



Understanding knowledge contribution in online knowledge communities: A model of community support and forum leader support



Hua Jonathan Ye^a, Yuanyue Feng^{b,*}, Ben C.F. Choi^{c,d}

^a University of Auckland Business School, The University of Auckland, New Zealand

^b College of Management, Shenzhen University, China

^c Australian School of Business, University of New South Wales, Australia

^d School of Computing, National University of Singapore, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

No research has quantitatively investigated knowledge contribution from the perspective of community support and leader support. Drawing on social exchange theory and organizational support theory, this study develops a model of perceived community support and leader support for knowledge contribution in online knowledge communities. The research model was tested using survey data collected from 169 online knowledge community users. The result shows that perceived community support and perceived leader support positively affect users' knowledge contribution. Additionally, we identified the antecedents of perceived community support and leader support. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, online knowledge communities are becoming popular and increasingly adopted by individuals (Chiu et al. 2006, Faraj et al. 2011, Ma and Agarwal 2007). It has been reported by TheBiggestBoards.com¹ that as of May 2014, there are in total 2550 online knowledge communities, among which 139 communities have more than 100,000 registered users. The biggest online knowledge community listed in the report – the UK Gaia Online² contains 26.5 million registered users with more than 2.08 billion posts in total. These communities are revolutionizing lives by offering a space for social interactions (Phang et al. 2009), where individuals obtain knowledge and feedback from others and to express opinions (Faraj et al. 2011, Ma and Agarwal 2007). In a recent survey, for example, 70% of Americans are found to acquire knowledge

through online knowledge sharing platforms, such as bulletin boards and online forums, and 62% reported to have spent more than 30 min online every week to acquire new knowledge (Zalesne 2009).

Knowledge contribution is considered a critical element for the sustainability of online knowledge community as individuals share and combine knowledge for their own benefits, while enhancing the value of the community (Faraj et al. 2011, Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006). However, the lack of knowledge contribution has been identified as an alarming issue faced by online knowledge communities (Fang and Chiu 2010). For example, a survey of 1650 Americans has revealed that less than 1-out-of-10 (6%) have engaged in knowledge contribution behaviors, such as posting of comments (PEW 2009). Past research has revealed similar evidence. For instance, Cummings et al. (2002) have examined 1066 listservs for a 130-day period and reported that less than 50% of members contributed messages. Likewise, Preece et al. (2004) have revealed that contributing individuals made up 54.5% of health support communities and only 18% of software support communities.

Much research to date has focused on understanding what motivates knowledge contributions in online knowledge communities from different perspective (e.g., Chiu et al. 2006, Ma and Agarwal 2007, Sun et al. 2012, Wasko and Faraj 2005). However, limited research has investigated the influences of online knowledge community itself (e.g., providing support to individual

* Corresponding author at: Department of Management Science, College of Management, Shenzhen University, Nanhai Ave 3688, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518060, PR China. Tel.: +86 755 26536121; fax: +86 755 26534451.

E-mail addresses: Jonathan.ye@auckland.ac.nz (H.J. Ye), yuanyuef@szu.edu.cn (Y. Feng), chun.choi@unsw.edu.au (B.C.F. Choi).

¹ The reported data was retrieved from <http://www.thebiggestboards.com> on May 31st, 2014. TheBiggestBoards.com is a Web directory that lists most active online communities ranked by their post count, user count, category, and software used to build the online community.

² <http://www.gaiaonline.com/forum/index.php>.

members) on individuals' knowledge contribution. Researchers note that the online knowledge community per se, e.g., community size (Butler 2001), roles and rules (Preece et al. 2004), and community governance (Murray and Mahony 2007), could affect members' knowledge contribution behaviors. Although past literature has postulated or marginally informed the impacts of online community support on members' knowledge contribution (Andrews 2002, Coulson 2005, Turner et al. 2001), few have quantitatively scrutinized the relationship. Online community support here refers to members' general belief that the online knowledge community, as a collective whole, is a source of knowledge and social support.

Further, there is a lack of research examining the influences of forum leader support on members' knowledge contribution. Typically, forum leader is defined as individuals who can influence other members or play leading roles in online communities (Koh et al. 2007). The enthusiasm and involvement of forum leaders are essential to the building of community membership (Figallo 1998, Koh et al. 2003) and foster community members' care and attention on the community (Kim 2000, Preece 1998, 1999), regardless of whether the forum leader is officially assigned and titled by the online community provider or is the self-proclaimed proprietor of an online community. In online knowledge communities, forum leaders may include active members, opinion leaders, and moderators (Lu et al. 2011). These forum leaders contribute to online knowledge communities by either serving as sources of useful knowledge or, helping encourage and guide members' productive contributions and collaboration (Preece 2002, Williams and Cothrel 2000, Zhang and Watts 2008). Extant literature notices that the interpersonal interaction between members and the forum leaders may affect members' knowledge contribution (Figallo 1998, Koh et al. 2007, Preece and Shneiderman 2009). The forum leaders may support member's knowledge contribution through developing necessary social climate to elicit interactions (Koh et al. 2007), synthesizing discussions and arguments to articulate ideas for other members (Cassell et al. 2006), or re-organizing and combining postings for easier retrieval and better understanding (Faraj et al. 2011). The existence of the forum leaders helps enhance the sustainability of online knowledge communities (Preece and Shneiderman 2009). Although past literature has postulated the potential influences of forum leader support, the effectiveness of forum leader support on members' knowledge contribution has not been empirically examined. Forum leader support here refers to members' general belief that the forum leader, as a specific person, is a source of knowledge and social support. In addition, given the potential importance of community support and forum leader support, it is critical to know what drives member's perception of such supports. However, no study has examined the antecedents of community support and forum leader support.

In this paper, we ask two important research questions: (1) how do community support and forum leader support affect member's knowledge contribution and (2) what are the antecedents of community support and forum leader support? To develop our research model, we integrate social exchange theory (Homans 1958) and organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Specifically, the model maintains that perceived community support and perceived leader support enhance knowledge contribution in online knowledge communities. Since online knowledge communities represent a virtual form of organization with rules and norms resembling the regulations and cultures of mundane organizations (Faraj et al. 2011), organizational support theory could be applied to the context of our study (Andrews 2002, Coulson 2005, Turner et al. 2001). To identify the antecedents of perceived community support and leader support, we draw on social exchange theory as suggested by previous studies (e.g., Wasko and Faraj 2005). However, it is important to note at the

up front that the focus of this paper is on knowledge-based type of online communities such as www.codeproject.com and stackoverflow.com, rather than other types of online communities such as networking-based type of online communities (e.g., facebook.com, twitter.com).

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we introduce the theoretical foundation of this paper, i.e., social exchange theory and organizational support theory. Based on the theoretical foundation, we develop our rationale for each of the hypotheses accordingly. Subsequently, we introduce the data collection method and the operationalization of constructs. We then conduct data analysis and present the results. Ultimately, we conclude this paper with a discussion of the contributions and implications of the findings.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory explains human behaviors in social exchanges (Blau 1964). It posits that individuals behave in ways that maximize their benefits (Molm 1997) and that they take part in an exchange only when they expect benefits from it (Gefen and Ridings 2002). Social exchange differs from economic exchange in the sense that the exchange is not governed by explicit rules or agreements. In such exchanges, people do others a favor with a general expectation of some future returns but no clear expectation of exact future returns. This belief of future returns (or reciprocity) is the central to a social exchange because the lack of explicit rules and regulations means that people have to rely on this belief to justify their expected benefits from the exchange. Therefore, social exchange theory assumes the existence of relatively long-term relationships of interest as opposed to one-off exchanges (Molm 1997).

Social exchange theory has been used to understand the knowledge exchange phenomenon in organizations (Kankanhalli et al. 2005) and online communities (Chiu et al. 2006, Wasko and Faraj 2005). In the context of online communities, members engage in a social exchange with the online community as a whole as well as with a particular forum leader. According to the theory, a member will contribute to an organization or community as long as they obtain benefits from their contributions such as reputation and recognition (Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006, Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Furthermore, past research adopting social exchange theory suggests that knowledge contribution can be derived by expectation of fair exchange, e.g., obtaining information or knowledge from others (Wasko and Faraj 2005) as well as norms for reciprocal exchange (Ye et al. 2010), e.g., pro-sharing norms (Kankanhalli et al. 2005).

2.2. Organizational support and knowledge contribution

As a critical extension of the social exchange theory, the organizational support theory posit that there are two types of perceptions, i.e. organizational support and supervisor support, that predict individuals' behaviors within an organization (Eisenberger et al. 2002, Rhoades et al. 2001). Organizational support refers to individuals' general beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-beings (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Supervisor support represents individuals' general beliefs that the supervisor is appreciative to their contributions and cares about their well-beings (Eisenberger et al. 2002).

Previous research has examined the outcomes of support perceptions. Prior organizational studies suggest that communal exchange and dyadic interaction both motivate organizational citizenship behavior (Eisenberger et al. 2002, Shanock and

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