



# Social capital and individual motivations on knowledge sharing: Participant involvement as a moderator

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## ABSTRACT

The Internet is a communication channel that allows individuals to share information and knowledge. However, it is not obvious why individuals share knowledge with strangers for no apparent benefit. What are the critical factors influencing such behavior? To attempt to understand this paradox, we combined the theories of social capital and individual motivation to investigate the factors influencing knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community, applying a participant involvement concept to analyze the moderating effects of individual motivation on knowledge sharing behavior. By analyzing the results of a survey using a questionnaire, we found that altruism, identification, reciprocity, and shared language had a significant and positive effect on knowledge sharing. Reputation, social interaction, and trust had positive effects on the quality, but not the quantity, of shared knowledge. Participant involvement had a moderating effect on the relationship of altruism and the quantity of shared knowledge. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The Internet has become an inexpensive medium that enables millions of people worldwide to exchange information and knowledge. It has drastically changed the scope, boundaries, and dynamics of social interactions. It provides a platform to support individual communication unrestricted by the constraints of time and space. Moreover, online social networks have become a part of the lives of users, serving to satisfy the desire to interact with and help others. According to Breslin and Decker [8], the 10 most popular domains account for about 40% of all page views on the Web, and nearly half of those views are from two social networking sites: MySpace and Facebook. In Taiwan, although the most used Internet application is still webpage searching and surfing, participating in virtual communities has become one of the major user activities.

Due to the pervasiveness of virtual communities, recent studies have focused on communities of practice in organizations [19], specific professional virtual communities [10], and educational learning communities [22]. In addition, Algesheimer et al. [1] considered the value of virtual communities in business.

Although people can obtain abundant information and knowledge from communities, there is no guarantee that they will share their knowledge without expecting a return. According to Bock et al. [6], individuals contribute knowledge only if their expected

benefits outweigh the costs. In addition, spontaneous knowledge sharing behavior can be regarded as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) [30].

Many authors have used TAM (the technology acceptance model) to explain the behavior of users, but we decided to apply social capital theory (SCT) to explain participation in online social networks [26]. Based on our literature review, we felt that a network of relationships in online communities could provide the resources that facilitate knowledge sharing between participants. Therefore, we attempted to enhance the notion of social capital by applying it to general virtual communities.

However, there has been little research on virtual communities examining the moderating effect of involvement. Our study applied the concept of involvement as a moderating construct to analyze how it affects the influence of individual motivation toward knowledge sharing behavior in virtual communities.

The main objectives of our study were to (1) investigate participant behavior and participants' interactive relationships within virtual communities and (2) incorporate both individual and organizational perspectives to determine their effect on knowledge sharing. These objectives were proposed to help in answering three research questions:

- (1) Why are people willing to share personal knowledge and participate in a virtual community?
- (2) How can individual motivation and social capital facilitate knowledge sharing behavior in the context of a general virtual community?

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- (3) How can participant involvement moderate the relationship between individual motivation and knowledge sharing behavior?

## 2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

People form groups and communities for reasons that include sharing their experiences, among many others. Rothaermel and Sugiyama [21] defined a community as a group of people meeting to perform a mutual obligation or to share particular interests. Muniz and O'Guinn [17] mention community as an important concept of sociology and identified three community factors: consciousness and intrinsic connection to other groups, shared rituals and tradition, and a shared sense of moral responsibilities. Virtual communities are developed around affinities, shared interests, professional disciplines, common practice, and values. They are formed and evolve through the participation and interaction of participants [18]. A virtual community is totally different from a conventional one; participants interact with each other via a communication system instead of face to face. In addition, communities do not have concrete reward systems to foster knowledge sharing; therefore, individual motivation is necessary to sustain participation.

Thus, a virtual community is a social network, such as bulletin board system (BBS) and an online discussion forum, among others. It is not limited by space and time, and participants in a virtual community have common interests and characteristics that lead them to interact with each other regularly via cyberspace. Mutual interaction and communication and a long-term relationship including shared content are the keys for a sustainable virtual community.

### 2.1. Knowledge sharing

Virtual communities provide an opportunity for users to interact and form relationships. Knowledge is accrued by integrating information, experience, and theory. *Tacit* knowledge can only be shared by interpersonal means while *explicit* knowledge can be delivered via technology-driven or structured processes. Individuals will participate in a virtual community to share or exchange knowledge if the personal perceived benefit outweighs the perceived loss of valuable knowledge.

Furthermore, knowledge sharing requires the effort of the individuals who do the sharing and are involved in the social process.

### 2.2. Social capital theory

Social capital has been conceptualized as the sum of the assets or resources embedded in the networks of relationships between individuals, communities, networks, or societies. It exists through interpersonal relationships among individuals. Therefore, social capital is embedded in the relationships between individuals and their connections with their communities.

The *structural dimension* deals the overall pattern of relationships found in organizations. It describes the impersonal configuration of linkages between people or units and the extent to which people in an organization are connected with one another [7]. The *relational dimension* deals with the nature of the connections between individuals in an organization. The key facets of this dimension are trust, norms, obligations, expectations and identification. The *cognitive dimension* of social capital concerns the extent to which people in a social network share a common perspective or understanding. The critical resources of this dimension may be shared language and codes.

Following the work of Chiu's et al., our study adopted *social interaction* as the variable of structural social capital, *trust*, *identification* and *reciprocity* as those for relational social capital, and *shared language* for cognitive social capital. Thus, we could examine how these embedded resources affected the operation of a virtual community. More specifically, social interaction was used to examine the effects of network ties, the utilization of trust, identification, and reciprocity in representing the quality of network relationships and with regard to the use of a shared language to determine the degree of understanding among members.

#### 2.2.1. Social interaction for knowledge sharing

In addition, network-related social relationships provide information channels that reduce the time and effort required to gather information. Knowledge sharing is relatively easy to achieve and sustain when networks have strong connections and direct ties between their members.

Chiu et al. argued that social interaction ties among members of a virtual community provided a cost-effective way to share knowledge. The more these social interactions build, the greater the intensity, frequency, and breadth of the knowledge exchanged [29]. Therefore, we posited that social interactions can enhance knowledge sharing behavior:

**H1a.** Social interaction from participation has a positive effect on the quality of knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community.

**H1b.** Social interaction from participation has a positive effect on the quantity of knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community.

#### 2.2.2. Trust, identification and reciprocity for knowledge sharing

Relational social capital is the affective nature of the connections among individuals that facilitates knowledge exchange. Wasko and Faraj [25] decided that relational capital exists when individuals have a strong identification and trust in a network.

Trust is an important antecedent of cooperation, resource acquisition, and knowledge sharing in virtual communities [20]. When relationships are high with regard to trust, people are more willing to engage in social exchange and cooperative interaction. Inter-personal trust is important in creating an atmosphere for knowledge sharing. Chiu et al. considered trust as a generally accepted set of values, norms, and principles followed by members of a virtual community that increases knowledge sharing. Therefore, we posited that a higher level of trust will lead to increased knowledge sharing.

**H2a.** Trust from participation has a positive effect on the quality of knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community.

**H2b.** Trust from participation has a positive effect on the quantity of knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community.

Identification is the process whereby individuals see themselves as grouped with another person or set of people. It reflects individuals' efforts to express and present themselves to others, and it enhances the degree of knowledge contribution [16]. Dholakia et al. [13] suggested that identification is an individual's willingness to maintain a relationship with a virtual community. Chiu et al. further verified that identification in a virtual community is essential for knowledge sharing. Therefore we made two more hypotheses:

**H3a.** Identification from participation has a positive effect on the quality of knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community.

**H3b.** Identification from participation has a positive effect on the quantity of knowledge sharing behavior in a virtual community.

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