CHAPTER 6:

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The study, after testing several hypotheses representing the relationships among social capital factors, knowledge collection and donation, and the promotion of VCoP, come out with a research model consisting of all the validated hypotheses. The final results can envisage various implications, both theoretical and managerial. This chapter discusses the theoretical and managerial contribution of this study and the directions in which this study can be extended in future.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

By testing the proposed model, this study has contributed to the body of literature. The literature review on social capital factors which influence knowledge sharing in Virtual communities of practice will benefit future researchers in gaining some conceptual views on these topics. This study by examining the outcome of knowledge sharing in the form of community promotion will provide a platform for future research. On the theoretical side this paper has conceived social capital constructs as the important factors in explaining knowledge sharing behavior amongst members in VCoPs. This is the first of its kind study that has used social capital factors to explain knowledge sharing in sponsored VCoPs.

This study also adds to the current literature by considering knowledge sharing as having two distinct parts: knowledge collection and knowledge donation. From the results of this study, it is seen that knowledge collection leads to knowledge donation and both collection and donation
influence community promotion. By dividing knowledge sharing into these two parts, it was possible to study the effects that social capital factors have on these parts separately. By empirically testing the relationship between knowledge collection and knowledge donation, this study has paved the way for further analysis of these two constructs. From a conceptual standpoint, this study uncovers the potential of the constructs knowledge donation and knowledge collection which may be linked to many other related community outcomes other than community promotion in future.

The social capital factors of social interaction, reciprocity and identification have been reported in literature to influence knowledge sharing indirectly through trust. But in the case of VCoPs the present study has confirmed that only social interactions have a direct effect on trust. So this study has extended the works of Chiu et al., (2006) and Chang & Chuang, (2010).

The present study has been carried out in sponsored VCoPs, which are started and operated by organizations. Such sponsored VCoPs differs greatly from those VCoPs that are general and open to all. The factors of social capital like trust, social interactions, reciprocity, identification, shared language and shared vision may manifest differently in sponsored VCoPs. By studying the influence of social capital factors on knowledge sharing, this study contributes and adds to the existing literature concerning sponsored VCoPs. This present research has contributed to theory by employing the constructs of social capital as conceptualized by Nahapiet & Ghoshal, (1998). The existing survey instrument has been modified to suit VCoPs and further validation of the questionnaire has been carried out. So, the final questionnaire employed in this study may be used by similar studies in the context of VCoPs.
6.2 Managerial Contribution

The results from this study will be practically significant by helping firms understand the factors which influence perpetuation of VCoPs and increase knowledge sharing within them. This study may help community organizers realize the importance of social capital in VCoPs. It has been seen in this study that social capital factors like trust, shared language and shared vision are important factors which encourage knowledge sharing. This study explicates various strategies that a manager should adopt to encourage and facilitate knowledge sharing in their firms.

Participation and contribution in sponsored VCoPs is voluntary just like any other general virtual community. Each VCoP would deal with a particular set of tasks or a particular skill. Employees who perform the same task may receive advice or help on how to troubleshoot a problem from each other. People may or may not share knowledge; they may take a passive role and not participate in the community. Without some form of knowledge sharing, any virtual community of practice will fail to survive. In this study it is seen that knowledge collection leads to knowledge donation. So managers have to encourage the employees to use the VCoP as a platform to get answers, or to troubleshoot problems. The more time employees spend in the VCoP the more social capital is formed and stronger bonds may be developed. This will lead to knowledge donation. To share knowledge, people have to spend their time and take some effort. From this study it is seen that people are willing to take that effort because of the interactions and bonds that they have in the community along with the common language and vision shared within the community. Encouraging these social factors could result in community promotion through which the firms would benefit.
6.3 Future Research Directions

This study was done in the context of sponsored VCoPs, which are initiated and managed by the organization. In some cases, participation may be forced by the management of the company. In such cases, the influence of social capital factors on knowledge sharing may not be strong. When participation is voluntary, the social capital factors of social interactions, trust, identification, reciprocity, shared language and shared vision will be more highly regarded by the employees for knowledge sharing. In this study, the compulsion given by management to the employees to share knowledge in the VCoP was not considered. So, it is necessary to study VCoPs which are not sponsored, to see if there is any difference in the level of knowledge sharing.

In this study Trust did not have a significant effect on knowledge collection. Employees may not feel the need to trust others in the community for collecting knowledge. Employees who access the community for solving their queries or work related issues may not be initially interested in forming bonds in a community and may access it for what they can get out of it. Thus knowledge collection may not be influenced by trust. It has to be further researched, in different contexts whether trust has an influence on knowledge collection. This finding shows that dividing knowledge sharing into knowledge collection and donation was useful, as the construct trust had a significant influence on knowledge donation but not on knowledge collection.

The three factors of social capital, social interaction, reciprocity and identification was modeled as directly influencing trust. They were proposed to indirectly influence knowledge sharing
through trust. However, a significant relationship was not found between reciprocity and identification on trust. Future research may study the direct influence of all the social capital factors on knowledge sharing, in the case of VCoPs.

In the present study, community promotion was regarded as the final dependent variable. It was the only considered outcome of the knowledge sharing activities. There are many other community outcomes and organizational outcomes which may be related to the knowledge sharing activities. Future studies may check the relationship of knowledge collection and knowledge donation with other outcome variables.

This study has considered only social interactions as the component of structural social capital. Other constructs of structural social capital like network centrality and density as conceptually explained by Nahapiet and Ghoshal, (1998) may also influence knowledge sharing, and future research may take up these constructs for analysis.

The present study did not measure knowledge sharing by means of the amount of postings and viewing done in the community, but used two constructs – knowledge collection and knowledge donation, each with their own indicators. Studies may be conducted in future, by considering the posting activity as knowledge donation and the viewing activity as knowledge collection. Then the amount of viewing and postings done in the community may be used to measure knowledge collection and donation respectively. Such a study will enable the constructs of knowledge donation and collection to be used even in the case of general and open virtual communities.