



A comparative study of knowledge construction within online user support discussion forums in Chinese and English-language cultural contexts

Xuguang Li ^{a,*}, Andrew M. Cox ^{b,1}

^a School of Information Management, Central China Normal University, China

^b Information School, The University of Sheffield, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 September 2015

Accepted 21 February 2016

Available online 7 March 2016

Keywords:

Knowledge construction

User support discussion forum

Cultural differences

Chinese culture

Social media

ABSTRACT

Many IT companies like HP, Dell and Lenovo have established both English language and Chinese user support forums for their consumers to share and construct knowledge. The innovative knowledge generated in these virtual product user communities is valuable for companies enabling them to incorporate users' innovative insights and problems solving skills. This research compares the knowledge construction processes within such forums in English and Chinese cultural contexts. The research adopts a method combining content analysis of discussion threads where technical problems are solved, complemented by observation and thematic analysis of interviews with forum members. The results show that the cultural and language differences do not cause a big change of users' knowledge construction patterns. However, the character of Chinese language and culture can indirectly affect the process by including more social information to influence social interactions. The research suggests that more tailored facilitation strategies should be adopted in managing producer sponsored user support forums designed for different cultural regions.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Social media is a broad term which refers to multiple computer-mediated tools and internet based services for people to seek, share, and create content, and for group members to interact and collaborate with each other (Kim et al., 2010; Lerman, 2007). It is defined in general terms by (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61) as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” They are “tools that enable open online exchange of information through conversation and interaction” (Yates and Paquette, 2011: 6). Hundreds of different social media platforms, for example, from traditional text messaging, discussion groups, Internet forums, blogs, wikis, podcasts, to social networking web sites (Hanna et al., 2011; Li et al., 2010). These diverse social media sites are each different in their scope and functionality (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

It is increasingly recognised that “social media is about creating, influencing, and sharing; and, importantly, it can have a powerful impact on performance” (Chiu et al., 2006: 271). It can help the firms exploit the opportunities provided by creative consumers (Berthon et al., 2007). Lee et al. (2003)'s findings indicate that the discussion forum is the most popular tool adopted in virtual communities. One type of social media of particular interest to this article is the company sponsored

* Corresponding author at: 152 Luoyu Road, Wuhan, Hubei Province 430079, China.

E-mail addresses: xlsheffield@gmail.com (X. Li), a.m.cox@sheffield.ac.uk (A.M. Cox).

¹ Postal address: Regent Court, 211 Portobello, Sheffield S1 4DP, UK.

discussion forum where virtual communities of product users share and create knowledge to solve their technical problems through peer support.

Many multinational IT producers, such as Dell, HP and Lenovo, have established such discussion forums in different languages for their regional users. However, there does not seem to have been any research on the impact of national cultural differences on virtual product user community members' collective knowledge construction behaviours. Such research would be of theoretical importance for our understanding the impact of culture on use of IT and social media. It would also be of practical importance to develop tailored facilitation for better management in different regions. In this context the research presented in this paper sought to conduct a systematic analysis of how knowledge construction in online forums was shaped by cultural context.

The paper is laid out as follows: the literature reviews briefly reviews existing theories and studies about cultural differences and its relationships with knowledge management. It points out the gap in the existing literature. The methodology section introduces how the empirical data about the knowledge construction was collected and analysed. The findings firstly present a content analysis framework for exploring knowledge construction, and a knowledge construction process model to illustrate the patterns. Then it describes the knowledge construction activities in different language and culture forums, based on thread analysis. The discussion section considers the differences of knowledge construction in the two different cultural contexts, and explores the reasons for differences. The conclusion section outlines the theoretical contributions and practical implications, and recommends future research.

2. Literature review

There are many theories classifying (/analysing) national culture, such as Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimension theory, Hall's (1976) classification of high-context culture and low-context culture, and Triandis's (1995) classification of individualism and collectivism. However, there are not many empirical studies on national cultural influences on knowledge management (Ardichvili et al., 2006) – even though it is recognised to be a very significant topic. Some researchers have explored knowledge transfer and sharing within multinational corporations or joint ventures (Inkpen and Dinur, 1998; Simonin, 1999; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Kogut and Singh, 1988; Kogut and Zander, 1993). Other researchers have conducted comparative studies of knowledge sharing within organizations in different countries, such as cases of America and China (Chow et al., 2000), cases of Russia and China (Michailova and Hutchings, 2006), and cases of China, Russia and Brazil (Ardichvili et al., 2006). In these cases, the researchers identify several significant cultural differences that influence knowledge sharing, such as collectivism and individualism, in-group and out-group orientation, low-context and high-context communication, face loosing, status and power distance.

The cultural differences between collectivism and individualism, and the high-context and the low context are the most frequently discussed features in influencing knowledge activities. Individualists tend to put personal goal before the larger social group, and perceive themselves as independent of other members. In contrast, collectivists tend to place the goal of the larger collective in priority, and see themselves as interdependent with others (Hofstede, 2001). Bhagat et al. (2002) state that members of collectivism and individualism cultures processing information and constructing knowledge in distinctively different ways. Members of individualistic cultures (e.g. USA) consider information independent of its context, concentrate on and welcome the written and codified information. People in collectivist cultures (e.g. China) tend to seek contextual cues in information and ignore written information (Bhagat et al., 2002). This finding can be supported by Hall's (1976) classification of low-context and high-context cultures. People in low-context cultures (e.g. USA) tend to rely more on explicit information in communication. The emphasis on the written word in the low-context culture leads to acceptance of communication media with low media-richness, such as online discussion forums (Ardichvili et al., 2006). Members in high-context cultures (e.g. China) usually imply a message through its context and environmental settings, which includes behaviour, situation, and paraverbal cues. This makes people in high-context cultures prefer to choose media with high media-richness, such as face-to-face communication (Ardichvili et al., 2006).

Knowledge sharing in organizations is heavily influenced by individual employees' cultural values (Hofstede, 2001; Hambrick et al., 1998; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). Cognitive styles in learning and knowledge creation also differs in different national and ethnic cultural contexts (Korac-Kakabadze and Kouzmin, 1999; Ginsburg et al., 1981). However, there are very few studies concentrating on exploring national cultural factors which influence knowledge transfer and knowledge management (Bhagat et al., 2002; Ford and Chan, 2003). There are even fewer studies that explore this subject in the context of virtual communities: Ardichvili et al. (2006) conducted an empirical study of exploring cultural factors affecting knowledge sharing strategies in virtual communities of practice. There are no empirical studies comparing knowledge creation or construction patterns in virtual communities under the influences of different national cultures. The current paper seeks to make a contribution to filling this gap.

3. Research methodology

In order to explore the impact of cultural differences on knowledge construction activities, the research reported in this paper sought to undertake a systematic comparison between English and Chinese user discussion forums (i.e. virtual product user communities) affiliated to respective company websites.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10343976>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10343976>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)