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**Published in:**

20th Americas Conference on Information Systems, AMCIS 2014

**Published:** 01/01/2014

**Document Version:**

Post-print, also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version

**Publication record in CityU Scholars:**

[Go to record](#)

**Publication details:**

Ou, C. X. J., Davison, R. M., & Wong, L. H. M. (2014). Contextual preferences and network-based knowledge sharing in China. In *20th Americas Conference on Information Systems, AMCIS 2014* Association for Information Systems. <https://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2014/GlobalIssues/GeneralPresentations/4/>

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# Contextual Preferences and Network-Based Knowledge Sharing in China

*Completed Research Paper*

## Abstract

Grounded on theories about guanxi and communication context in China, we investigate the moderating effects of individual preference for communication context on network-based knowledge sharing (NBKS) behaviour, its determinants and outcomes. Drawing on survey data from employees at multiple hotel properties in the same chain, we explore how guanxi elements drive knowledge sharing (KS) behaviour and thus enhance KS outcomes. Our data confirm that individual preference for communication context significantly moderates the effect that NBKS has on KS outcomes. However, we also find that the individual preference for communication context has a direct and negative impact on KS outcomes. We explain these seemingly contradictory findings and examine their implications for both research and practice.

## Keywords:

Guanxi Elements, Communication Context, Network-Based Knowledge Sharing, Knowledge Sharing Outcomes

## Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) is widely-accepted as being crucial for organisations that wish to promote best practices and reduce redundant reinvention efforts (McDermott and O'Dell, 2001). Effective competition in a knowledge intensive industry, it has been suggested, depends on employees not guarding or hoarding knowledge as personal secrets (Lu et al., 2005). To date, the vast majority of KM research has focused on organisational-level contexts characterised by the IT-supported codification of explicit knowledge: this is perhaps not surprising as codifiable knowledge has long been recognised as a source of strategic and competitive advantage (Kogut and Zander, 1992), with IT enabling “collaboration among different units and individuals unconstrained by the boundaries of geography and time” (Lu et al., 2005). However, individual employees may also choose to engage in knowledge exchange for their own reasons, i.e. irrespective of corporate norms or expectations. This is notably the case in China. Unfortunately most prior knowledge-focused research in China has not examined indigenous cultural practices but instead has focused either on comparisons with other countries (Chow et al., 2000) and/or on the inward transfer of knowledge (Li and Scullion, 2006). Such studies are commonly informed by Western theories, assumptions and priorities, and thus look into China through an externally informed lens, rather than studying China from the inside.

While such comparative research is valuable for cross-cultural purposes, it typically does not permit the identification of the full richness of knowledge exchange behaviour in the Chinese context. Key components of the Chinese context that have received less attention in the research literature, yet which are central to the way Chinese employees share knowledge, are guanxi and context. Davison et al. (2013) explore the role of indigenous Chinese variables in a qualitative study of knowledge exchange behaviour in two Public Relations firms in China, but we have not seen any evidence of a larger-scale survey of employee attitudes towards knowledge sharing in China that explicitly considers indigenous Chinese variables (cf. Tsui, 2006). As we explain in more detail later, guanxi refers to the reciprocally obligatory relationships that Chinese employees maintain with selected others – relationships that they leverage as they communicate, solve problems and help others. Context refers to the preference for communications to be implicit or explicit (Hall, 1976). In a high-context culture, much of the meaning in communications can be inferred from the context itself. In a low-context culture, it is necessary to write or speak the meaning explicitly in words. In this study we explore the knowledge sharing (KS) behaviour of Chinese employees at a major international hotel chain (code-named Ravine). We focus on the influence of guanxi elements on employees' behaviour of sharing knowledge with their network members, and the

moderating effects of context (high or low) on both guanxi elements and the ultimate outcomes of KS: individual work performance and collective network efficacy.

This research design enables us to answer the following question: What is the moderating effect of individual preference for communication context on the knowledge sharing behaviour of professional employees and the consequential work-related KS outcomes? Following this introduction, we review the relevant literature before proceeding to the theoretical development and hypotheses. We then explain the research context and introduce our data collection and analytical techniques. The results of the study follow, together with a discussion of the findings. Finally we conclude the paper with contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **Literature Review**

There are several areas of literature that are relevant to this research. These include: guanxi, context and network-based knowledge sharing (NBKS). We briefly review each of them in turn, providing sufficient detail to permit the development of hypotheses in the following section.

### ***Guanxi***

Guanxi is a Chinese concept that can be loosely defined as “a close and pervasive interpersonal relationship [that] is based on high quality social interactions and the reciprocal exchange of mutual benefits” (Ou et al., 2014). Guanxi elements include interpersonal trust, face and reciprocal obligation (Lee and Dawes, 2005). Over the last twenty years, guanxi has been operationalized in a wide variety of different ways depending on the context wherein it appears. For our purposes, guanxi can be seen as involving a network of social ties (Luo et al., 2008) that emphasizes the reciprocally obligatory nature of interpersonal favours (Lee and Dawes, 2005) in a long-term relationship (Leung et al., 2005). Guanxi is both ubiquitous and critical in Chinese society (Fu et al., 2006): all Chinese seek to develop and maintain guanxi throughout their working lives (Xin and Pearce, 1996). In the present context, guanxi is important because its presence facilitates the access by individuals to knowledge held by others who belong to the same relationship network.

### ***Context***

Hall (1976) defines context as the “information that surrounds an event” arguing that context is critical to meaning. Conventionally, context is described as being high or low. High context cultures are characterised by communication styles in which individuals prefer to draw inferences from implicit information. In contrast, individuals in low context cultures prefer information to be stated explicitly and also exhibit a preference for quantifiable detail. As Hall and Hall (1990) note: “In low-context communication, the listener knows very little and must be told practically everything. In high-context communication, the listener is already ‘contextualised’ and so does not need to be given much background information”. Hall (1976) suggested that all cultures occupy spaces along the low-high context continuum, with no culture exclusively occupying a single space. Instead, different contextual points on the spectrum will be appropriate in different circumstances – of people, topic and sub-cultures. However, although high-context and low-context communication takes place in every society and culture, cultures differ in the degree of context considered normal and necessary in every kind of discourse. In this respect, it is notable that Chinese society is traditionally considered to be one where high context communication predominates (Gudykunst, 1983). However, China’s recent economic growth has been paralleled by social and cultural changes that may have exerted an impact on both a propensity for high context communication and indeed guanxi-based interactions (cf. Inglehart and Baker, 2000). Given that each individual person will evaluate context differently, communication context (high or low) needs to be measured at the individual level, not the society level.

### ***Network-Based Knowledge Sharing***

As already noted, knowledge sharing in the Chinese context tends to take place between people who share guanxi. These closely connected people form networks. An individual employee might easily have several hundred or more guanxi-linked partners: between two and twelve (typically) form a single network.

Knowledge networks are a feature of Transactive Memory Systems (Wegner, 1987): these networks exist when individuals “disclose information to each other concerning their specialised knowledge” (Davison et al., 2013). These networks have the potential to create a dynamic capability for problem solving (Newell and Edelman, 2008). Engaging in knowledge exchange within a knowledge network is psychologically less stressful (Triandis, 1989) because one’s face and personal reputation can be enhanced (Peng and Heath, 1996), with individual network members loath to cause others to lose face (Young et al., 2012). Finally, we note that this form of knowledge sharing usually involves informal IT applications not formal corporate systems (Davison et al., 2013).

## **Theoretical Model and Hypotheses Development**

As explained in the Introduction, we follow Davison et al.’s (2013) call to focus on informal KS via interactive tools and refer to our key construct as network-based knowledge sharing (NBKS). Specifically, *NBKS* in this study refers to an employee’s actual behaviour when engaging in knowledge sharing activities with his/her network members using interactive systems at work. These interactive systems include: instant messengers, wikis, blogs, microblogs, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools, etc. Following the above literature review, we develop a set of formal hypotheses around NBKS based on an integrated theoretical lens of *guanxi*, the communication context, KS outcomes and the KS activities in which employees engage.

### ***Antecedents of NBKS***

Consistent with Lee and Dawes (2005), we propose that *guanxi* elements include interpersonal trust, face and reciprocal obligation. Researchers (e.g., Huang et al., 2012; Davison et al., 2013) have suggested the importance of *guanxi* for KS. We argue that employees who share interpersonal trust with each other, know how to develop and maintain their own and *guanxi*-linked others’ faces, and appreciate the value of obligatory reciprocity are more willing to share knowledge in general. When an employee believes in the good intent, competence and reliability of other people with respect to contributing and reusing knowledge, it is more likely that this employee would like to make use of interactive tools to contact other people in order to effectively seek and share knowledge. It is also likely that the same employee will attempt to create lasting and binding ties that help to guarantee the future exchange of knowledge. In today’s working environment, IT applications that facilitate interactive communication between people are readily available. The need to develop and maintain *guanxi* can increase an employee’s involvement in using networks to seek and share knowledge. In addition to trust and reciprocal obligations, face may also play a role in determining whether an employee engages in NBKS or not. Employees who value their *guanxi*-based KS relationships will very likely do their best to help others if they request knowledge. Meanwhile, by demonstrating their skills, expertise and helpfulness, these employees will benefit by virtue of the opportunity to burnish their reputation and so earn the respect of others in the professional network. Integrating the above arguments, we propose:

*H1: An employee’s appreciation of guanxi elements, including reciprocal obligation, trust and face maintenance, positively affects his/her network-based knowledge sharing behaviour.*

### ***Outcomes of NBKS***

Although the literature has demonstrated that the outcomes of knowledge sharing are diverse (e.g., Newell et al., 2009; Scarborough & Swan, 2001), we argue that the effective use of a network for sharing can bring positive effects to both individual work performance and also collective network efficacy. In this study, *work performance* refers to an employee’s self-evaluation of his/her work performance in terms of confidence, productivity, decision making, and work quality, following Rice (1992). Meanwhile, *collective network efficacy* is defined as the individual network member’s confidence that his/her work-related network can produce desirable outcomes (Hirschfeld and Bernerth, 2008). This is particularly apparent in contemporary work environments, where different domains of knowledge are involved and employees are distributed across time and space (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000). Employees who share knowledge in near real-time with their network members via interactive tools are able to locate answers to questions and solutions to problems. For instance, Voelpel and Han (2005) demonstrate how knowledge contributed by Chinese employees in an online forum was leveraged by Italian employees to achieve a

successful project outcome for the organization (Siemens) as a whole. Using interactive systems to exchange knowledge means that employees can bounce back quickly from adverse experiences, help other network members, locate appropriate network resources and finally leverage them effectively. From a network perspective, the effective use of interactive systems for exchanging knowledge can help ensure the realisation of desirable outcomes. Accordingly we propose:

*H2: An employee's network-based knowledge sharing behaviour can produce positive outcomes including improving his/her work performance and collective network efficacy.*

## **The Moderating Effects of Individual Preference for Communication Context**

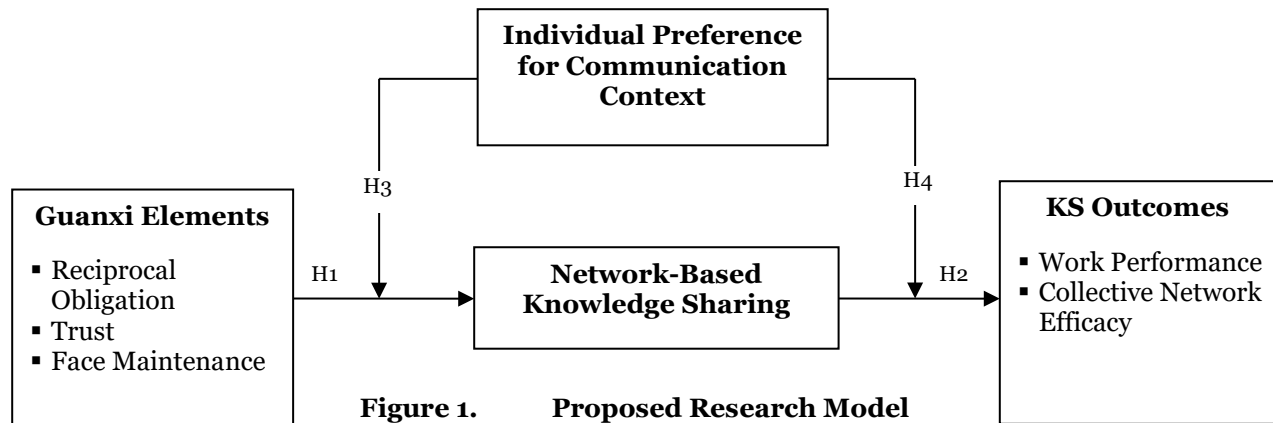
According to Hall (1976), communication context describes the cultural rules that relate to information exchange and, in particular, the degree to which information in a culture is explicit or implicated. Specifically, a preference for a low context culture suggests that information is vested in words or precise and unambiguous meanings; on the other hand, a preference for a high context culture suggests that information is communicated in a rather implicit way, vested in shared experiences and assumptions and conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal codes. When employees exchange knowledge with colleagues or team members who share inter-personal trust, reciprocal obligation and a responsibility to maintain each other's faces, it is more likely that they can understand the implicit meanings hidden in information and knowledge. That means, it is easier for people in a guanxi network to pick up the actual or hidden meaning of information when exchanging experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, Hall (1976) also highlights how high-context persons are guided by relationships that are stable and persistent over an extended period of time. Following this logic, guanxi elements, including trust, obligations and face, significantly determine a high-context person's sharing behaviour. We therefore hypothesize:

*H3: An employee's preference for communication context has a positive moderating effect on the path between guanxi elements and network-based knowledge sharing behaviour, where the guanxi elements have a stronger effect on increasing his/her network-based knowledge sharing behaviour when the employee prefers high context communication.*

The existence of interactive knowledge sharing systems, also known as conversational knowledge management systems (Wagner and Bolloju, 2005), reflects how much of the knowledge creation and sharing in these systems is undertaken through a process of discussion with questions and answers (discussion forum), collaborative editing (wikis), or through a process of storytelling (weblogs), (Wagner and Bolloju, 2005). Researchers (e.g., Brown, 2001) value storytelling for the sharing of otherwise implicit knowledge. Furthermore, it has been coined that "conversational knowledge management systems usually forego formal knowledge representation, as end users usually do not formally structure their knowledge as rules or similar constructs" (Wagner and Bolloju, 2005). Consequently, we argue that knowledge sharing via interactive systems is more effective for those people who prefer a high-context communication style: these systems can facilitate the sharing of implicit knowledge at work via story telling. Furthermore, sharing via interactive knowledge systems can pair with a high-context person's desire to build relationships with network members. Therefore we propose:

*H4: An employee's preference for communication context has a positive moderating effect on the path between knowledge network sharing behaviour and its outcome variables including work performance and collective network efficacy, where network-based knowledge sharing behaviour has a stronger effect on work performance and collective network efficiency when the employee prefers high context communication.*

We summarize the above hypotheses in Figure 1.



## Methodology

We established our measures based on the literature. Specifically, we followed the concept of guanxi elements from Lee and Dawes (2005) by covering three dimensions: trust, reciprocal obligations and face maintenance, in which we adapted the existing measures in the context of knowledge sharing from Bock et al. (2005) for reciprocal obligation, Kankanhalli et al. (2005) for trust and Huang et al. (2011) for face maintenance. In order to achieve a parsimonious model, we operationalize guanxi elements as a second level construct, following Petter et al. (2007). Grounded on the work of Morris et al. (2009), we established new items about network-based knowledge sharing. The moderator, individual preference of communication context is based on the conceptualization and scales from Hall (1976) and Kim et al. (1998) from low to high. The dependent variable, KS outcomes, is operationalized as a second-order construct covering individual work performance and collective network efficacy. Work performance is measured by the scales from Rice (1992) and collective network efficacy is measured by the scales from Hirschfeld and Bernerth (2008). For brevity, the survey questions are not included in this conference paper, but are available from the authors.

We used the survey method to collect the data. This survey instrument was initially developed and validated in English. Later it was translated into Chinese and back translated to English to ensure equivalence of meaning across the two language versions. The survey instrument was operationalized on web-based survey software (Qualtrics: Version 0.749s). The context for this research is the China-based operations of a global hotel chain, which we code name Ravine. Ravine operates hotel properties at all levels from simple to luxury. Ravine does not operate formal KM Systems internally. However, employees are free to contact external parties for knowledge exchange activities, so long as they do not disclose corporate secrets. The second author gained access to Ravine as a result of his frequent stays at and personal connections with the General Manager (GM) of, one property. This GM introduced him to a Vice-President for China who agreed to support the data collection effort.

We emailed a link to the GMs of 54 Ravine hotels in China asking them to ask their employees to complete the survey. 19 of these GMs replied to confirm they would ask their colleagues to complete the survey. It is hard to estimate how many employees received the invitation because the GMs may have decided only to invite certain employees. Nevertheless, a total of 301 valid responses were received over a ten-week period, from 15 cities. Although 5 respondents did not indicate the demographic details and 71 respondents refused to disclose their job titles, we still include them in the data analysis considering the validity of their responses to the survey questions about the research model. We summarize the demographics in Table 1.

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Working Location</b>	<b>Number</b>
Male	96	Beijing	35
Female	200	Chengdu	13
Undisclosed	5	Chongqing	44
<b>Education level</b>	<b>Number</b>	Dongguan	13
Secondary School	23	Hangzhou	5
College	154	Hong Kong	15
Bachelor Degree	107	Jinan	8
Master Degree or above	12	Nanjing	4
Undisclosed	5	Sanya	9
<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	Shanghai	50
21-25	77	Shenzhen	72
25-30	104	Taipei	10
31-35	47	Wuhan	6
36-40	36	Xian	11
41-45	20	Zhengzhou	1
46-50	10	Undisclosed	5
50-60	2		
Undisclosed	5		
<b>Job level</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Duration in current position</b>	<b>Number</b>
Staff	50	Less than 6 months	43
Junior Management	34	6 months - 2 years	86
Middle Management	126	2 - 5 years	96
Senior Management	20	Above 5 years	71
Undisclosed	71	Undisclosed	5

**Table 1. Demographics Summary (n=301)**

## Data Analysis

We used SPSS and Smart Partial Least Squares (SPLS) to calculate construct validity and reliability. We first examined the convergent and discriminant validity with factor analysis. The factor loading scores on their expected factors are all above 0.6, with the factor loading scores much higher on their expected factors than on other factors. Meanwhile all eigenvalues of the constructs exceed 1.0. The communality scores all exceed 0.61. These results confirmed adequate reliability of the measures.

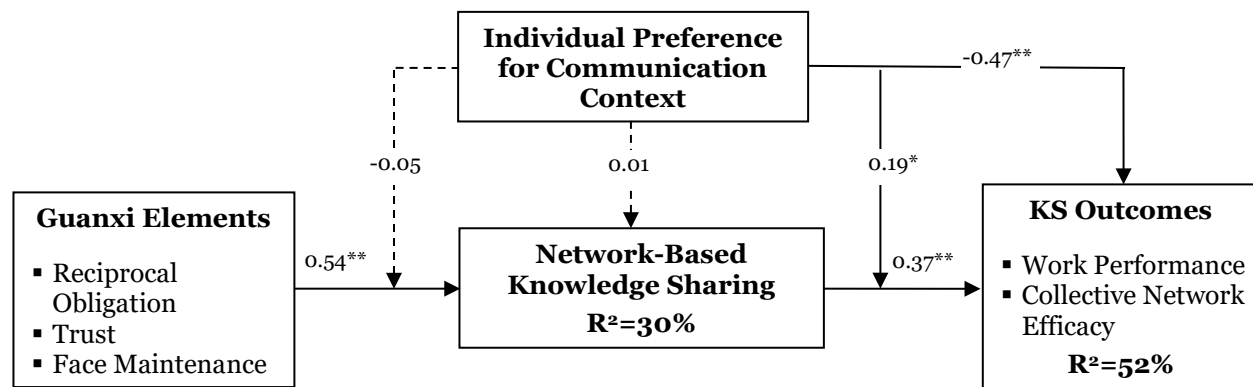
Second, since 'KS outcomes' is an endogenous second-order construct represented in the research model, we validated this construct with two steps. For its two first-level constructs – work performance and collective network efficacy – the reliability of the measures were both above 0.90. For the second-level construct of KS outcomes, the factor scores of two first-level constructs were taken as the composite dimensions of KS outcomes in the SPLS analysis, following the method of handling second-order constructs in SPLS suggested by Petter et al. (2007). Using the same procedures, we also confirmed the validity and reliability of the other second-order construct, guanxi elements, in this study.

Furthermore, construct reliability for all principal constructs was assessed by identifying the composite reliability scores, all of which are above 0.80 (Table 2), suggesting acceptable internal consistency. The square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are all above 0.78, which is greater than all other cross correlations. This shows that all constructs capture more construct-related variance than error variance.

Principal constructs	Mean (STD)	Composite Reliability	GE	NBKS	IPCC
Guanxi Elements (GE) – Second-Order Construct	-	0.81	0.79		
Network-Based Knowledge Sharing (NBKS)	4.93 (1.24)	0.96	0.55	0.93	
Individual Preference for Communication Context (IPCC)	2.53 (0.96)	0.83	0.52	0.30	0.79
Knowledge Sharing Outcomes (KSO) – Second-Order Construct	-	-	0.68	0.50	-0.61

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Correlation Matrix, and Average Variance Extracted**  
(Diagonal elements are the square root of the AVE from their indicators.  
Off-diagonal elements are correlations between constructs.)

The structural model was examined using SPLS. The results shown in Figure 2 indicate that the hypotheses were largely supported by the data, except H3. Guanxi elements have a significant impact on NBKS ( $b=0.54$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), supporting H1. NBKS is found to significantly influence KS outcomes ( $b=0.37$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), validating H2. Individual preference for communication context has no direct influence on NBKS ( $b=0.01$ ,  $p>0.10$ ) nor a significant moderating effect on the path between guanxi elements and NBKS ( $b=0.05$ ,  $p>0.10$ ), rejecting H3. However, individual preference for communication context was found a significant negative direct impact on KS outcomes ( $b=-0.47$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), as well as significant positive moderating effect on the path between NBKS and KS outcomes ( $b=0.19$ ,  $0.01<p<0.05$ ), confirming H4. We discuss the findings below.



**Figure 2. PLS Analysis Results**

Legend: \* $0.01<p<0.05$ ; \*\* $p<0.01$ ;  
Solid lines represent paths with significant coefficients;  
Dotted lines represent paths with insignificant coefficients

## Discussion and Implications

The findings from this research present two broad areas of contributions to scholarly and practical knowledge. Firstly, the strongly significant link from ‘guanxi elements’, which includes reciprocal obligation, trust and face maintenance, to NBKS and then the equally strong link from NBKS to KS outcomes are remarkable for their consistency as well as the extent of variance explained. Clearly when



knowledge is shared in the Chinese workplace, guanxi elements play a key motivating role. Equally, this NBKS process leads to enhanced work performance and collective network efficacy, suggesting a confirming effect since by enhancing the efficacy of the network, so that same network will facilitate better knowledge sharing in future. Whether the same findings will hold outside the Chinese workspace remains to be investigated, but it is plausible to assume that in other societies where guanxi-type structures prevail, then a similar set of relationships is likely to prevail.

The second major contribution relates to the interesting findings about the preference for communication context. Contradicting the perception that the Chinese are high-context people (Hall, 1976), our data suggest that our respondents prefer direct and explicit communication (Mean=2.53 on a scale from 1=lowest to 7=highest; STD =0.96); this is normally indicative of a low-context communication preference. This suggests that the Chinese may be changing and can be explained in two ways. Our sample consisted of employees at a global (non-Chinese) hotel group. It is very likely that the respondents were influenced by Western styles of communication and work. Furthermore, a considerable portion of the younger generation of Chinese have received Western-style education and have adopted a Western philosophy of life in their thinking and working. These people may prefer communication that is direct, specific and explicit. This reasoning explains the negative direct effect of individual preference of high communication context on KS outcomes ( $b=-0.47$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and suggests that the current work environment in China may be becoming more characterised by precision and a reduction of ambiguity.

Furthermore, our data confirmed the significant positive moderating effect of individual preference for communication context on the path between NBKS and KS outcomes ( $b=0.19$ ,  $0.01<b<0.05$ ). This suggests that for high-context people, NBKS can yield a much better effect on both work performance and collective network efficacy. Interactive systems (such as instant messengers, wikis, microblogs, knowledge forums and other collaborative tools) can be fine-tuned for these people in order to optimize the benefits of NBKS.

Interestingly, our data indicate the insignificant moderating effect of communication preference on the path from guanxi elements to NBKS. This may be due to the overwhelming effect of guanxi elements in Chinese people's lives in general, regardless of communication preference. This reasoning implies trust, reciprocal obligations and face are still the most important elements for knowledge sharing behaviour, at least in China, and are applicable to both individual high- and low-context persons.

## Conclusion

The significant influence of guanxi elements on knowledge sharing practices, identified in prior work, is confirmed in this study of hotel employees. However, the preference for a specific communication context emerges as a new and significant moderator of why network-based knowledge sharing makes a difference at work. While guanxi is embedded in the social consciousness of all Chinese employees, we detect changes in the way some employees view communication, with an intriguing preference for a direct and explicit style that is more akin to low context communication. This is remarkable for its juxtaposition to the more usual view of China as a high context society. Although our findings are restricted to the Chinese context, they may be extended to cultures with similar cultural makeup. We encourage researchers to explore the issue of context more carefully especially when dealing with transitional economies shaken by major social and cultural change.

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