

Chapter 25

The Effects of Individual and National Cultures in Knowledge Sharing: A Comparative Study of the U.S. and China

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ABSTRACT

A major challenge for multinational companies is to motivate employees with different individual cultural characteristics and national cultures to share knowledge. Although comparative studies across different countries have been conducted, little is known about the effects of individual cultural differences in this context. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of individual and national cultures in knowledge sharing. The individual cultural characteristics of power distance, individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance are incorporated into the model as antecedents of knowledge-sharing motivations (organizational rewards, image, and reciprocal benefits). National cultural differences are examined by subjects conducted in the U.S. and China. Results show that power distance is significantly related to reciprocal benefits for the U.S. but not for China. Individualism/collectivism is related to organizational rewards and image for the U.S. but not for China, while individualism/collectivism is significantly related to reciprocal benefits for China but not for the U.S. Uncertainty avoidance is significantly related to reciprocal benefits for the U.S. but not for China. This study provides knowledge-sharing practices and managements for multinational companies attempting to motivate U.S. and Chinese employees to share knowledge.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's knowledge-based business environments, a mass of knowledge are growing and increasing in organizations. Knowledge can be viewed as the most valuable resources because it helps organizations increase competitive advantage (Huang *et al.*, 2008; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). As knowledge is critical for organizations, how can organizations motivate their employees to share knowledge? Based on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), knowledge sharing can be driven by motivational factors, such as organizational rewards, image, reciprocal benefits, knowledge self-efficacy, and altruism (Bock & Kim, 2002; Bock *et al.*, 2005; Chen *et al.*, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2008; Hung *et al.*, 2011; Hung *et al.*, 2011; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Kankanhalli *et al.*, 2005; Lin, 2007). If knowledge-sharing motivations can be provided for employees, will all employees be willing to share their knowledge? According to prior results, the answers seem to be equivocal. For example, U.S. samples show that image has a significant impact on knowledge-sharing intentions (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), but Chinese samples do not (Hung *et al.*, 2011). In another case, reciprocal benefits positively affect knowledge-sharing intentions for Chinese employees (Lin, 2007) but not for U.S. employees (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). This implies that even if organizations provide the same motivations, employee's behavioral intentions do not universally hold across cultures and countries (Srite & Karahanna, 2006).

To deeply understand cultural contexts, some existing studies have employed Hofstede's (2001) multidimensional national cultural framework to analyze the main knowledge-sharing differences (Chow *et al.*, 2000; Griffith *et al.*, 2006; Jiacheng *et al.*, 2010; Posey *et al.*, 2010). The cultural dimensions include individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity (Hofstede, 1980). Also, Hofstede's country scores are lent to theorize differences between countries. For example, the U.S. and China can be classified as individualistic and collectivistic countries (the U.S. has a score of 91 and China has a score of 20). China and the U.S. can be classified as high and low power distance countries (China has a score of 80 and the U.S. has a score of 40).

Behavioral models can be influenced and modified by national culture, but individual beliefs, values, and self-motivated behaviors may also be shaped by individual cultural characteristics (Tyler *et al.*, 2000). Although two individuals belong to the same country, they may have different cultural characteristics because of religions, ethnic backgrounds, regions, and linguistic backgrounds (Lee *et al.*, 2007; Karahanna *et al.*, 2005). Thus, cultural characteristics are treated as individual difference variables and should be measured at individual level of analysis (Srite & Karahanna, 2006).

However, current knowledge-sharing studies have investigated the effects of culture at the national level rather than at the individual level (Chow *et al.*, 2000; Griffith *et al.*, 2006; Jiacheng *et al.*, 2010; Posey *et al.*, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how cultural characteristics influence knowledge-sharing motivations, which in turn influence knowledge-sharing intentions. We incorporate Hofstede's cultural dimensions into knowledge-sharing models. In addition to individual cultural characteristics, national cultural differences are examined by subjects conducted in the U.S. and China. We choose the U.S. and China because the two countries have salient differences in most of Hofstede's country score (Hofstede, 2001). The U.S. is characterized as individualistic, high uncertainty avoidance, and low power distance country, while China is characterized as collectivistic, low uncertainty avoidance, and high power distance country.

This study is the first to develop a model that includes the effects of both individual and national cultures in knowledge sharing. We confirm that individual cultural characteristics influence knowledge-sharing motivations, which in turn influence knowledge-sharing intentions. The results also show signifi-

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