



## Social capital, behavioural control, and tacit knowledge sharing—A multi-informant design

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### ABSTRACT

As suggested by prior studies, tacit knowledge sharing is a natural process of social interaction. The perspectives of social capital and behavioural control are thus employed in this study to investigate an employee's tacit knowledge sharing and behaviour within a workgroup. This study collects data through a multi-informant questionnaire design. Three interesting results were obtained in this study. First, results show that tacit knowledge sharing intention can be induced by affect-based trust. However, shared value is negatively related to tacit knowledge sharing intention. Second, internal control has a positive effect on tacit knowledge sharing intention, but the relationship between internal control and tacit knowledge sharing behaviour could not be confirmed. Third, external control positively moderates the relationship between tacit knowledge sharing intention and behaviour. It is interesting to note that tacit knowledge sharing intention does not necessarily lead to tacit knowledge sharing behaviour unless the moderating effect of external control is taken into account. These findings and their implications are also addressed.

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### 1. Introduction

The importance of knowledge within organisations has been highlighted by several researchers (e.g. Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005). It is important to note that knowledge itself cannot create significant value without utilisation (Fahey & Prusak, 1998). As argued by Alavi (2000), knowledge sharing among organisational members is the most important and challenging means to increase the value of knowledge utilisation. Based on Polanyi (1967) conceptualisation, Nonaka (1994) suggested that knowledge can be classified as tacit and explicit. Tacit knowledge—reflecting an individual's know-how and experiences from past actions—is increasingly considered as a valuable intangible resource that is difficult to imitate and acquire, and can be regarded as the most important source of competitive advantage for an individual, a group, or a firm (Berman, Down, & Hill, 2002). This is especially true in the context of innovative works, where much of the task-related knowledge is tacit in nature, and tacit knowledge sharing among members is crucial for creating higher collective performance (Käser & Miles, 2002). However, an individual may hoard rather than share his/her tacit knowledge because it is valu-

able and important, and the contribution of tacit knowledge cannot be easily measured and compensated accordingly (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Thus, tacit knowledge acquisition and sharing is one of most important issues for knowledge management within organisations. For a workgroup, tacit knowledge sharing among members is also critical for task completion and group performance. Accordingly, this study intends to answer the following two research questions: (1) what are the factors that influence an individual's tacit knowledge sharing intention and behaviour within a workgroup? (2) Will an individual's tacit knowledge sharing intention necessarily lead to tacit knowledge sharing behaviour?

While explicit knowledge sharing can be facilitated by information technology, tacit knowledge sharing is subject to social interaction (Käser & Miles, 2002; Nonaka, 1994). In other words, tacit knowledge sharing among organisational members is socially driven. Moreover, knowledge sharing behaviour is inherently a type of collective action (Bock et al., 2005) and sometimes beyond an individual's volitional control. Accordingly, perspectives of social capital and behavioural control are employed in this study in order to investigate an employee's tacit knowledge sharing behaviour within a workgroup. In this study, data are collected through multi-informant questionnaires in which each respondent's social capital and tacit knowledge sharing behaviour are reported by his/her colleagues. In this manner the study avoids the perceptual bias from self-reporting and common-method bias from single informants.

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## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Tacit knowledge sharing

Nonaka (1994) addresses two types of knowledge within organisations: explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is regarded as knowledge that can be formally and systematically stored, articulated, and disseminated in certain codified forms such as manual or computer files (Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2001). On the other hand, tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in action, experience, thought, and involvement in a particular context (Alavi & Leidner, 2001), and thus is difficult to be transformed into explicit form in order to be easily transferred and shared (Berman et al., 2002). Polanyi (1967, p. 4) describes the nature of tacit knowledge with the following phrase: 'we know more than we can tell'. That is to say, tacit knowledge is deeply embedded in the mind to the extent that the knowers are not fully aware of that knowledge they possess (Koskinen, Pihlanto, & Vanharanta, 2003). Nevertheless the tacit knowledge determines the behaviour of the knower. Common examples of tacit knowledge include the ability to ride a bicycle, the knowledge of an expert baseball player, and skill debugging a computer program.

Tacit knowledge may be understood through the concepts of skill (Berman et al., 2002) or practical know-how (Koskinen et al., 2003), thus an individual usually will not share his/her knowledge when the knowledge is regarded as valuable or important because of a fear of losing possible advantages (Bock et al., 2005). Furthermore, potential risk of losing advantage and lack of proper reward mechanism are the major reasons that an individual is usually reluctant to share his/her tacit knowledge with others (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Thus, tacit knowledge sharing can be only facilitated by intrinsic motivation, such as sociability and friendship (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Choi and Lee (2003) also suggest that an individual can acquire tacit knowledge and personal experience only in a tacit-oriented manner that emphasises social interaction. Nonaka (1994) also considers that tacit knowledge is of a personal nature and can be shared through sharing metaphors or experiences during social interaction without substantial knowledge loss. Thus, social relationship may be the most important factor that facilitates tacit knowledge sharing among employees within an organisation.

### 2.2. Social capital

Social capital is conceptualised as a set of resources embedded in the social relationship among social actors and can be regarded as a valuable asset that secures benefits for social actors ranging from individuals to organisations (Adler & Kwon, 2002). For example, a higher degree of social capital is helpful in finding better jobs (Granovetter, 1995), receiving early promotions (Burt, 1997), making collective work easier (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002), inter-unit resource exchange and collaboration within an organisation (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), creation of intellectual capital and dissemination of knowledge within an organisation (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), enhancing organisational flexibility (Leana & Van Buren, 1999), and facilitating IT outsourcing (Chou, Chen, & Pan, 2006).

In a broader sense, social capital is not a unidimensional concept (Putnam, 1995) and 'encompasses many aspects of a social context, such as social ties, trusting relations, and value systems that facilitate actions of individuals located within that context' (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 465). Putnam (1995) argues that clarifying the dimensions of social capital is a top priority because social capital has many complicated attributes related to a social context. Accordingly, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) propose that structural, relational, and cognitive aspects are the three dimen-

sions of social capital. This three-dimensional framework has been employed to investigate the relationship between social capital and intra-organisational phenomena, such as creation of intellectual capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), inter-unit resource exchange (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998), and organisational citizenship behaviour (Bolino et al., 2002).

Structural social capital can be conceptualised as the overall pattern of relationships among social actors (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Bolino et al. (2002) suggest that the structural social capital can also be considered as the extent to which actors in a social network are connected. Relational social capital includes the assets created and leveraged through ongoing relationship that influence social actors' behaviour (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). This dimension bears some resemblance to Adler and Kwon's (2002) concept of 'goodwill' and can be manifested by trust, norms, obligations, and identification (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Besides, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) regard cognitive social capital as the common understanding among social actors through shared language and narratives. It is embodied in attributes such as shared vision or shared value that facilitates individual and collective actions and common understanding of proper actions and collective goals. Boland and Tenkasi (1995) suggest that higher cognitive social capital gives partners a common perspective that enables them to develop similar perception and interpretation toward events. Unlike the impersonal nature of structural social capital, both relational and cognitive dimensions describe the personal qualities of interpersonal relationship (Bolino et al., 2002) and can be categorised into relational embeddedness of social capital that represents the motivational characteristic of interpersonal social exchange. Thus, relational social capital and cognitive social capital are emphasised in this study.

Among the studies on relational social capital, trust quality has received much attention in organisational and management research (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003). Further, trust is an important dimension of Leana and Van Buren's (1999) conceptualisation of social capital. McAllister (1995) suggests that the two factors of trust are 'affect-based trust' and 'cognition-based trust'. Trust is cognition-based in that 'we cognitively choose whom we will trust in which respects and under which circumstances, and we base the choice on what we take to be "good reasons", constituting evidence of trustworthiness' (Lewis & Weigert, 1985, p. 970). On the other hand, affect-based trust is based on the emotional ties linking individuals, such as friendship, love, or care (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; McAllister, 1995). This study employs affect-based trust to characterise the relational dimension because relational social capital represents the affective quality of interpersonal relationship (Bolino et al., 2002). Furthermore, the concept of shared value is employed to characterise the cognitive dimension of social capital in this study. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 25) define shared value as 'the extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviours, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong'.

### 2.3. Internal and external control

Although there are several empirical studies that support the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) across a number of domains (e.g. Armitage & Conner, 2001; Conner & McMillan, 1999), the role and concept of perceived behavioural control (PBC) has not yet garnered a consensus. In the earlier versions of the TPB, Ajzen (1985) states that PBC, which reflects the availability of requisite opportunities and resources, will moderate the intention-behaviour relationship. That is to say, the relationship between intention and behaviour is stronger when PBC is high. Due to lack of evidence on the moderating effects of PBC, Ajzen (1991) subsequently argues that PBC will

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