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A Hierarchical Perspective of Employees' Knowledge Sharing Behaviors: A Two-Phase Study

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Introduction

How would employees' behaviors differ when sharing knowledge with colleagues from different hierarchical levels? This question impinges on the practical considerations of the expected benefits and risks that can be brought to them by knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing (KS), defined as the articulation and learning of know-what and know-how for performing tasks among organizational members, has long been recognized by both scholars and human resource professionals as the key to organizational success in today's knowledge-based economies (Nickerson & Zenger, 2004; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Yet, employees may not want to participate (fully) in KS due to different kinds of concerns. Some may even choose to hide their knowledge from their colleagues and managers (He, 2013). It is therefore important to examine how employees' KS behaviors are influenced by different social and individual factors at the workplace.

One important factor that the extant literature has failed to capture fully is the effect of hierarchical positions within the organizations. We put forward such a claim because most prior studies were prescriptive in nature, trying to specify how employees *should* share knowledge rather than truly examining how employees *would* share knowledge. For example, it has been commonly prescribed that person-to-person interaction is essential in tacit knowledge sharing while using documentations would be a more efficient way to share explicit knowledge (Hansen, Nohria & Tierney, 1999; Murray & Peyrefitte, 2007). Despite the value of such prescriptive studies, other scholars have argued that employees may not always act in the interest of the organization (Harrell & Harrison, 1998; Pfeffer, 1981) − that is, they may not follow the prescribed way to achieve the best outcome of KS for the good of the organization.

The current study aims to address the above limitation by

conducting a two-phase study to unfold how the hierarchical position of the target of knowledge sharing would affect the communication behaviors of mid-level employees. This research question is stemmed from the findings of Garicano and Wu (2012) and Kuo and Young (2008) that employees normally behaved differently when interacting with subordinates, peers, and superiors. Our target respondents are set to be mid-level employees because they usually act a bridge of communication in the organization and thus have great needs to interact with colleagues from all the three different hierarchal levels. Also, we set the context of study to be small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong (HK) because of practical reasons as the authors are located in HK and have established prior contacts with some small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) managers.

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, we examined hierarchical position as a determinant of employees' KS behaviors which has been relatively undermined in past KS studies. Second, we examined KS phenomenon in SMEs in the East rather than large organizations past studies in the West. The effect of this contextual difference on managing KS as well as other knowledge management (KM) behaviors has been called for investigation by different scholars (Durst & Evardsson, 2012; Massaro, Handley, Bagnoli & Dunmay 2016; Wilkesman, Fischer & Wilkesmann, 2009).

The paper is divided into three parts. The literature review section following this introductory section will discuss the limitations of past KS studies and highlight the importance of taking into consideration hierarchical positions when understanding employees' KS behaviors. Then the methodology and findings sections will outline the design of the two-phase study and present the major analyses and findings of the gathered data. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections will discuss the contributions and implications of the current study but also acknowledge its limitations. Ideas worthy of future investigation generated from the current study will also be offered.

Literature review

The topic of KS has been approached by scholars from different perspectives. Some scholars adopted a mechanism perspective to examine the so-called best approach of sharing knowledge. Hansen et al. (1999) proposed two general KS strategies, personalization and codification, and Law and Kamoche (2015) proposed four distinct knowledge transfer approaches. Other studies by Gupta and Govindarajan (2000), Murray and Peyrefitte (2007) and Law (2014) followed these typologies and suggested that the choice of the approach of KS should depend on the tacitness or ambiguity of the knowledge to be shared. In other words, these studies adopting the mechanism perspective tried to prescribe the ideal ways of sharing knowledge under different circumstances.

There were other scholars focusing on the enablers or motivators of KS. For example, Lin and Lee (2004) and Lin (2007) found that self-enjoyment and self-efficacy in KS, managerial support and organizational rewards, and the provision of information and communication technologies (ICTs) were all contributive to the intention of the employees to engage in KS. Law, Chan and Ozer (2017) later conducted a more systematic analysis of the major relevant intrinsic motivators and extrinsic motivators to encourage KS in organizations.

There were yet other scholars examining the effect of group composition and communication on the effectiveness of KS. Cummings (2004) found that external KS was more strongly associated with group performance when work groups were more structurally diverse. Moreover, Ahmad (2017) explored the effect of language use in affecting KS between different employee groups and established a research model linking language diversity and KS behavior.

Despite the diverse perspectives of past studies reviewed above, they still failed to predict actual KS behaviour of employees as employees' behaviors are largely affected by self-interest concerns (Harrell & Harrison, 1998; Law, 2013; Ouchi, 1980). In particular, the

effect of power relations has been a major focus of investigation: how the consideration of power relations would affect one's status and benefits in the organization when conducting certain behaviors (Pfeffer, 1981; Scott, 2001). More specifically to KS, Willem and Scarbrough (2006) found power relations and politicking behaviors in organizations to influence the employees to engage in a highly selective form of KS. Moreover, Kuo and Young (2008) found that employees' attitudes towards controllability of KS had a significant impact on their intentions and actual behaviour in KS.

In addition to power relations, employees' KS behaviors may also be affected by cultural and geographic factors. Hutchings and Michailova (2004) and Huang, Davison and Gu (2008) specifically investigated the importance of "guanxi" and "face" in KS among Chinese employees. Furthermore, Voelpel and Han (2005) confirmed that the practice of distinguishing between in-group and out-group KS activities (i.e. the guanxi network) and "face-saving" behaviors were not limited to face-to-face communication but also extended to indirect online sharing.

The above literature review revealed that several limitations of the existing KS literature. First, despite there were studies concerning power relations in organizations, organizational hierarchy, presumably to be the most prominent manifestation of power relations in organizations, has been relatively under-explored in its effect on KS. The organizational communication literature argued that power relations embedded in organizational hierarchical positions would affect the communication behaviors adopted by workers (Myers, Knox, Pawlowski & Ropog, 1999). For example, Fritz and Dillard (1994) found that the target of communication (e.g. superiors, fellow colleagues and subordinates) had an effect on the degree of honesty, self-disclosure, irreplaceability, and mutual dependence employees displayed during the communication process. Such kind of observation should therefore be incorporate into KS research. Second, managers were not well informed on how employees' KS behaviors or reactions would differ and be managed in different situations such as solicited KS

vs voluntary KS, horizontal KS vs vertical KS, and in-group KS vs out-group KS (see, for example, Garicano & Wu, 2012). It is therefore important to explore what considerations employees would take into account when engaging in different situations of KS with colleagues at different hierarchal positions, and how these considerations can be used to explain employees' preferred KS behaviors.

Methodology

This paper explores, through a two-phase study design, the differences in the behaviors of mid-level employees when sharing knowledge with targets from different hierarchal positions. In the first phase of study, a grounded theory approach was employed for exploration purposes as the research question involves complex interactions of human and social phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the second phase of study, a small-scale survey test will be conducted to verify the exploratory findings generated from the first phase of study.

The first-phase exploratory study

In the first phase, exploratory study was founded on a series of semi-structured interviews with fifteen mid-level employees working in knowledge-intensive SMEs in HK. Mid-level employees were chosen as the key informants in this research because they have the most opportunities to engage in KS with colleagues from different hierarchical levels, given their constant communication with both the senior management and the junior workers. As in Yang's (2007) observation, mid-level employees played three significant roles in their organization – as innovator, mentors and facilitators – all of which required them to participate frequently in both voluntary sharing of personal knowledge and experience and solicited sharing of task-related knowledge with colleagues in different hierarchical relationships. Also, mid-level employees are often crucial in the knowledge base of a firm as their experience and social connections can be useful for obtaining new

markets or expert information about other firms in the market (Adama, 2016).

The present study was based on SMEs in HK for two reasons. First, KM in SMEs is often neglected by researchers and SME managers per se as SMEs normally do not have as much awareness and resources for KM as compared with large or multi-national companies (Law & Chan, 2017). As a result, our understanding of the KM practices in SMEs stems mostly from a "large organization" perspective, which normally overlooks the particularities of managing KM behaviors in SMEs. In addition, past KM and KS research has been conducted mainly in the West, the findings from which might not be applicable to organizations in the East (Law & Chan, 2017; Wilkesmann et al., 2009). Therefore, by basing the study on SMEs in HK, it is not only possible to analyze employees' KS behaviors in different circumstances but also generate insights for the management of KS in alternative contexts such as SMEs in the East. Also, as noted earlier, it is convenient for the authors to gain access to interviews as they are both working in HK, where over 98% of organizations are SMEs.

Convenience sampling was used given the exploratory nature of the first phase of study. Despite the convenience sampling, clear criteria were set in selecting target interviewees and SMEs. The first criterion was the knowledge-intensive nature of the SME's business. The second criterion was the position of the interviewee – mid-level employee. Invitation emails were sent to over 30 SMEs with the research objective and the choice of target interviewees being well explained. Fifteen SMEs eventually accepted our invitation to interview one of their mid-level employees.

The interviews were conducted during the period August 2014 to December 2016. The SMEs studied were engaged in five different business fields: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), banking and finance, real estate, public relations and information technology. The mid-level employees interviewed were mostly working as supervisors overseeing three to five frontline subordinates and reporting to the figurehead of the SME. Table 1 lists the fields and job titles of our

interviewees.

Table 1   Backgrounds of the 15 Interviewees and their respective SME

SME	Business Field	Job Title of Interviewee
1		Senior Officer
2	Public relations	Consultant
3		Account Manager
4		Account Manager
5		Project Officer
6	NGOs	Executive Secretary
7		Project Coordinator
8		Human Resources Manager
9	Banking and finance	Insurance Agency Manager
10		Actuarial Officer
11		Relationship Manager
12		Assistant Supervisor, Sales
13	Information technology	Consultant
14		Project Assistant Manager
15	Real estate	Leasing Manager

The interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions about the type of communication behavior they adopted in different circumstances of KS, as well as the underlying rationale. Ample time was given to allow interviewees to give full accounts of their own perceptions and views. The process was guided by a written interview protocol, which could be revised after each interview once the emerging themes of the research had taken a much clearer shape (Riley, 1996; Yin, 2014). The protocol was applied flexibly so that the flow of interviews responded to the interviewee's train of thought. Overall, the interview questions were designed to encourage the interviewees to 'volunteer' information. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and were conducted in the mother tongue (Cantonese) language of the interviewees to avoid possible language barriers. All the

interviews were tape-recorded and supplemented with field notes. They were subsequently transcribed and translated for content analysis, with a total of more than 1,000 minutes of recordings and over 50,000 English words in the corpus.

The analysis process followed the logic of abduction and was characterized by open coding (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). We searched for interviewees' descriptions of their KS behaviors in different scenarios and identified why they behaved in the ways they did. In sum, the analysis focused on (1) the interviewee's choice of behaviors in different scenarios of KS (a more objective description of KS behaviors) and (2) the underlying reasons for their choice of behaviors (a more subjective and contextual explanation). We then attempt to formulate a theoretical framework based on the factors observed from the interviews.

The second-phase quantitative study

In the second phase of study, a small-scale survey was conducted to verify the exploratory findings generated from the first-phase exploratory study. A questionnaire was developed to test the relationship between the influential factors identified from the exploratory study and employees' KS decisions.

The questionnaire was contained in the Google form platform and was sent in the form of a hyperlink to 103 employees working in five knowledge-intensive companies in Taiwan via email. The potential respondents were contracted through trusted contacts of the authors. We finally collected 46 usable questionnaire data, i.e. a response rate of 44.7%. Of these 46 respondents, 43.5% reported that their age below 35 and 17.4% between the range of 46 and 55 years old. Additionally, 45.7% of participants had their bachelor degree and 37% had master degree or above.

Findings

Findings of the first-phase exploratory study

From the semi-structured interviews, we were able to observe significant differences in KS behavior when our interviewees were sharing knowledge with colleagues at different hierarchical positions. The differences were shown in Table 2. Table 2 reveals that the interviewees' choice of behavior and their rationale differs when they are engaging in KS with superiors, peers and subordinates. Different considerations underpin these variations in their KS behaviors. In short, the interviewees' KS behavior can be broadly categorized into two types – indirect/codification and direct/personalization. This categorization follows Hansen et al. (1999)'s classification and definitions. The indirect/codification type of KS refers to the dissemination of codified documents as a means to transfer knowledge in which meeting with the recipient can be avoided and, according to our interviewees, this kind of sharing that is put in writing would normally look more formal and be able to leave a record of the sharing circumstance. The direct/personalization type of KS refers to the direct communication of the knowledge with the recipient in a face-to-face manner. According to our interviewees, this personalized way of sharing is quick but mistakes in explanation or impoliteness in talking are some possible drawbacks of this type of KS. The underlying rationale for the choice of KS behavior can be broadly categorized into three factors of consideration – efficiency concerns, compliance with social norms, and the nature of social relationship. We will explain these factors in details in the below paragraphs.

Table 2   Differences in interviewees' knowledge sharing behaviors

Knowledge sharing with	Type of communication	Rationale
superiors	Indirect	Asymmetrical relationship to show respect and obedience to social norms
peers	Indirect/ Codification	Social relationship: friends or passersby
subordinates	Direct/ Personification	Efficiency concerns

Knowledge Sharing with Supervisors. In KS with superiors, the social norms of showing respect and obedience seem to be an important, or even predominant, factor in their decisions on how to behave. When sharing knowledge with superiors, the interviewees tended to act more formally and carefully on such occasions. They also prepared themselves better (e.g. having relevant documentation ready or typing a procedural manual) and made appointments (mostly via email) before sharing their knowledge or information with their superiors. In general, codified forms of communication were preferred when transferring knowledge to superiors, either as a standalone form of communication or complements face-to-face communication conducted. Disrespectful or ignorant behavior was deliberately avoided to prevent leaving a bad impression on their superiors. Interestingly, even though the interviewees were all mindful of such tendencies during the interviews, they did not explain much about the rationale behind them, especially when such implicitness was compared with their colorful explanation on making KS decisions with their subordinates. When the explanation of such behavior was prompted, they usually responded by saying "You have to respect your superiors" or "some bosses are more old-fashioned, so they would like to be respected". Another important observation is that the interviewees admitted that they were rather conservative in formal sharing sessions, such as weekly or monthly meetings. Yet, the hoarding of knowledge to gain power or monetary incentives, as normally postulated in the KM literature, seemed not to be the major reason for their withholding. Instead, being too active to share

knowledge, according to the interviewees, might make them seem like "know-it-alls" or people who are flashy and like to show off. Hence, remaining silence can sometimes "save face" with their co-workers and such behavior is important for maintaining a humble façade of themselves. Therefore, if they decided to remain quiet in KS opportunities, it was not about capturing benefits from the knowledge receiver. Instead, the decision to withhold information derived from the norm of being humble and not standing out from the rest of their peers. We thus categorized this implicit underlying rationale as "compliance with social norms" to respect the superiors and saving face for others – two of the strong cultural values inherited from the Confucian teachings prevalent in the East.

Knowledge Sharing with Subordinates. The interviewees adopted a completely different approach when they were sharing knowledge with their subordinates. In this case, they usually encouraged effective and expeditious communication and preferred direct, face-to-face communication. They also expected their subordinates to "drop in" and ask questions about their work, instead of having a formalized KS regime that involved invitations or codified approaches for communication. Unlike what they did with their own superiors, most of the interviewees did not require strict obedience from their subordinates because they recognized how such "old" social norms had changed in the minds of their juniors, despite a few interviewees complaining about their younger subordinates being too casual and disrespectful to them. Nevertheless, the interviewees in general found it more effective to share knowledge in more direct and less formal ways with their subordinates, because the mid-level employees are often expected to act as line managers who are responsible not only for their own job performance but also for those of a lower rank employees. It is therefore crucial for the mid-level managers to conduct KS in an efficient and effective way so that the subordinates are able to perform their tasks correctly. Most of the interviewees believed that, as a "boss" of those employees in lower positions, they are expected to "set the tone" in the office, i.e. subordinates will follow their choice of KS behaviors. If they

invite open communication, their subordinates will be open and direct in KS, and vice versa. We thus categorized this kind of consideration as "efficiency concerns".

Knowledge Sharing with Peers. Most of the interviewees expressed that personal relationship with the target was the most important consideration when sharing knowledge with someone at the same hierarchical position. Specifically, a majority of interviewees indicated KS would be limited only to close acquaintances because they believed this would prevent them from being taken advantage of. KS with peers at the same hierarchical position is different from and more complicated than KS with superiors or subordinates as people at the same hierarchical position are usually in competition for resources and promotion. Therefore, both compliance with social norm and efficiency concerns as identified above do not apply to KS with peers at the same hierarchical position. Instead, a risk-averse mentality stays in the interviewees' mind. The interviewees tended to perceive peers who were friends as "low risk" and peers who were not friends as "high risk". In other words, if they felt close to the target of sharing, they would be willing to share knowledge despite the possibility of losing some competitive edge in the organization. We thus categorized such kind of consideration as "social relationship".

After discussing the differences in KS with individuals from different hierarchical level, Table 3 provides illustrative quotes from interviewees to substantiate their views of KS.

Table 3 Illustrative Quotes

Situations	Illustrative Quotes
KS with superiors	"Of course I will be a bit more nervous when I am talking with my superiors. It's a must. I might think more clearly and further before going in and presenting to him. If I am talking with my peers or subordinates, I might not think as clearly or [be] as well prepared."
KS with subordinates	"I think when communicating with subordinates, it's important to put myself in their shoes… if you think you're high up there all the time, it's not good for the development of the team. I actually prefer blending in with them."
KS with peers	"I think a main reason is since we all are in the same grade and are peers, it can be difficult to teach or ask others. I think it needs somebody to stand out, maybe like to [the] role of a professional leader. It's lucky that I have expertise in that type of activity and my colleagues respects that so they are willing to participate. But if it's daily activities, people might think they don't have the authority to do so if the supervisor doesn't say anything."

Figure 1 depicts how our interviewees made their KS decisions based on our first-phase exploratory study. There was no single rule which dictated how the interviewees chose their KS behaviors. Instead, they looked at the hierarchical relationships they were involved in and utilized different sharing and communication strategies accordingly.

Figure 1 A decision model of knowledge-sharing behavior
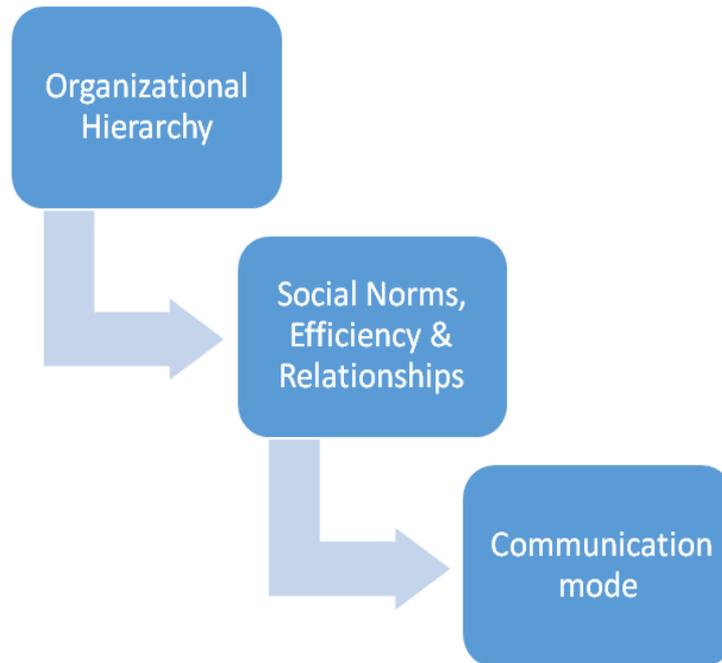
Findings of the second-phase quantitative study

Based on the findings of the first-phase exploratory study, the following hypotheses between the identified influential factors (i.e. efficiency concerns, compliance with social norms, and the nature of relationship) and employees' choice of KS behaviors (indirect/codification vs direct/personalization) were specifically set up for testing (see Figure 2 as well):

Hypothesis 1: The consideration of efficiency concerns is positively related to employees' choice of direct, personalized KS behaviors.

Hypothesis 2: The consideration of compliance with social norms is positively related to employees' choice of indirect, codified KS behaviors.

Hypothesis 3: The nature of social relationship with the target of sharing affects employees' choice of KS behaviors in that (a) a good

relationship is positively related to direct, personalized KS behaviors and (b) a poor relationship is positively related to indirect, codified KS behaviors.

Figure 2 The Hypothesized Model
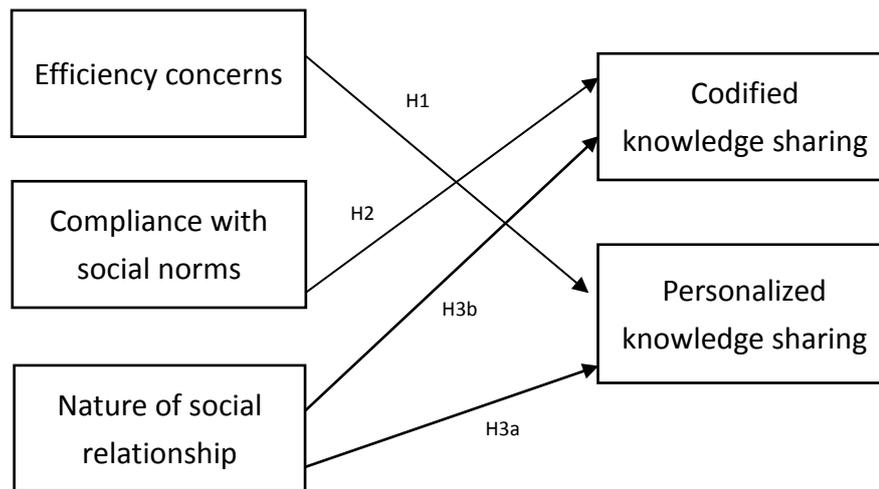
We adapted and adopted scales available from existing literature to test Hypotheses 1 to 3. In relation to mechanisms of KS, we adopted the measures developed by Lee and Choi (2003): codification and personalization. Sample items of codified knowledge sharing included "I like to share knowledge through codified forms like manuals or documents" and of personalized knowledge sharing included "I like to share knowledge through informal dialogues and meetings". Efficiency concerns refer to the amount of time, effort, and expenses needed to share knowledge and we created 3-item measurement to tap this concept. A sample item included "increase flexibility to transfer tacit knowledge". We measured compliance with social norms by using Schwartz's two-item of conformity scale (Schwartz, 1992) including obedience and honoring of superiors. Finally, we asked respondents to identify an anonymous person to whom he/she interacted in daily work and KS activities were involved. We then asked the corresponding respondent "how do you generally feel about the person" where 4 = dislike extremely, 1 = dislike slightly or 4 = like extremely 1 = like

slightly.

Table 4   Results of Linear Regression

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Personal Knowledge Sharing	3.91	1.81					
2. Codified Knowledge Sharing	2.34	1.15	0.22				
3. Efficiency	4.59	0.77	0.55 **	-0.30 *			
4. Compliance with Social Norms	3.87	0.49	0.17	0.31 *	0.05		
5. Good Relation	3.97	1.35	0.40 **	0.20	0.51 **	0.10	
6. Poor Relation	3.70	0.55	0.28	0.36 *	0.10	0.23	-0.00

N = 46. Listwise.

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

***p < 0.001

Linear regression was deployed to analyze the collected data. Table 4 above shows some of the important statistical figures. We hypothesized that there was a positive relationship between efficiency concerns and personalized KS (i.e. Hypothesis 1). Regression results showed that the hypothesis was significantly supported (β=.55, p <.000). We also hypothesized that there was a positive relationship between compliance social norms and codified KS (i.e. Hypothesis 2).

Results demonstrated the hypothesis was significantly supported as well (β =.31, p <.03). Finally, our results indicated that the nature of social relationship would affect the mechanism of knowledge sharing. Specifically, good relationship would positively associate with personalized KS (β=.40, p <.01) whereas poor relationship would positively associate with codified KS (β=.36, p <.01). Hypothesis 3 was therefore supported.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, our two-phase study demonstrated that hierarchal position affects employees' choice of communication behaviors in KS. Specifically, we found employees tended to use a more indirect approach such as via codified documentations to share knowledge if the target of KS is their superior. On the contrary, employees preferred a more direct approach of communication such as face-to-face meeting when they are sharing knowledge with their subordinates. Moreover, employees were likely to be cautious when they are sharing knowledge with peers at the same hierarchical level. It was identified that the factors of efficiency, social norms, and nature of the relationship underpinned these differences in communication behaviors in different situations of KS. These findings go beyond past prescriptive studies from specifying and assuming how employees *should* share knowledge to truly understanding how employees *would* share knowledge based on various social and individual considerations.

One interesting finding in this study is that, despite encouragement by their superiors, many of our interviewees were still reluctant to share their knowledge in formal KS events or meetings. An issue worthy of investigation by academics is the labelled "collectivist" value of Chinese workers by Western research. Theoretically, a strong collectivist culture should lead to employees' collaboration behaviors for the good of the collective. What we found in reality in two Chinese societies (HK and Taiwan) is that employees were reluctant to share knowledge with others despite the damages it might bring to the

collective. It is therefore worth investigating in deep such a disconnection between our conventional wisdom and the empirical evidences presented here. In addition to cultural differences with relation to the East and the West, it is also interesting to look at cultural differences between the senior and the young. In our semi-structured interviews, some interviewees expressed dissatisfaction on the younger subordinates for their lack of respect on their superior. It is therefore useful to examine age as factor in affecting employees' KS behaviors.

As in any other study, the current study has its limitations. The research model in this study was built up from semi-structured interviews conducted with mid-level employees in SMEs in HK. It was therefore context-specified and might not be applicable to other contexts. Nevertheless, we conducted a small-scale survey to demonstrate the validity of our model using data from another context, Taiwan. Yet, future research is definitely encouraged to expand our study to other contexts. Another limitation is regarding the relatively small sample sizes in both phases of our study. The findings of the current study thus should not be taken as universal. Future research is needed to repeat our study with larger sample sizes in order to claim universality of the findings.

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