Going Online to Meet Offline: Organizational Practices of Social Activities through Meetup

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ABSTRACT

Event-Based Social Networks assist the coalescing of groups for social activities. In this paper, we present a mixed-method study of Meetup organizers' experiences coordinating events. Through a survey of 100 Meetup groups and interviews with 13 organizers of Meetup groups, we describe their organizational practices and challenges as well as potential longer-term success factors. We emphasize motivations and factors both in terms of social and technological issues. We discuss how these organizers build and maintain social capital but also how they rely on their already existing community leadership capabilities. We conclude that organizers had four different reasons to start a group through Meetup and describe each in turn. Our research contributes to a better understanding of how event-based social networking platforms can be designed and built to support coalescing within niche interest groups.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Information systems** → **Information systems applications**;
Collaborative and social computing systems and tools → Social networking sites

KEYWORDS

Meetup; Event-Based Social Networks; Groupware; Social Software; Socializing; Social Media; Leadership.

1 INTRODUCTION

Being fundamentally social beings, humans have adopted ICTs to facilitate both online and offline social interaction. Social networking software (SNS) such as Facebook has been used extensively to support online interactions between individuals with preexisting social ties. To a lesser extent social networking

applications and social media have also been deployed with the specific aim of supporting face-to-face group interactions. Such Event-Based Social Networks (EBSNs) [18] allow organizers to propose social events, ranging from informal get-togethers (e.g. movie night, dining out, or a recreational sports activity) to formal activities (e.g. technical conferences and business meetings). One such community, Meetup.com, enables organizers to create special interest groups online that will meet offline for specific activities, from hiking groups over cooking groups to expat groups. Meetup spans multiple countries and currently has over 500,000 monthly 'meetups' in 230,000 Meetup groups worldwide [37].

While EBSNs like Meetup work well for some activities and organizers, most offline social activity coordination is managed through unstructured conversation using a variety of communication channels (e.g. face-to-face, phone calls, e-mails, Facebook messages, texting). Unfortunately, coordinating social activities through open communication channels often results in difficulties, such as plans not being fully communicated to all parties and confusion about who is doing what and when [4][32]. EBSNs aim to address these group coordination challenges, although their success in this regard is an open research question. Another type of social group activity coordination challenge that EBSNs aim to address is that of group coalescing. Often those with a desire to participate in a social group activity of interest do not know of a critical mass of other individuals who share their desire [23][30]. Research on event based social networks have pointed out that people have difficulties finding others, and have focused on designing recommender systems to make it easier for participants to find events [8], [18], [21]. Beyond discovery of a critical mass of likeminded individuals, organizing activities takes time and energy, and so EBSNs aim to reduce the effort involved in leadership so that more people will take the initiative to lead activities.

In order to develop better EBSN support for social coalescing (the gathering of people for both online and offline social events), and to understand how they could reduce organizer coordination load, we need to understand the organizational practices and challenges in existing systems. To address the gap in our knowledge, in this paper we present a mixed method empirical study of the practices of Meetup.com organizers. Both qualitative inquiry and quantitative measures are collected and analyzed. The focus of our inquiry is into the practices around organizational work, from how people became organizers to how they

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maintained the groups from an organizational perspective. Our research contributes to a better understanding of how technology can support interest based group activity coalescing and coordination.

2 BACKGROUND

We start by reviewing social network systems and how people use them for social interaction. We follow this by discussing a subset of social network systems, EBSNs and how they are used to coordinate online groups for offline events. Third, we discuss leadership and its importance to organizing social activities. We then discuss the issues leaders and organizers have with organizing groups online, and finally, explain Meetup, one of the most popular EBSNs, and why we decided to study it to understand leaders and their experience organizing groups and events online.

2.1 Social Network Systems

Since the early emergence of social network systems (SNS) research has investigated the effects of these networks on social capital – as online interactions have created new ways for people socialize (e.g. web forums [8][15], email lists [14], social network sites [5], virtual worlds, video games). Lampe and Ellison et. al. found that social networks sites (specifically Facebook) were mainly used for maintaining offline relationships, and not for creating new social ties [9], [16]. Other studies have found that Facebook Groups on college campuses were largely used for socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and event information seeking, although younger college students were more likely to use Groups to find local events than others [27].

2.2 Event-Based Social Networks

A subset of social media networks has been designed to create online communities that organize offline events, called Event-based Social Networks (EBSNs) [18]. Examples of such systems include Meetup, Plancast, Eventbrite, and to a certain extent, the events feature on Facebook. These systems provide an online platform for users to create, distribute and organize social events, which are generally face-to-face. Similar systems built for online organization for offline events have been shown to strengthen social connections between members [5][32].

Research on these systems has focused on enhancing social engagement through recommending events or public event-focused groups to individuals through an analysis of user interests, user social-ties, and co-presence data [2][20][25]. Previous research assumed that groups for these interests existed, or that users were willing to become leaders and organizers. For example, both Noulas et al. [25] and Burke et al. [6] studied activity recommendation based on previous physical location history. Their systems assumed that groups already visited a location to participate in activities for that interest. Research in this domain has not focused on emerging group leadership or group emergence. One major gap in this area is on leadership, addressing who organizes events and why.

Commercial EBSN applications generally adopt one of three commercial models – pay for the ability to lead/organize groups (e.g. Meetup), sell event tickets (e.g. Eventbrite), or push commercial venues through advertising and getting users to make private group planning a fairly public activity (e.g. Plancast). Each of these models pushes the support focus towards social structures where there is: 1) a main organizer of an activity (leader) who is willing to make significant investment to actualize the event; and/or 2) an existing social group interested in using a commercial venue of one sort or another.

2.3 Leadership

Meetup and other EBSNs rely on leaders (or organizers) to create content for their site. Without leaders, events would not be generated. Traditional explanations for effective leadership have focused on a range of factors including personality correlations [33], leadership style [17], the relationship between leaders and followers [13], and implicit leadership theories [19]. However, more recently leadership has also been defined by the group phenomenon that links group membership to social identity [11][12]. Members of groups who exemplify prototypical traits of goals, values, and attitudes of the mass are looked upon as leaders.

Hogg found that leaders do not emerge because they exerted influence on others, but because the others in the group viewed that person as having the behaviors and values inherent to the group [11], [12]. When Hogg and associates applied Social Identity Theory to online communities, they found that prototypical group members stood a better chance of becoming a leader of an online community than those engaged in face-to-face group activities. Prototypical leaders stood a better chance because online anonymity reduced outside factors (e.g. age, race, physical attractiveness), which in turn allows for leadership to be based primarily on leader behavior [24].

Most leadership research focused on leaders who emerge from groups that exist. Take for example, Tuckman's stages of group development [34] [35], which is still used today as one of the de-facto group formation models. Tuckman's design was based on groups that have already formed (all members known) or were formed externally (e.g. a business team or classwork group) rather than groups in their infancy (e.g. during the coalescing process). Previous group and online group research have all assumed a pre-established group to some extent in their research [1][15][31]. Flores et al. assumed leadership roles were already defined [10], and McKenna and Green downplayed physical gatherings of interest groups in general [24].

Margetts, et. al. [22] recently proposed that there is a type of leader who is willing to emerge as an organizer when there is still a low chance of success (e.g. a starter), in order to help jumpstart the coalescing process. This is akin to an early adopter for technology. In surveying those who signed online petitions before the petition drew momentum or media coverage, they found starters had a lower threshold for taking action, and were often extraverted. This research raises many questions, and leads the way to research in the field of how and why people take the first step in organizing activities online.

2.4 Organizing Social Events

Recent research looked at how people organized activities using social media. Barkhuus and Tashiro, in discussing Facebook use among students, found that they heavily relied on the event system, wall posts, and messaging in order to coordinate both ad-hoc and scheduled events. The use of Facebook enabled coordination that otherwise would not take place. Wall posts were lightweight enough for organizers to invite friends-of-friends, since they would never cold call someone they did not know via phone [4].

Event coordination is often complex. Another medium for organizing is mobile group chat (e.g. WhatsApp [8] and group texting). Group messaging enables multiple individuals to be included in one chat room during the coordination conversation. These tools are used for both coordinating and socializing [26], but often mixing both coordination and socializing leads to planning being derailed by tangents or spam [32].

Coordination also becomes complex when using multiple communication channels (e.g. phone calls, texts, group messages, Facebook posts) to coordinate a single event. Schuler et al. followed 36 students as they coordinated social gatherings. They found that the process was often cumbersome because participants used mixed channels (e.g. group chat, text, email, Facebook posts, phone calls) to disseminate the necessary information to the entire group for a single event [32]. Ricken et al. interviewed 60 students at an urban university, which found that organizers were often not able to reach a critical mass of participants using physical flyers or Facebook notifications, because their audience was being overloaded with too many unrelated events [30]. It was also found that people did not want to become a leader and begin the organization process because they felt the burden of leadership was too great without a critical mass of interested individuals [30].

From what we currently understand, successful online-only communities have leaders who emerge after a group has been formed, are often prototypical, and fill a roll to keep the group active. The goal of our research is to learn what characteristics of online-to-offline groups assist or hinder leaders. This can then be applied to new technologies to assist emergent leaders in the beginning stages of the coalescing process. In order to understand technology's role in group coalescing, we gathered data on the current use of an EBSN. Before describing our mixed-method research method, we briefly describe this service.

2.5 Meetup

Meetup.com was chosen for this study because it is the largest EBSN. Meetup.com started in 2001 to bring people together locally for social activities. According to Meetup, in 2015 they had 24 million users and over 230,000 Meetup groups that hosted 560,000 "meetups" (face-to-face group activities) per month [37]. Organizers create and lead groups based on interests, and then users are free to join these groups to participate in activities created by organizers. This is unlike some other popular social gathering websites (e.g. Kickball.com, ZogSports) where members pay a fee to join activities curated by a company. On

Meetup.com, organizers pay 80 dollars per year to be an organizer.

Meetup has two types of users. The first, Organizers, pay an annual fee for the ability to create and lead interest groups (e.g. volleyball players, bird watchers). Organizers create events within their group for others to join. The second group of users acts as followers. They join the site for free and join existing groups that are related to their interests. It is the responsibility of the Organizer to create enticing events that others join. Most Meetup Organizers do not advertise their group or events; Meetup uses keywords the Organizer enters to advertise to users who list those interests in their profile.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

While we understand that Meetup is a popular platform, we do not yet know when and why an organizer decides to create a group. In order to better understand behaviors of organizers we explore two main research questions:

- 1) What characterizes the decision making process to become an online organizer and what are the perceived barriers and challenges of starting a new group on Meetup?
- 2) How do event-based social networks such as Meetup play a role in the coalescing process?

The quantitative research examined four hypotheses:

H1: Groups are more successful (defined by still being active after 1 month of existence) when the organizer knows others who share the same interest before creating the Meetup group.

H2: having the ideal amount of people come to the first meetup influences the organizer's perceived success of the group.

H3: having the ideal amount of active participation during the first meetup influences longer-term group success influences the organizer's perceived success of the group.

Both H2 and H3 are grounded in the same idea that attendance and participation can be used as a barometer for group success, and motivate organizers to continue their group. This was a finding in previous research with a campus community [30], so here we test it with a larger online community as well.

Once we have a better understanding of perceived success, we want to test whether organizers are truly motivated to continue organizing, and what influences group success.

H4: The organizer's early perceived success of the group influences longer-term group success.

4 METHOD

For this study, we wanted to capture as much information about fledgling groups as possible. The more information garnered, the more we could understand early success and long-term success of fledgling activity groups. The survey of 100 organizers of fledgling groups gave insight into how new organizers started their groups, and the reasons they decided to use Meetup. By following over 700 new groups, this study had the opportunity to learn what happens to many new groups after a period of time. Following both those who completed the survey

and those who did not allowed for comparison between groups that continued to exist and those failed. Finally, the follow-up interviews gave an in-depth look into what participants considered success. This helped answer the ‘why’ that came from the survey responses.

4.1 Data Collection

This study combined three types of data: observational data, survey data, and interview data.

Once per week for 3 months, the researchers searched for new groups within 100 miles of Newark, NJ using the search bar on Meetup.com. The “new” flag designated new groups (formed within the last week) in the search results (see Figure 1). Information about each new group was cataloged (e.g., group name, date founded, number of members), and then contacted using the Meetup private message system. The organizers were asked to fill out a SurveyMonkey survey. 763 groups were contacted, until 100 survey responses were collected.

The 763 groups were checked for activity one month after being contacted. The 100 groups who took the survey were checked one month and one year after being contacted. If a group closed before being cataloged, no further information could be collected as Meetup completely removes the group from public access. Public group information and survey responses were paired with the 100 groups who responded to the survey.

Figure 1: “New” flag on Meetup.com group

As a follow-up to the survey, 105 organizers of “successful” groups were contacted for an interview. “Successful” groups were those that had existed for over six months, were still active, and had at least one meetup. Out of these, we were able to interview thirteen organizers over the phone, using a semi-structured interview format. These conversations were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

We interviewed seven females and six males (13 in total), between 27 and 56 with a median age of 36. They were organizing a diverse set of groups from a Motorcycle riding club to a women’s empowerment group.

Interviews gathered deeper details about why organizers created their group and their experience using Meetup. Participants spoke about the topic of their Meetup group (e.g. their interest), and if they participated in or organized a group for that interest before creating their group on Meetup.com. They then explained their reason for starting their Meetup group and the experience as they were first starting, how others found the group, what type of advertising they did, at what point did they have their first meetup, and what factors made it successful. From there,

participants talked about the challenges and successes using Meetup and organizing their group.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Name	Group	Age of group	Activity frequency
James	Motorcycle club	2 years	2+/week
Ben	Pin-up photography	8 years	2/week
Doris	Convertible car club	2 years	1-2/week
Hudson	Technology in Society	<1 year	2/month
Christa	Doberman social club	1 year	1/week
Jack	Outdoor drawing and sketching	7 years	2-3/month
Joseph	Dog hiking	4 years	1/month
Steve	Music together	3 years	1/month
Marie	Book club	<1 year	
Nadia	Women’s empowerment group	3 years	1/month
Anna	Mother’s writing club	<1 year	1/week
Tilly	Books and drinks	3 months	2/month
Karen	Sex discussion club	1 year	1/week

4.2 Analysis

Hypothesis testing was performed using SPSS statistics software on the survey data. Interviews were analyzed using elements from grounded theory such as categorization and constant comparison. Two of the authors independently read the interview transcriptions and used selective coding related to organizing Meetup groups. From there, the authors compared notes to develop relevant themes. The themes were compared to the survey data and hypothesis testing to tell a coherent story of Meetup organizer behavior. Once the themes were chosen, the interviews were read through one final time to find quotes related to the themes, to answer the research questions.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Observational Results

Our observational data provides an overview of how the new groups grew over a month and how many of them survived. We

present the data according to whether or not the group's organizer had replied to the survey or not.

After one month, 29% of non-responder groups had closed, compared to 9% of the survey group (see Table 2). Before joining Meetup, some organizers of respondent groups participated in or organized groups. 26% reported forming a group for their interest and 40% reported organizing an activity related to this interest with people they knew.

Table 2: Observational Data Overview

Group	Took survey	Did not take survey	Total
Total groups	100	663	763
Exists one month later	91 (91%)	471 (71%)	562
Exists one year later	51 (51%)	N/A	N/A
Avg. # meetups within 1 month	7	7	7
Avg. # members within 1 month	57	64	62
Avg. # of days from founding to first meetup	21	> 30	> 30
No meetups	22 (22%)	115 (17.34%)	137

5.2 Survey Results

Our survey data was able to inform our hypothesis testing, which we describe one after another.

H1: Groups are more successful (are active after one month of existence) when the organizer knows others who share the same interest before creating the Meetup group.

Hypothesis 1 posits that organizers use their offline contacts as a starter group to build critical mass faster using Meetup. To answer this question, we tested multiple variables: 'number of people they knew who shared the same interest,' 'did they form a group before meetup (and number of participants),' and 'did they participate in a group before forming their group.' None of these variables were significant. We fail to reject the null hypothesis, and cannot conclude that knowing others affects group success.

H2: having the ideal amount of people come to the first meetup influences the organizer's perceived success of the group

This hypothesis posits that the events that take place at the first meetup have an effect on the long-term success of the group. Organizers were asked about the attendance number of the first meetup on a Likert-type scale from "too few" to "too many." For H2, the results were consistent with our expectations. The correlation between the organizers' subjectively rated level of "ideal attendance" and group success (defined by the group still having meetups a year after the initial survey) was positive ($r_s =$

.612, $p < .01$). Group success is affected by having the ideal amount of people attend the first meetup.

H3: having the ideal amount of active participation during the first meetup influences longer-term group success influences the organizer's perceived success of the group.

Similarly to H2, this hypothesis posits that active participation at the first meetup affects long-term group success. Active participation and group success were also positively correlated ($r_s = .509$, $p < .01$). Having the ideal number of attendance and participation at the first meetup positively affects group success on Meetup. The ideal number is the number specified by the organizer in question, because the ideal amount of people not only differs from activity to activity, it is also highly dependent on the organizer's subjective definition.

H4: The organizer's early perceived success of the group influences longer-term group success.

This hypothesis posits that organizers who perceive that their group will be a success are more likely to experience long-term success. There was a positive correlation between believing in a successful group and longer-term success ($r_s = .248$, $p < .05$). A general feeling of success positively affected organizers perceived success, which was in turn also influenced by the participation and attendance of the first meetup.

5.3 Interview Results

We now continue describing the findings from our interviews.

5.3.1 Practices Around Starting a Group

Although most of the interview participants were organizers of long running Meetup groups, not all had in fact started the group themselves. Two of the organizers had taken over their group from previous organizers. Jack had taken over his sketch group only six months into its existence and Doris had taken over a group for convertible car enthusiasts after being an active member for about a year, when the original organizer decided to step down. But where Jack had been specifically asked if he would take over in relation to his high level of engagement, Doris had only volunteered to take over the group after witnessing no one stepping up when the original organizer retired. The remaining organizers we interviewed had started the group in question themselves and all were only organizers of one group at the time of the interview.

5.3.2 Reasons and Motivations to Start a Group

Organizers formed groups for many different reasons. Some formed groups offline before migrating to Meetup, and others created a group when they couldn't find others locally who shared the same interest. Of the organizers who were surveyed, 26% of the organizers formed a group and 40% organized an activity offline before turning to Meetup.

Four of the interviewed groups (e.g. music group, pin-up photography group, dog hiking, and motorcycle riding group) were in fact migrated from either other social community sites or face-to-face groups of people who met on a regular basis. The

latter type of community group often needed a technology construct and Meetup fit the organizers' needs fairly well. For example, Steve explained that he had started an entrepreneur community offline and "saw that there were a lot of closet musicians." He formed a group of musicians to be a jam band for holiday parties, but the community grew and more bands emerged with overlapping members. He then made it into a more structured community, first through Yahoo groups, but later through Meetup. In two other groups, the organizers had been explicitly thrown out of another Meetup group (James' motorcycle and Joseph's dog hiker club) and therefore decided to start their own more inclusive group. Another common motivation was that the organizer had a particular interest but did not know anyone personally who shared that interest.

5.3.3 Challenges to Starting a Group

Organizers reported that initial challenges to starting a group were both technical and practical: where a few had difficulties using the Meetup tools, others mostly highlighted that gathering the critical mass for the first few activities was the most challenging. Anna said, "I didn't really advertise. I created a lot of 'hashtags' for the interest of the group. [Meetup] sends emails to all the people that put in their interests the 'hashtags' that I made. If they had a similar interest they would automatically receive emails from the meet up." Interestingly, almost all organizers relied solely on Meetup to advertise their groups to new members. As Anna stated, Meetup sends notifications to potential new members when a group with their related interest is formed (people who sign up for Meetup in general can define a large set of interests and then receive group suggestions). There were only a few instances where an organizer recruited outside Meetup. Karen for example, would walk up to others in the bar where she held her discussion activities and let them know about the Meetup group. Christa had negative experiences advertising outside Meetup. In the beginning she would walk up to other Doberman owners she met on the street or in the park and let them know about the Meetup group; now, she had given up on that: "Not a single person I talked to on the street has joined. I saw a really sweet person on the street with a red 'dobe' this morning and I refrained from talking to them, partially [...] because those people don't show up." But for others, the public gatherings were real-life advertisements for their group; Jack said he often had people walk up during their outdoor sketch sessions, asking how to join.

Another challenge was to determine how often the group should plan activities. Both Doris and Joseph told us that at first they had planned 3-4 activities per week but group members had told them it was too much, so they had cut activities to once per week. Looking at the survey data, successful groups existed for an average of 21 days before their first meetup. Successful groups had an average of 5.5 meetups per month, and 50% had 1-4 meetings within the first month. Regular intervals between meetups gave time for organizers to prep and group members to RSVP for future events.

5.4 Success of a Group

Organizer's perceived group success was based on the amount of attendance and participation at Meetups. Qualitative data supported these findings. Hudson, for example, specifically said that the quality of conversation was most important. Karen's success depended on the distribution between male and female members due to the topic of sex for her group's discussion. Not many women signed up, yet, and most men would only go if there were girls in the discussion group. Jack measured success by attendance and positive feedback: "That's how I measure success. I do it by the number of attendees, because a lot of them are repeat people, and that's just market proof of having good Meetups, and the comments that people leave [on Meetup], everyone seems to like it." The survey data found statistical significance between groups that existed after one month and both active participation ($r_s = .509, p < .01$) and the right number of attendees ($r_s = .612, p < .01$) at the first meetup. Both attendance and participation influenced organizers' perceived future success of the group.

Interestingly, the majority of the organizers had low expectations for attendance based on the number of people who RSVP'd. James, Karen, and Joseph all said that it was normal for two thirds of the people who had RSVP'd to actually show up and that was considered successful attendance. Karen for example explained, "It's always less than the people who RSVP because for a lot of people, something will come up that day. [...] I'm fine with it. I actually don't mind when the group is small because we get to have more intimate conversations. I feel like everyone gets a chance to talk about maybe what's on their mind or their opinions and what they think about things." For groups with very low or very high attendance (e.g. mom's writing group, books and drinks, and Jack's sketch group) they relied on those who RSVP to actually show up. For the smaller groups, it became a problem if people did not show up due to critical mass. Consequently Marie, for example, would quickly kick people out of the Meetup group if they did not attend without informing her beforehand. Jack's group, on the other hand, was very popular, with 60 people attending each Meetup. Due to the high demand, a cap and waitlist were needed to ensure attendance was not too excessive. Jack would also throw out 'no-shows' to prevent large wait lists for future events, to give members an equal chance to attend events. Finally, Joseph would do a 'spring cleaning' occasionally, "When I do my annual clean up [of members], if you were a no-show 3 times, you are eliminated."

5.4.1 Activities Outside the group

Some organizers (e.g. Doris, Christa, Jack, Steve and Tilly) reported that their Meetup group had spurred other social activities to be organically organized by non-organizer members, often a "core" group of members. Christa, for example, was surprised just how quickly the people in her group had become close friends. "Probably 15 of us are going to Saratoga Springs together next month. I didn't think we were going to be doing things like that, I didn't think we'd be such good friends." Doris told us she would often go see a show with one or two friends that she had met through the Meetup group, building close friendships

with people from her convertible group. Steve said this was an important element to any group he had organized, “I always said back at the [professional] group that the most important meetings are the meetings that happen between the meetings. That being a group of one, two, or three [members] that meet at a meeting and then get on with their own things. There's an online and an offline component.” It was not only an indication of group success; it was also a motivation for organizers to keep maintaining the official Meetup groups.

5.5 The work that goes into organization

Organizing Meetup activities and maintaining a group through the Meetup service was acknowledged as quite a bit of work by all the organizers. Yet, some liked the work more than others. Doris for example enjoyed it but recognized that it might be because she was unemployed at the moment. Joseph felt it was a problem to spend so much time organizing. He reported that he was tired, and that he wanted to enjoy the group without all the responsibility. He kept reaching out to others to organize their own meetups within the group, so that he did not have to do it every time. Generally, the organizers with more time on their hands enjoyed the work more, as well as the organizers of well-established groups such as Jack's sketching club and James's motorcycle club. When survey respondents were asked, “How much work is involved in organizing a meetup?” The average score was a 3.0 on a 5-point scale (see Table 5). Only 6% answered “a lot” of work was involved. When comparing organizer's perceived amount of work to their perceived success, there was no significance.

Table 3: Participants' self-reported amount of work.

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much work was involved in organizing the meetup?		
Answer	N	%
1	0	0%
2	21	33.3%
3	25	39.7%
4	11	17.5%
5	6	9.5%
Total	63	100%

While most organizers did not mind the work, others found it to be overwhelming. Hudson said when explaining that he was probably not continuing his group, “The amount of promotion that's involved, I don't think I have time for that [anymore].” Joseph felt organizing took more time than he would like; he spent much of his time answering questions on the group forum and private messages. He reported often getting frustrated by questions that could be answered in the activity's description (e.g. “when and where are we meeting?”). He courteously answered these questions anyway in order to keep members involved.

The work was not just limited to coordinating activities online and communicating with members, it also comprised tasks such as scouting out new locations. Joseph for example said, “I have to select a place. I have to find a right trail, and scout it out.” Jack

did not feel that this task was hard work: “I do spend some of my time scouting out the city for new spots, but that's just fun, that's not really work.” Finally, for some the location was scouted and chosen early in the group's foundation. Karen and Tilly both chose a bar they felt comfortable using, and return to that location for every meetup. Anna decided early that each meeting would be hosted at a member's house in a rotation.

5.5.1 Organizers' view of Themselves as Organizers

In relation to the work that organizers put into the overall management of Meetup groups and activity organization many of them viewed themselves as, if not necessarily community leaders, at least activity initiators. Karen said that her co-organizer sometimes had to ‘keep her down’: “[E]ven though I do try to make everyone feel good and special, I'm a little much for some people. I'm really loud, especially when I'm there. I'm like [Karen] on stage. I'm talking to everybody. [...] I'm just loud and having fun and the center of attention. [...] I'm playing a role, kind of. [My co-organizer] is a really good balance to that.” Almost everybody viewed themselves as “good organizers,” for example Doris who said that she simply liked organizing. For the longer-lived groups, organizers often had experience from other organizations or even community building. Steve told us: “It's something that I can't help but do [community building]. I would pull people together in my New York church group to go and be big brothers and big sisters to foster children. To help at homeless shelters during the holidays. Doing service type of stuff out of my church community.” Organization came natural to them; it was part of their life already before starting the Meetup group.

5.5.2 Co-organization

Several of the organizers had co-organizers to help them with general organizational tasks. Where some had co-organizers who were complementary and equally involved, such as Karen who did most of the activities with her friend Daniel, others mainly had ‘assistants’, people who would be given specific small tasks for each event. Jack for example, relied on these 4-5 assistants who would help out bring materials to the area where the group would be drawing and sketching as well as help out with practicalities once there. But he did the majority of the organization, including deciding on the location for each event as well as scheduling and RSVP'ing. Ben also reported having difficulty keeping up with all the tasks, booking models, make-up artists, locations, and handling the group, so he hired an assistant to take care of those details.

Some members built their groups in the hope that open organization would allow the group to exist autonomously. Jim welcomed members to set up their own Meetup activities. Joseph said “I have been sending messages out asking people to organize their own hikes, in order to reduce the amount of work I have to do, because I'm getting older.” Steve, as mentioned earlier, hoped people would meet “between Meetups” to help grow the community.

5.6 The Advantages of the Social Technology

The Meetup social coordination tool's success rests on the fact that it was the first of its kind, with a unique set of features lacking in previous systems such as Yahoo! Groups and LinkedIn. Prior systems focused on the collecting user profiles into one group and contacting them easily through a list, whereas Meetup provided this as well as tools for advertising and coordinating large face-to-face meetings. One key feature of Meetup was activity/event promotion through automatic notification of related interest groups. Most of the organizers we interviewed did not do self-promotion for the group, and when they did ask friends or stopped clearly relevant people on the street (i.e. Doberman owners in Christa's case), they did not actually recruit more members. Instead, the ecology of Meetup worked well for them, helping them communicate the goal of their group and send notifications to relevant potential members. The disadvantage of Meetup was almost only reported as the amount of work that they had to keep up with such as listing of activities, membership management and fee-collection.

5.6.1 Why Choose Meetup as a Tool?

In terms of choosing Meetup as a coordination tool, it was no surprise that the organizers had selected it out of convenience and previous knowledge of this as one of the only 'full circle' tools for arranging continuous social activities around a topic. When asked why she decided to use Meetup, Karen explained by referring to other nonsensical tools: "I didn't think there was another way. I thought that was just the way you do things. I didn't know how else I get people to know about my interest and want to come. I guess there is, if I want to put in the hard work of making a Facebook and doing the Twitter and constantly posting and following up, but it's not a job, it's for fun. I don't want to have it be a second job." Jack similarly admitted that he had no knowledge about other tools with the same possibilities: "I wouldn't have any idea how [to organize] without Meetup. Meetup facilitates this. It wasn't until I joined meetup, went to 1 or 2 events, and thought, 'oh I can do this, and clearly Meetup is the start.'"

Occasionally, the organizers felt they were able to arrange social activities explicitly because of the availability of Meetup. Anne, who had taken part in other Meetup groups for mothers, found no existing local mom groups when she moved to a new city. She quickly set up one herself on Meetup, in order to get to know local people, particularly other mothers. It was the existence of Meetup that enabled her to do so easily and because of her previous experience with the social tool itself, she had no hesitations to set up her own group.

6 DISCUSSION

Humans are social beings, and seek out others who share similar interests. Those who are leaders and take steps to form groups face several barriers to success. First, organizers need ways to find and advertise to others who share their interest. Most online social tools (e.g. Whatsapp) do not support this. Organizers have to spread the word themselves, which is often difficult and

becomes a "second job" because of the time it takes. Meetup, on the other hand, provides organizers with an automatic system to advertise to others using profile and specified interest data. Most of the organizers interviewed in this study appreciated Meetup's recommendation feature, as it reduced the amount of work needed to advertise. It also helped to target the correct audience (e.g. it helped Christa who found that approaching Doberman owners at parks did not generate new members). For any group to exist, a critical mass of participants is needed for success. Failure to reach those who both share an interest and are willing to participate in a group leads to failure.

Another barrier organizers face is the need for communication support tools. This study found that the first meeting is an excellent indication of longer-term group success. Strong participation and attendance at the first meetup influence leaders to continue supporting their group, and give them the motivation to organize more events. Again, organizers need to advertise their activity to individuals who are willing to participate in an activity.

Finally, activity communities are leadership-focused. Meetup groups are only formed when someone steps forward to take the responsibility of creating, advertising, and organizing a group. Those who are not typical leaders often do not step forward to take on the organizer role, which causes missed opportunities for potential groups when no one is willing to organize. For example, Doris' convertible driving club was the only such club in her area. Doris' group closed 6 months after her interview, due to lower attendance and no-shows. A year later, no new car enthusiast/driving groups had formed in the area. There is a missed opportunity for those who would want to participate, since now that the group no longer exists.

One ideal solution for leadership-centric communities is to develop tools that empower groups of individuals to disperse the leadership role. Empowerment is a principal theory of community psychology, where, given the right tools, individuals in a community are empowered to contribute toward a common goal [28][29]. In the case of interest-based activity coalescing, giving those who share a common interest the ability to discuss their interest and contribute toward planning an activity, will increase the likelihood the goal is met, and that the group is tighter-knit.

To empower individuals to form interest-based groups and organize group activities, we suggest a set of lightweight coalescing tools: a) displaying levels of interest within the user community, b) communication tools, and c) activity suggestion.

First, potential organizers can be persuaded to create a group if they have both knowledge of who has an interest and a way to communicate easily with those individuals. While our research found that simply knowing others did not lead to group success, we can extrapolate that knowing others who are *willing to participate* in a group activity leads to success. Displaying a number or list of those who have searched for the same activity and/or expressed interest in an activity in search results may lead to higher group formation rates. Showing community interest can motivate an individual, because they see others will participate if they organize an activity.

Second, communication is key. Meetup automatically advertises groups based on keywords to potential participants.

This is a great start to group success, but does not necessarily empower individuals to start a group. The use of asynchronous chat around specific interests can help empower participants to take the first step in organizing an activity. From previous research, we know group chats enable involved parties to suggest details in planning events. The most significant issue is the off-topic chat or banter that crowds group chats [32]. By focusing an asynchronous chat under the label of a specific interest (e.g. beach volleyball chat in the search results for beach volleyball), the chat is less likely to get off-topic. When multiple people are discussing a topic locally, this gives a single individual confidence to suggest a meet up with like-minded individuals.

Finally, development of a feature that allows for suggestions when planning an activity will empower a community of participants to organize an event, rather than forcing a single individual to hold the responsibility of choosing a location, date, time, and planning the activity. For example, a “brainstorm” for beach volleyball involves Person A suggesting a date, Person B suggesting a time, and Person C suggesting the local beach court. Other individuals can RSVP based on the details (to see how many are interested in participating). Person B can then approve the brainstorm and have it invite anyone who searched for or has interest in beach volleyball nearby. Instead of one person having to take responsibility for all the details, several people only need to provide a suggestion to help make an activity happen. Since several people are invested, a potential critical mass is formed as well. This gives even more chance for the activity to take place, and a successful group activity to occur.

These three features have the potential to change the interest-based group activity coalescing process through empowering communities to create events, where individuals would normally not take the lead. These features need to be tested, which is the next step in this research.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper we presented a mixed-method study of organizational practices within an event-based social network, in an attempt to find out what characterizes decision-making processes around and challenges to starting new social activity groups. Through our survey, we discovered that fledgling group organizers on Meetup face the struggle of keeping their group relevant and active. With such a high turnover rate (26% of the 763 groups closed within one month), it takes a lot of work and determination by organizers to keep members returning to meetups. The first meetup is a health barometer for long-term group success, and can spur organizers to believe in what they are doing. Knowing individuals who share an interest or being part of a group does not make a group successful.

Our follow-up interviews helped to describe a wide set of common organizational practices among Meetup organizers in terms of challenges, organizers’ definition of success, and the significant amount of work that goes into organizing activities and group maintenance. On the basis of this description, we conclude that organizers had four different reasons to start a group through Meetup. 1) Individuals were unable to find others who shared

their interest locally, and used Meetup as a way to advertise to others. 2) A social group around the topic already existed, either as a community based group or as a group hosted through another EBSN. The organizers found that Meetup provided an appropriate platform and were able to successfully migrate the group, bringing at least a part of the original group with them to create a core. 3) Members were kicked out of their Meetup group and started a new group for the same interest, often bringing a proportion of the members from the original group with them. 4) Fourthly, people who found themselves in a new area or a new situation (e.g. being in a new job or being a student who now lives on campus) without an obvious opportunity to socialize around an activity of interest started groups in order to find like-minded people to socialize with. These four reasons can help us understand how to support organizational practices through social media technologies.

We also investigated how event-based social networks such as Meetup play a role in the coalescing process in comparison to how organizers perceived coalescing via traditional methods. Our results show that Meetup was a necessary tool for organizers to create or continue to maintain their group. While Meetup does provide the necessary basis for organizing, there are still aspects that need work. For some, controlling the number of members was difficult because their group exceeded the expected success; for others, communicating the true purpose of the group activities through the description was sometimes difficult. However, most of the organizers found that the challenges they faced were countered by the advantages of the overall Meetup framework.

One of the limitations to our survey was the disparity between success of our 100-person sample and the general 663 observed groups. Over the first month since a group’s formation our respondents had a 91% success rate compared to 74% for the user population as a whole. We counter with the fact that we contacted all groups randomly, while they were in their infancy. We could not predict the success or decline of these groups.

This research focused on Meetup groups to understand the how organizers use EBSNs for group coalescing. Our next step is to study a large number of organizers within a local community, to understand the tools and methods they use to coalesce with others, as well as to gain insight into what tools organizers need in order to be successful and, thereby, increasing social capital with communities.

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