**Knowledge Sharing in Online Question and Answering Community:**

**The Mediating Role of Sense of Virtual Community**

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In China, there exists a social media platform that transcends conventional Question and Answering (Q&A) forums, reshaping the landscape of knowledge sharing. This platform, known as Zhihu (知乎), creates a collaborative space where individuals actively contribute, share, and help one another tackle their personalized questions. Often hailed as a "thoughtful Quora," Zhihu has achieved remarkable success in its first decade established, solving 44 million questions with over 240 million user-provided answers. Instead of engaging in trivial or meaningless discussions, it is really surprising that the platform's focus is on addressing serious and thought-provoking questions that provide meaningful information and stimulate deep and insightful discussions. With an emphasis on academic nature, question-driven content, and targeting of knowledge-oriented individuals, the platform has attracted a knowledgeable and high-quality user community. With a harmonious community where users mutually assist and support each other in the pursuit of knowledge in professional and academic domains, the platform has successfully created a space for them to exchange their knowledge in the virtual space.

Being a crowdsourcing community, it becomes a hub where individuals voluntarily contribute their skills, creativity, and knowledge to solve problems collectively. For knowledge sharing in the context of crowdsourcing communities, people exchange their information, ideas, and experiences, and contribute to the formal or informal learning experience of the users in an online world. Examining the Top 100 popular questions selected by Zhihu over its first decade reveals a high level of professionalism and academic rigor. Discussions range from topics like the policies of the sharing economy to applications of Nobel Prize contributions and analyses of aerospace achievements. Each question got rich and meticulous responses, featuring either in-depth insights, data-driven analysis, or professional knowledge. Given the inherently entertaining nature of social media, contrasting with the academic nature of those questions and the detailed and well-written answers, this phenomenon surprises me. Whenever I came across those earnest and comprehensive answers, I couldn’t help wondering about the generosity and altruism of individuals who willingly invest time and effort to assist and help strangers on the internet. With the platform mainly relying on the user-generated content of questions and answers, the rich content and the helpful vibe also made me curious about what is the platform’s role in promoting engagement and encouraging knowledge sharing in the virtual space. In this paper, my analysis will focus on how the Zhihu platform strategically reinforces key factors that motivate individuals to participate in knowledge sharing, with a particular emphasis on cultivating a sense of virtual community.

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From an individual perspective, the behavior science model uses the framework of the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability (MOA) to analyze one's participation in a community. To explain this model, Motivation ('will do') is an individual's willingness to carry out tasks; Opportunity is the contest that supports an individual's actions; and Ability ('can do') is the individual's capacity, including knowledge, skills, or confidence, for undertaking those actions.[[1]](#footnote-0) Originally utilized in the context of information processing, Gan and her fellows explore its applicability in understanding knowledge-sharing behavior in the context of crowdsourcing communities and suggest that users are more likely to share knowledge if they have the motivation, opportunity, and ability to do so.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Different from the individual level, Joon Koh and Young-Gul Ki explored the concept of the Sense of Virtual Community (SVO), and defined it across three dimensions: membership, influence, and immersion.[[3]](#footnote-2) These dimensions describe the feelings of belonging, the perception of influencing other community members, and the overall interaction experience within the community. In the context of an online Q&A community, the SVO plays a crucial role in building emotional connections between the user and the platform, contributing to their willingness to share their knowledge. In this article, I argue that it is through building a Sense of Virtual Community with a positive learning ideology that the Zhihu platform caters to individuals' perception of their motivation, opportunity, and ability to promote knowledge-sharing activities.

In terms of motivation, users can be driven by both internal and external factors. While internal motivation might initially seem determined by the users themselves and hard to be influenced by the media experience, my personal exploratory experience shows that the media experience could actually shape users' perceptions in terms of belief in gaining direct benefits in learning and gaining personal fulfillment through active participation in knowledge-sharing communities.

The Zhihu platform strategically emphasizes learning as its core objective through promotional campaigns, content creation, and user interface design, which creates a leading ideology of learning for the virtual community. With its slogan, "Share your knowledge, experience, and insights with the world," Zhihu is actively marketed as an online learning community through various channels such as advertisements, lectures, and events. Through this, the platform makes the members believe that it is a place where people can actually learn. In addition to promotional efforts, content design subtly communicates the platform's commitment to learning. The well-organized columns and topics, including “Zhihu Knowledge Academy”(知乎知学堂), “Academic” (学术), and “Quality knowledge”(盐选) create a positive learning environment, encouraging users to perceive participation as an active learning experience. Moreover, the interactive engagement system's interface is strategically designed to promote the affordance of academic discussion. With features of approval, likes, comments, and time presented in a hierarchy, it emphasizes the importance of user academic-based rational agreement and acknowledgment instead of their sensual and emotional liking.

The platform's learning-centric approach of a series of promotions and designs effectively attracts users who are motivated to seek learning benefits. Knowledge-oriented users from a well-educated, high-end demographic are enticed to join the community, aspiring to become active members because the platform cultivates a sacred aura of learning. This enhances the sense of belonging and fosters a strong desire for membership within this community. People would love to show their membership by actively engaging in knowledge-sharing activities and using it as proof of their identity. At the same time, users are drawn to join the platform not just to consume knowledge but to actively engage in the learning process. Capitalizing on users' inherent motivation to gain direct learning benefits, the platform deliberately encourages individuals to actively engage and contribute, emphasizing that active participation would deepen the learning experience. This makes the users willing to contribute their insights and enhance their understanding through discussion and knowledge-sharing. This alignment between the platform's promotion and design of a positive learning environment with the users' intrinsic motivation for learning contributes to the platform's success in building a community where members actively seek to join, learn, and contribute.

In addition to cultivating the learning ideology as a part of the sense of virtual community, Zhihu strategically appeals to users' desires to share, and cater to their inherent need for personal prestige. Zhihu enhances users' personal integrative benefits by recognizing and valuing their influence on the community, while extending their influence beyond the platform. Notably, the platform does not use traditional reward systems like credit or level systems to provide external motivation, it emphasizes rational academic metrics like follower count, upvotes on answers, and the frequency of answers being cited or shared on external authorized platforms. At the same time, Zhihu's unique invitation mechanism, designed to ensure both the quantity and quality of answers, caters to individuals' higher-level needs for their social acknowledgment and self-actualization. This mechanism provides a form of recognition and encouragement for those invited to contribute, giving them a sense of being valued and needed, and enhancing their perception of their own community influence.

The systematic designs implemented on the Zhihu platform contribute significantly to users' personal integrative benefits, encompassing image enhancement, peer recognition, and the sense of being valued. This, in turn, molds their perception of influence within the Zhihu community. Users, motivated by the desire to showcase their abilities and gain more influence, find a compelling platform that not only acknowledges their contributions but also amplifies their impact. As influence becomes an integral component of the sense of virtual community, it not only enhances users' connection with the community but also fuels their willingness to actively share and make more impacts. This strategic emphasis on influence, seamlessly woven into the virtual community experience, plays a pivotal role in shaping users' motivation to contribute and engage actively.

Opportunity, as the second component of the MOA model, is said that users are likely to be more motivated when exposed to supportive and empowering contexts facilitated by opportunity. As highlighted in Gan’s paper on crowdsourcing Q&A communities, two critical factors influencing knowledge-sharing behaviors are community culture and community support[[4]](#footnote-3). Zhihu actively cultivates the community culture of trust, while fostering a supportive community through the implemented system. These efforts contribute to creating an environment that presents opportunities for individuals to engage in knowledge sharing, and contribute to the membership and immersion dimension of the Sense of Virtual Community.

As noted by Mayer, trust plays a pivotal role in virtual communities, defined as an actor's willingness to be vulnerable[[5]](#footnote-4). Dirks and Ferrin further categorize trust into interpersonal trust and systemic trust, illustrating the faith in the sincerity, professional capabilities, and respect for knowledge and achievements of other community members, and the belief in the community and platform[[6]](#footnote-5). The platform's content is well-designed to support interpersonal trust within the Zhihu community, targeting well-educated and knowledge-oriented individuals, Zhihu has over 80% of users holding a bachelor's degree or above[[7]](#footnote-6). Zhihu employs a stringent real-name authentication system, including educational background, job positions, and professional qualifications, ensuring transparent user information to foster trust among community members.

Zhihu also has a strong emphasis on copyright protection for cultivating trust within the community. Distinguished from other crowdsourcing platforms like Baidu Zhidao and Quora, Zhihu deliberately focuses on safeguarding the rights of original creators, promoting a culture of respect for intellectual property. Responses on Zhihu often have limitations on direct copying, allowing users to copy only the initial 1000 characters. Additionally, any copied and pasted content will automatically include details about the source platform, links, author information, and statements regarding copyright protection. This emphasized protection of original copyrights contributes to the establishment of contributors’ trust in the platform, making them more willing to share their personal views and knowledge on the platform. This culture of trust in both the community members and the platform contributes to the user's sense of belonging and membership toward the platform, and enhances the virtual sense of community.

In addition to fostering a community culture of trust, the community also provides users with opportunities for knowledge sharing with systematic support, which contributes to enhancing the 'immersion' aspect of users' sense of virtual community. Immersion refers to gaining a sense of virtual community through engaging in activities on the platform, including viewing or sharing, and connecting with other members of the community. This engagement will increase the sense of urgency to share knowledge with other members of the community and participate in knowledge sharing.[[8]](#footnote-7) Zhihu's algorithm and recommendation system not only deliver posts of interest to users but also present questions that need answers and might be interesting to the users. In the "Waiting for your answer" (等你来答) section, questions with mixed tags, including "you might be interested in," "popular this week in the field of... (the field user might be interested in)," and "many people followed recently," create precise yet diverse recommendations. According to an authoritative user with over 2 million 'approvals' on Zhihu, the recommendation system considers user information, content features, user-content match, real-time behavior, popular topics, and other users' feedback to achieve varied and accurate suggestions[[9]](#footnote-8). The user information further includes the user's behavior and professional identity, considering both their interest and ability to answer. As a result, community support not only contributes to the opportunity of the user’s contribution but also accesses their ability of knowledge and skills.

Not only can users answer questions in the "Waiting for your answer" column, but the more crucial design is that questions presented in the main feed on the homepage are always open for user participation and encouragement to answer. This design allows users while browsing content of interest on the homepage, to participate in discussions and share knowledge when seeing others' answers, thereby increasing the exposure of questions and the likelihood of user responses. According to Johanna Faust, a user of Zhihu, he notes that he doesn’t participate actively, but couldn’t help to share his knowledge and opinion when looking through others’ discussions.[[10]](#footnote-9) Witnessing discussions on a question by others enhances an individual's urgency to share knowledge, encouraging participation in knowledge sharing[[11]](#footnote-10). This engagement-driven approach, increasing users' immersion in the process of browsing, strengthens their sense of immersion in the community. This immersion results in a connected interaction between users and the community, enhancing their sense of virtual community as they contribute to the community's vitality.

In conclusion, the Zhihu platform adeptly shapes a comprehensive Sense of Virtual Community (SVO), incorporating the dimensions of membership, influence, and immersion by strategically aligning them with users' motivations, opportunities, and abilities. The platform's emphasis on a positive learning ideology and cultivating a culture of trust foster a sense of membership within the community. This combination of motivational factors and the creation of opportunities makes joining the community an attractive proposition. Furthermore, Zhihu's emphasis on influence, both within and beyond the platform, resonates with users' motivations for personal integrative benefits, satisfying their desires for prestige and self-actualization. This strategic emphasis on users' influence and its extension outside the platform adds a layer of intrinsic motivation, contributing significantly to the membership dimension of the SVO. Additionally, the platform's sophisticated system design plays a pivotal role in providing opportunities and enhancing users' abilities to contribute effectively. Exposures of relevant questions to users create a dynamic and immersive environment for the SVO.

These insightful findings from the Zhihu platform carry significant implications, not only for online community building but also for formal crowdsourcing scenarios of online knowledge-sharing. The successful combination of positive ideology, trust-building, emphasis on influences, and systematic support strategic alignment with user motivations positions Zhihu as a noteworthy model for constructing virtual communities that effectively motivate, engage, and retain users. Additionally, numerous specific mechanisms, such as the invitation system, personalized feeds, and copyright protection, could also be adept to other platforms aiming to enhance their community-building strategies. Ultimately, Zhihu's approach provides a blueprint for creating a vibrant virtual community that taps into users' motivations, seizes opportunities, and leverages their abilities, fostering a lasting sense of virtual community.

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