



Knowledge sharing and social media: Altruism, perceived online attachment motivation, and perceived online relationship commitment



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ABSTRACT

Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have become extremely popular. Facebook, for example, has more than a billion registered users and thousands of millions of units of information are shared every day, including short phrases, articles, photos, and audio and video clips. However, only a tiny proportion of these sharing units trigger any type of knowledge exchange that is ultimately beneficial to the users. This study draws on the theory of belonging and the intrinsic motivation of altruism to explore the factors contributing to knowledge sharing behavior. Using a survey of 299 high school students applying for university after the release of the public examination results, we find that perceived online attachment motivation ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.001$) and perceived online relationship commitment ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.001$) have positive, direct, and significant effects on online knowledge sharing ($R^2 = 0.568$). Moreover, when introduced into the model, altruism has a direct and significant effect on online knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$) and the total variance explained by the extended model increases to 64.9%. The implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Online social media have become increasingly popular in the last few years. The rapidly increasing use of social media for sharing information has also triggered a great deal of academic interest (Osatuyi, 2013). For example, there were 757 million daily active users of Facebook on average in December 2013, with 2.7 billion ‘likes’ made daily on and off the Facebook site and 300 million photos uploaded (Tam, 2012; Facebook, 2014). In addition to having a very large user base, Facebook encourages frequent interaction among users through such things as the exchange of ‘likes’, comments, photos, tags, polling, events, inbox messages, and online chatting. These figures pose an interesting question: What motivates individuals to share information and interact with other users to such a significant extent in the social media environment? In particular, does this social interaction go a step further and contribute to knowledge sharing and hence knowledge creation? While some previous empirical

studies have measured knowledge sharing in terms of participation and interaction (Kapur & Kinzer, 2007; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007), others have suggested that knowledge sharing is complicated and cannot be attained through social media due to the extent of social interaction (Liao, 2006; Wang & Noe, 2010; Ma & Yuen, 2011; Ghadirian, Ayub, Silong, Bakar, & Zadeh, 2014). The motivation for the present study was prompted by the idea that it would be good if the interaction among users in the social media environment led to knowledge sharing behavior, as this would be an important step in the process of knowledge creation.

Few studies have examined the motivations for online knowledge sharing behavior (Ghadirian et al., 2014). This study aims to fill this gap in the research by exploring the motivational factors that affect knowledge sharing among individuals, with a specific focus on how interpersonal relationships influence such sharing in the social media environment. An existing online knowledge sharing framework is extended to investigate the motivational factors relating to knowledge sharing and to further identify whether altruism is a key determinant of such behavior. An alternative explanation of knowledge sharing in the social media environment is discussed, with particular reference to the theory of the need for belonging among online users.

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2. Theoretical foundations and hypothesis development

2.1. Online knowledge sharing behavior

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning holds that people learn through social interaction and the sharing of ideas and experiences. According to later studies of Vygotsky's work on social construction as a mechanism for learning (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Forman & Kraker, 1985; Bivens, 1990), social processes promote cognitive change through the process of social interaction. Hence, knowledge sharing plays an important role in converting social knowledge into individual knowledge, and public knowledge into private knowledge. From an organizational perspective, Nonaka (1994) describes tacit knowledge as knowledge that is sticky and leaky (Brown & Duguid, 1998) and difficult to describe, explain or transfer. Successful modes of knowledge creation depend on the dynamic conversion of tacit-explicit knowledge into individual knowledge through socialization, internalization, externalization, and combination (Brown & Duguid, 1998). The conversion of public tacit knowledge to individual tacit knowledge can take place only through processes of socialization and, hence, knowledge sharing. Chou (2005) describes the objective of knowledge sharing as "to combine ... individual knowledge and social knowledge to form potential team knowledge" (p. 271). According to Chou (2005), four mechanisms are needed to establish potential team knowledge: absorptive capacity (an individual's ability to utilize the available knowledge); access to communities of practice, which foster the ability to transform potential team knowledge into usable knowledge; transactive memory, which represents a shared system of encoding, storing, and retrieving the knowledge that is available to the group; and synergistic knowledge (the knowledge created within the team that actualizes the potential knowledge initially held by the individual team members). Many existing empirical studies measure knowledge sharing in terms of participation and interaction (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Kapur & Kinzer, 2007), while others measure knowledge sharing intentions (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee 2005). However, a recent review of the knowledge sharing literature found that few studies have measured the seeking and sharing dimensions of actual knowledge sharing behavior (Liao, 2006; Ma & Yuen, 2011; Ghadirian et al., 2014). In another review study on knowledge sharing, Wang and Noe (2010) suggest a framework for organizing the predictive variables of knowledge sharing, which where applicable include some or all of the five areas of organizational context, interpersonal and team characteristics, cultural characteristics, individual characteristics, and motivational factors. Alternatively, Ko, Kirsch, and King (2005) argue that although many scholars have conceptualized knowledge sharing or knowledge transfer, relatively few have attempted to measure it directly. Based on the study of Argote and Ingram (2000), Ko et al. (2005) define knowledge sharing as the communication of knowledge from a source in such a way that it is learned and applied by the recipient. Building on the work of Ko et al. (2005), Ma and Yuen (2011) develop and empirically validate an online knowledge sharing scale using different samples in different online environments.

2.2. Perceived online attachment motivation and perceived online relationship commitment

Ma and Yuen (2011) define perceived online attachment motivation (POAM) as "the degree to which an individual believes that he or she can improve his or her social interaction and the sense of communion with others on an online learning platform" and perceived online relationship commitment (PORC) as "the degree to which an individual believes that he or she can persist in a

relationship with others on an online learning platform" (p. 213). Moreover, the theory of the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggests that social interaction is an innate human motivation whereby people are naturally driven toward establishing and sustaining a sense of belonging. The need to belong also provides the theoretical grounds to explain the motivation for social interaction through the mechanisms of affiliation (to form social bonds) and relationship commitment (to maintain those bonds). Other traditional theory also supported the importance of the need to belong. For example, Ryan and Deci (2000) developed the self-determination theory to include three factors, competence, autonomy and relatedness to explain intrinsic human motivation, social development and well-being. Relatedness is defined as the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others where behaviors are prompted, modeled, or valued by significant others to whom they feel (or want to feel) attached or related (p. 73). In line with this, a recent study found that intrinsic motivations moderate the effects of knowledge sharing (Jadin, Gnamb, & Batinic, 2013).

The concept of perceived online attachment motivation has both theoretical and empirical support. People in almost every society belong to small primary groups that engage in face-to-face and personal interaction (Mann, 1980). The anthropologist Coon (1946) suggests that the formation of natural groups is an innate human characteristic. Studies have found that group cohesion is developed as long as social bonds exist while others have found that within-group favoritism occurs even when group members are randomly assigned (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). Reis and Patrick (1996) suggest that people feel safe among others, which is why they actively seek support from social networks. Hill (1987), Hill (1997) suggests that the motivation for social contact is the central influence on human behavior, even though people are drawn to others for different reasons. Accordingly, if an individual online user expects to have strong social interactions on a social media platform, then he or she will be more willing to develop relationships with other members in that community. To develop relationships, the online user will be willing to interact more with other members of the social media platform, using devices such as small talk, certain forms of address, communicative norms, and self-disclosure. Pro-social behavior in sharing one's knowledge is a good way to develop relationships. This leads to the following hypothesis.

H1a. There is a significant relationship between the perceived online attachment motivation (POAM) of individual online users of social media platforms and their knowledge sharing behavior (OKSB).

The concept of perceived online relationship commitment describes another behavioral motivation. Weiss (1973) suggests that feelings of loneliness may be due to insufficient social contact or a lack of meaningful, intimate relatedness (Shaver & Buhrmester, 1983). Thus, the need to belong is manifest in the need for regular social contact with those to whom one feels connected. Research suggests that the stress response to the end of a social relationship is an almost universal human trait that transcends different cultures and generations (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Empirical studies have found that group members resist the notion that the group will dissolve, even though they understand early on that the group will eventually cease to exist (Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973). Moreover, people are often reluctant to end bad or even destructive relationships because they fear the negative effect of ending the relationship (Strube, 1988). Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew (1998) propose that commitment is the key to understanding why some relationships persist and others do not. Relationship commitment has been found to be an important determinant of friendship and close relationships and

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