Virtual knowledge sharing in a cross-cultural context

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify what factors impact employees’ online knowledge sharing in a cross-cultural context.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research design was used. Data were collected from 41 in-depth interviews with Chinese and American employees who worked for a multinational Fortune 100 company.

Findings – The research discovered that three categories of factors were critical in impacting Chinese and American participants’ online knowledge sharing: organizational issues, national cultural differences, and online communities of practice (CoPs). Organizational issues, including performance expectancy, compatibility based on work practice, knowledge-sharing culture and time pressures, were identified as being important factors that strongly influenced both Chinese and Americans’ knowledge sharing. Three major national culture-related differences emerged as significant: language, different thinking logic, and different levels of perceived credibility of voluntarily shared knowledge. These cultural differences made Chinese participants contribute knowledge less frequently than their US peers. Online CoPs showed both advantages and disadvantages in facilitating knowledge sharing among globally distributed members, and these factors influenced both cultural groups in similar ways.

Research limitations/implications – The findings were based on a single case study from one business sector. Only US and Chinese participants were included in the study.

Originality/value – Research on knowledge sharing among geographically distributed and culturally diversified employees through online systems is still in its infancy. The paper integrates research from multiple disciplines (organizational studies, national culture and online CoPs) to address the literature gap. The findings will assist knowledge management managers to make global knowledge sharing more fruitful in multinational organizations.

Keywords Knowledge management, Organizations, National cultures

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The emergence of the knowledge-based economy, the vast size of global organizations, and the intensification of competition have come together to require organizations to be as agile and intelligent as they can be, and one important way for organizations to meet this requirement is to enable organizational members to share their knowledge efficiently (Nissen, 2007). As large organizations go global, they tend to recruit members from various countries and these members bring different national cultural values to workplaces. National culture influences people’s knowledge sharing by shaping their knowledge sharing attitudes and impacting their cognitive styles (Bhagat et al., 2002; Ford and Chan, 2003; Leidner and Kayworth, 2006). As the trend of globalization continues, the need has never been greater for understanding the complicated process of knowledge sharing among organizational members in cross-cultural contexts, but research in this area is still in its infancy (Peltokorpi, 2006; Yoo and Torrey, 2002).
Empirical research has shown a strong and positive relationship between the adoption of knowledge management practices and firms’ performance (Marqués and Simón, 2006; Small, 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that many multinational corporations have adopted knowledge management practices and implemented online knowledge sharing systems by taking advantage of advanced information and communication technologies (ICTs) in order to support knowledge sharing between geographically distributed and culturally diversified members (Michailova and Nielsen, 2006; Yoo and Torrey, 2002). As cross-cultural knowledge sharing goes online, the computer-mediated environment adds another layer of complexity to the already complicated cross-cultural sharing process in organizational settings. Although real knowledge management practice presents a strong need to explore how people share knowledge and what influences their sharing behavior in online, cross-cultural contexts, very little research has been conducted to date in the field of cross-cultural knowledge sharing among organizational members through online systems (Ardichvili et al., 2006).

To address the research gap, this study examined a specific knowledge sharing system, given the pseudonym ShareNet, within a US-based multinational corporation. The research objectives were to find out what factors impact Chinese and American users’ online knowledge sharing in ShareNet.

Literature review

In order to get some ideas about what factors influence cross-cultural knowledge sharing through online systems in organizations, let us look at the three relevant research fields:

1. the influence of organizational issues on knowledge sharing;
2. the impact of national cultural differences on knowledge sharing; and
3. the effect of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on knowledge sharing.

Many studies have been carried out to examine how organizational issues such as reward systems, work practices and organizational culture impact on knowledge sharing (Chong, 2007; Davenport and Prusak, 1998). This body of rich research is very valuable in explaining why people share knowledge to different extents in organizational environments, but cannot explain why, within the same organization, different cultural groups share knowledge differently.

In the area of cross-cultural research, many scholars have highlighted the importance of cross-cultural consideration in cross-border knowledge sharing, and some have explored how national cultural differences impact knowledge sharing (Bhagat et al., 2002; Dulaimi, 2007). For example, researchers use national culture models, such as Hofstede’s (2001) model, to propose theoretical frameworks of how national culture might influence knowledge sharing between people from different cultures (Bhagat et al., 2002), but these hypotheses have not been tested yet. Other researchers use national cultural theories, such as collectivism-individualism and Confucian dynamism to set up hypotheses and then use survey data to test these hypotheses, but more hypotheses are disproved than supported (Zhang et al., 2006). Some researchers have conducted case studies on knowledge sharing in multicultural settings (Ford and Chan, 2003). What is in common among all these efforts is that researchers try to use national culture to explain the difference observed among people from different countries, with many other possible factors left out, such as organizational issues. Therefore, they cannot provide a sound explanation for the fact that even within the same cultural group, individuals share knowledge differently.

Research on the effect of CMC on knowledge sharing has provided mixed findings. For example, some researchers find that CMC has a negative effect on knowledge sharing (Roberts, 2000), while some researchers report the opposite (Pan and Leidner, 2003). Empirical studies also indicate that sometimes there is no direct influence of CMC on knowledge sharing (Hooff and Ridder, 2004). Considering these mixed findings, more research should be carried out in order to find out how online media impact knowledge sharing.
Besides the research done in each of the three single areas, some researchers have looked at the intersection of two of the three areas. For example, some studies have looked at how people from different countries share knowledge in organizational settings (Chow et al., 2000; Ford and Chan, 2003; Pak and Park, 2004; Peltokorpi, 2006). These studies provide important empirical findings on how national culture can impact knowledge sharing, but these studies either did not address the influence of online environments or failed to address organizational issues and national cultural factors in a systematic way. Some studies have looked at knowledge sharing through online systems in organizational settings (Kwok and Gao, 2004) or knowledge sharing between project/team members in virtual environments (Soule, 2003; Zakaria et al., 2004). But these studies did not integrate cross-cultural factors.

Therefore, we can see that each of these reference areas is limited in some way for understanding why and how people with different national cultural values share or do not share knowledge through online systems within the same organization. In addition, when a domestically used online system is used by people from other countries, the cross-cultural factor should be included in a systematic way, because this addition may bring an interaction effect between national culture and organizational culture and/or an interaction effect between national culture and online environments. But researchers have not yet looked into this complexity.

Theoretical development

Knowledge sharing and communities of practice

The theoretical perspectives developed by Brown and Duguid (1991, 2001), Lave and Wenger (1991), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and Wenger (1998) suggest that participants, either experts or novices, partake jointly in the process of learning from each other and creating new knowledge. People take part in knowledge sharing activities in order to acquire new knowledge. According to Brown and Duguid (2001), “learning is inevitably implied in the acquisition of knowledge” (p. 200), so learning is an indispensable component of the knowledge sharing process. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) also suggest that learning and knowledge sharing are interdependent. Building on these theoretical perspectives, I define “knowledge sharing” in this study as the activity in which participants are involved in the joint process of contributing, negotiating and utilizing knowledge. Knowledge sharing is a joint process in nature because participants need to be engaged in the process if they really want to share knowledge. The form of engagement can be contributing their ideas, or negotiating the meaning of knowledge, or absorbing and making sense of others’ ideas in order to use them for future tasks; therefore, knowledge sharing activities include both knowledge contributing and knowledge consuming aspects. Other researchers have also argued that knowledge sharing is a two-way process with both knowledge providers and knowledge consumers involved (Hendriks, 1999; Hooff and Ridder, 2004; Koh and Kim, 2004).

In their book on situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) establish the notion of a “community of practice”. Wenger et al. (2002) define communities of practice (CoPs) as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). In recent years, CoPs have been described and justified as an effective way for knowledge sharing and learning because CoPs can provide the right context and shared language (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 2001; Chua, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). The rationale for this strategy is that knowledge is embedded in communities,
Conceptual framework

Some scholars from information system research have constructed a unified model that summarizes the factors influencing user acceptance and behavior within information systems, known as the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003, p. 447). The contributors to the UTAUT have suggested that the core determinants (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions) in this model can be used to explain actual usage of information technologies. According to the UTAUT, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions influence use behavior in information systems. Knowledge sharing systems are information and communication systems designed to support and enhance knowledge sharing activities (Carlsson, 2003; Feng et al., 2004); therefore, research results from the area of information systems can inform us as to what factors might influence people’s behavior within knowledge sharing systems. A modified version of this model is adopted in this study to build a guiding framework. For the purpose of this study, “use behavior” is replaced with “knowledge sharing behavior”. By adapting the UTAUT to the particular knowledge sharing context for this study, the author has built a conceptual framework that guides this study (see Figure 1). In this conceptual framework, knowledge sharing is the response variable, which may be influenced by four categories of explanatory variables:

1. performance expectancy;
2. effort expectancy;
3. social influence; and
4. facilitating conditions.

A detailed explanation of the four categories of variables is provided by Venkatesh et al. (2003).

According to Kling (2000), the social and cultural contexts in which ICTs are situated do matter, so he argues for a social-technical perspective for studying the design, uses and consequences of ICTs. The ShareNet examined in this research is one type of ICTs. Therefore, based on Kling’s arguments, not only is the technical aspect important, but the institutional and cultural contexts where the ShareNet is implemented should also be taken into account in order to understand American and Chinese users’ knowledge sharing behavior. In this study, the ‘institutional and cultural contexts’ specifically refer to the multinational corporation that the Chinese and American participants work for and the cross-cultural environment where they act based on different national cultural values.

This study takes the customized UTAUT (Venkatesh et al., 2003), namely the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1, as a starting-point and tests it qualitatively by collecting data in order to find out what factors impact American and Chinese users’ knowledge sharing behavior. A bottom-up strategy is employed for treating all the possible factors that
influence their knowledge sharing in order to avoid bias as much as possible. The impact of national cultural differences is expected to emerge from the research process, if they are important, as this study employs the bottom-up strategy to treat cultural factors instead of asking participants culture-related leading questions.

**Research method**

To fulfill the research goals, the author conducted 41 in-depth interviews. The interviewees were 21 American and 20 Chinese employees who worked for a multinational Fortune 100 company (to maintain confidentiality, a pseudonym, Alpha, is used for this company). These interviewees played various job roles in Alpha. In order to facilitate knowledge sharing among its globally dispersed employees, Alpha provides various advanced ICTs as collaborative tools and one of them is the ShareNet. The ShareNet is internet-based and password-protected. It hosts thousands of CoPs and each of them is devoted to one specific topic area. The ShareNet allows users to consume knowledge in the form of browsing or searching, and to contribute knowledge in the form of posting (e.g. asking questions, answering questions, making recommendations and posting materials) in communities.

An interview instrument was developed to guide the interviews. The semi-structured interview instrument covered the factors that were expected to influence knowledge sharing in the conceptual framework. Questions that operationalized performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and facilitating conditions were developed based on existing literature and information obtained from the knowledge-sharing representatives in Alpha. The interviewees were also invited to discuss any factors that they thought impact their knowledge sharing, but were not mentioned by the interviewer. The 41 interviews lasted from 42 to 126 minutes, with an average of 75 minutes. Of the 41 interviews, 30 were completed face-to-face in participants’ working locations and the other 11 were done over the phone.

When collecting data, the author visited Alpha’s headquarters and its subsidiaries in China (Beijing and Shanghai) multiple times and had meetings with Alpha’s knowledge sharing managers in order to gain field experiences and better understand employees’ working environments. All the interview data were coded and analyzed in ATLAS.ti (version 5.0) using the qualitative data analysis method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). In order to increase credibility of the findings from the interview data, the author did member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) at the end of the interview. Senior researchers in the field of knowledge sharing were invited to review the study findings. In addition, knowledge sharing managers from Alpha reviewed the findings and acknowledged that the findings were credible.

**Findings**

This section presents the results of the interview data analysis. Three categories of factors were identified by the study participants as being critical in impacting their knowledge sharing in the ShareNet:

1. organizational issues;
2. national cultural differences; and
3. online CoPs.

**The impact of organizational issues**

In this study, performance expectancy, compatibility based on work practice, knowledge sharing culture and time pressure turned out to be important organizational factors that strongly influenced both Chinese and Americans’ knowledge sharing.

Performance expectancy turned out to be the strongest driver for both cultural groups to share knowledge through the ShareNet, either in the consuming or the contributing manner. Almost all the interviewees commented that people were motivated to share knowledge in the ShareNet because they realized its value for their jobs. In particular, the interviewees
mentioned three main reasons for using the system to improve their job performance. First, they perceived that the ShareNet could help them solve problems by reaching out to many people quickly or conveniently. Second, the participants stated that the ShareNet helped them stay on top of developments in their professional areas. Many interviewees explained that they spent time reading postings in the ShareNet because they wanted to stay current. Third, most interviewees emphasized that the ShareNet provided them unique benefits that were hard to gain from elsewhere. They identified several unique benefits that could only be gained through the ShareNet. These unique benefits included building/expanding networks, harvesting collective intelligence, and providing a final resort for community members to seek for help. And respondents felt very strongly about these benefits.

This study also provides clear evidence that the value of knowledge sharing for improving job performance was closely related to compatibility, i.e. the fit between knowledge sharing and work practice. Both Chinese and American participants explicitly remarked that the compatibility influenced the extent to which they used the system. And the level of compatibility was determined by what job roles people were in and whether they thought using the system could help them fulfill job responsibilities. Actually, half of the interviewees explicitly said that people’s job roles impacted their participation level in the ShareNet.

In terms of posting in the ShareNet, characteristics of job tasks made a big difference because people with different assignments perceived different levels of fit between contributing and their job needs. For some participants, answering questions or sharing materials in the ShareNet was part of their job duties, as one can see from quotes like ‘‘sharing is part of my job’’. However, if answering questions was not viewed as included in people’s job scope, they would not be motivated much to spend time in offering ideas, as indicated by such comments as ‘‘it is not my duty to answer others’ questions in the ShareNet’’.

In addition, some interviewees mentioned that they participated in knowledge sharing differently simply because of the different job roles they played during different periods of time. Most of the interviewees perceived that Alpha had a fairly strong knowledge sharing culture. And they made remarks such as ‘‘Alpha emphasizes teamwork. An individual can not perform well if his team does not perform well’’. With an open, sharing attitude and high teamwork spirit, most people interviewed seldom sheltered knowledge for the purpose of keeping personal competitive advantage. Situated in such a sharing-friendly culture, if someone did not share proactively it typically was not due to knowledge hoarding. Participants from both cultural groups rarely mentioned any factors related to peer competition for not sharing. Influenced by this strong sharing culture, some people were motivated to share knowledge out of reciprocity or for the purpose of helping colleagues grow.

Time constraint was also an important factor influencing how frequently participants used the ShareNet. Even though there was a strong knowledge sharing culture in Alpha, half of the interviewees mentioned that lack of time prevented them from using the ShareNet more heavily. Some participants, especially Chinese participants, even stayed up late to finish their daily routine and this type of workload did not leave much time for them to consume
knowledge, let alone contribute knowledge, as seen from the interesting words offered by a Chinese Traffic Manager:

Our department is called “night club”. “Night club” means 夜总会 in Chinese, “夜” means “at night,” “总会” means “always” and “have meetings”, so “night club” means “always have meetings at night”.

This Chinese participant used a metaphor in a joking way to express the fact that they had to work overtime. Her words illustrate the fact that many participants were under pressure to finish their own job responsibilities. Besides, knowledge sharing was not directly considered in Alpha’s job evaluation process. Therefore, many interviewees put knowledge sharing as a lower priority than their assigned tasks unless sharing was part of their job tasks. Some participants also mentioned that the time constraints made the sharing culture in Alpha were more reactive than proactive in nature. They remarked that Alpha employees were generous with sharing upon request. When asked directly, they were enthusiastic to respond to the best of their abilities. However, most people did not share proactively because of the fast-paced work dynamics.

The influence of national cultural differences

This study identified three major national culture-related differences between the Chinese and American groups. To be more specific, language, different thinking logic, and different levels of perceived credibility of what was shared in the ShareNet emerged as important factors in this study that influenced participants’ knowledge sharing.

Findings from this study indicate that English created some barriers for Chinese participants to share knowledge. The negative influence of different languages was clearly reflected in Chinese participants’ reluctance to post. Chinese participants in this study did not want to make extra effort to express their ideas in a second language when they were not required to do so. In addition, they might be concerned that what they wrote in English would be interpreted differently from what they intended to communicate. The negative influence caused by the language barrier was well stated by a Chinese Certified Public Accountant who had working experience in both China and the USA. She said:

When Chinese people have to solve problems in English, they can overcome the language barrier. However, in a free space like the ShareNet, people may not be willing to post. They are concerned whether they can freely express their ideas and whether what they write will be understood as they wish.

However, in terms of consuming knowledge, language did not seem to be a huge barrier. With sufficient English skills, many Chinese did not perceive that text only being available in English made much difference for them to browse what others posted.

Different thinking logic was the second cultural difference suggested by the study findings. Interview data show that Chinese and American participants emphasized context to different extents and thus had different thinking logics. Most Chinese participants hesitated to borrow knowledge accumulated from a different context because they placed high weight on context when interpreting knowledge. For example, a Market/Administrative Assistant explained why she did not want to raise questions in the ShareNet this way:

If I ask a question on the ShareNet and get answers from the US or Australia, I don’t know whether their answers will be valuable for me considering different situations in different locations. We do different work in different locations.

Chinese interviewees also felt more reluctant to broadcast their knowledge to people who work in radically different environments. They were less willing to answer questions or to exchange ideas with American colleagues because Chinese interviewees thought that different working contexts made it not as valuable to share with Americans. Also, they were concerned about the possibility of introducing confusion rather than helping by sharing the knowledge they gained in Chinese subsidiaries, where practices can be unique to the local areas.
However, the interview data indicate that most American users adopted a different thinking style. They thought that different working contexts made knowledge sharing not only a necessary task but also a rewarding one. Most American interviewees expressed strong interests in reading non-English postings because they thought that postings from other countries could bring unique information and ideas. For example, an IT Analyst remarked that he found that some unique information came from areas of the world where people do not use English. Here is the instance he used to explain his point of view:

Chinese and Japanese characters use the double-byte links. They run into that kind of stuff much more often than we do. Sometimes they have specialized information that can be extremely useful.

From these quotes, we can see that the different perceived connection between diverse working contexts and the necessity to share made a difference in participants’ knowledge sharing: Americans asked/answered questions more often and shared personal experiences more often than Chinese users in the ShareNet.

The ShareNet examined in this study was a free and equal space for members to post voluntarily. Most American users perceived that what was posted in the ShareNet was credible and therefore they thought the system was a great resource to tap into. And some of the American participants asked questions in the ShareNet in order to collect inputs from multiple people and then create solutions by using their own judgment. They thought the ShareNet was a fairly credible source for getting opinions as reference. An American Human Resource Manager explained this way:

When a question is asked, typically who responds is someone who is an expert or who knows the subject matter. I don’t think I will have a problem to trust the answer that is given.

Differently, some Chinese did not feel as comfortable as their American peers when using the voluntarily shared knowledge since in their opinions the ShareNet was not official and thus could not function as a source for authoritative answers. And Chinese participants did not seem to think of using the ShareNet to collect different ideas. A Chinese Direct Sales Representative provided a typical quote:

I dare not trust the answers from the ShareNet since people just volunteer to answer questions there. I need someone to answer my question and be responsible for his or her answer. I question the qualification of respondents on the ShareNet.

**The effects of online CoPs**

In this study, online CoPs showed both advantages and disadvantages in facilitating knowledge sharing among globally distributed members when compared with other media. Participants in this study stressed a unique benefit of sharing knowledge through online CoPs, saying that the key value of the ShareNet resided in its communities. People could set up communities or join those they were interested in, and then obtained a list of people with common professional interests. Besides, this list kept being updated automatically as community members joined or left. For example, an American engineer in the Global Mining Division said:

If you are a member of a community, you have a list of the people who have the same interest with you. There is no other way to get it easily.

As soon as a message was posted in the virtual community, all the community members received that message via e-mail and some of those who had opinions to share would respond. Some of these interviewees clearly recognized that the electronic ties through online CoPs could bring out the power of collective intelligence and thus secure a way to solve problems as quickly as possible; therefore, they posted questions in communities or read others’ postings in order to gather general information or opinions on a topic, collect suggestions and find solutions to specific problems.

Although online CoPs have the advantages of connecting people who are electronically weakly tied, they are not without limitations. In this study, some participants did not ask questions in online CoPs because of the special nature of questions they encountered, such
as questions that are hard to explain online or sensitive issues that it is not proper to disclose. In these situations, these people preferred to consult someone one-on-one rather than ask in a public space like the ShareNet.

In addition, participants in this study stressed a compelling factor – the presence of multiple sharing channels, such as e-mail, face-to-face meetings and videoconferencing, which were often more direct and efficient. In many cases, these more direct sharing means with higher media richness were more effective for accomplishing jobs than the ShareNet, and thus using other channels was beneficial for their performance. Among all the supplemental sharing channels for the ShareNet, personal networks were the most frequently mentioned by both cultural groups. For example, when explaining the reasons for not asking questions in the ShareNet, many interviewees said that they usually preferred to use their personal networks, because they knew who in their networks could answer their questions.

**Discussion and implications**

The findings from this study help confirm the significant impact of organizational issues on knowledge sharing, as reported by previous research. Performance expectancy and compatibility with job needs were critical factors influencing participants’ knowledge sharing. Indeed, literature in information system research has unanimously agreed that performance expectancy is what motivates people to use the systems (Venkatesh et al., 2003). According to Rogers (2003), people have to see the compatibility between using a knowledge sharing system and a felt need in order to be motivated to use it. The influence of job tasks on knowledge sharing has also been documented by previous research (Chong, 2007).

Together these findings suggest the importance of building a connection between knowledge sharing and one’s felt job needs in order to motivate knowledge sharing. Organizations should provide enough support, such as training and communication on how the knowledge sharing system can fit into targeted users’ jobs, to help them build the connection instead of merely providing the technical component. The findings also imply that organizations should make efforts to provide knowledge sharing systems that can be integrated into employees’ daily work practice or design jobs that entail knowledge sharing if they want to promote knowledge sharing effectively.

Three major national cultural differences emerged as important in impacting Chinese and American participants’ knowledge sharing. These findings were consistent with previous research. First, the present study reported a negative effect of lack of a common language on knowledge sharing, which is consistent with existing empirical studies (Peltokorpi, 2006; Wei, 2007). The negative impact of the linguistic barrier on Chinese participants’ willingness to contribute suggests that multinational organizations might want to allow members working in overseas subsidiaries to post in their native language and then translate their postings for circulation to a larger audience.

The second cultural difference is that Chinese and American interviewees showed different thinking logics. This difference might be rooted in collectivism/individualism, one of the five main national cultural dimensions theorized by Hofstede (2001). Bhagat et al. (2002) argue that collectivism and individualism significantly influence people’s cognitive styles. Drawing on evidence from different fields, including ethnography and philosophy, they claim that
people in an individualist society tend to adopt the “analytic” mode of thinking while collectivists tend to have a “holistic” mode of thinking (p. 215). According to Bhagat et al. (2002), Americans tend to adopt the “analytic” mode and “analyze each piece of information, taken one at a time, for its unique contribution to knowledge”; however, Chinese usually have the “holistic” mode and like to “analyze the entire spectrum of information”, which is called “contextualism” (p. 215). Indeed, existing studies have reported similar cultural differences between people from collectivistic societies and those from individualistic societies (Husted and Michailova, 2002; Peltokorpi, 2006).

The third cultural difference regarding different levels of perceived credibility of what was shared might be caused by participants’ different levels of uncertainty avoidance, another important dimension to differentiate Chinese culture from American culture (Hofstede, 2001). According to Hofstede, Chinese like to seek a precise match or authoritative answers since they come from a culture with high uncertainty avoidance, while Americans are used to taking various types of explicit knowledge and integrating them to create something new, since they are from a culture with low uncertainty avoidance. These theoretical perspectives are echoed by Triandis (1995). Actually, uncertainty avoidance has been documented as a common factor in the existing literature that can affect how people share knowledge (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Yoo and Torrey, 2002).

Research on CoPs, CMC, and social networks suggests that online CoPs can have both positive and negative impacts on knowledge sharing (Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Wenger et al., 2002). This is indeed the case of the present study. The main advantage of online CoPs was that ShareNet users could take advantage of “the strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973). However, online CoPs also had limitations. Actually, experts in knowledge sharing have pointed out that although virtual CoPs have been used widely by organizations and discussed abundantly in the literature, they are supplemented by many other sharing channels (Dalkir, 2005). In this research, participants emphasized that they shared through a collection of multiple channels. There is a critical practical implication from this fact. Organizations should provide an appropriate mix of communication media in order to optimize the whole knowledge sharing process as different sharing channels can complement each other. Participants in this study repeatedly pointed out their reliance on personal networks for sharing knowledge. Other researchers have also reported similar findings (Ardichvili et al., 2003). Considering the key role played by personal networks in facilitating knowledge sharing, organizations should make efforts to help people build and maintain professional networks. In particular, they can help build fairly strong connections between people from different cultures in order to encourage cross-cultural knowledge sharing.

Finally, this research has suggested the strong need to synthesize theories from different disciplines to examine the complex phenomenon of online knowledge sharing among organizational members in cross-cultural settings because they can all make a contribution to understanding people’s knowledge sharing patterns. By focusing on knowledge sharing through one specific system, this study has identified three categories of factors that impacted Chinese and American participants’ knowledge sharing, namely:

1. organizational issues;
2. national culture; and
3. online CoPs.

Future scholars can investigate online knowledge sharing in other types of organizations or in contexts of different cultural mixes in order to further this area of research. Two limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting findings from this study. First, the study findings were based on a single case study from one business sector and thus could be industry-specific. Second, only American and Chinese users were included in this study. Further research is needed to see whether the findings from this study can be transferred to other types of cross-cultural settings.
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