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Finding Common Interests: Using Social Media to boost Retention in Voluntary Professional Associations

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ABSTRACT

Attrition is one of the most important challenges faced by Professional Associations like the Project Management Institute (PMI). According to publicly available data, 90,000 members joined PMI in 2005. In the month of April 2006 alone, 33,751 new members were added, which leads to the logical conclusion that the PMI membership must have grown by over 115,750 during the period 2005-2006. However, records show that the growth has been by only 70,000. PMI's reported growth of 5% would have been much higher had it not been for their attrition of 23%. Similarly, ISACA's growth during 2014 dropped to 4% due to their attrition of 19%. In this paper, we combine the social identity theory and communication ecology theory to propose a Social Identity Theory (SITPA) for professionals. We argue that by leveraging the social media, Voluntary Professional Associations (VPAs) can provide "value" to their members, increasing their retention rates.

Keywords

Voluntary Professional Associations, social identity theory for professional associations, virtual communities,

INTRODUCTION

Professional associations project identity, community role, external boundaries and legitimacy. They are important to their respective professions because they are arenas through which members interact and collectively represent themselves by defining the profession through activities, services and membership criteria (Greenwood et al. 2002). These associations offer a range of services to their members categorized as Member discount services, Communication services, Professional networking services, Information dissemination services, Career advancement services, Advocacy services, or Leadership and Community services (Ritzhaupt et al. 2012). Voluntary membership to a professional association not only provides a space for members to satisfactorily exchange dues, time and expertise for services and products offered by the association (Gruen et al. 2000) but also provides a democratic society where individuals can gain power through group affiliation and participation (Siedentop 1994).

Some professions, like the professional bar association, mandates membership depending on the jurisdiction, while in others, the membership is voluntary. In some other professions like Medicine, Law, Accounting, Financial management etc. require licenses for practice. These licenses provide legitimacy, regulatory oversight and accountability to the profession. In the tech world, however, to the best of our knowledge, there are no formal mandatory licenses for practice. Certifications like PMP (Project Management Professional), CISA (Certified Information Systems Auditor) and CISM (Certified Information Security Manager) to name a few, although good to have are not absolutely required for practice. While these certifications may signal to prospective employers, the worker's legitimacy in the field, once earned there may be little incentive to maintain ongoing membership in the corresponding professional associations without regulatory requirements. In the absence of a formal license for

practice, the authenticity of the professional becomes questionable. Professional Associations help address these gaps by providing legitimacy and authenticity to the profession. We term professional organizations where regulatory license is not required to practice as Voluntary Professional Associations (VPA).

If IT Project Managers are not engaged in VPA they may miss out on opportunities to update and enhance their project management skills, and limit their future employment opportunities. While local project management networking groups can be an asset to some project managers (due to high levels of variability in the types of projects that project managers work on, and varying levels of participation in local VPA) virtual communities may provide a more robust means of encouraging ongoing membership within project management networking organizations. An area that merits further investigation is the use of Social Media to develop virtual communities. In this study, we examine the antecedents necessary for IT project managers for creating a VPA online presence. We argue that a strong online presence will create a strong virtual community which in turn will improve their retention rates. Using the lens of social media research, we identify a series of propositions for enhancing the retention rates of project managers within professional associations.

Participation in a VPA is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, VPAs play a critical role in providing valuable professional networking and career advancement services (Dicke 2014; Ritzhaupt et al. 2012) to a tech worker. In this study, we focus on a group of tech workers that are most vulnerable to drop off from the profession in the absence of VPAs due to the lack of standard accreditation practices through regulatory licenses. These professionals include but are not limited to Project Managers (PMs), Business Analysts (BAs), Developers, and Open source coders that constitute an important portion of the IT work force. A second reason that VPA participation is crucial for IT professionals is because they believe information gathering techniques, systems design topics, file design and planning and control of systems to be the most promising and demanding skill areas (Cheney and Lyons 1980). VPA membership plays an important role in providing an opportunity for these professionals to update their skill. IT road warriors, who spend a major portion of their work week at client sites (Ahuja et al. 2007), however are unable to capitalize on this "offline opportunity" due to their demanding work schedules.

A question then arises "*Can we capitalize on virtual communities to provide opportunities for professional to update their skills?"* We believe yes. In this work, we theorize a conceptual model to demonstrate that VPAs can provide "value" to their membership by creating an online community. We measure value by the extent to which members feel committed to the VPA by virtue of costs they feel are associated with leaving (Meyer and Allen 1984). To develop our model, we adopted the causal chain framework (Ngai et al. 2015) to conceptualize the antecedents, mediators and moderators to predict the outcome – Renewal Intention (Meyer and Allen 1991). In this study, we scope our definition of Professionals to tech workers like PMs, and BAs who do not necessarily need a license (or a certification) or be a part of an association to practice but could benefit from the collective wisdom of their peers.

In the following sections, we briefly discuss the prominent theories that influence acquisition and attrition in professional associations. We then explain the Social Identity theory in the light of Social Media Research (SMR) to make an argument that Social Media by creating a better person environment fit creates virtual communities that help improve retention rates in professional associations. We propose Social Identity Theory (SIT) for Professional Associations and call it the SITPA model.
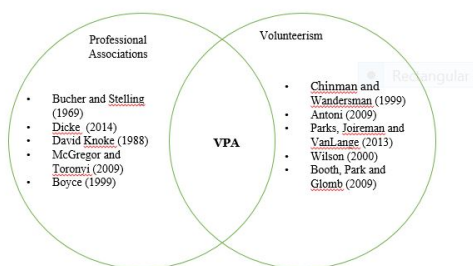
LITERATURE REVIEW

Figure 1: Literature Review

Existing literature on the subject can be classified into two broad streams. The first stream discusses the various elements of professional associations. Bucher and Stelling (1969) identified the major characteristics of a professional association – Role creation and negotiation, Spontaneous internal differentiation, Competition and conflict for resources, Integration through a political process and Locus of power shifts. Dicke (2014) identified the key activities performed by these associations –Building/securing Networks, Opening Opportunities, Exchanging experiences/mentorship, staying current and recognition in the field. Knoke (1988) identified organizational incentives to be the key drivers for involvement. McGregor and Tse Toronyi (2009) focused on engaging the Millennials in professional associations by

proposing a four-pronged model. Boyce (1999) described the role of a professional association as a network and communication node. This research collectively contributes to our understanding of interactions within professional organizations. The second stream discusses the nature of volunteering. Chinman & Wandersman (1999) studied the benefits and cost of volunteering in a community organization. Antoni (2009) identifies the intrinsic motivators for volunteering. Parks et al (2013) advocated the promotion of products of volunteering through cooperation, trust and antagonism. Wilson (2000) explained that the activity of volunteering cannot be explained by a single theory. Booth, Park, & Glomb (2009) studied the benefits of enployer supported volunteering. The above findings are summarized in figure 1.

We then looked at the literature on online communities. Chen & Hung (2010) identified norm of reciprocity, interpersonal trust, knowledge sharing self efficacy and perceived relative advantage as the "influential" factors that could foster knowledge sharing among professionals in an online community. Interaction of negative and positive influences of passion, time, socially ambiguous identities and temporary convergence were found to aid knowledge collaboration among online communities (Faraj et al. 2011). Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler (2007) studied the factors that promoted a common identity among online community members.

POSITIONING IN THE NOMOLOGICAL NETWORK

Figure 2: Theories

As with the literature, we found a gap in theories as well. Incentive theory was one of the major theories of motivation that suggests human behavior is motivated by a desire for reinforcement of incentives. According to this theory members volunteer their time and resources when they perceive that their value of services align with those of the association they choose to serve (Chen 2004). Herzberg's two factor motivation theory describes two types of motivations – Intrinsic and extrinsic for work related needs and desires (Ronen and Kraut 1980). Achievement, recognition responsibility and growth (Ronen and Kraut 1980) are intrinsic (comes from within) motivators that leads one to volunteer. These prominent theories explained volunteerism among members.
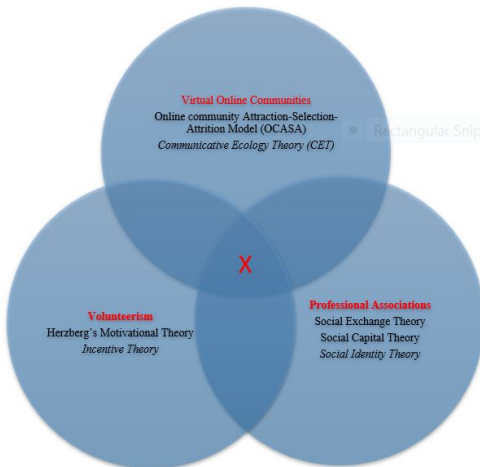
Members of professional associations exchange dues, time and expertise for services and products offered by the association and expect a satisfactory exchange for their investment (Fine 1990).

Popularly known as the social exchange theory, this exchange is most likely to occur when the perceived benefits of obtaining a good or service such as monetary value; information; prestige; status and appreciation, outweighs its costs (Phillips 2011). Social capital theory suggest that bonding matters for organizational affiliations (Dicke 2014). Social Capital encompasses a set of resources inherent in the structure of social relations among individuals (Di Vincenzo and Mascia 2012). These theories explain the professional choices made by individuals.

The Attraction-Selection-Attrition theory (Schneider et al. 2000) models the emergence of organizational characteristic as a function of three processes that reflect a member's decision to join, remain in and ultimately leave an organization. The Online Community Attraction-Selection-Attrition Model (Butler et al. 2014) theorizes the underlying constructs and causal mechanisms that can be impacted by technology choices to build more robust, integrative models of online community dynamics and development. Communicative Ecology Theory (CET) posits that new media and information technologies can influence the communicative content and social interactions in a professional association. These theories explain the dynamics of a virtual online community. As can be inferred from figure 2, there lies a gap in the literature that does not quite explain the region associated with the "X" in the model. In this paper we address this gap by proposing Social Identity Theory for professional associations (SITPA).

Our arguments are based on the premise that Social Identity will play out differently in online and offline communities among professionals. We draw this conclusion from the following excerpts from an interview with a former board member of a PMI (Project Management Institute) chapter. This interview was one of the three interviews with board members of the INW (Inland Northwest) chapter.

> *"In my experience, people bond over shared experiences that result in personal or professional growth. The chapter events offer very limited, passive presentations where people aren't interacting or engaging with each other."*

The same member in the later part of the interview makes the following observation:

> *"I think that [hesitation to share information on a Social Media Platform] comes from a basic lack of understanding of how to protect their privacy and professional image. They don't know how to prevent an embarrassing photo from being shared and damaging their credibility in a professional group."*

The offline VPA community offers less opportunities for interaction because in this model, there is usually a presenter who takes the center stage while the others are passive onlookers. In the online model however there is an opportunity for everybody to participate. However, the levels of sharing differ among individuals. Content sharing will depend on factors such as personality and familiarity with the social media tool. By proposing SITPA, we argue that tech professionals by virtue of their ability to create their own distinctive social organization within a larger organization (Bucher and Stelling 1969), combined with their natural attraction for technology are likely to be more engaged in the virtual communities of the VPAs. This engagement could lead to greater retention rates. The switching costs associated with quitting their current association and join another acts as a deterrent to attrition.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY FOR PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (SITPA)

An individual's sense of who they are based on their group memberships defines the social identity of the individual. Social identity theory (SIT) emphasizes the potential effect of group identification on membership decisions (Phillips and Leahy 2012). In the following paragraphs, we lay out the constructs in the model to explain the phenomenon of online engagement in VPAs.

An individual's self-concept is derived from his or her personal knowledge of membership in a VPA combined with the value and emotional significance attached to the membership (Tajfel 1981). Self-categorization, affective commitment and group self-esteem are the distinct aspects of social identity (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that individuals categorize themselves (self-categorization) which then leads them to associate themselves with different groups. Affective Commitment is the positive feelings of identification with, attachment to and involvement with the VPA (Meyer and Allen 1984). The degree to which an individual believes that they can satisfy their needs by participating in roles within the association is defined as group based self-esteem (Pierce et al. 1989). We believe that VPA identity is an antecedent to retention. Further, Professionals derive a sense of self-worth and social belongingness from their memberships in groups and hence are motivated to draw favorable comparisons between their own group and other groups (Tajfel and Turner 2004). This leads us to our first proposition that Professional with a strong VPA identity are more likely to renew their membership with the VPA. These individuals are also more likely to frequent the Social networking sites of the VPA.

P1a: Professionals who emotionally connect strongly with the VPA are more likely to frequent the social networking sites of the VPA.

P1b: Professionals who score high on affective commitment are more likely to frequent the social networking sites of the VPA.

P1c: Professionals who believe that their needs can be satisfied by participating in the roles of the VPA are more likely to frequent the social networking sites of the VPA.

Big 5 personality traits (Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism and Openness) were found to be significantly related to volunteer satisfaction (Jabari et al. 2012). Agreeableness is the degree to which the member is helpful, co-operative and sympathetic towards others (Tupes and Christal 1992). Conscientiousness is the degree to which the member is disciplined, organized and achievement oriented (Digman and Inouye 1986). Extraversion is the degree of the member's sociability, sensitiveness and talkativeness (Costa and McCrae 1985). Neuroticism is defined as the degree of the member's emotional stability, impulse control and anxiety (Costa and McCrae 1985). Finally openness is the degree of the member's intellectual curiosity and preference for novelty and variety (Costa and McCrae 1985).

We believe the Big 5 are the best descriptors for human personality (Digman 1990). Of these, Extraversion, Neuroticism and Openness were found to influence social Media use (Correa et al. 2010). Specifically they found that "*People who are more extraverted will use social media more frequently*", "*People who are emotionally stable will use the social media less frequently*" and "*People who are open to new experiences will use social media more frequently*" (Correa et al. 2010, p. 250). This leads us to the following propositions:

P2a: Professionals who score high on extraversion will use the social networking sites of the VPA more frequently.

P2b: Professionals who are emotionally instable are more likely to frequent the social networking sites of the VPA.

P2c: Professionals who are open to new experiences will use the social networking sites of the VPA more frequently.

To develop our propositions on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, we relied on the excerpts from the three interviews mentioned earlier. A quote from a retired professional who spent the entire career training future leaders:

> *"And initially I was a little uneasy… because I felt like that it [Social media] might be exposing them to some risks….and then facebook began to emerge…. And then, we stated hearing from the students from the class that this [facebook] was a good way to communicate with them…and then it [Social media presence] began to grow"*

P2d: Professionals who are helpful, co-operative and sensitive to fellow member's needs will use the social media sites of the VPA more frequently.

A quote from another professional:

> *"I am our there [blogs] looking for information. I am looking for something very specific. Mostly times run out from the blog. I mean I have gone to different help pages from there".*

P2e: Professionals who score high on conscientiousness will use the social media sites of the VPA selectively.

Social Media platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn provide an alternative mechanism for members to increase their social capital. Features like tagging, commenting, suggesting connections, posting to name a few helps re-inforce the "in-group" identity among members. Once an "in-group" identity is established and strengthened, members draw comparisons between their own group and other groups. Recognizing "out-groups" reinforces the identity just as "in-groups". Frequency of interactions, venue of interactions and the type of interactions are found to be the influencers of Bonding social capital (Dicke 2014).

The Communicative ecology as proposed by Communicative Ecology Theory (CET) has three distinct components - technological, social and discursive (Bock et al. 2015). We use the "Extent of use of Social media tools" to represent the CET technological dimension. With the passage of time, members will begin to strengthen their ties and their loyalty to the VPA. We therefore use the "Strength of emotional ties" to represent the social dimension of CET (Bock et al. 2015). Members see "value" in their VPA association if information is readily accessible. Hence we use "Sharing of Information" to represent the discursive dimension. Presence of a communicative ecology builds a strong virtual community for the VPA. A strong identity in a virtual community will lead to a positive intention to renew membership.

P3: Frequent sharing of useful information with peers on the VPA social networking sites will create a virtual community within the VPA.

P4: Participation in the virtual community strengthens a member's intention to renew his VPA membership.

Table 1 below summarizes the constructs described above.

Construct	Variables	Definition
VPA Identity	Self Categorization	The member's personal knowledge of the VPA membership combined with the value and emotional significance attached (Tajfel, 1981).
	VPA Affective Commitment	Positive feelings of identification with, attachment to and involvement with the VPA (Meyer and Allen, 1984).
	Group Self Esteem	The degree to which a member believes he or she can satisfy their needs by participating in roles with the VPA (Pierce et al., 1989).
Communicative Ecology	Extent of use of Social Media Tools	Technological capabilities provided by the VPA to support communication and information exchange (Bock et al, 2015).
	Strength of Emotional Ties	People and Social modes that represent the quality of the communication and interpersonal relationships within the VPA (Bock et al, 2015).
	Sharing of Information	Extent to which timely, relevant and valuable information is shared on the platform (Bock et al, 2015).
User personality	Agreeableness	Degree to which the member is helpful, co-operative and sympathetic towards others (Tupes and Christal, 1992).
	Conscientiousness	Degree to which the member is disciplined, organized and achievement-oriented (Digman and Inouye, 1986).
	Extraversion	Degree of the member's sociability, assertiveness and talkativeness (Costa and McCrae, 1985).
	Neuroticism	Degree of the member's emotional stability, impulse control and anxiety (Costa and McCrae, 1985).
	Openness	Degree of the member's intellectual curiosity and preference for novelty and variety (Costa and McCrae, 1985).
Renewal Intention	VPA Continuance Commitment	Extent to which members feel committed to the VPA by virtue of costs they feel are associated with leaving (Meyer and Allen, 1984).

Table 1: Construct Definition

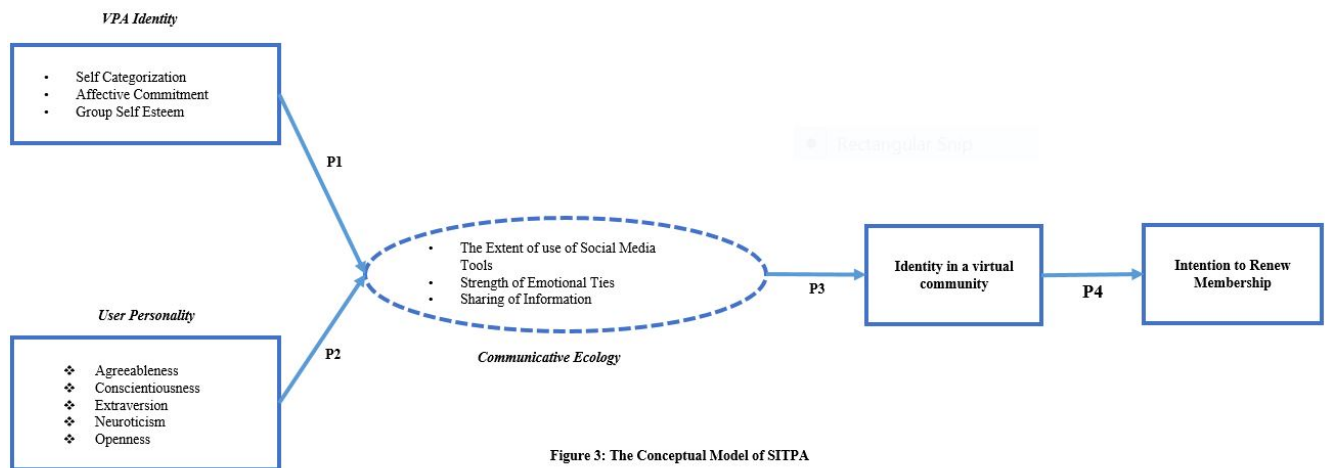Figure 3 below conceptualizes the research model.

Figure 3: The Conceptual Model of SITPA

FUTURE RESEARCH METHODS

The SITPA model provides a framework by which the relationship between social media participation and membership retention may be evaluated. Through this model the level of identity and use of VPA members may be evaluated, and the relationship between communicative ecology, both in physical and virtual communities, and ongoing retention may be isolated. Future work may empirically examine these relationships by investigating retention rates, both at individual and VPA chapter levels, with social media usage levels, measured by such observed variables as views, posts, likes, membership or comments.

CONTRIBUTIONS

A person's decision to join a VPA is not a cost-benefit analysis (Dalton and Dignam 2007). In a survey conducted involving 18 different membership associations and 16,944 respondents, the survey takers indicated that professional development, information dissemination and networking were the primary factors that influenced their decision to join a professional association (Dalton and Dignam 2007). VPAs exists for nearly every industry, occupation and area of interest. Membership is the lifeblood for these associations. Retaining members is therefore a critical task for membership committees because of the high costs of replacing departing members that results from a loss of knowledge. This work contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon of attrition and retention in VPAs.

VPA individuals are experts (professionals) seeking to advance a particular profession. Bound by a common interest, they enter into an agreement voluntarily to accomplish a common purpose. These characteristics make the group unique. Members develop a strong sense of identity within the group and tend to differentiate themselves from the world outside of it. By virtue of their expertise, professionals tend to successfully influence their working conditions by imposing their own set of professional values (Bucher and Stelling 1969). They tend to seek intellectually challenging work (Bucher and Stelling 1969). We therefore hypothesize that professionals will be more willing to embrace advances in technology to fulfil their goal. The conceptual model presented in this paper advances our understanding of social identity among professionals who volunteer their resources for the benefit of the community they belong. By proposing a SIT model specifically for Professional associations, we make a theoretical contribution by extending SIT to a virtual environment of professional engagement. Further, it addresses the impacts of social media platforms, an area that is significantly under-researched.

This work also makes a significant contribution to practice. Almost 23% of the associations in the United States have a dedicated person who spends more than 10 (ten) hours a week on social media activity with about 20% of them spending more than 20 (twenty) hours a week (Social Media Impact Study for Associations, 2015). The irony is that most voluntary associations are managed by members who have little to no exposure to social media platforms and virtual communities. By highlighting the communicative ecology, the model demonstrates that by choosing the channels wisely and posting consistently with purpose, voluntary professional associations can build awareness and create standards. Although the model is proposed for IT professionals, it can be generalized to other non-accreditation fields as well.

LIMITATIONS

This work assumes that members are associated with only one professional association. It does not account for memberships with multiple associations. Members can be part of multiple voluntary professional associations. Being a part of multiple associations may or may not affect the renewal intention associated with a particular association. This study however has not accounted for this. Another limitation is that this study focuses only on social media websites. It has not considered non-social media websites like Columbus dispatch, Kiva, Amazon and Pandora to name a few. The study limits its focuses on Big 5 (Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Neuroticism and Openness) personality traits. We acknowledge this to be a major limitation. The study does not consider other factors like user perception, user behavior, age, culture and internet self-efficacy to name a few that could also have a significant effect on the relationship. Similarly, the study does not consider intergroup and between group dynamics. Individuals with similar passion and concern sometimes unconsciously begin to learn from each other. They need not necessarily be aware of this learning process. Etienne Wenger calls this group a "Communities of Practice". This phenomenon is not addressed in this work. By scoping our work to non-licensing certifications like PMP and ISACA, we have not considered the licensing certifications like CFA or CPA. Although for the purposes of our study we have scoped our work to tech workers, we believe it can be generalized to other groups as well.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations cited above provide several avenues for future research. In this paper, we have presented a conceptual model. We hope to continue this work and test the model with empirical data. Future researchers by developing on this model can study the effects of memberships with multiple associations. The impact of non-social media websites like Columbus dispatch, Kiva, Amazon and Pandora to name a few could be another venue for future research. The user personalities used in the study could be expanded to check the effects of user perception, user behavior, age, gender, culture and other user demographics. The study could also be extended to cover

communities of practice. Group dynamics is another possible venue for future studies. The most interesting aspect of this model is generalizability. In this work, we have considered the outcome variable (Member Intention) – Intention to renew. The model, we believe, can be generalized to explain other possible outcomes like skill development, workforce development, finding a new job and so on.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a conceptual model to explain the decision to continue the membership by professionals in a voluntary association. The study aims to address the burning issue of attrition in voluntary professional associations by presenting an easy to understand model that builds on the Social Identity Theory (SIT). In doing so, this work makes a major theoretical contribution. First, by applying the concept of communicative ecology, this paper proposes the effective use of Social Media to develop a social identity among professionals. This paper thus makes a theoretical contribution by proposing a new SIT to professional associations, SITPA.

The paper also makes significant contribution to the practitioner world. By applying the model, voluntary professional associations can increase their membership by attracting new members while at the same time retaining the existing ones. The model presented in this paper can be extended to explain other phenomenon like finding a new job, developing professional skills, developing professional workforce to mention a few. While acknowledging the limitations, the paper proposes several avenues for future research.

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