Chapter 4
National Culture on Knowledge Sharing in the U.S. and China

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge for multinational companies is how to motivate employees with different individual cultural characteristics and national cultures to share knowledge. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of individual and national cultures on knowledge sharing. Individual cultural characteristics are incorporated into the model as antecedents of knowledge-sharing motivations (organizational rewards, image, and reciprocal benefits). National cultural differences are examined by conducting studies with subjects in the U.S. and China. The results show that power distance is significantly related to reciprocal benefits in the U.S. but not in China. Individualism/collectivism is related to organizational rewards and image in the U.S. but not in China, while individualism/collectivism is significantly related to reciprocal benefits in China but not in the U.S. Uncertainty avoidance is significantly related to reciprocal benefits in the U.S. but not in China. This study provides knowledge-sharing practices and management implications for multinational companies.
INTRODUCTION

In today’s knowledge-based business environments, a mass of knowledge is growing and increasing in organizations. Knowledge can be viewed as the most valuable resource because it helps organizations increase competitive advantage (Huang et al., 2008; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). As knowledge is critical for organizations, how can organizations motivate their employees to share knowledge? Based on social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), knowledge sharing can be driven by motivational factors, such as organizational rewards, image, reciprocal benefits, knowledge self-efficacy, and altruism (Bock & Kim, 2002; Bock et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2008; Hung et al., 2011; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Lin, 2007; Lin et al., 2015; Sedighi et al., 2016; Yan et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017; Zhou, 2018).

If knowledge-sharing motivations are provided for employees, will all employees be willing to share their knowledge? According to prior research results, the answers seem to be equivocal. For example, U.S. samples show that image has a significant impact on knowledge-sharing intentions (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), but Chinese samples do not (Hung et al., 2011). In another case, reciprocal benefits positively affect knowledge-sharing intentions for Chinese employees (Lin, 2007; Zhang et al., 2017) but not for U.S. employees (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). This implies that even if organizations provide the same motivations, employee behavioral intentions do not universally hold across cultures and countries (Srite & Karahanna, 2006; Zhang et al., 2014).

To deeply understand cultural contexts, some existing studies have employed Hofstede’s (2001) multidimensional national cultural framework to analyze the main knowledge-sharing differences (Chiu et al., 2018; Chow et al., 2000; Griffith et al., 2006; Jiacheng et al., 2010; Jin et al., 2017; Scuotto et al., 2017; Posey et al., 2010). The cultural dimensions include individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity (Hofstede, 1980). Additionally, Hofstede’s country scores are used to theorize about differences between countries. For example, the U.S. and China can be classified as individualistic and collectivistic countries (the U.S. has a score of 91 and China has a score of 20). China and the U.S. can be classified as high and low power distance countries (China has a score of 80 and the U.S. has a score of 40).

Behavioral models can be influenced and modified by national culture, but individual beliefs, values, and self-motivated behaviors may also be shaped by individual cultural characteristics (Chiu et al., 2018; Tyler et al., 2000; Kivrak et al., 2014). Although two individuals both belong to the same country, they may have different cultural characteristics because of religion, ethnic background, region, and linguistic background (Lee et al., 2007; Karahanna et al., 2005). Thus, cultural characteristics are treated as individual difference variables and should be measured at the individual level of analysis (Srite & Karahanna, 2006; Zhang et al., 2014).
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