TRIPADVISOR: A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRATICE

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ABSTRACT: The research concentrates on describing how knowledge is shared within an online community of practice. The focus is on the type of shared knowledge and on the knowledge flows that cross the TripAdvisor community of practice. Therefore, 121 posts with 33,592 users liking or commenting 52,963 times are extracted. The main results prove that TripAdvisor is a fully active community of practice which fosters members' relationships; none of the members are isolated and all of them are focusing either on acquiring or disseminating emotional and cognitive knowledge. These findings have both theoretical and practical implication. At the theoretical level, it extends the theory by emphasizing the nexus between knowledge management and social media; the last one may serve as an instrument for knowledge sharing and also as a transactive memory system. At the policy-makers level, it offers a viable tool which can get the managers closer to their customers and can also improve the communication and collaboration between the firm and its external stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: knowledge sharing; community of practice; social media; organization; tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, the communities of practice represent a fundamental subject of interest for both knowledge management practitioners and scholars. Still, during the time, the perspective from which these are analyzed changed radically; the focus practically switched from the influence factors [1], [2], [3], [4] to the obtained outcomes [5], [6], [7], from the internal level [8], [9] to the external one [10], and from the real world [9], [11] to the virtual one [8], [12], [13].

Despite the valuable findings of the previous studies, there is still little research regarding the type of knowledge that is shared within a community of practice and how does knowledge flow among its members. In order to fill this gap, the current paper aims to analyze how and what type of knowledge is shared within an online community of practice.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the concepts of "community of practice", "online community of practice", "emotional knowledge", "spiritual knowledge", and "cognitive knowledge"; Section 3 emphasizes the research methodology while Section 4 highlights how emotional and cognitive knowledge flows within the TripAdvisor community of practice. The paper closes by drawing several conclusions, and determining the theoretical and practical implications of the main results.

2. THE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE: FROM THE REAL WORLD TO THE VIRTUAL ONE

The concept of "community of practice" has its roots in the psychological theory of activity developed, in the 1920s, by the Vygotokian school of developmental psychology [14]. Fifty years later, it captures the interest of the business and organizational practitioners and scholars [15], [16]. Practically, [16] brought the concept into the business area by presenting the community of practice as a group of individuals who have a common interest, solve specific problems and tend to create new knowledge by practicing together. Given the ambiguity of this definition, a few years later, [11] claims that the cornerstone of a community of practice is represented by the following three elements:

- a domain of knowledge (the area in which the members have expertise);

- a coherent group of people who want to share what they know and are open to learn from the others;

- a shared practice that is constantly developed and enriched.

Starting from these and the fast pace of technological development, the communities of practice move from the real world to the virtual one and start to be described as "informal and self-organized networks of peers with diverse skills in an area of practice or a profession" [9]. Just like the ones from the real world, the online communities of practice bring together the individuals who share a common interest, are willing to foster individuals and groups learning, and invest effort into discovering what may happened or what may unexpectedly emerge in a given domain. As [17] sustain, the online communities of practice are based on five principles, such as:

- knowledge is public – anyone can access individuals and groups memory (the artefacts that the members have already shared) at anytime and from any place in the world; anyone can read and comment previous posts which synthesize what individuals have felt, thought or done in a certain situation;

- the membership is open – anyone can become a member as long as he or she is interested in the subject and is willing to access others' ideas, opinions and experiences and to disseminate what he or she knows or believes within the group;

- the members of the community are volunteers – the members become part of the community because they desire to and they may leave if they are no longer interested in the subject; nevertheless, they decide to join a certain community because they believe they can bring different perspectives and they can facilitate the development of future approaches or directions;

- knowledge distribution goes beyond the organizational boundaries – each of the members includes the acquired ideas, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, experiences in his or her mental models and take them with him or her in the real world, fostering their dissemination worldwide;

- interaction is mainly virtual and technology-based – the members meet in a virtual space and communicate with one another without having any type of face-to-face interaction.

As a consequence, it can be argued that the members of an online community of practice are linked by a private emotion (a desire to discover more and to share what they know), reflexive engagement and learning, the possibility of having access to individuals or groups memory at any time, autonomy, personal responsibility and discretion. Each of these elements is related with what [18], [19], [20] label as emotional, spiritual and cognitive knowledge; the spiritual knowledge is the one that links the members of an online community of practice while the emotional and cognitive knowledge are the ones that support and foster the relationships developed among the members.

Within an online community of practice, the individuals from different parts of the world and various hierarchical levels of the same or different organization are aware of their role in the community and help each other to solve problems, by sharing with others data, information, insights, experiences, ideas, emotions, beliefs, know-how and fellowship. As a result, they identify new perspectives, from which the problems could be approached, develop new tools. In other words, they start by disseminating a mix of emotional and cognitive knowledge and end up creating mainly cognitive knowledge, and secondary emotional knowledge.

Synthesizing, the communities of practice play a critical role in facilitating knowledge to be created, used, transformed and shared within and among organizations [13], and they also save time, money, energy and effort [21]. Therefore, it is important to know whether they are predominantly share emotional or cognitive knowledge. Are they focusing on what they feel

or on the facts and processes that took place? And if so, how does each type of knowledge flow among the members of an online community of practice?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research concentrates on analyzing how knowledge is shared within an online community of practice. The focus is on the type of shared knowledge and also on the knowledge flow direction.

The case study strategy is applied since this is the most appropriate one for answering to the "how" and "why" questions [22]. The analyzed case is represented by TripAdvisor, world's largest travel site. This acts as a community of practice due to the fact that it reunites the individuals who are interested in travelling and encourages knowledge sharing among them. As [21] states "the principles on which this community is based on include: sharing cognitive and emotional knowledge directly (each member posts his/her impressions on a given destination – what he/she saw; what does he/she think about the people, the culture etc.) or by evaluation (each member may rate a destination, an attraction or an accommodation based on how he/she felt like – was he/she moved by the architectural style of the city; was he/she satisfied with hotel's services etc.) and asking for cognitive and emotional knowledge (members have the opportunity to ask others what they think a certain location or what places would they recommend)".

For data collection the Facebook application – Netvizz – is used. As [23] highlight the generated results include "all texts of post and comments published by users or by the pages in a given period of time or most recent posts, subject to the user's preferences, and the Facebook engagement measures for each post (i.e., umber of likes, comments, shares, comment-likes, and a total sum of all the engagement measures)". Therefore, the activity on TripAdvisor page is tracked and synthesized from September 31 until November 1, 2015; this period is selected due to the fact that during this time people review the experiences they lived in their summer vacation, which is usually described as the busiest time of the year for the tourism companies. Therefore, 121 posts with 33,592 users liking or commenting 52,963 times are extracted.

4. MAIN RESULTS

On general basis, TripAdvisor is a fully active community of practice which encourages and fosters members' relationships. Any individual can become a member if he or she wants to and if he or she is interested in travelling. So, the membership is open, the members are volunteers and they interact mainly virtual. Nevertheless, the members are linked through a set of common spiritual knowledge, and the emotional, spiritual and cognitive knowledge that is shared within the platform becomes public in just a couple of seconds.

As it may be observed from Figure 1, none of the members are isolated and all of them are focusing either on acquiring knowledge or on disseminating it. However, some relationships are more frequent than others; the solid lines emphasize the powerful (frequently) knowledge sharing processes while the dashed lines bring forward the occasional knowledge sharing processes that occur among the members of the TripAdvisor community of practice.

Although the processes of knowledge sharing seem to be fostered by at least 10 members who occupy a central position within the TripAdvisor community of practice, a special attention should be given to the satellite groups. These are linked with the others by only one member who acts as a gatekeeper. He or she acts as an interface between the cornerstone of the community of practice and the members of the satellite group, mediates the relationships between the two parts and controls the knowledge that goes in and out of the group.
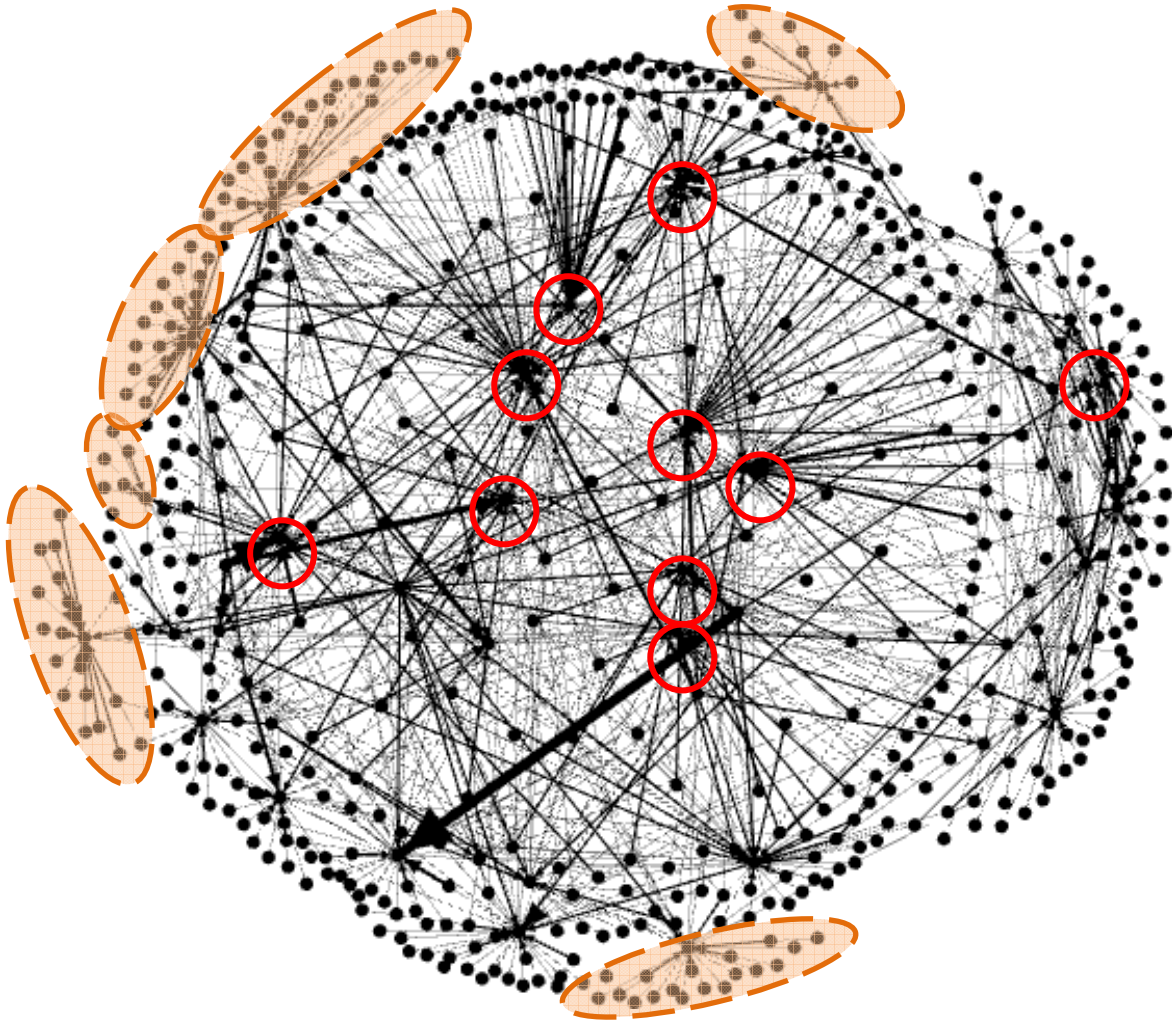
Figure 1. Knowledge sharing within the TripAdvisor community of practice. A general view

According to the overall network statistics (Figure 2), the average degree is 20.042 which signifies that each member of the TripAdvisor community of practice shares his or her knowledge with at least 20 other community members. However, the degree dispersion follows a power law pattern and registers a high level, ranging from 0 to a little more than 65. Given these aspects, it can be stated that there are a few members in the TripAdvisor community of practice who have a lot of connections, are very popular and gained the trust of others. They focus on disseminating what they think, feel or believe on a certain subject (vacation experiences, accommodation, trips etc.) and are usually labelled as "experts"; their opinion on the matter weighs a lot, in the eyes of others. As highlighted in Figure 1, 10 members represent the cornerstone of the TripAdvisor community of practice since they concentrate on both acquiring and sharing knowledge. They are open to receive emotional, spiritual and cognitive knowledge from others but they are also willing to disseminate what they valued, felt, thought and experiences in certain circumstances.
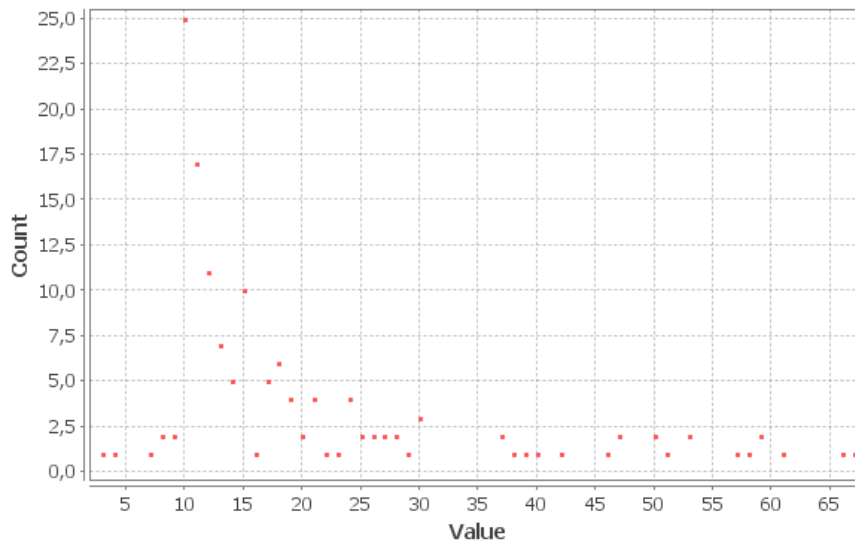
Figure 2. Degree distribution

Besides, if data presented in Figure 3 is taken into account, it can be remarked that emotional knowledge sharing occurs frequently among 17 members of the TripAdvisor community of practice, and it is controlled by one member. However, at the overall network level, there is an infusion of emotional knowledge but the process of knowledge sharing occurs mainly occasionally among the members. The results are justified since sharing emotional knowledge is highly depending on context, individuals' disposition, personality and experience.
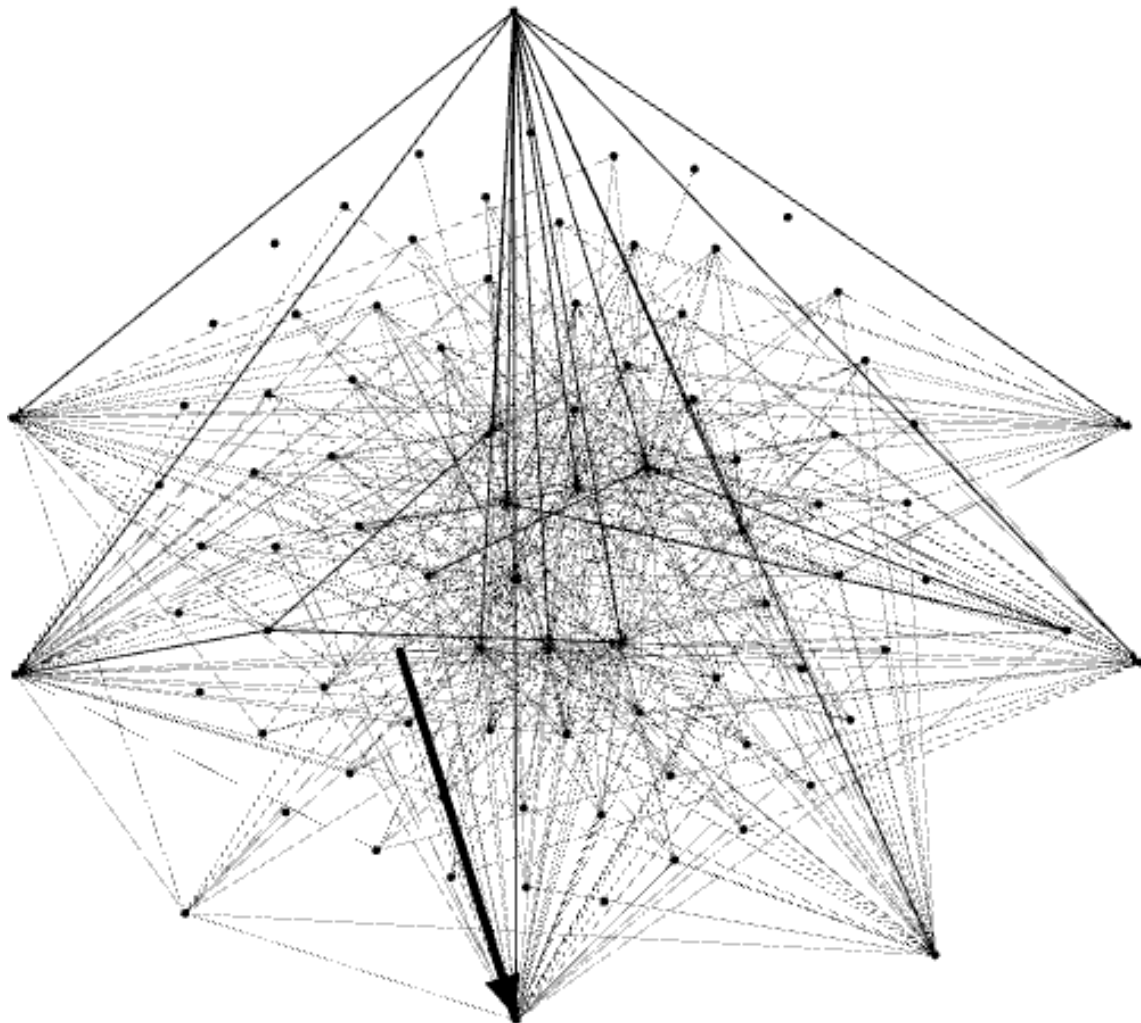

Figure 3. Emotional knowledge sharing within the TripAdvisor community of practice

Cognitive knowledge sharing occurs within and between the groups that have at least three regular members (Figure 4). In other words, when it comes to deciding the future destination

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for their vacation, the members of the TripAdvisor community of practice feel a psychological need of gathering knowledge from various sources. Therefore, they are either posting questions which increase the interest of other members or they reply to previous posts in order to ask for more details. As a result, they obtain more insights regarding what to do and see in a certain locations.
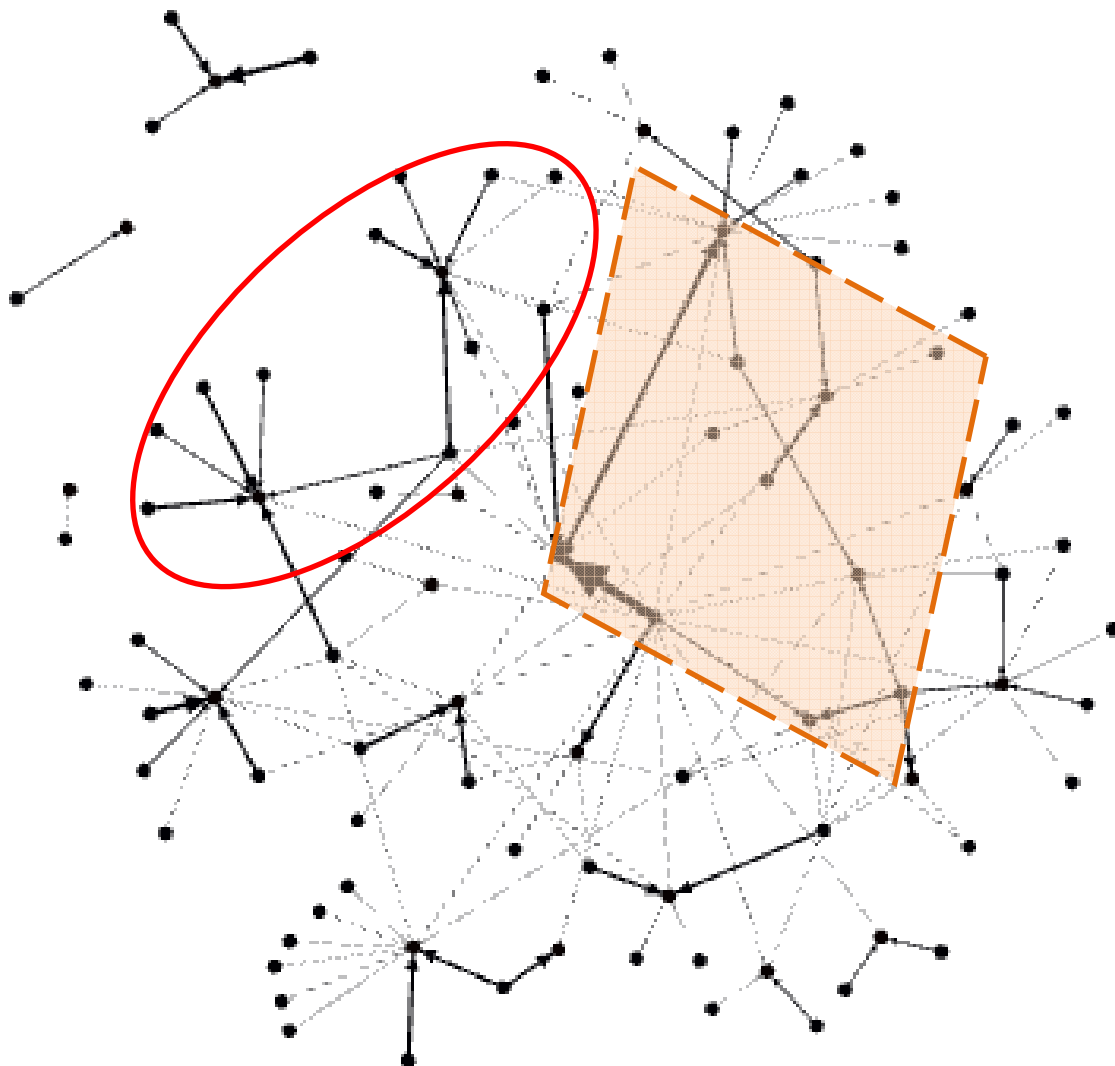

Figure 4. Cognitive knowledge sharing within the TripAdvisor community of practice

Nevertheless, the inter-group cognitive knowledge sharing occurs on the same basis as the emotional one; some members act as gatekeepers, linking the individuals who have the same interests but do not know of one another while others obtain what they need from various intermediaries. In the first case, knowledge becomes subject to interpretation and manipulation at three levels: at the transmitter (what he or she means to say when he or she says what he or she says), at the intermediary (what he or she believes that the transmitter wanted to say when he or she said what he or she said), at the receiver (what he or she believes that the intermediary wanted to say when he or she said what he or she said). In the last case, knowledge becomes subject to interpretation and manipulation at n levels, depending on the number of intermediaries; the phenomenon from the intermediary level is multiplied by n times.

When both the emotional and cognitive knowledge are taken into account (Figure 5), two distinct and disconnected groups can be identified. These are linked by 13 users who act as gatekeepers. They come from different parts of the world, do not know each other and still manage to control the emotional and cognitive knowledge that goes in and out from the two groups.

Figure 5. Emotional and cognitive knowledge sharing within the TripAdvisor community of practice

On the other hand, it can be noticed that the western group is highly connected in between, while the members of the eastern group are more oriented on developing external relationships. They mainly connect with the 13 gatekeepers and do not share any type of knowledge with one another. Given the circumstances and the particularities of the TripAdvisor community of practice, they are either new members or representatives of tourism companies that are trying to use the main gatekeepers in order to get to the large amount of potential customers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

TripAdvisor is an active community of practice which fosters cognitive and emotional knowledge sharing among the members. Individuals share what they know, feel and experience on certain circumstances while the tourism companies have the possibility to react to customers opinions without advertising their services. In other words, it is a virtual space where the offer meets the demand, while reactions, feelings, perceptions and experiences are disseminated.

As aforementioned, cognitive and emotional knowledge sharing occurs within and between the group and it is mainly supported by 10 persons who manage to link occasionally with at least 20 others, depending on the communication subjects. The results are in line with [20] findings who argues that "TripAdvisor community managed: (1) to overcome the barriers imposed by cognitive proximity which assumes that is difficult for members with different cultural and professional background to share knowledge with one another; (2) to create a resourceful knowledge repository which is available to anyone at any time; (3) to facilitate the creation and development of shared mental models; (4) to determine each individual to accept, more or less consciously, other members' opinions, judgments and assumptions; (5) to facilitate knowledge sharing inside and outside community's boundaries".

These findings have both theoretical and practical implication. At the theoretical level, it extends the theory by emphasizing the nexus between knowledge management and social media; the last one may serve as an instrument for knowledge sharing and also as a transactive memory system. At the policy-makers level, it offers a viable tool which can get the managers closer to their customers and can also improve the communication and collaboration between the firm and its external stakeholders.

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