

Chapter 2

Internationalization of Online Professional Communities: An Empirical Investigation of AIS-ISWorld

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ABSTRACT

We report on an empirical investigation of the internationalization of an online community of practice situated in academe and which fosters among its members communication and collaboration. Attracting additional active participants throughout the world is an important goal for many online professional communities. Based on theories and findings in the innovation diffusion and international business literature, we propose that cultural distance has significant negative effects on the activity of an online community encompassing different countries, while economic conditions will moderate this negative impact. An empirical study based on the archival data from AIS-ISWorld, an online community of information systems academics, supports our central hypotheses.

INTRODUCTION

Online communities are used widely across different professions to support collaborative professional and social interactions as well as knowledge

exchange among people with common interests, backgrounds, or both. In an online community of practice (CoP), members share ideas and experiences, ask questions, access industry information, and increase their professional exposure through social networking. They also perform tasks and solve problems through collaboration with both

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known and unknown colleagues. Many online professional communities transcend geographical constraints and expand their operations worldwide. Such international expansion can be beneficial to the community because membership diversity contributes significantly to its growth and development through the absorption of novel ideas, the transfer of knowledge, the solving and prevention of problems collaboratively, and expansion of the community's base network—all in a borderless medium.

Professional online communities promote collaborative work among professionals across boundaries through two parallel approaches. On the one hand, they effectively complement established off-line communities of practice to allow for broader collaboration among already familiar colleagues and contacts. With much greater speed, the online communities can disseminate time-sensitive information regarding various off-line activities of related communities of practice—information such as the logistics of organizing conferences. On the other hand, online communities also provide opportunities for users to extend collaborative activities beyond face-to-face meetings. In some cases, they lead to new collaborations sustained online even when face-to-face connections have not already been established. In online communities, users voluntarily engage in various problem solving and knowledge exchanges. These self-motivated collaborations can transcend both geographical boundaries and the constraints of specific knowledge domains. In this sense, online communities not only forge a sense of professional kinship but also nurture global team building.

Several studies have addressed issues related to the dynamics of virtual collaboration (e.g., Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004) as well as the antecedents of active participation in online communities (e.g., Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

However, most of these studies take a micro-perspective and examine the issues by investigating individual differences, group compositions, or design features of computer-mediated technologies (e.g., Gemino, Parker, & Kutzschan, 2006; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2000; Preece, 2000; Webb, Nemer, Chizhik, & Sugrue, 1998). By contrast, this article presents an analysis of online community participation from a macro-perspective and describes an investigation based on aggregated active participation at the national level. Our empirical results contribute to a better understanding of how international professional associations and societies can more effectively manage online collaboration among members affiliated with organizations in different countries.

The international business and global diffusion literature offer theories and findings related to the international expansion of organizations. Based on these theories, cultural distance and economic factors are two representative antecedents of international expansion. Hence, we specifically propose (1) that cultural distance will negatively affect the expansion of an online community of practice across countries and (2) that national economic standing (GDP per capita) is positively related to the expansion. We examine the two proposed hypotheses using archival data collected from a particular online community of practice in academe: AIS-ISWorld.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we provide a brief conceptual overview of online communities. Then we describe our research setting: AISWorld Net and the ISWorld Mailing List. Next, we review the relevant theoretical literature and develop our specific research hypotheses. Then, we present the research design and results of our data analysis and subsequently identify the limitations of the study. Finally, we summarize our major findings and their implications and suggest some possible directions for future research.

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