

Servants, dictators, and gatekeepers : leadership styles and patterns of Facebook group admins / Tal Eitan

Abstract

Over the past decade, Facebook groups have become a central arena for discussions, information exchange, sharing, interactions, and connections between people. A recent report by the Israeli telecommunication company "Bezeq" found that activity in Facebook groups accounts for 86% of Israelis' activity on social networks, and numerous studies indicate that these groups play an important role in the daily lives of millions of people who use them regularly. Despite the high popularity of Facebook groups, very little is known about the administrators of these groups and their operating methods. The literature contains studies examining groups through the lens of users, but there are very few focused specifically on group administrators and the various strategies they employ to manage, lead, and guide members. Previous research has found that administrators hold almost absolute power in managing groups, deciding which topics are discussed (and which are rejected), approving or denying member entry, setting discussion topics, and defining rules, often arbitrarily. Given the significance of Facebook groups in people's lives and their impact on members, in-depth research examining the operating patterns of group administrators is clearly warranted.

This study investigates the leadership of Facebook group administrators through the lens of transformational leadership theory, which has been found particularly relevant and suitable for leaders in online spaces. According to this theory, transformational leaders employ a broad repertoire of actions, such as building legitimacy, upholding morality and integrity, providing individualized consideration and coaching, intellectual stimulation, and motivational encouragement. Transformational leadership has been identified as a positive and highly influential factor on group members, shifting the locus of motivation among followers and consequently altering their perceptions, perspectives, and behaviors. The primary aim of this research is to understand the operating patterns of Facebook group administrators in relation to transformational leadership theory and its various components, map their action strategies,

identify patterns as well as working methods and practices they employ to lead groups, and thereby shed light on the unique type of leadership manifested in Facebook groups. This research comprises three stages: a survey, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of posts published by administrators in their groups. To provide as comprehensive, complete, and rich a picture as possible, this study employs a mixed research method, incorporating both sampling techniques and qualitative and quantitative analysis methods, in an explanatory sequential design (beginning with a quantitative phase and then proceeding to examine qualitative data).

181 participants took part in a quantitative survey, the results of which and the discussion thereof in relation to the literature are presented in Chapter 5. Twenty group administrators participated in the interview stage, the results and discussion of which are presented in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7, which deals with post analysis, 595 posts published by 15 administrators over a one-month period in their groups were analyzed.

The findings of the survey stage revealed, among other things, differences among administrators in their degree of transformational leadership utilization and in their use of each of its various styles. Variables such as administrator age, interpersonal skills, group type, and digital literacy were found to be associated with the level and type of administrators' transformational leadership. Administrators exhibited the highest level of idealized influence and the lowest level of idealized behavior. These findings indicate that when dealing with leaders in online spaces, administrators are required to engage in numerous actions related to establishing and maintaining discourse rules, reinforcing their authority within the group, and tightening their control over content and members. Additionally, the findings suggest that administrators tend to make decisions that are not necessarily moral or ethical, an issue that also emerged prominently in the second stage of the research – the in-depth interviews.

In the in-depth interview stage, it was found that administrators employ a wide range of tools and actions to lead and manage groups. The main finding of this stage coalesces around the concept of the "servant dictator," whereby administrators on one hand exhibit dictatorial and totalitarian traits, exerting near-absolute control over the discussion space, while on the other hand adopting

patterns of servant leadership, viewing group members as akin to "customers" and administrators as "service providers," despite the fact that administrators typically do not receive compensation for their voluntary work. In other words, a curious duality of tight control and exercise of authority by administrators coupled with deep dedication to members was identified.

Additionally in this stage, interviewees reported intensive use of emojis and other visual aids (images, videos) to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication and address differences between physical and online interactions. It was also found that over time, administrators tended to become "informal experts" in the group's subject area due to their exposure to information and questions.

In the post analysis stage, it was found that the transformational leadership model does not adequately describe all of the actions administrators perform, and that there are numerous activities administrators undertake in groups, reflected in the posts they write, which are not part of the original model examined. It was also found that the posts published by administrators closely align with Lieberman et al.'s (1973) Helper Therapy Principle model, which describes the behavior of support group leaders in physical meetings. These posts include various types of engaging, thought-provoking content, posts that reframe phenomena, provide information and frameworks for thinking, personal sharing, and more. Another intriguing and unique finding of this section concerned the distinctive language, or idiolect, developed by many administrators in their groups. Administrators cultivate a unique style associated with them and the group, using word and sentence distortions, coining terms, and creating a rich, distinctive community language

This research contributes to the theoretical body of research on online communities, leadership in social networks and digital spaces in general, and allows for an examination of different models of physical and digital leadership as manifested among Facebook group administrators. Through this examination, profound and diverse insights were gained not only about Facebook group administrators but also about leaders in online spaces in general, such that the research also has practical and applicable implications that can be processed, adapted, and implemented in organizations, bodies, and institutions engaged in some form of online leadership and operating in various digitized spaces.

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