Reciprocity norms and information-sharing behavior in online consumption communities: An empirical investigation of antecedents and moderators

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks a better understanding of information-sharing behavior in online consumption communities by investigating both the antecedents and moderating mechanisms of such behavior. Using self-reported data collected over two periods, along with objective behavioral data, the authors show that a reciprocity norm functions as a proximal determinant of information-sharing behavior. This norm also channels the effects of social, hedonic, and utilitarian community values on sharing behavior. The results reveal that the conversion of reciprocity norms into information-sharing behavior depends on individual and contextual conditions. These significant insights reflect the integration of consumer resource allocation theory with a reciprocity framework to establish an explanatory platform for members' information-sharing behavior in online communities. Both theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The growing influence of social media has prompted increased academic and mass-media attention to online consumption communities (e.g., [3,104,121]), which are defined as online groups in which members' interactions reflect their shared enthusiasm for or knowledge of a specific consumption activity [25,76]. Such communities allow members to affiliate with like-minded others to obtain purchase advice and/or to share product/service experiences [25,62]. Managers can also leverage the shared information from consumption communities to improve their products or services [4,67,89]. These developments give rise to a new question: Is it possible to encourage greater information-sharing behavior among community members who interact through technology-mediated communication and, if so, how?

The norm of reciprocity is likely a key mechanism underlying members' information-sharing behavior (e.g., [30,36,37,72,83, 118,125]). Gouldner [57] argues that this universal social norm requires people to return some benefits in exchange for any benefits they receive. Community members who hold strong, positive reciprocity norms feel obligated to reciprocate for any beneficial resources that they receive from their online communities because the reciprocation process "reinforces self-esteem and the self-concept, confirms the need to reciprocate, and promotes predictability" [8, p. 276]. Despite the apparent importance of the norm of reciprocity for guiding members' information-sharing behavior, empirical evidence of this link has been inconsistent. For example, Wasko and Faraj [118] employ a social-capital lens to examine knowledge sharing in electronic networks of practice; they find that although reciprocity has no effect on the helpfulness of a contribution, it has a significant, negative impact on contribution volumes. Wiertz and de Ruyter [125] investigate firm-hosted commercial online communities in which customers interact to solve others' service problems, finding that the norm of reciprocity is not associated with information contributions. However, several studies (e.g., [31,37,106]) assert that reciprocity norms have positive effects on members' information-sharing behavior, even in anonymous settings such as Internet browsing.

These conflicting findings suggest the likely presence of moderators that could explain the weak, inconsistent relationships between the predictor and the outcome [18,93]. We accordingly undertake three tasks in this study. First, we draw on consumer resource allocation theory from consumer psychology to examine

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potential moderators of the link between reciprocity norms and information-sharing behavior. This theory states that people allocate various resources to behavioral decision-making processes, including cognitive ability, time, effort, and motivation [20,100,127]. Because decision making involves complex resource-processing tasks, the reciprocity norm alone might not be enough to trigger information-sharing behavior. Instead, according to developments in consumer resource allocation theory, some internal and external resources moderate the effects of behavioral drivers. For example, in their study of consumers' repurchase decision making, Seiders et al. [108] suggest that individual characteristics such as income, relational characteristics such as relationship age, and marketplace (i.e., contextual or situational) characteristics such as competitive intensity moderate the effect of satisfaction as a behavioral driver. Moreover, they posit that these three categories of moderators might be generalizable, and they encourage studies that investigate additional individual and contextual characteristics [108, pp. 39–40]. To complement existing conceptual approaches and focus explicitly on members' information-sharing behavior in online consumption communities, we adopt a similar contingency approach and develop a framework that examines the three types of moderators in members' decision-making processes. To the best of our knowledge, this study contains the first empirical analysis of whether the effect of the norm of reciprocity on information sharing is contingent on these three moderating mechanisms.

Second, there is little research that investigates antecedents of the norm of reciprocity in online communities, even though empirical studies on these factors are extremely important due to the various investments associated with building and maintaining online communities. With better knowledge of these multifaceted determinants, community cultivators can make more efficient resource-allocation decisions. According to social-exchange theory [23,65], embedded obligations result from exchanges of value or favors. Research on group participation behavior also indicates that three levels of community interaction value—social, hedonic, and utilitarian—contribute to the reciprocity norms shared by community members [45,67,114]. To more fully understand information-sharing behavior, we first propose and test a model in which these three dimensions are antecedents of the reciprocity norm and then investigate the relative importance of those dimensions. By adopting this approach, we can test the entire model simultaneously and thus account for all of the variable effects.

Third, to test our proposed model, we undertake a longitudinal field study that combines self-reported and objective behavioral data. This approach constitutes a natural experiment [34] in that it investigates the effects of treatments that researchers cannot—or would find it difficult to—manipulate (e.g., social interactions). Moreover, we collect independent and dependent variable data separately, both to reduce the possibility of same-source or common-method biases and to improve our causal inferences [99]. With this empirical assessment, we also respond to calls for a more comprehensive framework that models the complexity of exchange processes in online communities with longitudinal designs [81,118].

In the next section, we present our conceptual framework and research hypotheses. We then describe our research methodology and present the empirical evidence, after which we discuss the findings and their theoretical and practical implications. We conclude with the limitations of our study and future research avenues.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The conceptual framework in Fig. 1 depicts how we attempt to address extant research gaps. We next define each relevant construct and develop theoretical rationales for the causal relationships among them.

2.1. Information-sharing behavior and the norm of reciprocity

From a value-creation perspective, members' information-sharing behavior constitutes a significant source of collective value in online communities [11,88,89,111]. We regard this behavior as an extra-role construct that differs meaningfully from traditional, passive participation behaviors (e.g., viewing articles, visiting community websites). Noting the central role of members' information-sharing behavior for an online community's success and recognizing that the very nature of online communities diminishes the emphasis on visible and tangible dimensions of communal life (e.g., face-to-face social activities, neighborhoods), we attempt to determine which factors shape information-sharing behavior in online community settings.

Prior attempts to explain members' sharing behaviors are dominated by references to the reciprocity framework [30]. This interpersonal construct appears fundamental to social stability and drives relational exchanges [22,57,65,87]. Despite repeated calls for investigation [8,91], little relationship management research
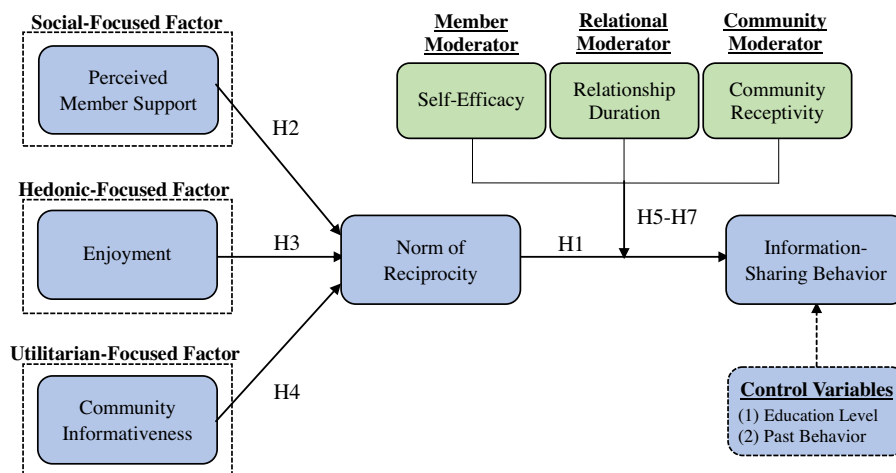

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.