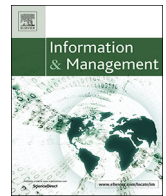




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## Not all posts are treated equal: An empirical investigation of post replying behavior in an online travel community

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## ABSTRACT

The post replying behavior in online communities (OCs) has garnered little consideration, even though the feedback behavior represents the central social dynamic of OCs and greatly determines the vibrancy of OCs. To fill this gap, this study aims to identify major sharing post-related variables that explain the heterogeneity in the post replying behavior in knowledge sharing OCs. The research model is validated through a panel dataset assembled from an online travel community. The results reveal that sharing post length and vividness, contributors' expertise and degree centrality, and members' social interactions have significant associations with the number of replying posts.

### 1. Introduction

Online communities (OCs) are collective groups of individuals who utilize computer-mediated environments to interact around a shared interest [59]. Online reviews or user-generated contents (UGC) in OCs have become one of the most influential information sources for consumers to make decisions [2]. It is believed that the success of an OC is dependent on the ability to attract community members to proactively participate and contribute in meaningful discussion [12,63]. Indeed, Pai and Tsai [49] report that OC participation and engagement can significantly enhance loyalty intentions. However, a consistent finding in the study of UGC system is that most users do not participate in and contribute to the systems they visit. The "silent groups" in OCs, usually known as lurkers, comprise the majority of community members [58]. The lack of participation in OCs makes the majority of such communities fail at growing into vibrant social media forums beyond merely existing [39].

Participation behavior in OCs has inspired a number of research streams, engendering important insights into its antecedents (e.g., [31,35,63]), and its ramifications (e.g., [49,62]). One notable common feature of these studies is that the majority focused on psychological factors associated with the content sharing (e.g., posting product information and sharing experiences). However, the activities performed by one member in an OC require both initiative contribution as an information source, and others' feedback on the contribution [35]. Surprisingly, little attention so far has been given to the feedback dynamics (i.e., the post-replying behavior) in an OC, even though the feedback

behavior is deemed as the key social dynamics of an OC [4,12].

There is obviously a difference between the motivations driving an individual to reply to a post and the motivations driving people to share knowledge in an OC. Earlier research suggests that establishing reputation and gaining approval from other peers [31,48] and developing a sense of identification with the community [39,52] are the two primary motivations for people to contribute knowledge in an OC. Unlike knowledge contribution behavior, the post replying behavior may not obtain any direct monetary return or external rewards [74]. Prior research reports that the most important drivers of responding behavior in online discussion groups consist of the controversiality of the content, the readability of the post, and the status of the post author [53]. Therefore, factors facilitating content sharing in OCs are rather distinct from the factors impelling people to comment on a post.

Extending current OC research to investigate the feedback behavior in OCs also has important managerial implications. Prior research reports that the contribution behaviors in OCs are largely decided by the feedback that they would receive from other members. Joyce and Kraut [33] observe that responses to community members' postings by other members increase their likelihood of contribution. Similarly, Jin et al. [31] and Kim and Sundar [35] reveal that individuals are more willing to contribute in a community when they perceive positive feedback of their postings. According to these findings, insufficient feedback from other members may hinder the contributors from realizing their initial purposes and discourage the contributors to contribute in the future. Consistent with this view, Cheng et al. [12] report that the contributors who receive no feedback are likely to leave a community. Furthermore,

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the dynamic communication processes (e.g., providing comments on posted contents) can also promote members' engagement in an OC [7,56,65]. Taken together, besides attracting community members to contribute, the survival and success of an OC is dependent on creating a community ambiance that enables the contributors get feedback on how well their contributions are perceived by others in the online community. Obviously, both people's contribution and dynamic social interaction behavior deserve our explicit attention.

Having noted all this, little attention has been paid to the factors driving community members' post replying behavior. To our best knowledge, there is no research that directly models heterogeneity in the post replying behavior in OCs. This lack of research prevents OC operators from identifying and proposing well-grounded strategies to attract community members to post replies. To fill this important gap, the purpose of the present study is to explore which sharing posts' characteristics can explain the differences in the replying post number of a sharing post in OCs. There are various types of OCs that serve a wide range of purposes for their users, such as social media based communities [38], online collaborative communities [74], social Q&A communities [31], transactional online communities [59,60], and knowledge sharing communities [15,75]. This research is specifically concerned with post replying behavior in knowledge sharing OCs. Different from the social media based communities that is centered on tight social linkages, knowledge sharing OC is generally based on loose social relationships between users that shares a common interest. In knowledge sharing communities, members take their own initiative to facilitate knowledge contribution and dissemination, which is clearly different from the knowledge contribution behavior in the social Q&A community where a member's knowledge contribution behavior is triggered by other members' questions. Knowledge sharing OC is also dissimilar to the online collaborative community such as Wikipedia in that the sharing content in the collaborative community is the results of member collaboration while the knowledge contribution in knowledge sharing OCs can always be clearly attributed to a solitary member. Finally, the sharing behavior in knowledge sharing OC is guided by the social exchange protocol; while in transactional virtual communities, knowledge contribution is guided mainly under the principle of economic exchange [60].

The norm of reciprocity is salient in the knowledge sharing OCs as the sharing content in the knowledge sharing OCs is treated as a public good that is free to all OC members. Prior research reports that when the OC members regard knowledge as a public good that belongs to the OC, they feel obligated to reciprocate [1]. High quality posts (informative, entertaining and relevant) results in high levels of perceived functional and hedonic benefits, and OC members are likely to post replies because they have a sense of obligation to repay the contributor and the online community. Central to the social exchange theory is the idea of norm of reciprocity. Commitment is also recognized as an important form of the reciprocation [32]. As such, we in this study use social exchange theory to justify users' obligation towards the contributor. At the same time, we use organization commitment theory to rationalize users' obligation towards the OC. On the other hand, people participate in OCs are not just for functional and hedonic needs, they also attempt to develop social relationships with other people inside the OCs [13]. In general, individuals are more inclined to endorse those who are part of a group that they like and care about [25]. As such, in addition to the perceived functional and hedonic value which may stimulate the post replying behavior, social network factors of the contributor should also affect the post replying behavior. Social capital theory are thus used. Together, we in this study use social exchange theory, organization commitment theory, and social capital theory to provide complementary perspectives on people's motivation to post replies in knowledge sharing OCs.

Specifically, drawing upon work by Hovland et al. [27], we propose five sharing post-related characteristics from three distinct levels (i.e., contributor features, content features, and receiver social interaction

features) as being the antecedents of post replying behavior. We validate the proposed linear panel data models by using the data assembled from a major Chinese online travel community (OTC). Tourism represents one of the most information-intensive industries. In today's social media-obsessed world, online consumer-generated content has become a major information source for travel consumers and plays an instrumental role in their destination selection [40,77]. Online travel communities, a typical type of the knowledge sharing OCs, wherein customers can easily communicate their opinions, share experience, and rate destinations, become increasingly prevalent as a credible information source since it provides prospective tourists with reliable destination recommendations and suggestions [14].

The current research differs from previous studies in three main ways. First, this study is among the first to focus on post replying behavior in knowledge sharing OCs and empirically establish the link between the characteristics of a sharing post and its replying post number. Although providing asynchronous feedback on previous postings is crucial for an OC to be truly vibrant, we are not aware of any prior research explicitly focusing on feedback behaviors and discussing sharing post factors that are likely to have an effect on the feedback behaviors. Second, this study is also the first to apply social exchange theory, commitment theory and social capital theory to the context of post replying behavior in OCs. The empirical results attest to the felicitous application of these theories. Third, our study is one of the rare studies to gather real world post replying data from an OC and quantify the differential effects of sharing posts' characteristics on the number of replying posts by using econometric analysis, which allows us to gain a more reliable quantitative insight, compared to previous survey research or laboratory studies. Taken together, this study not only extends the OC participation literature by exploring how the characteristics of sharing posts and contributors might shape post replying behavior, but it also contributes to OC operators' ability to develop better strategies in building and maintaining a vibrant and successful OC.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on perceived benefits of OC participation, and make an introduction to social exchange theory, commitment theory, and social capital theory. Section 3 presents the research hypotheses. Section 4 first describes the empirical method, and then presents the results of data analysis. We conclude the paper with a discussion of the results, implications and limitations.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Perceived benefits of OC participation

Community members' proactive participation is the key antecedent of determining community growth and ensuring the community's long-term success [24,63,74]. Prior OC literature has identified diverse benefits and needs of OCs toward members that motivate them to participate in various types of OCs in general (e.g., [24,32,43,75]). In particular, Vogt and Fesenmaier [64] expand the view of information search, beyond a functional need, and report that functional, hedonic and social needs are the three main benefits influencing participation and attitude towards an OC. Functional needs refer to motivated efforts that are directed at a purpose. Hedonic needs involve the pursuit of enjoyment. Social needs are associated with the search for status expression and social interaction.

Following the work of Vogt and Fesenmaier [64], Wang et al. [66] propose that members participate in OCs in order to satisfy three fundamental needs: functional, social, and psychological needs. Wang and Fesenmaier [65] and Chung and Buhalis [14] further claim that an OC provides functional/information acquisition, hedonic, psychological, and social benefits to members. These benefits or needs contribute to increasing the levels of participation and creating positive attitude toward the OC. Kang [34], in addition to these four benefits, incorporates monetary benefit as a predictor of member participation. Tsai and Pai

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