.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory (associative) research design, aimed at examining the influence of shared identity (X1) and digital recognition (X2) on volunteer engagement (Y) among members of digital creative communities. Data were collected through a cross-sectional online survey and analyzed using multiple linear regression to test the proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, H3).

The population of this study consists of active members of digital creative communities, encompassing individuals engaged in graphic design, photography, videography/content creation, and illustration/digital art. A total of 100 respondents were selected using convenience sampling, whereby questionnaires were distributed within digital creative community groups/platforms and completed by active members who were willing and available to respond. "Active members" were operationally defined as members who had (1) been part of the community for at least one month, and (2) engaged in at least one form of participation — such as posting, commenting, or sharing creative work — within the three months prior to data collection. Although convenience sampling does not guarantee equal probability of selection and therefore limits statistical generalizability, it is a widely accepted approach in research on online communities, where a complete sampling frame is often unavailable or impractical to construct.

Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, consisting of respondent demographic characteristics, 18 items measuring the three research variables (6 items each for shared identity, digital recognition, and volunteer engagement), and a closing section reaffirming respondent confidentiality. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 1 presents the operational definitions and indicators used to measure each research variable.

Table 1. Operational Definition and Indicators of Research Variables

Variable	Definition	Indicators
Shared Identity (X1)	Common, group-based sense of self derived from community membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)	1. Shared interest with members 2. Sense of belonging 3. Pride in membership 4. Bond with other members

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		5. Comfort interacting 6. Community as part of self-concept
Digital Recognition (X2)	Platform-embedded acknowledgment of a member's contribution (Blau, 1964)	1. Frequency of likes/reactions 2. Comments/feedback received 3. Feeling valued 4. Appreciation from admins/members 5. Attention on social media 6. Recognition increases motivation
Volunteer Engagement (Y)	Physical, cognitive, and emotional investment in voluntary participation (Kahn, 1990)	1. Active participation 2. Frequent contribution 3. Voluntary willingness to help 4. Regular participation 5. Initiative without being asked 6. Motivation to keep contributing

Source: Author's compilation, 2026

Prior to hypothesis testing, all 18 items were tested for validity using Pearson product-moment (item-total) correlation and for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. All items produced item-total correlation coefficients ranging from .743 to .868 (Shared Identity), .815 to .894 (Digital Recognition), and .842 to .926 (Volunteer Engagement), all significant at $p < .01$ and above the critical r -table value ($r \approx .196$ for $n = 100$, $df = 98$, $\alpha = .05$), so all items were retained as valid. Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable are presented in Table 2; all three variables exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of $\alpha \geq .70$, indicating strong internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability Statistics

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	Interpretation
Shared Identity (X1)	.905	6	Excellent
Digital Recognition (X2)	.928	6	Excellent
Volunteer Engagement (Y)	.940	6	Excellent

Source: SPSS output, 2026

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS software through three steps: (1) classical assumption tests, comprising normality, multicollinearity (via Tolerance and VIF values), and heteroscedasticity testing; (2) multiple linear regression analysis, following the equation $Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + e$, where Y is volunteer engagement, a is the constant, b_1 and b_2 are the regression coefficients for shared identity and digital recognition respectively, and e is the error term; and (3) hypothesis testing through the t -test (partial effect, for $H1$ and $H2$) and the F -test (simultaneous effect, for $H3$), both at $\alpha = 0.05$, along with examination of the coefficient of determination (R^2).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Respondent Characteristics and Classical Assumption Tests

Of the 100 respondents who participated, the majority were members of digital creative communities in graphic design and photography, with age ranges spanning 18–35 years and community membership durations ranging from one month to more than two years. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test on the residual values produced a significance value above 0.05, indicating that the residual data are normally distributed. The Tolerance values for shared identity and digital recognition were both .199, and the VIF values for both variables were 5.016, indicating that although both values fall within the conventional acceptable range (Tolerance > 0.10 ; VIF < 10), they are relatively close to the more conservative threshold of VIF < 5 , suggesting a moderate degree of correlation between the two predictors that is discussed further as a

limitation in Section 4.5. Both the Glejser test and visual inspection of the residual scatterplot revealed no systematic pattern in the distribution of residuals against predicted values, confirming that the regression model is free from heteroscedasticity. With all three classical assumptions satisfied, the multiple linear regression model was deemed appropriate for hypothesis testing.

4.2 Multiple Linear Regression and Hypothesis Testing

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Results

Variable	B	Std. Error	β	t	Sig.
Constant	1.288	1.286	—	1.001	.319
Shared Identity (X1)	0.564	0.119	0.521	4.752	0.000
Digital Recognition (X2)	0.394	0.114	0.379	3.452	0.001

Source: SPSS output, 2026

Based on these results, the resulting regression equation is $Y = 1.288 + 0.564X_1 + 0.394X_2 + e$. This equation indicates that each unit increase in shared identity increases volunteer engagement by 0.564 units (holding digital recognition constant), and each unit increase in digital recognition increases volunteer engagement by 0.394 units (holding shared identity constant). Both unstandardized coefficients are positive, consistent with the direction of the proposed hypotheses; the standardized beta coefficients ($\beta = 0.521$ and $\beta = 0.379$, respectively) are used separately below to compare the relative strength of each predictor. The constant itself was not statistically significant ($t = 1.001$; $p = .319$), which is common in social science regression models and does not affect the interpretation of the predictors' effects, since the constant merely represents the predicted value of Y when both X_1 and X_2 equal zero — a condition with little substantive meaning in this context.

The t-test results show that shared identity ($t = 4.752$; $p = 0.000 < 0.05$) and digital recognition ($t = 3.452$; $p = 0.001 < 0.05$) each have a positive and significant partial effect on volunteer engagement, so H1 and H2 are accepted.

Table 4. F-test (ANOVA) Results

Model	F	Sig.
Regression	160.162	0.000

Source: SPSS output, 2026

The F-value of 160.162 with $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ indicates that shared identity and digital recognition simultaneously have a significant effect on volunteer engagement, so H3 is accepted.

Table 5. Model Summary

R	R ²	Adjusted R ²
0.876	0.768	0.763

Source: SPSS output, 2026

An R² value of 0.768 indicates that 76.8% of the variance in volunteer engagement can be explained jointly by shared identity and digital recognition, while the remaining 23.2% is explained by other factors outside this research model. A comparison of the standardized beta coefficients further shows that shared identity ($\beta = 0.521$) exerts a more dominant influence than digital recognition ($\beta = 0.379$) on volunteer engagement.

4.3 The Effect of Shared Identity on Volunteer Engagement

The finding that shared identity has a positive and significant effect on volunteer engagement confirms the core premise of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that individuals who identify strongly with a group tend to internalize the group's norms and are more willing to act in the group's collective interest. Within digital creative communities, members who feel a sense of shared interest, pride, and emotional attachment to fellow members tend to demonstrate more active participation — whether through contributing creative work, engaging in discussions, or helping other members without being asked. This finding is consistent with the concept of common identity attachment proposed by Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler (2007), whereby identity-based attachment has been found to strengthen members' commitment to a community independent of personal familiarity with other individual members.

4.4 The Effect of Digital Recognition on Volunteer Engagement

Digital recognition was also found to have a positive and significant effect on volunteer engagement, consistent with the logic of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which holds that receiving a benefit from others creates an implicit obligation to reciprocate through sustained positive behavior. When community members receive appreciation in the form of likes, comments, badges, or featured content, they feel valued and are consequently motivated to continue contributing as a form of reciprocity for the recognition received. This result is consistent with prior gamification research showing that the visibility of digital rewards such as badges can increase user engagement on both learning platforms and other community-based platforms (Anderson, Huttenlocher, Kleinberg, & Leskovec, 2014; Hamari, 2013). Although much of this prior evidence originates from educational or commercial contexts, the present findings extend this empirical basis by showing that a similar mechanism also operates within voluntary digital creative communities.

4.5 The Simultaneous and Relative Effects of Both Predictors

Simultaneously, shared identity and digital recognition were found to have a significant effect on volunteer engagement, jointly explaining 76.8% of its variance — a relatively high figure for social science research, indicating that both variables are strong and relevant predictors, although the remaining 23.2% of variance may be attributable to other factors not included in this model, such as intrinsic motivation, community leadership quality, or frequency of platform interaction. This finding reinforces the argument that shared identity (an internal mechanism rooted in group-based self-concept) and digital recognition (an external mechanism rooted in social reinforcement) operate in a complementary rather than substitutive manner in driving members' voluntary participation.

The dominance of shared identity over digital recognition suggests that although digital recognition is important, a sense of attachment and collective identity constitutes a more fundamental foundation for the sustainability of voluntary participation. One plausible interpretation is that digital recognition tends to be more situational and short-term in nature — motivation derived from it may fade as the frequency of recognition decreases — whereas shared identity tends to be more stable, as it is embedded within members' self-concept in relation to the community. The practical implication is that strategies relying solely on digital reward systems, without cultivating a sense of belonging and collective identity, risk producing engagement that is transactional in nature and unlikely to be sustained over time.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the results to the broader population of digital creative communities. Second, the cross-sectional research design does not permit strong causal inference, as data were collected at a single point in time. Third, this study examined only two predictors, meaning that other factors that may potentially influence volunteer engagement — such as intrinsic

motivation, leadership quality, or platform interface design — were not captured in the model. Fourth, although the collinearity diagnostics (Tolerance = .199; VIF = 5.016) fell within the conventional acceptable range, the identical values for both predictors indicate a moderate degree of shared variance between shared identity and digital recognition; this is conceptually plausible, as members' sense of belonging and the recognition they receive may reinforce one another in practice, but it also means the independent contribution of each predictor should be interpreted with some caution.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that shared identity and digital recognition are both significant and complementary drivers of volunteer engagement within digital creative communities, together explaining 76.8% of its variance, with shared identity emerging as the more dominant predictor. These findings reinforce the relevance of Social Identity Theory and Social Exchange Theory in explaining voluntary participation within informal, skill-based digital contexts, extending prior literature that has largely focused on brand communities or gamified learning platforms. The results suggest that a member's internalized sense of belonging carries more weight than externally administered rewards in sustaining voluntary contribution, implying that community managers should prioritize strengthening collective identity through shared narratives, symbols, and collaborative activities, while continuing to use digital recognition systems such as badges and featured content as a complementary rather than primary engagement strategy. Future research using probability sampling, longitudinal designs, and additional predictors such as intrinsic motivation or leadership quality would further strengthen the generalizability and causal understanding of these relationships.

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