



Group social capital in virtual teaming contexts: A moderating role of positive affective tone in knowledge sharing



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interplay of social capital and positive affective tone in virtual group working contexts. This study integrates social capital theory with positive affective tone to postulate an integrated model that captures the main effects of social capital and the moderating effects of positive affective tone in the formation of knowledge sharing. Our empirical analysis confirms the duality between social and affective considerations in influencing knowledge sharing, as well as demonstrates a complex pattern of interdependencies between these two effects. The empirical tests show that knowledge sharing is positively influenced by positive affective tone, trust, and shared vision. Meanwhile, the effects of trust and social interaction on knowledge sharing are moderated by positive affective tone. Last, theoretical and managerial implications of our findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A critical type of organizational work that has captured the attention of social and organizational researchers is knowledge work – one that involves creating, sharing, processing, and utilizing knowledge artifacts such as ideas, models, and decisions (e.g., [1,2]). Knowledge is widely considered a valuable organizational resource that is central to sustaining and improving an organization's product or service offerings, customer base, market share, innovation and competitive position in the industry. Unlike other organizational resources, knowledge typically resides in the minds of workgroup members and is only invoked during use. Such knowledge, when shared (i.e., knowledge sharing), can create organizational value by reducing the needs of information search and processing among collaborating workers, thereby making them more efficient and effective in achieving their job goals.

As knowledge sharing enables the sharing of relevant experiences and information between workgroup members [3], it is therefore important for workgroups to improve knowledge sharing so as to ultimately achieve their goals. The competitive position and effectiveness of workgroups are likely undermined in case of the lack of knowledge sharing [4]. Previous studies have related knowledge sharing to a variety of variables such as organizational transient, culture, situation-specific attitudes and incentives (e.g., [5]). However, none of prior research has linked knowledge sharing to group emotional state characterized by positive affective tone (i.e., group affective tone). Our goal is to understand how people in virtual teams with specific affective tone are willing to share their knowledge with online others.

A key driver of knowledge sharing in workgroups is social capital referring to as the features of social organizations that facilitate coordination and cooperation among workgroup members [6]. Over the last decade or so, the concept of social capital has captured the attention of sociologists (e.g., [6,7]) and organizational theorists (e.g., [8]) as a way of understanding why people in social communities, workgroups, and organizations share knowledge, ideas, and support with each other, even when

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there is no legal obligation or expectations of personal gains from doing so. Though organizational scholars have assessed the relationship between social capital and knowledge sharing, to the best of our knowledge, little prior research has critically examined the role of social capital in virtual groups by contrasting it with non-socially derived constructs, such as positive affective tone, that can also influence knowledge sharing. Without a thorough examination of positive affective tone and its joint effect with social capital on knowledge sharing in virtual workgroups, our understanding about knowledge sharing in virtual contexts will remain limited, and organizational initiatives directed at building social capital and improving affective tone will remain unjustifiable based on blind faith. In light of the above gaps in the literature, a key research question we examine in this study is “what role does social capital play in influencing knowledge sharing relative to positive affective tone among online workgroups?”

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section examines relevant theories and postulates hypotheses for empirical testing. The third section describes our research methods, including subjects, sampling, and construct operationalization. The fourth section describes our data analytic techniques and observed results. The final section presents a discussion of our findings, including its limitations and implications for research and practice.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Social capital theory

Social capital is defined as the “the features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” ([6], p.67). Based on relationships between people in a social network, social capital is the invisible glue that holds social networks together and motivates people to work towards a common, shared goal [7]. The above definition underscores three dimensions of social capital [9]: (1) social interaction (or network ties), referring to structural links or connections between individuals in a social network; (2) trust, referring to the strength of social relationships developed among individuals in the network that are developed through a history of prior interactions among these members which influence their subsequent behaviors in the network; and (3) shared vision, referring to a set of beliefs and assumptions about organizational work and processes used to perform work that are broadly agreed upon by the organizational community.

In this study, we focus on the relationships between these dimensions of social capital and knowledge sharing (i.e., the outcome) for the purpose of studying the moderating effects of positive affective tone on such relationships in virtual and collaborative work settings. While prior studies have somewhat attested to various effects of social capital on knowledge sharing, none of previous studies has explored the moderating impacts of positive affective tone on the relationship between social capital and knowledge sharing.

2.2. Development of hypotheses

This study examines the joint role of social capital and positive affective tone on knowledge sharing among virtual

teams involved in online collaborations, and the moderating effects of the positive affective tone. Specifically, we integrate social capital theory with affective infusion considerations [10,11] to postulate an integrated model that captures the main and moderating effects of positive affective tone during the knowledge sharing formation. The rationale for our hypotheses is provided in the followings.

According to affect infusion model [10,11], affective mood has a strong effect on circumstances that are within complex and ambiguous situations and demand the use of active and constructive processing strategies [10,11]. Given that teamwork has the inherent feature of being complex for individuals to tackle alone, team positive affective tone that helps reduce team members' cognitive complexity [12] becomes a substantial factor on such team dynamics as knowledge sharing. How exactly positive affective tone influences employees' information processing depends on the valence of the affect [13]. In general, positive affective tone tends to facilitate knowledge and information integration [14] and positive interpretation of group issues, such as considering strategic issues as opportunities [15]. Hence, when work teams have a positive affective tone, their members perceive things in an optimistic perspective and therefore are more likely to feel good about coworkers [16] and actively share knowledge with each other. Positive affective tone facilitates good organizational behavior because it influences both what people think (the content of cognition) positively and how people share (the process of cognition) [11]. Collectively, positive affective tone influences not only information processing but also resulting behaviors of knowledge sharing in a team. In light of the above logic and empirical evidence, this study hypothesizes:

H1. Positive affective tone is positively related to knowledge sharing in virtual teaming contexts.

The relational dimension of social capital is represented here using the trust construct [17]. Trust can be defined as a willingness of organizational members to be vulnerable to the actions of others due to beliefs in their benevolence, competence, and integrity [18]. Trust has been recognized as the core of knowledge exchange [3,6]. If the interpersonal relationships of a team are poorly maintained, it will undermine trust and even generate mistrust, which will eventually damage such relationships and the potential for learning, knowledge sharing, and knowledge creation [4,7]. On contrary, high levels of trust facilitate effective communication, understanding and sharing because trust improves the quality of dialog, discussion, and comprehension [3,4,9].

Trust is built over time as organizational members engage in repeated interactions with others and learn to rely on them for achieving shared organizational goals and outcomes. Trust is important in the knowledge sharing context because individuals are more likely to share knowledge with others when they perceive others to be trustworthy [19]. Within organizational settings, different mechanisms of trust (e.g., affect-based trust, mutual trust, interpersonal trust, identification-based trust) have been shown to facilitate complex knowledge sharing, from the perspective of both knowledge receivers and knowledge senders [20].

Extending the above research to virtual organizations, Staples and Webster [21] have argued that interpersonal trust in online members is positively associated with the

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