Why People are Involved in and Committed to Online Knowledge-Sharing Communities: An Expectancy-Value Perspective

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ABSTRACT

One challenge to the success of online knowledge-sharing communities relates to the participants’ longtime participation. Literature has explored the determinants of initial participation rather than longtime participation despite significant differences between them. To fill this research gap, this article conceptualizes involvement and continuous commitment regarding longtime participation and examines their antecedents in the Chinese context. Extending the expectancy-value theory, knowledge-sharing expectancy, knowledge-sharing value, and knowledge-sharing affect are identified as antecedents of involvement and continuous commitment. This article further suggests that interpersonal trust and the norm of reciprocity are important contextual factors in the Chinese context that enhance the positive impacts of these antecedents on involvement and continuous commitment. Empirical results confirm most hypotheses. Interestingly, the impact of knowledge-sharing affect is not influenced by interpersonal trust or the norm of reciprocity. Both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Affect, Expectancy, Longtime Participation, Online Knowledge-Sharing Communities, Value

INTRODUCTION

Online knowledge-sharing communities (OKSCs) are online social networks that facilitate social interactions and promote knowledge sharing (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). Despite the considerable body of registrants in OKSCs, the number of longtime participants is limited. The existence of OKSCs depends on initial participation, but their success relies heavily on participants’ longtime participation (Hwang, Singh, & Argote, 2015). This study focuses on OKSCs that enable open and voluntary participation. In OKSCs, individuals are free to participate in the community and

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they also have the freedom to leave the community without worrying about being punished. In this sense, many participants are one-time or short-term users (Sun, Fang, & Lim, 2012). The social networks cannot be well-developed and social interactions cannot be fostered among them, which impedes the development of longtime participation. Additionally, compared with knowledge-sharing communities that are regulated by organizations, the issue of longtime participation is more notable in the OKSC type investigated in this study. To this end, this study aims to develop an understanding of the antecedents of the longtime OKSC participation by examining why people become involved and continuously commit to OKSCs.

Knowledge management in China has gained great importance due to an emphasis on the global economy (Ou, Davison, & Wong, 2016). Since Chinese have an appreciation of face maintenance, they tend to prefer informal and implicit communication styles (Li, Ardichvili, Maurer, Wentling, & Stuedemann, 2007). Therefore, OKSCs are warmly embraced by Chinese people for informal communication. Despite the popularity of OKSCs, the reasons why people maintain longtime participation in OKSCs in China are not well understood. Since OKSCs entail open and voluntary participation, participative behavior is inherently a function of individual characteristics (Huang, Davison, Liu, & Gu, 2008). As such, it is necessary to examine how participants’ motivations influence their longtime OKSC participation in the Chinese context.

OKSCs inherit the social features of real communities (Yu, Jiang, & Chan, 2011). China has been categorized as a collectivistic culture where people attach great importance to personal relationships (Huang et al., 2008). As a consequence, it is necessary to develop an understanding of how contextual factors influence OKSC participative behavior. Interpersonal trust and the norm of reciprocity have been identified as important elements in China with respect to knowledge sharing (Ou et al., 2016). However, prior studies have mainly focused on examining their direct effects on knowledge sharing (Chen & Hung, 2010; Huang et al., 2008). Since personal motivations to stay in OKSCs can be influenced by contextual factors, this study investigates how interpersonal trust and the norm of reciprocity moderate the relationship between personal motivations and OKSC longtime participation.

As one of the main process theories of motivation, the expectancy-value theory (EVT) is a basic and integrated paradigm for understanding individuals’ motivations and behaviors (Liu & Liu, 2011). Unlike initial participants, longtime participants have accumulated a certain amount of community experience upon which they form their expectations and pursue value in OKSCs. After a certain period of time, participants may also anticipate emotions with respect to OKSCs, which predict their future level of participation. EVT has been adopted as the theoretical foundation of this study for the following reasons. First, EVT distinguishes variables related to expectancy, value, and affect components, providing a good way to investigate these variables in detail. In OKSCs, members’ longtime participation depends not only on how they expect success regarding these goals, but also on what value they can acquire (Yu et al., 2011). The importance of affect has also been emphasized when explaining longtime participation behavior (Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014). Second, EVT recognizes the importance of contextual factors (Du, Ai, Abbott, & Zheng, 2011), which are critical in OKSC research in China. Building on EVT, this study identifies three motivational constructs; namely, knowledge-sharing expectancy, knowledge-sharing value, and knowledge-sharing affect, which are antecedents of OKSC involvement and continuous commitment. Interpersonal trust and the norm of reciprocity are examined as moderators between knowledge-sharing motivations and both OKSC involvement and continuous commitment.

This study has both theoretical and practical implications for knowledge-sharing research. First, in theoretical terms, this research explores individuals’ motivations for longtime participation in Chinese OKSCs, which is in contrast to initial participation in previous research. Second, this research provides an integrated perspective of motivations by classifying motivations into expectancy, value, and affect components. The operationalization of knowledge-sharing expectancy, knowledge-sharing value, and knowledge-sharing affect as second-order factors improves our understanding of EVT. Third, this research contributes to knowledge-sharing literature by theoretically proposing and empirically
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