A Symbolic Convergence Perspective for Examining Employee Knowledge Sharing Behaviors in Company-Hosted Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates individual knowledge sharing behaviors (KSBs) in company-hosted virtual communities of practice (CVCs), where KSBs are guided mainly by the sense of virtual community (SVC) and the shared meanings that are formed via the recurring communicative patterns and emotional responses in the interpersonal communication processes. The symbolic convergence theory (SCT) addresses the significance of the shared meanings of a social group in facilitating the harmony among and the favorable behaviors of the members of the group. By adopting SCT, the authors examine the effects of SVC and shared-meaning-related factors on KSBs in CVCs. Data collected from 159 CVC participants were analyzed to examine the research model. The authors found that shared language and shared emotional connection significantly influence KSBs both directly and indirectly via SVC. The research findings highlight the importance of achieving shared meaning among individuals in CVCs to encourage interpersonal knowledge sharing via effective communication processes.

KEYWORDS
Knowledge Sharing Behavior, Sense of Virtual Community, Shared Emotional Connection, Shared Language, Symbolic Convergence Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The continuing development and spread of information technologies (IT), particularly the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has had significant impacts on the management of organizations. One key to successful business operations is thus the effective collection, storage, dissemination, and use of critical information and knowledge via Internet-based IT (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2006). Among the emerging Web 2.0 technologies, the blossoming of virtual communities of practice enables the efficient exchange and propagation of knowledge and information that can facilitate mutual learning and collaboration for problem solving, regardless of where the people involved are (Colombo-Mendoza, Valencia-García, & Rodríguez-González, Colomo-Palacios, & Alor-Hernández, 2018; Fouladi & Navimipour, 2017; Sun, Fang, & Lim, 2014). Consequently, an increasing number of corporations
are beginning to introduce virtual communities of practice, which are termed company-hosted virtual communities of practice (CVCs) in this study, with these being seen as important mechanisms for facilitating knowledge sharing and collaboration among employees. The implementation of CVCs for knowledge sharing can benefit organizations in various ways. For example, the process of developing user-generated content for CVCs facilitates employees’ collective value creation efforts, which enables the organizations to develop a large pool of valuable knowledge that can be stored, distributed, and used for gaining strategic benefits, including identifying new business opportunities and offering better customer services for branding purposes. Additionally, through intensive online interactions via CVCs, employees promote the understanding and reconciliation of their differences, which enables the development and maintenance of group cohesion (i.e., sense of belonging and emotional attachment to a group), which is, in turn, favorable to future collaboration (Salisbury, Carte, & Chidambaram, 2006). Online communication media, such as CVCs, are also found to be effective in terms of drawing employees’ attention to their previous work-related emotional experience and its impact on how operational-related knowledge is utilized to increase the level of organizational innovativeness (Akgun, Keskin, & Byrne, 2012). Moreover, company-hosted online or offline communities of practices are found to have a critical influence on organizational performance, because they facilitate continuous communication processes among employees, and thereby contribute to both the construction of logically sound interpretations of the business events of interest and the formation of a shared understanding of the companies’ strategic aims among employees, which can lead to the employees being further engaged in altruistic knowledge sharing activities to reduce organizational errors flaws and achieve the shared organizational visions/goals (Wang, 2011; Wang, 2016).

However, despite the proliferation of the CVCs, very little is known about the factors leading to their success or failure (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009). Earlier studies of knowledge sharing in virtual communities primarily focus on investigating individuals’ social-psychological motivations regarding sharing knowledge in public virtual communities in general online contexts using a social capital perspective, rather than in the context of CVCs (Chang & Chuang, 2011; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Chow & Chan, 2008; Corkindale, Ram, & Chen, 2018; Gang & Ravichandran, 2015; Huvila, Ek, & Widén, 2014; Jian & Jeffres, 2006; Ma & Agarwal, 2007; Tsai & Pai, 2014). Although there have been a few studies that focus on the issue of knowledge sharing via CVCs (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009), those studies tend to be qualitative in nature and provide no empirical evidence on the issues they explore, primarily rely on the structural, relational, or cognitive dimensions of the social capital perspective, as do other studies of knowledge sharing in virtual communities. While interpersonal communication practices in CVCs serve as a symbolic mechanism for creating, accumulating, sustaining, and expending social capital (Saffer, 2016), empirical studies that investigate the influences of the factors of the communication dimension of social capitals on individuals’ knowledge-sharing behaviors in CVCs are missing from the existing literature.

Knowledge processed through virtual communities becomes explicit and turns into common assets (i.e., being recorded in digital formats) that can benefit all participants of the communities (Shin & Kook, 2014). Consequently, compared to the members of virtual communities in general contexts, members of CVCs tend to manage knowledge in a more informal, personal, and cautious manner because of various work-related reasons, including the potential work-related conflicts of interests among different members, individual members’ fear of criticism or of misleading other community members (Ardichvili et al., 2003). Additionally, while the social capital view offers researchers a useful reference for evaluating the roles that factors of the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capitals (e.g., relationship, trust, reputation, and social tie) play in facilitating human behaviors and activities, prior knowledge-sharing studies that adopt this view have lacked a communication focus. The dimension of communication is considered to be one of the primary dimensions of the social capital perspective that represents the symbolic mechanism for creating, sustaining, and expending social capitals (Saffer, 2016). Additionally, the existence of the shared meaning and collective narrative
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