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The Impact of Management Style on the Intention to Share knowledge in China

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Abstract

Knowledge management (KM) is a dominant theme in the behaviour of contemporary organisations. While KM has been extensively studied in developed economies, it is much less well understood in developing economies, notably those that are characterised by different social and cultural traditions to the mainstream of Western societies. This is notably the case in China. In this paper, we develop and test a theoretical model that explains the impact of management style and interpersonal trust on the intention of information and knowledge workers in China to share their knowledge with their peers. All but one of the hypotheses are supported, with 28.7% of the variance in employees' intention to share knowledge explained. We discuss the theoretical contributions of the paper, identify future research opportunities, and highlight the implications for practicing managers.

Keywords: Knowledge Management; China; Management Style; Trust; Knowledge Sharing

1. Introduction

With the development of China's economy, an increasing amount of investment has been injected into various sectors and there has been a consequent increase in the flow of knowledge and information into, out of and within China. Consequently, there is an increasing realisation that knowledge is both an important organisational asset and a source of competitive advantage. However, advancements in knowledge management do not depend exclusively on the application of advanced technology, since the actions taken by individual knowledge workers are also of critical importance. What is more, compared to physical assets, knowledge is more difficult to be managed due to its intangibility (Stewart et al., 2000). Due to the different cultural background, attitudes and values of the Chinese people, when compared with Western countries (cf. Burrows et al., 2005; Hofstede, 2001), it is entirely likely that the lessons gained from knowledge management practices in developed Western countries will not apply directly in the Chinese context. This is not a technical problem with knowledge sharing systems, but a matter of how

people choose to share and communicate their knowledge with others. As such, it relates to psychological and social factors.

Since knowledge sharing can be affected by cultural factors, a considerable amount of research has investigated knowledge sharing practices in different countries such as the US, China, Japan and Arab cultures (Chow et al., 2000; Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Weir and Hutchings, 2005). In China, it has been found that, given high levels of collectivism and the willingness of employees to sacrifice their own interests for their collective in-group (those who work in the same group) (Chow et al., 2000), it is easier to stimulate knowledge sharing within the in-group members of other groups. A desire to improve personal reputation is also positively associated with knowledge sharing (Voelpel and Han, 2005).

Cultural characteristics can act to impede the sharing of knowledge as well as promote it. Since China has become an increasingly important player in the global economy, it is important that we develop a better understanding of knowledge sharing practices in China. In this paper, we investigate the link between management style and the intention of employees to share knowledge in China. This is an important contribution to our knowledge about knowledge sharing practices in the Chinese context, which has significant implications for organisations that plan to engage in knowledge work in China, a phenomenon that is increasingly frequently encountered.

The layout of this paper is as follows. Following this introduction, we review the relevant literature on management style and knowledge sharing. We then present our research methodology and research model, including the hypotheses. Next, we analyze the results and discuss the implications of the findings for research and practice. Finally we conclude and make suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

There are a number of areas of literature that are relevant to this study. These include management style, affect-based and cognition-based trust, and the intention to share knowledge. Each of these literatures is reviewed in turn, before we turn to the research model and development of hypotheses.

2.1 Management Style

Behavioral theories of leadership suggest that a good leader could be developed through appropriate training. By way of contrast, trait theories of leadership suggest that a good leader should have inborn characteristics or traits that are appropriate to leadership (Robbins, 1997). Whichever theory of leadership is accepted, it is also important to consider the leadership or management style, i.e. the manner used by managers as they undertake their work. A number of distinct styles have been identified, including ‘initiating structure’ and ‘consideration’. Any one individual manager may display characteristics of each of these styles, and indeed the balance of styles will vary according to the specific job, organisation and culture. Although Blake and Mouton (1969) have proposed that ideally a manager has the potential to perform strongly according to the principles of both styles, other researchers (e.g. Schriesheim, 1982) suggest that “the hi-hi style is often not any better than a style which emphasizes just one aspect of leader behavior”.

2.1.1 Initiating Structure

Initiating structure “refers to the extent to which the leader is likely to define and structure his or her role and those of subordinates in the search for goal attainment. It includes behavior that attempts to organize work, work relationships and goals” (Robbins, 1997). It has often been observed (Judge et al., 2004) that managers who are inclined to a high initiating structure are also the subject of satisfaction by their own superiors due to their better performance and effectiveness. However, it has also been suggested that a high initiating structure is often linked with high employee turnover (Fleishman and Harris, 1962).

2.1.2 Consideration

“Consideration refers to the extent to which a person has job relationships characterized by mutual trust and respect for subordinates’ ideas and feelings” (Robbins, 1997). If managers are inclined to high consideration, the work group tends to behave in a more harmonious fashion, with a correspondingly reduced level of employee turnover, when compared to high initiating structure, due to a higher satisfaction level experienced by subordinates (Filley et al., 1976). Also, managers with a high consideration characteristic should raise workgroup productivity (Duntelman and Bass, 1963).

The leadership behavior description questionnaire (LBDQ) (Halpin, 1957) is used to measure to what extent managers are inclined to consideration and/or initiating structure. Some researchers have applied it to knowledge management since management style may affect the subsequent success of any knowledge management system (Lu and Wang, 1997) or attempt to acquire knowledge (Politis, 2001).

2.2 *Affect and Cognition Based Trust*

Trust can be explained as “the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another” (McAllister, 1995). In the past few years, the impact of trust was investigated in a variety of fields such as business relationships, e-commerce, interpersonal trust in organizations, buyer-supplier relationships, etc. (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Korsgaard et al., 1995; Zaheer et al., 1998; Gefen et al., 2003).

There is also a body of research that investigates the role of trust in knowledge sharing. Abrams et al. (2003) studied how to promote knowledge sharing by increasing the level of interpersonal trust from a managerial aspect including organizational factors and personal factors. Panteli and Sockalingam (2005) investigated the function of trust in knowledge sharing within virtual inter-organizational alliances, showing that the level of trust between persons would affect both relationships and the extent and nature of the knowledge shared. In general, it has been observed that trust has a positive and significant effect on knowledge sharing behaviours. Since previous research has indicated that trust plays an important role in the process of knowledge sharing, it has been suggested that trust is “at the heart of knowledge exchange” (Davenport and Prusak, 2000). Meanwhile, the level of trust has been found to have a positive relationship with communication effectiveness (Dodgson, 1993), since trust can improve the quality of knowledge sharing (Argyris, 1982) and reduce the costs involved (Currall and Judge, 1995).

Trust has been classified in many different ways, but interpersonal trust is often observed to have cognitive and affective foundations (Lewis and Weigert, 1985), a characteristic that is accepted by many researchers (McAllister, 1995; Holste and Fields, 2005). Cognition based trust can be explained as “we cognitively choose whom we will trust in which respects and under which circumstances and we base the choice on what we take to be ‘good reasons’” (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). That is to say, cognition based trust is always established through some understanding toward the person we are going to trust. McAllister (1995) identified the antecedents of cognition based trust as reliable role performance, cultural-ethnic similarity and professional credentials. However, Lewis and Weigert (1985) suggested that a cognitive foundation for trust is far from sufficient for a person to trust others. Consequently, they suggested that trust constructed on an emotional base can constitute a kind of complementary foundation which can also explain “why the betrayal of a personal trust arouses a sense of emotional outrage in the betrayed” (Lewis and Weigert, 1985).

McAllister (1995) identified the antecedents of affect-based trust as citizenship and interaction frequency. Each kind of trust can have its use during the interaction among the people, as Lewis and Weigert (1985, p.972) indicated: “if all cognitive content were removed from emotional trust, we would be left with blind faith or fixed hope, the true believer or the pious faithful. On the other hand, if all emotional content were removed from cognitive trust, we would be left with nothing more than a cold blooded prediction or rationally calculated risk”.

2.2.1 Antecedents of Affect and Cognition Based Trust

Two antecedents of affect-based trust can be identified: citizenship behavior and interaction frequency. Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) has been investigated by many researchers since 1993, and such investigations were not only limited to organization behavior (Podsakoff et al., 2000). Organ (1988) first formally defined OCB as “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization”. After a complete literature review, Podsakoff et al. (2000) synthesised seven dimensions of OCB, taking into consideration the fact that different researchers had not been consistent in their use of the construct, viz.: (1) Helping Behavior, (2) Sportsmanship, (3) Organizational Loyalty, (4) Organizational Compliance, (5) Individual Initiative, (6) Civic Virtue, (7) Self Development. For the purposes of our research, we use the fifth dimension, since it has the closest meaning to Organ’s original definition. Podsakoff et al. (2000) described it as “extra-role only in the sense that it involves engaging in task-related behaviors at a level that is so far beyond minimally required or generally expected levels that it takes on a voluntary flavor”. Compared with Organ’s definition, the two definitions have two points in common: first, the behavior is voluntary; second, the behavior is more than the basic requirement of the work.

Three antecedents of cognition-based trust can be identified: reliable role performance, cultural-ethnic similarity and professional credentials. Reliable role performance is related to how a person implements his/her assigned work. McAllister (1995) deemed that in the work place, it is natural for people to consider how well their coworkers have performed their tasks when assessing their trustworthiness. Past performance is one of the aspects of a person’s competence. Since competence-based

trust will let a person be more willing to communicate with the person he trusts (Abrams et al., 2003), so reliable role performance can be considered to have a positive relationship with cognition-based trust.

Cultural-ethnic similarity is a form of social similarity between individuals which can promote the establishment of trust. McAllister (1995) proposed two reasons to support the positive relationship between culture-ethnic similarity and cognition-based trust. First, social similarity can affect levels of trust. Second, we can conclude from self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987) that persons will be more ready to trust a person in the same group rather than a person in a different group. Based on these two points, we find that cultural-ethnic similarity is in accordance with the function of being predictable in the establishment of trust. It was suggested that being predictable was a factor to engender trust intention to a person (McKnight, 1998). Cultural-ethnic similarity can enhance predictability toward a person, because people will be more familiar with a person having the same background with them.

People with professional credentials are in a position to demonstrate that they are professionally qualified for their work (cf. McAllister, 1995). However, many studies have previously showed that ability is an important antecedent of trust (Cook and Wall, 1980; Sitkin and Roth, 1993). Mayer and Davis (1995) identified ability as a factor in their model of trust. They defined ability as a “group of skills, competencies, and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain”. This kind of trust is often established toward those people who have excellent behaviour/performance in their professional job and quite often this trust was engendered in a certain area which the trustee was good at.

2.3 Intention to Share Knowledge

The intention to share knowledge has a direct effect on knowledge sharing behavior. In consequence, the intention to share knowledge has been the focus of many researchers who have employed the Theory of Reasoned Action (Kolekofski and Heminger, 2003) or the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ryu et al., 2003). This body of research suggests that factors such as attitudes toward knowledge sharing and subjective norms play an important role in knowledge sharing intentions (Kolekofski and Heminger, 2003; Ryu et al., 2003; Bock et al., 2005).

3. Hypotheses & Research Model

Hofstede (1998) has suggested that employees will follow their managers' instructions if they want to be members of the organization, and so “leaders' values become followers' practice”. Furthermore, there is an assumption built into concepts of leadership such that the leader would affect his/her subordinates' task and social behavior (Yukl, 1992). Moreover, Southon et al. (2002) have proposed that management policy has a direct influence on communication culture within the company, i.e. management style affects employees' behavior. Thus, if managers are more inclined to consideration or initiating structure, then the subordinates of these managers will be correspondingly affected to behave in a manner that is oriented towards their managers' style.

When a manager is more inclined to consideration, he will express more concern for his subordinates and attach importance to the relationships among the groups by respecting his subordinates and paying attention to what they feel and think. Employees

working in such groups will also be affected to maintain such an atmosphere by concern and care for the colleagues around them; in this way, citizenship behavior and frequency of interaction will be enhanced. Accordingly,

H1a: The manager's inclination to consideration will have a positive relationship with the team members' citizenship behavior towards each other.

H1b: The manager's inclination to consideration will have a positive relationship with the frequency of interaction between the team members.

When a manager is more inclined to initiating structure, he is likely to prefer subordinates to obey a standard set of rules and procedures, stressing the implementation of a task as the most important thing. Such a manager will pay less attention to employees' feelings and thoughts, instead considering employees as the means to carry out a task. Managers with this kind of style will create a serious atmosphere for the work group and pressure their subordinates; as a result, each employee would be affected to take the task as their most important activity. Part of this preparation will involve interaction between employees so as to ensure that they can work effectively.

Accordingly,

H2a: The manager's inclination to initiating structure will have a positive relationship with the frequency of interaction between the team members.

H2b: The manager's inclination to initiating structure will increase the reliability of team members' role performance.

Following McAllister (1995), we hypothesize that both citizenship behavior and frequency of interaction have a positive relationship with affect-based trust. McAllister (1995) suggests that "altruistic behavior may provide an attributional basis for affect-based trust", since altruistic behavior can be embodied by organizational citizenship behavior. Furthermore, as in previous research, it was found that organizational citizenship behavior would enhance trust between supervisor and subordinates (Deluga, 1995). The following hypotheses, H3a and H3b, were supported in previous research (McAllister, 1995), where citizenship behavior and frequency of interaction were identified as the antecedents of affect-based trust.

H3a: The level of the team members' citizenship behavior directed towards their fellow employees will be positively associated with the level of the affect based trust in one another.

H3b: The frequency of interaction between team members will be positively associated with the level of their affect based trust in one another.

McAllister (1995) proposed three antecedents of cognition-based trust, viz.: peer reliable role performance, cultural-ethnic similarity and professional credentials.

However, given our focus on management style, we believe that only the first of these, peer reliable role performance, is relevant for our purposes. In our target population, cultural-ethnic similarity is expected to be high, i.e. it is controlled for by the research design that focuses on ethnic Chinese professionals working in the PRC. Likewise, given that the sample is intentionally restricted to current MBA students, all of whom are working full time, we believe that we can control for the professional credentials of the respondents. It has previously been established (Mayer and Davis, 1995) that ability has an important relationship with trust. We find that peer reliable role performance can reflect the ability of respondents' peers. Since trust based on peers' ability implies that trustees may only be relied on in the context of their professional responsibility, it

suggests that there is a relationship between ability and reliable role performance to cognition-based trust which is related more to task. Consequently, we consider that peer reliable role performance is an important factor, and propose:

H4: The extent to which employees reliably perform their role will be positively associated with the level of the employee's cognition based trust in his team members.

Previous research (Chowdhury, 2005; Holste and Fields, 2005) has supported the notion that cognition-based and affect-based trust has a positive relationship with knowledge sharing. Thus we propose:

H5: The more a person has affect based trust towards his team members, the more he will have the intention to share knowledge with them

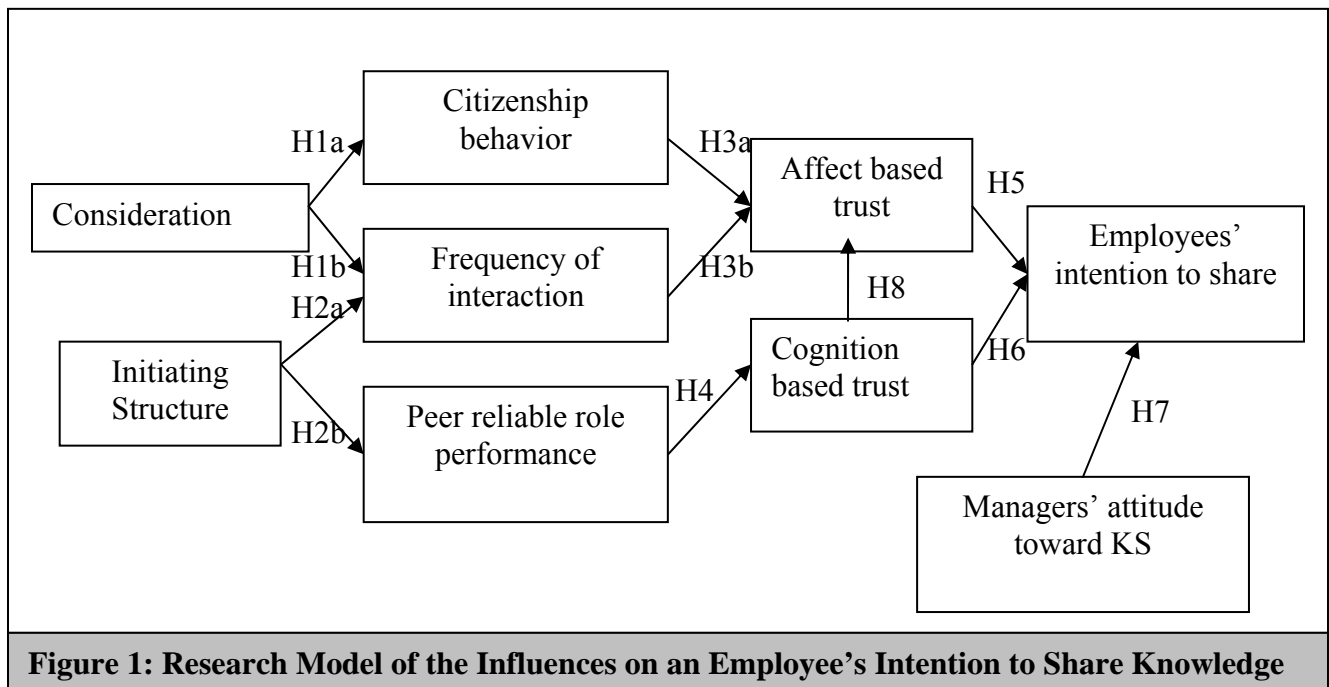
H6: The more a person has cognition based trust towards his team members, the more he will have the intention to share knowledge with them.

Besides, managers' attitude toward knowledge sharing should also affect an employee's intention to share knowledge and will in turn lead to knowledge sharing behaviour (Lin and Lee, 2004). If senior managers encourage knowledge sharing behavior then this can stimulate the development of an organizational culture that is supportive of knowledge sharing by all group members. So, we propose that,

H7: The manager's attitude toward knowledge sharing will have a positive relationship with the intention of employees to share knowledge with other team members.

Finally, McAllister (1995) also found that cognition based trust has a positive relationship with affect-based trust. Although McAllister (1995) studied the relationship between managers and employees, the relationships between employees are also relevant. Employees need to perform effectively with both their managers and their co-workers, since they need to create a good impression with both. An employee who has an excellent reputation is likely to be more sought after for advice. Thus affect based trust would be enhanced by an increased frequency of interaction. So, we propose,

H8: High cognition based trust will also cause high affection based trust.



4. Research Methodology and Analysis

4.1 Measurement and Data Collection

We developed our research instrument in English, drawing heavily on previously validated measures (Halpin, 1957; McAllister, 1995). We then translated the instrument into Chinese and performed a back-translation so as to ensure equivalence of meaning between the English and Chinese versions. Both versions of the instrument are available from the authors. The study population is comprised of MBA students from the Suzhou and Hefei campuses of The University of Science and Technology of China (USTC). All respondents are full time employees working in a variety of different organizations. A total of 239 individuals were invited to participate voluntarily in this research. 152 valid responses were returned, a response rate of 63.6%.

4.2 Research Methodology and Analysis

PLS Graph Version 3.00 was used as it supports not only confirmatory research but also exploratory research (Gefen, 2000). Besides, it requires a smaller sample size than other structural equation modelling techniques.

4.2.1 Measurement Model

According to two-stage analytical procedures (Hair, 1998), the measurement model and structural relationships were examined. In order to validate the measurement model, we assessed content validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity. Content validity was assessed by interviewing the extant literature and pilot-testing the instrument. We examined composite reliability and average variance extracted to assess convergent validity. Table 1 below shows our composite reliability values range from 0.864 to 0.927 and average variance extracted scores range from 0.56 to 0.65; all scores are above the acceptability value. In addition, Appendix B shows the weights and loadings of the measures. Finally, to assess discriminant validity, we take loadings and cross-loadings into consideration in Appendix C (all Appendices available from the authors).

Table 1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis				
Measures	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Consideration (CON)	5	0.849	0.892	0.624
Initiating (INI)	4	0.878	0.917	0.734
Citizenship Behavior (CB)	5	0.901	0.926	0.716
Frequency of Interaction (FI)	4	0.850	0.899	0.691
Peer Reliable Role Performance (RRP)	6	0.864	0.898	0.596
Affect Based Trust (ABT)	5	0.802	0.864	0.560
Cognition Based Trust (CBT)	5	0.902	0.927	0.718
Employees' Intention to Share Knowledge (ISK)	3	0.837	0.907	0.765
Managers' Attitude toward Knowledge Sharing (MA)	3	0.822	0.902	0.755

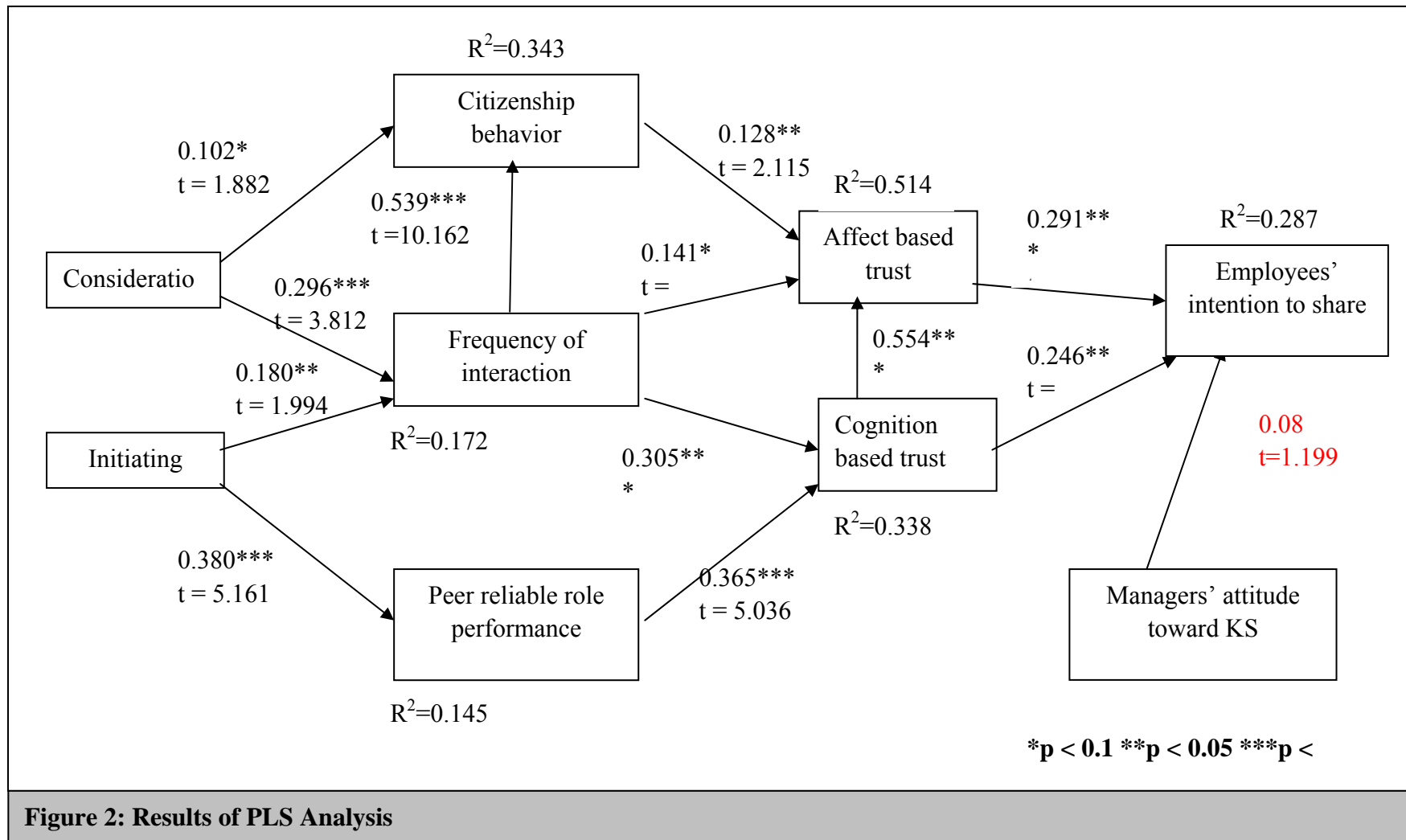


Figure 2: Results of PLS Analysis

4.2.2 Structural Model

After examining the measurement model, we tested the proposed hypotheses with PLS. The results of the analysis are shown in Figure 2. We will discuss the results as follows: management style's effect on antecedents to the trust (H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b); antecedents to the two kinds of trust (H3a, H3b and H4); two kinds of trust (H5, H6 and H8) and manager's attitude toward knowledge sharing (H7).

H1a, H1b, H2a, and H2b are all supported with significant relationships found for these four links. This result shows that citizenship behavior of the employees is influenced positively by managers with a consideration characteristic while peer reliable performance is influenced positively by managers with an initiating characteristic. Besides, both consideration and initiating character have a positive relationship with employees' frequency of interaction. We also find that consideration's influence on citizenship behavior is stronger than on frequency of interaction, while initiating structure's influence on peer reliable role performance is stronger than frequency of interaction.

H3a and H3b are both supported, confirming previous research findings that citizenship behavior and interaction frequency have a positive relationship with affect based trust. H4 is also found to be supported, which is contrary to previous research (McAllister, 1995), suggesting that peer reliable role performance has a positive relationship with cognition based trust. It should be noted that peer reliable role performance's effect on cognition based trust is much stronger than citizenship behavior and frequency of interaction's effect on affect based trust. In addition, we also found two correlations which we did not expect. Firstly, frequency of interaction has a significant influence on cognition based trust. Furthermore, the influence of interaction on cognition based trust is even stronger than on affect based trust. We consider that the establishment of cognition based trust should be mutual and the frequency of interaction will help each party to know the other better. The second unexpected correlation we found is that frequency of interaction has a strong influence on citizenship behavior. The relationship between citizenship behavior and interaction frequency has not been the focus of much research to date. Lai et al. (2004) have proposed that network members who frequently contact one another may develop stronger citizenship behavior because frequency of interaction will make them more supportive towards each other.

Both kinds of trust were found to influence employees' intention to share knowledge, supporting H5 and H6, though affect based trust has a stronger influence on intention to share knowledge than does cognition based trust. Furthermore, cognition based trust was found to have a significant influence on affect based trust (H8).

Finally, we found no significant relationship between managers' attitudes toward knowledge sharing and employees' intention to share knowledge. That is to say, H7 was not supported in our research. We suggest that this lack of effect may be due to managers in China having a poorly developed sense of the importance of encouraging knowledge sharing among their employees.

5. Discussion, Contribution and Limitations

The purpose of this study is to assess to what extent different management styles would affect subordinates' work practices in the context of team-based work, how these work practices

would in turn lead to the creation of trust between work team members, and what the impact of this trust is on the intention to share knowledge. The paper has both theoretical and practical implications. Given the lack of prior studies on the relationship between management style and subordinate trust, mediated by subordinate work practices, this study breaks new ground. Furthermore, this study considers the development of this trust in the context of work teams in China, at the same time assessing to what extent trust affects the intention to share knowledge in the Chinese context. Finally, our study finds that management styles do affect employees' intentions to share knowledge through establishing trust with one another.

Interaction frequency is an important factor linking management style and establishment of trust. Not only can it be affected by consideration style and initiating style, but it can also influence both affect based trust and cognition based trust. Contrary to other researchers' findings, interaction frequency has a greater influence on cognition based trust than on affect based trust. Moreover, interaction frequency also has a strong influence on citizenship behavior.

Since it has been found that affect based trust has a greater influence on the intention to share knowledge than cognition based trust, people may tend to think that a management style of consideration is more effective in facilitating knowledge sharing among employees. In fact, a much greater proportion of affect based trust could be formed from cognition based trust than from citizenship behavior and the frequency of interaction which can be established from a consideration management style. That is to say, we find that the management style of initiating structure is more helpful in trust establishment which subsequently leads to the intention to share knowledge. Managers' encouragement of knowledge sharing seems to be far from sufficient to effectively stimulate employees to share their knowledge. It is clearly necessary for managers both to develop their own positions more carefully and to communicate those positions to their subordinates more effectively, if knowledge is to be shared as desired.

In our study, we confirmed once more that affect based trust has a stronger influence on the intention to share knowledge than cognition based trust, although affect based trust can be established through cognition based trust.

The practical implication of this study is that if managers want to encourage their subordinates to share knowledge, they need to ensure that members of work groups develop more trust with one other. Managers should also realize that their own attitude towards knowledge sharing is important given their leadership responsibility. It is important to point out that our suggestions may not be generalisable beyond the Chinese environment, given the significant differences between the cultural values and traditions of Chinese people and those of other countries (cf. Hofstede, 2001). Nevertheless, for managers working in China, we suggest that ideally, they will be characterized by a high-high style, i.e. will be both considerate and capable of initiating structure. We also strongly encourage employees to interact with one another on a regular basis: survey feedback indicates that most respondents do not interact with their colleagues on a regular basis (McInerney, 2002; Wang and Guan, 2005). Task-based opportunities will provide the context where knowledge sharing is appropriate, but incentives from management to share knowledge will be important as well.

Our study has a number of limitations. The data about management style is based on the employees' perception. However, each respondent is only one member of a work group, suggesting that other opinions about management style may differ. Unfortunately, it was not possible to survey all members of any one work group. Furthermore, this study focuses on the intention to share knowledge among work group members as a whole, not with individual work group members. Clearly, an employee may have a stronger intention to share knowledge with some colleagues, but not others. However, the current research design is not sufficiently sensitive to assess such details. Future research should consider this issue, ideally with a more qualitative research methodology. Finally, this study paid more attention to general management style, without taking into consideration such details as the industry type, the exact position of the respondent or the manager.

Given these limitations, we strongly encourage other researchers to undertake more research in this domain. It would be useful to conduct a case study in a single organization so as to understand how different management styles work in facilitating knowledge sharing intention. Replicating the study in other cultures would help to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, the topic to be studied could also be broadened: actual knowledge sharing can be involved in research; knowledge sharing across work group can be investigated; more factors influencing affect based trust can be researched as well.

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