

The Relationship between Cultural Identity and Individual Knowledge Sharing Behavior

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Abstract

While study focusing on cultural identity has been vastly reported in the literature, not much is really known about the relationship between knowledge sharing behavior and cultural identity. Against this background, this study was undertaken to examine the relationship between knowledge sharing identity and the four cultural identities, namely, horizontal individualism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism. Using the survey research method involving 100 respondents in a university setting, the study found that both collectivism behaviors are significantly correlated with the knowledge sharing behavior. The findings also suggest that vertical collectivism is more dominant amongst research respondents.

Keywords: cultural orientation, knowledge sharing behavior, university students, Malaysia

Introduction

Every individual member of any given society is bound to a certain cultural identity. Individuals who belong to a certain cultural identity will embrace common characteristics such as languages, practices, customs, values and views. In fact, cultural identity has significant influences towards individuals' behavior either within the same group as well as behavior between those from different groups. Therefore, individuals' cultural identity will influence the social interactions that occur among them in which will be reflected through their social behavior. Thus, cultural identity may

influence one behavior in both ways; positively and negatively. Therefore, people who grasp strongly to their cultural identity may capitalize and optimize their strong values or practices while interacting within the society. Equally, strongly embracing to a certain cultural identity may also draw upon some barriers in social interactions such as issues of intolerance in blending their culture with others.

While study focusing on cultural identity has been vastly reported in the literature, not much is really known about the relationship between knowledge sharing behavior and cultural identity. According to von Krogh (2003) studies on knowledge

sharing is still very scarce. In particular, studies addressing the relationship between cultural identity and knowledge sharing behavior are still very limited. Against this background, this chapter aims to highlight the relationship between cultural identity and knowledge sharing behavior. It unveils such relationship that exists among the social actors particularly students of the Faculty of Information Management (FIM), MARA University of Technology (UiTM). It is based on a study which was undertaken with the purpose of answering the following research questions:

- What is the status of knowledge sharing among students of the Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA?
- What is the cultural orientation of students in the Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA?
- Is there any significant relationship between the four cultural identity and knowledge sharing behavior?

To this effect, the objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between knowledge sharing behavior and the four cultural identities, namely, horizontal individualism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism.

Literature Review

Defining Knowledge Sharing

Mining of the extant literature on knowledge sharing unveiled that, there is no standard definition of knowledge sharing. Many scholars and researchers define knowledge sharing differently, depending on the context of their studies. For instance, Davenport and Prusak (1998) define knowledge sharing as the process that involves exchanging knowledge between individuals and groups. Connelly

and Kelloway (2003) define knowledge sharing as “a set of behaviors that involve the exchange of information or assistance to other”. Van den Hooff & De Ridder (2004), on the other hand, define knowledge sharing as the process where individuals mutually exchange their (tacit and explicit) knowledge and jointly create new knowledge.

Importance of Knowledge Sharing

As one of the core elements of knowledge management (KM), sharing of knowledge is a necessary behavior for the success of KM which is now being practiced in many organizations. Within the context of an organization, knowledge sharing is about capturing, organizing, reusing and transferring one’s experience-based knowledge that is embedded within the organization and at the same time allowing the knowledge to smoothly flow for others to capitalize in the business (Nghah & Jusoff, 2009). While, according to Van den Hooff & Hendrix (2004), knowledge sharing is the process where individuals mutually exchange their knowledge with 2 occurring activities; bringing (donating) knowledge and getting (collecting) knowledge, knowledge sharing promotes trust and mutual respect as well as facilitates the flow of one’s knowledge assets to be capitalized for performance improvements. For example, for organization, embracing knowledge sharing within work culture may contribute towards superior organizational performances (Darroch & McNaughton, 2002; Du, Ai & Ren, 2007; Widen-Wulff & Suomi, 2007; Nghah & Jusoff, 2009). Although knowledge has always been highlighted as ‘knowledge is power’; Gurteen (1999) however affirms that it has to be explicitly understood that the ‘sharing’ of knowledge is actually ‘power’ than the knowledge itself. The emphasis of acknowledging the importance of knowledge sharing behavior is due to the fact that it could support various strategic processes, operations and decisions in an organization. In this context, best practices

and lesson learned could be shared throughout the organization. According to Scarborough (2003), through knowledge sharing, employee could promote organization best practices as well as reduce the learning efforts redundancy of re-inventing the wheel. Furthermore, through knowledge sharing, problems may easily be resolved through a better knowledge-enriched decision which is based on combined expertise, skills, experiences, ideas and insights. In the context of academic setting, knowledge sharing is apparently very crucial among students. The learning and teaching by its very nature, involves knowledge sharing activities. The interactions between lecturers and students or among the students themselves denote explicit activities of knowledge sharing. These interactions which can appear in various forms and modes such as face-to-face communications, e-mail, SMS, voice mail signify the mutual exchange of knowledge among students. In essence, without knowledge sharing, the effective learning and teaching process can never be materialized.

Previous Studies on Knowledge Sharing

According to Cummings (2003), the study of knowledge sharing has its roots within the technology transfer and innovation literature. Within the domain of these studies, researchers have identified various factors that promote or motivate knowledge sharing, which can be summarized in Table 1. The study by Chow, Deng and Ho (2000) had showed the influence of culture on knowledge sharing behavior. However, the study did not differentiate the different types of individualism and collectivism as identified by Triandis (1995) who suggested that the individualism-collectivism cultural dimension could best be reflected in four types: horizontal individualism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism, and vertical collectivism.

Table 1: Previous Studies on Factors Influencing Knowledge Sharing

Authors	Purpose	Findings
Constant, Keisler & Sproull (1994)	Factors that support or constrain information sharing in technologically advanced organizations	Information sharing behavior is affected by rational self-interest as well as the social and organizational context
Chow, Deng & Ho (2000)	The impact of individualism and collectivism on knowledge sharing	When there is no conflict between self and collective interests, both the managers in the individualistic and collectivistic culture were equally willing to share knowledge
Jarvenpaa and Staples (2000)	Factors affecting the use of collaborative technologies such as electronic mail, World Wide Web, list serves, and other collaborative systems for sharing information	Predictors of individual's use of collaborative technology for information sharing to be task characteristics, perceived information usefulness and the user's computer comfort.
Lee and Choi (2003)	Developed and tested an integrative research model that interconnects knowledge management enablers and organizational performance	Collaboration, trust, learning and centralization affect knowledge creation and sharing process
Connelly and Kelloway (2003)	Factors that impact employee's perceptions of a knowledge sharing culture	Perceptions about management's support for knowledge sharing, and perceptions of a positive social interaction culture to be significant predictors of a positive knowledge sharing culture
Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei (2005)	Factors affecting electronic knowledge repositories usage from the perspective of knowledge contributors	Contextual factors (generalized trust, pro-sharing norms, and identification) moderate the impact of extrinsic benefits (reciprocity and organizational reward) on EKR usage by contributors but not the intrinsic benefits (knowledge self-efficacy and enjoyment in helping others).
Wasko and Faraj (2005)	Why individuals in electronic networks of practice contribute knowledge to others?	Individuals contribute their knowledge when (i) they believe that participation enhances the professional reputation (ii) when they have necessary expertise to share and (iii) they become part of the structural network.
Bock et al. (2005)	Factors that influence individuals' knowledge-sharing intentions using Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)	Attitude towards knowledge sharing along with the subjective norms and organizational climate influence individual's intention to engage in knowledge sharing behavior.

Cultural Identity

According to Okoro, Cardon & Marshall (2008), the individualism-collectivism cultural dimension has become one of the most important constructs identifying cross-cultural variation in values, attitudes, and behaviors. The individualism/collectivism (I/C) construct describes a cultural syndrome in which individualists tend to give priority to individual goals and collectivists place more emphasis on group goals and norms (Triandis, 1995). Singelis et al. (1995) define horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism as follows:

- Horizontal individualism (HI) is “a cultural pattern where an autonomous self is postulated, but the individual is more or less equal in status with others”
- Vertical individualism (VI) is “a cultural pattern in which an autonomous self is postulated, but individuals see each other as different, and inequality is expected. . .

Competition is an important aspect of this pattern”

- Horizontal collectivism (HC) is “a cultural pattern in which the individual sees the self as an aspect of an in-group. . . In this pattern, the self is interdependent and the same as the self of others. Equality is the essence of this pattern”
- Vertical collectivism (VC) is “a cultural pattern in which the individual sees the self as an aspect of an in-group, but the members of the in-group are different from each other, some having more status than others. . . Serving and sacrificing for the in-group is an important aspect of this pattern”

From the above definitions as classified by Singelis et. al. (1995), the orientations are simplified into four cultural dimensions as constructed in Okoro, Cardon & Marshall (2008):

Table 2: Characteristics of Cultural Dimension

Cultural dimension	Characteristics
Horizontal Individualism (HI)	Independent, same status
Vertical Individualism (VI)	Independent, different status
Horizontal Collectivism (HC)	Interdependent, same status
Vertical Collectivism (VC)	Interdependent, different status

Relationship between Cultural Identity and Knowledge Sharing Behavior

Various theories, models and frameworks have shown that there are various factors that could shape individual behavior (Fishbain & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 1986; Davis; 1989). In essence, these factors include organizational, environmental (individual’s surrounding) or the traits of the individual. One of the

prominent traits which have received great deal of attention among researchers is the cultural identity which has been shown to have bearing in shaping user behavior.

Given that previous study has yet to explore the relationship between the four different types of individualism-collectivism culture and knowledge sharing behavior, this study posited that:

- H1: Horizontal individualism is significantly correlated with knowledge sharing behavior
- H2: Horizontal collectivism is significantly correlated with knowledge sharing behavior
- H3: Vertical individualism is significantly correlated with knowledge sharing behavior
- H4: Vertical collectivism is significantly correlated with knowledge sharing behavior

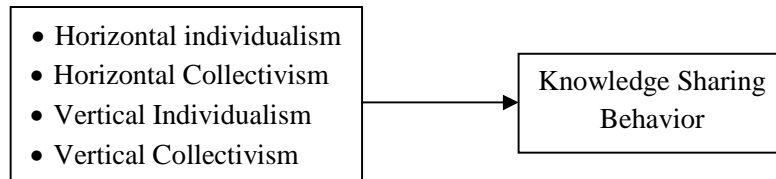


Fig 1. Research Theoretical Framework

Research Method

The conduct of the study involved the use of survey research method. The instrument used for collecting the data was the questionnaire. The measures for cultural variables were adopted from the instrument originally developed by Triandis and Gelfand (1998), while the measure for knowledge sharing behavior was adopted from de Vries, van den Hoof and de Ridder (2006). Both cultural identity and knowledge sharing variables used the Likert Point scaling with five anchoring being 1 for Strongly Disagree and 5 for Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was segmented into four parts with Part A capturing demographic information. Part B capturing the cultural identity information, Part C capturing knowledge sharing behavior information and Part D was the open ended questions requesting respondents to give additional comments pertaining to the topic being researched. Prior to the actual data collection, the questionnaire undergoes both pre-testing and pilot testing. A simple random sampling method was used to disseminate the questionnaires to students of semester 3, 4, 5 and 6 from the four undergraduate academic programs in the Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA. The

justification for the selection of this population was because of the researchers' easy access to the respondents. Overall, a total of 100 usable responses were obtained and due to the exploratory nature of the study, this amount is considered reasonable.

Findings

Factor Analysis and Instrument Reliability

To ensure that this research produces reliable findings and results, a reliable tool would need to be employed. Moreover, the exploratory nature of this study necessitated the need to conduct some form of test to check whether items used in the measures are tapping into the same constructs (variables) or not. Such test was accomplished through the use of factor analysis. According to Coakes and Steed (2003), factor analysis "is a data reduction technique used to reduce a large number of variables to a smaller set of underlying factors that summarize the essential information contained in the variables." Two widely used methods in factor analysis are Principal Components and Principal Axis Factoring (Coakes and Steed, 2003). However, this study adopted the former and applied it to all variables that

employed multi-items measures. The results of the factors analysis unveiled that all items measuring cultural identity. However, the original 5 items measuring knowledge donating and knowledge collecting had to be reduced into 3 and 2 respectively because of not meeting the cut-off loading of 0.5. Following the factor analysis exercise, a reliability test was

clearly loaded onto conceptualized variables.

performed for each and every variable. The result of the test is shown in Table 3. Considering that the alpha values for all variables are well above 0.7, reliability of the instrument can be assumed.

Table 3: Instrument Reliability Measures

Variables		No of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural Orientation	Horizontal Individualism	4	0.830
	Horizontal Collectivism	4	0.794
	Vertical Individualism	4	0.845
	Vertical Collectivism	4	0.839
Knowledge Sharing Behavior		3	0.770

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 4 presents the profiles of respondents' gender. The total number of male respondents was 60 or 60 % of the entire sample. In contrast, the female respondents contributed 40% of the whole research sample. With regard to students' semester, the majority of the respondents

were in semester 6 (64%), followed by semester 4 (19%) and semester 6 (14%). In terms of academic program, majority of respondents were pursuing BSc Information Systems Management (36%), followed by BSc Library Management (25%) and BSc Resource Centre Management (20%).

Table 4: Demographic Profile of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	60	60.0	60.0	60.0
	Female	40	40.0	40.0	100.0
Semester	3	4	4.0	4.0	4.0
	4	19	19.0	19.0	23.0
	5	63	63.0	63.0	86.0
	6	14	14.0	14.0	100.0
Academic Programs	BSc Library Management	25	25.0	25.0	25.0
	BSc Information System Management	36	36.0	36.0	61.0
	BSc Records Management	19	19.0	19.0	80.0
	BSc Resource. Center Management	20	20.0	20.0	100.0

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Table 5 depicts the descriptive profile of the research variables. The mean score of the knowledge sharing behavior variable is above the mid-value of 3 and this implies that the students practice knowledge sharing among them. The mean scores across the four different cultural variables are well above the neutral value, hence

suggesting that four cultural identities are indeed prevailed among the respondents. Among the four, vertical collectivism scored the highest mean value, suggesting that this form of cultural identity is more dominant among the respondent. Horizontal collectivism scored the lowest mean value, hence indicating that this type of cultural identity is inferior among the research sample.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistic of Research Variables

Variables	Mean		Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Std. Error		
Horizontal individualism	3.83	0.077	0.762	0.582
Vertical individualism	3.74	0.085	0.846	0.721
Horizontal collectivism	3.69	0.084	0.846	0.718
Vertical collectivism	4.08	0.082	0.815	0.664
Knowledge sharing behavior	3.51	0.082	0.819	0.673

Inferential Statistics among Research Variables

To examine the association between the research variables, the Pearson correlation test was used and the result is shown in Table 6. Based on the results, both collectivism variables were found to be significantly correlated with the knowledge sharing behaviors. The Pearson correlation r value stood at 0.306 and 0.375 for horizontal collectivism and vertical

collectivism respectively. The other two variables which are horizontal individualism and vertical individualism were found not to be significantly correlated with knowledge sharing behavior. Conclusively, the findings simply suggest that the higher the level of collectivism behavior among the respondents is, the higher the knowledge sharing behavior would be.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation Test Results

	HI	VI	HC	VC	KSB
Horizontal Individualism (HI)	1	0.389**	0.414**	0.375**	0.088
Vertical Individualism (VI)	0.389**	1	0.347**	0.008	-0.084
Horizontal Collectivism (HC)	0.414**	0.347**	1	0.510**	0.306**
Vertical Collectivism (VC)	0.375**	0.008	0.510**	1	0.375**
Knowledge Sharing Behavior (KSB)	0.088	-0.084	0.306**	0.375**	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

The Status of Knowledge Sharing

As one of the fundamental activities in knowledge management, knowledge sharing may occur in almost any platform of communications within an organization. Employees and stakeholders share knowledge everyday and the amount of knowledge transpired depends on the context of communication. Sohail & Daud (2009), highlight that in general, knowledge sharing is key for organizational success, indeed it is more vital to share knowledge in higher education institutions (HIE) which are considered as 'knowledge-intensive organizations'. Through knowledge sharing, the HIE communities may share their knowledge as to capitalize their intellectual capital which could be used as competitive advantage in the global market

place (Swart & Kinnie, 2003). Knowledge sharing is very common activity within HIE, which occurs and establishes in various types of interaction that may involve academicians, students as well as other stakeholders in the tertiary education environment. These interactions are important as to support teaching and learning process. However, the effective sharing between knowledge sender and receiver will require careful knowledge transmission and absorption process (Al-Hawamdeh, 2003). According to Ting & Majid (2007), an active and voluntarily sharing of knowledge which is based on mutual trust and respect is fundamental ingredient in creating effective and meaningful learning experience at higher education level. Since knowledge consists of both explicit and tacit, sharing of knowledge will be influenced by many factors within individual's interaction in the social world such as those related to

technology, environment, and culture. Given that 'culture' is a complex entity, individuals' cultural characteristics which are reflected in the interpretations, expectations, perceptions and constructions of meanings will influence their social interactions including their knowledge sharing behavior. For that reason, a study by Voepel, Zheng and Li-Choy (2005), expose that one's need to consider the cultural dimensions in establishing knowledge management as culture certainly influences knowledge-sharing behavior.

The Cultural Orientation of Students in the FIM

Extending the work of Hofstede (1980), Triandis (1995) discovered that human cultural identity can be divided into four, namely horizontal individualism, vertical individualism, horizontal collectivism and vertical collectivism. The findings of this study have indicated that all of these four cultural identities are present among students of FIM. The existence of these four cultural orientations (VI, HI, VC and HC) is common state of affairs in every social interaction which were built from the individualism/collectivism construct (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). Students that belong to the vertical individualism, view themselves as different from other students and at the same time accept inequality and believe that rank within a hierarchy has its privileges, while students from the horizontal individualism view themselves as their equal and having the same status as other students (Triandis, 1995). However, similar to other researches on cultural diversity such as in Okoro, Cardon & Marshall (2008) and Nelson & Shavitt (2002), the patterns for all four cultural identities are not equal for every situation. Cultures have profiles whereby different circumstances may have prominent tendencies towards either individualism or collectivism cultural dimension (Okoro, Cardon & Marshall, 2008). For example, in this study, it was

demonstrated that the vertical collectivism is more dominant among FIM students. In this context, students who strongly believe in the vertical collectivism values emphasize in-group commitment individuals and see himself/herself as an aspect of an in-group who are willing to serve or sacrifice for the group. On the other hand, although in general, all four cultural dimensions are above the neutral level, as opposed to vertical collectivism, horizontal collectivism was found to be the weakest among FIM students. Perhaps this is because of those in the horizontal collectivism stresses on the sociability of network interactions (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). According to Triandis & Gelfand (1998), horizontal collectivists view themselves as "being similar to others....emphasize common goals with others" and indeed resonate with highly homogenous population. In the case of this study, FIM students are not truly homogenous because they come from four main bachelor programs; Library Management, Information Systems Management, Record Management and Resource Centre Management.

The Relationship between Cultural Identity and Knowledge Sharing Behavior

This study has evidently showed that, among the four cultural identities, both collectivism cultures were found to be significantly related to knowledge sharing behavior. Based on the findings of this research that investigate on the cultural orientation of FIM students towards knowledge sharing, the 'vertical collectivism' was found to be the dominant among the respondents. This result is consistent with many other previous researches which demonstrated that people in the collectivist culture do believe that coordinated group work (in which knowledge sharing occurs) enhances innovation and creativity (Triandis, 1995; Burn & Thongprasert, 2005; Schulte & Kim, 2007). In this context, this collectivist

culture is believed to facilitate knowledge sharing behavior (Burn & Thongprasert, 2005) in which this collectivist orientation stress in-group obligations (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002). This shows that FIM students value the platform of coordinated work group as viewed by this collectivist orientation to benefit from the knowledge sharing behavior. This supported the findings of previous work by Schulte & Kim (2007) that the traits of collectivist culture are supportive of knowledge management success in which they are 'enablers' to knowledge sharing. In a study on the knowledge sharing pattern among students of the higher institutions in Singapore, it concludes that academic institutions should promote and establish initiatives that provide interaction opportunities through informal activities (Ting & Majid, 2007).

Conclusion

The conduct of this study has been to investigate the status of knowledge sharing among students of Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA. In addition, it seeks to understand the cultural orientation and the relationship with knowledge sharing behavior. Although the findings of the study have shown that all the four dimensions of cultural identity exist among the FIM student, it is the vertical collectivism dimension that seems to govern the knowledge sharing behavior. On the other hand, the respondents demonstrate an insubstantial state of horizontal collectivism dimension of cultural diversity in relevant to their sharing of knowledge. Nevertheless, culture is a very complex entity and its patterns are extremely embedded and generally with unconscious path will influence our sense-making, situation construction, knowledge preferences, process and sharing. From the results, the study confirmed that cultural dimensions; individualism and collectivism are driving forces behind the students'

perceptions on knowledge sharing behavior.

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