User Involvement in Self-governing Contents in Professional Online Communities

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Abstract

Increasingly, professionals seek knowledge from online communities to resolve problems that they encounter in the workplace. However, the quality and reliability of online contents are still a concern. Previous research suggests that user involvement in sorting out online contents is likely to be an effective means to ease some of the concern. Nonetheless, our understanding of factors that influence professionals’ involvement in sorting out quality contents in professional online communities is still limited. Thus, this study proposes a research model to understand the underlying factors. The key factors include reciprocity, reputation, trust, community commitment, and self-determined motivation. A web-based survey is developed based on validated measures in the literature to collect data to empirically evaluate the research model. This study can enhance our understanding of professionals’ involvement in sorting out online contents. In addition, findings of this study may assist professional online communities to find ways to incentivise user involvement.

Keywords
Intention, Motivation, Professional online communities, Self-governance, Social exchange

1. Introduction

A Harris Poll commissioned by Business Week in 1997 showed that 42% of participants who were involved in online communities said that their participation was related to their profession (Chiu et al., 2006). Since then, online communities, especially professional online communities where people can obtain, share, and exchange professional knowledge, have been playing an increasingly important role in professionals’ careers. For example, Ala-Mutka et al.’s (2009) reported that 75% of the IT professionals who were using IT online communities reported that participating in these communities help them do a better job and 68% stated that their participation helped their professional development.

As the use of professional online communities among professional people increases, the quality and reliability of contents have become a concern. The public participation in professional online communities means that, the amount of contents can increase dramatically which may prolong the time for users to locate useful contents (Zheng et al., 2010). As a result, some users may stop using these communities or decrease their uses over time (Hercheui, 2010). In other words, users can easily switch to other professional online communities if they have to spend a lot of time to locate useful contents.
Therefore, a professional online community needs to have effective mechanisms to sort out quality contents in order to retain users and increase the likelihood of its success.

Previously, some online communities assign the quality maintenance task to community managers or a small group of users with privileges to safeguard the quality of shared knowledge (Waterson, 2006). However, in recent years, there are increasing calls for getting users involved in this task to share the workload (Arrasvuori et al., 2009). This concept is generally referred to as a self-governance mechanism which is defined as the task of users steering and coordinating actions and managing their interdependencies among themselves (Schwagereit et al., 2011). Examples of adopting self-governance mechanisms are eBay’s feedback forum, Amazon’s book review, Yahoo! Answers’ voting, and Slashdot’s moderation system. In these applications, users’ inputs provide information for community decisions by promoting useful information while ranking down less useful information.

The goal of implementing self-governance mechanisms is to maintain quality and reliable contents in professional online communities. Achieving this goal relies on users’ voluntary participation and collaboration. Website features supporting the implementation of self-governance mechanisms may include “comment”, “vote”, and “report”. For example, reviews and comments written by users were found useful for identifying quality contents in organisational repositories (Kayhan et al., 2009). Jeon et al. (2006) argued that non-textual information, such as “vote”, could be used to predict the quality of answers in Q&A online communities. In addition, users flagging and reporting low quality news comments were found to be beneficial for managing the quality of news comments (Diakopoulos et al., 2011).

Prior research highlights the importance of user involvement in efficiently implementing self-governance mechanisms. Nevertheless, our understanding of why users are willing to get involved in sorting out quality contents for other professionals beyond organisational boundaries is still limited. Therefore, this study aims to develop a research model to explain users’ intention to participate in self-governing contents in professional online communities.

2. Theoretical background and propositions development

Three streams of research on user motivation and contribution to online knowledge management are useful for this study. The first stream investigates users’ motivation to be moderators or leaders in helping the community achieve its goals of managing the quality of online contents. The second stream has looked into user motivation to give comments or to rate online contents to present quality contents to others. The third stream investigates user motivation to collaboratively and voluntarily provide quality products in online settings.

Based on previous literature, this paper proposes a research model, as shown in Figure 1., to explain users’ intention to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities. Relationships between these constructs in the research model are discussed below.

![Figure 1. Research model](image-url)
3.1 Self-determined motivation and intention

Prior research conceptualises motivation as consisting of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2000). However, it is argued that it is not the distinction among different types of motivations that drives user behaviour, but rather the degree to which the motivation is self-determined (Ryan et al., 2002). While intrinsic motivation comes from the self, extrinsic motivation can be integrated or internalized and accumulated together with intrinsic motivation as self-determined motivation (Ryan et al., 2002). Despite different degrees of each type of motivation, all types of motivation eventually compose self-determined motivation to induce behaviour.

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), self-determined motivation reflects an individual’s intention to act. In other words, the more self-determined the motivation is, the more an individual is likely to carry out the activity with greater effort. Empirically, self-determined motivation was found to be positively related to the effort an individual take to perform an activity (Sheldon et al., 1996). Moreover, in Malhotra et al.’s (2008) study, self-determination motivation was positively related to user intention to use an online learning platform. Therefore, self-determined motivation is expected to affect a user’s intention to get involved in self-governing online contents in professional online communities, which leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Self-determined motivation is positively related to users’ intention to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities.

2.2 Social exchange beliefs and self-determined motivation

Prior studies have identified that user motivation can be driven by the belief a user holds (Malhotra et al., 2008). In a social platform like a professional online community, users’ voluntary contribution and collaboration are perceived as social exchange activities (Tsai et al., 2012). Therefore, social exchange beliefs are considered as motivational forces for users to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities. SET is appropriate for this study because it was developed to explain why individuals engage in cooperative behaviours that are not formally rewarded (Blau, 1964).

Central to SET is reciprocity which specifies that individuals should help those who have helped them by returning the favour. For example, reciprocity was found to be one of the factors that facilitate voluntary user contribution in professional online communities (Wasko et al., 2005). A user can benefit from a professional online community where contents are safeguarded by other users. As a result, a user may want to take part in self-governing online contents with the expectation that others would do the same to save his or her time in finding quality contents and to benefit the community at large. Therefore, strong belief in reciprocity can be a stimulus to motivate users to help each other and the community by self-governing online contents. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Reciprocity is positively related to users’ self-determined motivation to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities.

Reputation is another important social exchange belief which is related to user motivation to engage in self-governing contents in professional online communities. Gaining reputation can be helpful to professionals to advance their careers (Oreg et al., 2008). A user’s reputation in a professional online community can extend to his or her profession (Wasko et al., 2005). The notion that gaining reputation is a strong motivator for active participation is evidenced by findings from prior studies on user participation in both inter-organisational and cross-organisational professional online communities (Wasko et al., 2005). Thus, users’ belief that getting involved in sorting out contents will enhance their reputation in a professional online community is likely to make users self-motivated to engage in the activity. This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 3: Reputation is positively related to users’ self-determined motivation to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities.

Trust is also a frequently mentioned concept in social exchange activities. Previous research argues that trust in online settings are important to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among users (Hsu et al., 2011). Prior research suggests that, individuals are more willing to engage in community activities in
a trusting environment (Chiu et al., 2006). For example, trust has been found to motivate users to share knowledge in an online community for professional learning (Tseng et al., 2010) and to have a positive effect on motivation to share quality knowledge in an online community for IT professionals (Chiu et al., 2006). Hsiao et al. (2010) also found that trust in recommendations made by other users motivates users to purchase products. Moreover, Fang and Chiu (2010) argued that users who believe that the management systems (i.e., managers, moderators, or management teams) consider and care about their needs are more willing to spend time and effort on community activities voluntarily. Thus, trust is likely to affect a user’s self-determined motivation to act. This leads to the following proposition:

**Proposition 4:** Trust is positively related to users’ self-determined motivation to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities.

A sense of community and a sense of obligation are two additional concepts used by prior studies to explain social exchange activities. A sense of community refers to a sense of emotional involvement and attachment to a community (Cheung et al., 2012). It has been found to be related to active user participation in online communities (Chai et al., 2012). A sense of obligation refers to a sense of duty and responsibility to engage in action which is also found to be related to user contribution in professional online communities (Wasko et al., 2005).

However, this paper argues that a sense of community and a sense of obligation should be considered as two distinct yet related dimensions of community commitment. Following Meyer and Allen’s (1991) work, this paper combines these two aspects into one construct, community commitment, which is discussed below.

### 2.3 Community commitment and self-determined motivation

Commitment theory is another useful theory that can partially explain voluntary social exchange behaviours in professional online communities (Bateman et al., 2011). Commitment theory proposed by Meyer and Allen (1991) defines a sense of community and a sense of obligation as affective community commitment and normative community commitment respectively.

Prior research has acknowledged community commitment as one among a set of energising forces that contributes to motivation (Meyer et al., 2004). Users who are committed to a community are likely to voluntarily engage in activities that help achieve the community goals (Kim, 2006) and that are beneficial to the community (Oreg et al., 2008). According to Bateman et al. (2011), users with high levels of affective community commitment and normative community commitment are likely to care about the communities’ sustainability. In addition, when a sense of obligation to help others in the community increases, users are more motivated to assist others in the collective by sharing their knowledge (Wasko et al., 2005). Therefore, a user’s community commitment is likely to lead them to help other users and to help ensure the success of the community by engaging in self-governing contents in professional online communities. This leads to the following proposition:

**Proposition 5:** Community commitment is positively related to users’ self-determined motivation to get involved in self-governing contents in professional online communities.

### 3. Research methodology

In order to evaluate the research model, this study develops a web-based survey based on validated measurements in the literature to collect empirical data.

### 3.1 Measurement development

Items measuring professionals’ intention to get involved in self-governing contents are adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003). Items measuring self-determined motivation, reciprocity, reputation, and trust are adapted from Malhotra et al. (2008), Kankanhalli et al. (2005), Tong et al. (2007), and Hsu et al. (2011) respectively. Community commitment is a second-order construct consisting of two components: normative commitment and affective commitment which are measured using items adapted from Bateman et al. (2011).
The adapted and modified measurement items will be presented in a questionnaire as statements. Seven-point Likert scales ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” will be used for all of the measurement items. The survey also includes demographic questions such as: gender, age, profession, places to search for work-related online contents, and past experience in getting involved in self-governing online contents.

3.2 Survey design

This study uses a web-based survey, which will be hosted on www.qualtrics.com, to collect empirical data. A convenience sampling technique is used to collect cross-sectional data for this study. An invitation message regarding the recruitment of participants for the survey will be posted on selected professional online communities. A link to the web-based survey is provided in the invitation message so that those who are interested are able to participate in the survey by clicking on the link.

3.3 State of study

This study is currently at the stage of finalising the survey questionnaire. A pre-test will be conducted before the main data collection commences. Upon completion of data collection, Structural Equation Modeling techniques will be used to analyse the data because it can simultaneously test the measurement model and the structural model.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The increasing use of online contents among professionals raises concerns about the quality and reliability of the contents available in professional online communities. Active user involvement is likely to be a long-term, pragmatic, and sustainable governance mechanism for maintaining quality online contents. Yet, little is known about why users are willing to get involved. Drawing from prior related studies, this study proposes a research model to explain users’ intention to participate in self-governing contents in professional online communities. The research model illustrates that user intention is influenced by users’ self-determined motivation which, in turn, is affected by users social exchange beliefs, including trust, reputation, reciprocity, and commitment.

The potential theoretical contributions of this study are two-fold. First, this study contributes to the body of literature on self-governance mechanisms in online settings which is one of the increasingly important topics in a digital society (Ziewitz et al., 2010). While other research looks into the evolvement (Markus, 2007), implementation (Beschastnikh et al., 2008), and implications (Lampe et al., 2007) of self-governance mechanisms in online communities from the governance structure’s perspective, this study examines self-governance mechanisms from users’ point of view. The research model highlights user involvement and promotes an understanding of the significance of user participation in sorting out quality contents in professional online communities. Second, this study answers Meyer et al.’s (2004) call for acknowledging commitment as an important energising force in the motivation process by establishing a relationship between community commitment and self-determination motivation.

This study also has three possible practical implications. First, the awareness of the significance of user involvement could guide professionals who take advantage of online contents for their work to make extra effort to contribute to the community beyond posting questions and answering questions. Second, the findings of this study may provide useful suggestions to sponsors of professional online communities on how to engage users in supporting the sustainability of the community in terms of providing quality and reliable contents. Third, designers of professional online communities could benefit from this study because the understandings of factors that promote users’ self-determined motivation to take part in sorting out quality contents may generate design guidelines to support the effective implementation of self-governance mechanisms.
References


