Postprint: fsQCA-Based Configurational Study of Knowledge Hiding Behavior in Social Q&A Communities

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Abstract

[Purpose / Significance] Knowledge hiding behavior is not only detrimental to individual knowledge creation, but also adversely affects the healthy development of social Q&A communities. Investigating the causes of user knowledge hiding behavior in social Q&A communities holds significant importance for enriching theories related to user behavior in social Q&A communities and guiding platform optimization. [Method / Process] From a configurational perspective and based on Person-Environment Fit theory, this study employs fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) to analyze 157 valid samples collected through questionnaires, exploring the combinational effects of five variables—value congruence, interpersonal similarity, external demand fit, internal demand fit, and ability fit—on knowledge hiding behavior. [Results / Conclusion] The study identifies combinational paths leading to high and non-high levels of knowledge hiding behavior, revealing that demand fit plays a critical role in influencing knowledge hiding behavior. Through comparative analysis, it is found that users tend to engage in knowledge hiding, while reducing such behavior requires strengthening multi-dimensional fit across various conditions.

Full Text

A Configurational Study of Knowledge Hiding Behaviors in Social Q&A Communities Based on fsQCA

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Abstract

[**Purpose/Significance**] Knowledge hiding behavior is not only detrimental to individual knowledge generation but also negatively impacts the healthy development of social Q&A communities. Investigating the causes of users' knowledge hiding behaviors in social Q&A communities is significant for enriching theories related to user behavior in such communities and guiding platform optimization. [**Method/Process**] From a configurational perspective and based on person-environment fit theory, this study employs fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to analyze 157 valid samples collected through questionnaires. The research explores the combined effects of five variables—value congruence, interpersonal similarity, external needs-supplies fit, internal needs-supplies fit, and demands-abilities fit—on knowledge hiding behavior. [**Result/Conclusion**] The study identifies configurational paths leading to both high and low levels of knowledge hiding behavior, revealing that needs-supplies fit plays a critical role in knowledge hiding. Comparative analysis shows that users are more inclined toward knowledge hiding, and reducing such behavior requires strengthening multiple dimensions of person-environment fit.

Keywords: knowledge hiding behavior; social Q&A community; fsQCA; person-environment fit theory

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With the continuous development of internet technology, online knowledge products have become indispensable tools for users to acquire, exchange, and share knowledge. According to the "China Online Knowledge Q&A Industry White Paper 2020" [1], by 2020, the penetration rate of mobile internet users in China's online pan-knowledge content platforms had reached over 86%, with online knowledge Q&A user penetration reaching 80.3%. Compared with traditional search engines and Q&A platforms, social Q&A communities emphasize social features more prominently, allowing users to post questions and invite others to answer at any time, or to respond to requests from other users and voluntarily choose questions across various domains and types to answer.

However, in social Q&A communities, many users adopt strategies of avoiding answers or withholding knowledge when faced with knowledge requests—behavior known as knowledge hiding [2]. This behavior not only prevents many questions from receiving timely and satisfactory answers but also hinders knowledge generation among individuals, causing serious adverse effects on the sustainable and healthy development of communities [3]. Therefore, understanding the influencing factors of users' knowledge hiding behavior can provide references for optimizing social Q&A communities and is of great significance for promoting their healthy development.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have studied users' negative usage behaviors on social platforms. As an aspect of online social knowledge behavior, knowledge hiding has also attracted scholarly attention across differ-

ent types of online platforms. Social Q&A communities, as knowledge service platforms with social functions, exhibit more complex mechanisms of user behavior generation, characterized by causal complexity [4]. Therefore, this study argues that compared with traditional methods examining the net effects of variables, using QCA to investigate the configurational effects of antecedent variables can help us better understand users' knowledge hiding behavior. This research takes "Zhihu," currently one of China' s most active social Q&A platforms, as the research context. From a configurational perspective and based on person-environment fit theory, the study explores the synergistic effects of value congruence, interpersonal similarity, external needs-supplies fit, internal needs-supplies fit, and demands-abilities fit on knowledge hiding behavior.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Knowledge Hiding Behavior C. E. Connelly et al. [2] first provided a clear definition of knowledge hiding behavior, describing it as a deliberate act of concealing knowledge requested by others and categorizing it into three dimensions: evasive hiding, playing dumb, and rationalized hiding. Research on knowledge hiding behavior in organizations has been extensively conducted, with scholars investigating its antecedents [6–10] and consequences [6,11–12]. In contrast, online communities are relatively new phenomena, and research on knowledge hiding behavior in these contexts remains limited [13]. Some scholars have examined knowledge hiding behavior in different types of online communities. For example, Gan et al. [3] analyzed key factors influencing knowledge hiding behavior in virtual brand communities based on a psychological research framework. Y. F. Fang [14] explored how users of mobile social networking applications employ three coping strategies—knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding, and knowledge contribution omission—to deal with fear and guilt emotions. Zhang et al. [15] investigated the formation path of users' subjective knowledge hiding behavior in online health communities. Zhai et al. [16] explored the relationship between learners' professional commitment and instructors' transformational guidance style on knowledge hiding in online learning communities. X. Lv et al. [17] empirically examined the negative impacts of knowledge hiding behavior on online travel communities, including reputation damage and counterproductive behavior. However, insufficient attention has been paid to knowledge hiding behavior in social Q&A communities—important platforms for knowledge acquisition and sharing.

Research indicates that 90% of users in online communities are "lurkers" [18]. As primary content producers in social Q&A communities, users' knowledge hiding behavior inevitably affects community development. On the one hand, knowledge hiders' behavior can hurt knowledge seekers' feelings and cause distrust [19], thereby affecting users' willingness to ask questions again. On the other hand, it can also reduce the hiders' own creativity. Ultimately, this leads to many questions remaining unanswered, creating a vicious cycle. Therefore, understanding the causes of users' knowledge hiding behavior can enrich theo-

ries related to user knowledge behavior in social Q&A communities and provide references for community optimization to promote healthy development.

1.2 Person-Environment Fit Theory Person-environment fit theory measures the degree of match between individual characteristics and environmental characteristics. Currently, definitions of person-environment fit theory mainly follow three directions: dimension theory, content theory, and integration theory. Dimension theory focuses on which level of environment individuals match with [23]; content theory proposes supplementary fit and complementary fit based on the definition of "fit" [24]; while integration theory synthesizes the above two approaches. C. R. Beasley et al. [25] developed the General Environment Fit Scale (GEFS) through experimental research, arguing that person-environment fit can be subdivided into value congruence, interpersonal similarity, needs-supplies fit (environmental supplies matching individual needs), demands-abilities fit (environmental demands matching individual abilities), and individuals' unique roles in the environment. Compared with person-environment fit types based on specific contexts, this model is more general, has a wider application range, and has proven to have good explanatory power.

Social Q&A communities are a combination of information communities and social networking sites. The long-accumulated Q&A environment and cultural atmosphere significantly influence users' knowledge contribution behavior intentions [26]. According to Bandura' s social cognitive theory [27], there is an interactive relationship among individuals, environment, and behavior. As external conditions for individual existence, environments affect individual behavior. As carriers of user knowledge behavior, the characteristics and attributes of social Q&A communities also influence user behavior. When individuals match their environment, their attitudes and behaviors tend to be positive; conversely, when there is a mismatch, negative attitudes and behaviors may emerge [28].

In summary, the environment significantly influences individual behavior. Moreover, existing research suggests that users can be regarded as "half employees" of the community [18] and are thus more susceptible to environmental influences. Therefore, this study adopts person-environment fit theory as the theoretical foundation. Based on the characteristics of Q&A communities and combining content theory with the GEFS model, the study explores the effects of value congruence, interpersonal similarity, demands-abilities fit, and needs-supplies fit on knowledge hiding behavior. Value congruence and interpersonal similarity examine the influence of consistency between individuals and the community, while demands-abilities fit and needs-supplies fit focus on the complementarity between individuals and the community.

1.3 Qualitative Comparative Analysis Method Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), proposed by Ragin in 1987, is a research method combining qualitative and quantitative approaches based on Boolean algebra and set the-

ory for cross-case comparative analysis [29]. From a holistic perspective, QCA assumes interdependence among conditions and focuses on analyzing "configurational effects" rather than the "net effects" of single variables. Its advantage lies in identifying different configurational antecedents for the same outcome variable [30]. In recent years, QCA has been gradually applied to various management subfields due to its capability in handling large samples and analyzing complex configurational problems [31]. Based on variable types, QCA can be divided into crisp-set QCA (csQCA), multi-value QCA (mvQCA), and fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA). This study employs fsQCA, which converts fuzzy-set data into truth tables through calibration and analyzes the combinational drivers of knowledge hiding behavior by combining qualitative and quantitative analysis.

In the digital environment, user behavior exhibits complexity and contextualization, influenced by multi-dimensional factors that are interdependent and jointly affect user behavior. This requires more comprehensive consideration of issues, and QCA provides a feasible theoretical perspective for exploring user behavior in new research contexts [35]. Therefore, this study selects fsQCA to investigate the influencing factors of knowledge hiding behavior.

2. Research Design

2.1 Variable Setting and Sample Collection Based on the content theory of person-environment fit and the GEFS model, this study uses fsQCA to analyze the influencing factors of knowledge hiding behavior from a fit perspective. The antecedent variables include five dimensions: value congruence, interpersonal similarity, external needs-supplies fit, internal needs-supplies fit, and demands-abilities fit, with knowledge hiding behavior as the outcome variable. The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

Antecedent Variables

(1) Value Congruence. Value congruence refers to the degree of match between an individual's goals or values and those of the organizational environment. The most common forms of supplementary fit studied between employees and organizations are value congruence and person-culture fit [28]. Research has thoroughly examined how value congruence between individuals and organizations affects employee performance in organizations. Value congruence can promote effective communication and understanding of organizational resource allocation [36]. Therefore, this study argues that in virtual social Q&A communities, when users' values or goals align with those of the community, it can enhance users' pleasure in participating in interactions and affect their knowledge hiding behavior.

(2) Interpersonal Similarity. Interpersonal similarity refers to the similarity in background between users within an organization. Research shows that when users are similar in demographic or psychological backgrounds, it can reduce interpersonal risks and promote communication [25]. Scholars studying knowledge hiding behavior in organizations believe that interpersonal relation-

ships critically affect employee behavior [2]. Although users in social Q&A communities have weak ties, their knowledge-seeking or sharing behaviors are based on expertise or interest in certain types of knowledge. This similarity can increase intimacy among members, make interaction processes more interesting, and consequently influence users' knowledge hiding behavior.

(3) Needs-Supplies Fit. Needs-supplies fit refers to the extent to which resources provided by the environment meet individual needs. Unlike in organizations, users' behaviors in Q&A communities are autonomous. According to self-determination theory, individual decisions involve choosing actions based on full awareness of personal needs and environmental information [37]. Therefore, this study argues that whether users' needs are met is significantly related to their knowledge hiding behavior. Motivation for behavior is divided into three types: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation arises from internal desires, thoughts, and emotions about the activity itself, such as interest, reciprocity, and self-achievement. Extrinsic motivation is triggered by external stimuli or expected outcomes, such as benefits, rewards, and reputation [38]. Based on the different motivations underlying needs, this study divides needs-supplies fit into internal needs-supplies fit and external needs-supplies fit.

(4) Demands-Abilities Fit. Demands-abilities fit refers to an individual' s skills meeting environmental requirements. In this study, it refers to the degree of match between requests initiated by knowledge seekers or the platform and users' possessed knowledge. Organizational behavior research shows that when individuals' abilities meet organizational demands, they experience greater value and stronger competence, thereby enhancing their motivation to participate in community activities [39]. In Q&A communities, when users'knowledge matches what others need, users have stronger willingness to share knowledge [40], and their level of knowledge hiding will be lower.

Outcome Variable

This study examines the influencing factors of knowledge hiding behavior in social Q&A communities. Knowledge hiding behavior refers to the degree to which individuals conceal knowledge when faced with knowledge requests. In social Q&A communities, it manifests as users frequently adopting strategies of avoiding answers or providing only partial information when invited by other users to respond.

The measurement items in this study are derived from existing literature at home and abroad, with partial modifications based on the current usage of social Q&A communities in China. The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part covers demographic variables including respondents' gender, age, education level, and frequency of using "Zhihu" ; the second part surveys the variables involved in the research. The questionnaire uses a 7-point Likert scale, where "1" represents "strongly disagree" and "7" represents "strongly agree." Specific measurement items are shown in Table 1 .

This study uses users of "Zhihu," a highly active social Q&A community in China, as the data collection sample and employs a questionnaire survey for data collection. The questionnaire was distributed through an online survey platform. To ensure reliability and validity, a pilot test was first conducted, and scholars in information systems, knowledge management, and related fields were invited to revise the questionnaire wording and clarify ambiguous parts. After the second round of distribution, 203 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid questionnaires, 157 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective response rate of 77.3%. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 2 .

2.2 Reliability and Validity Tests This study uses SPSS Statistics 22 to test the reliability and validity of measurement items in the questionnaire. Cronbach' s α and CR values are used to measure scale reliability, while AVE values test convergent validity. All α and CR values are greater than 0.7, indicating good scale reliability. All AVE values are greater than 0.5, indicating good convergent validity. Additionally, the square root of each variable' s AVE value is greater than its correlation coefficients, demonstrating good discriminant validity. Therefore, all measurement results reach satisfactory levels. Specific test results are shown in Table 3 .

2.3 Calibration of Conditions and Outcome Since this study' s questionnaire uses a 7-point Likert scale while fsQCA requires membership values between 0 and 1, the data must be converted to values on a 0-1 scale before analysis. The first step in data calibration is to calculate the mean of measurement items as the variable' s reflective value. Following existing literature [41], this study selects the maximum value of 7, the midpoint value of 4, and the minimum value of 1 as the calibration anchors for full membership, crossover point, and full non-membership, respectively. Using the calibration function of fsQCA3.0 software, the sample data for condition variables (VC, IS, EMNS, IMNS, DA) and outcome variable (KH) were calibrated to obtain fuzzy membership values.

3. Qualitative Comparative Analysis Results of Knowledge Hiding Behavior

3.1 Necessary Condition Analysis Before conducting fuzzy-set analysis, it is necessary to analyze the necessity of condition variables. Table 4 shows the consistency and coverage of all single antecedent variables. Necessary condition analysis examines the explanatory power of a single antecedent variable on the outcome variable. As shown in Table 4, for high-level knowledge hiding behavior (KH), the consistency of all single antecedent variables is less than 0.9, indicating no necessary condition. For non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior (~KH), the necessity of individual antecedent conditions (except IS, IMNS, and DA) does not exceed 0.9. Further examination using XY scatter plots of condition and outcome variables reveals that these conditions are trivial necessary conditions [42]. Therefore, neither KH nor ~KH has necessary conditions.

3.2 Configurational Analysis This study uses fsQCA3.0 software to analyze the influence of condition combinations composed of five antecedent variables on users' knowledge hiding behavior in social Q&A communities. Fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis yields three types of solutions: complex solution, parsimonious solution, and intermediate solution. The complex solution includes only configurations with actual observed cases; the parsimonious solution includes both configurations with actual observed cases and all "logical remainders" ; while the intermediate solution includes only configurations with actual observed cases and "easy logical remainders." If an antecedent condition appears in both the parsimonious and intermediate solutions, it is a core condition that significantly influences the outcome; if it appears only in the intermediate solution, it is a peripheral condition that plays a supportive role [31].

3.2.1 Configurational Analysis of High-Level Knowledge Hiding Behavior

As shown in Table 5 , six different combinational paths lead to high-level knowledge hiding behavior, each with consistency greater than 0.9. The overall solution consistency is approximately 0.823, and overall solution coverage is approximately 0.864, indicating strong explanatory power of the identified antecedent combinations. These six paths can be summarized into three types:

(1) **Type 1:** Includes paths Ha1 ($_{\text{EMNS}\sim DA)\ and\ Ha2\ (\sim VC}$EMNS), indicating that when users' external needs-supplies fit (EMNS) is absent as a core causal condition, the additional absence of either demands-abilities fit (DA) or value congruence (VC) as core conditions leads to knowledge hiding behavior (KH).

(2) **Type 2:** Includes paths Hb1 ($_{\text{IMNS}\sim EMNS),\ Hb2\ (IS}$IMNS$DA),\ and\ Hb3\ (VC_{\text{IS}\sim IMNS}$DA). This type features the absence of internal needs-supplies fit (IMNS) as the core causal condition, with different auxiliary causal conditions producing three paths. Path Hb1 shows that when both internal and external needs-supplies fit (IMNS, EMNS) are absent, users exhibit knowledge hiding behavior (KH). In path Hb2, although interpersonal similarity (IS) and demands-abilities fit (DA) are present, the absence of internal needs-supplies fit (IMNS) as a core condition still results in high-level knowledge hiding behavior (KH). When interpersonal similarity (IS), internal needs-supplies fit (IMNS), and demands-abilities fit (DA) are all absent, users still demonstrate high-level knowledge hiding behavior (KH) even when value congruence (VC) is present (Hb3).

(3) **Type 3:** Path Hc ($_{\text{VC}IS}$DA) shows that when value congruence (VC) and demands-abilities fit (DA) are absent as core conditions, high-level knowledge hiding behavior (KH) occurs even when interpersonal similarity (IS) is present.

3.2.2 Configurational Analysis of Non-High-Level Knowledge Hiding Behavior

The configurational antecedents for non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior are shown in Table 6 , with four different combinational paths: L1 (VC*IS*EMNS*IMNS), L2 (IS*EMNS*IMNS*DA), L3 (VC*$_{\text{IS}_{EMNS\text{IMNS}}}$, and L4 (VC*IS*EMNS~*IMNS*DA). The overall consistency of these four paths is approximately 0.888, and overall coverage is approximately 0.833.

When value congruence (VC), interpersonal similarity (IS), external needs-supplies fit (EMNS), and internal needs-supplies fit (IMNS) are simultaneously present (L1), or when interpersonal similarity (IS), external needs-supplies fit (EMNS), internal needs-supplies fit (IMNS), and demands-abilities fit (DA) are simultaneously present (L2), users exhibit non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior (KH). When interpersonal similarity (IS) and external needs-supplies fit (EMNS) are absent while value congruence (VC) and internal needs-supplies fit (IMNS) are present as core conditions (L3), or when value congruence (VC) and external needs-supplies fit (EMNS) are present as core conditions while other conditions are absent (L4), users also demonstrate non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior (KH).

Based on the fsQCA results, this study identifies six configurational paths leading to high-level knowledge hiding behavior and four paths leading to low-level knowledge hiding behavior, describing the dynamic interaction processes of various causal factors. This validates the QCA method and configurational perspective that antecedent conditions for outcome production are interdependent and interact to form multiple concurrent causes, rather than a single optimal path [31].

Comparing the configurational paths of high and non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior reveals that: (1) The absence of fewer conditions can lead to high-level knowledge hiding behavior, while non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior requires higher levels of person-environment fit. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, the absence of just one core causal condition can lead to high-level knowledge hiding behavior, whereas paths for non-high-level knowledge hiding behavior require at least two core causal conditions to be present.

Knowledge is a valuable resource that requires significant time and effort to acquire, leading individuals to perceive knowledge as personal property [43]. Knowledge sharing implies relinquishing one' s advantageous position and can generate negative emotions [44]. Therefore, without sufficient person-environment fit, users may be more inclined toward knowledge hiding. (2) Only when both supplementary fit (including value congruence and interpersonal similarity) and complementary fit (including needs-supplies fit and demands-abilities fit) are present will users' knowledge hiding behavior decrease, and supplementary fit cannot compensate for the absence of complementary fit. Value congruence and interpersonal similarity describe the consistency between users and the community environment and its members, respectively. Their fit can promote efficient communication among community members [36], thereby enhancing interaction. Complementary fit describes the degree of mutual

satisfaction between users and the community. According to social exchange theory, individuals analyze the benefits and costs of behavioral outcomes [45]. If users can obtain needed rewards through knowledge interaction, the likelihood of knowledge hiding decreases. Demands-abilities fit enhances users' willingness to share knowledge by strengthening their sense of autonomy and competence [36].

4. Discussion

Current research on knowledge hiding behavior predominantly uses structural equation modeling, whereas this study adopts a configurational perspective based on person-environment fit theory and employs fsQCA to investigate configurational antecedents of both high and low levels of knowledge hiding behavior. The results show that different combinations of fit conditions can produce the same behavior. Analysis of high-level knowledge hiding behavior configurations reveals that needs-supplies fit is the core factor leading to this behavior. Through comparative analysis, we find that configurations leading to knowledge hiding behavior contain fewer conditions, while configurations for low-level knowledge hiding behavior contain more conditions. This suggests that high-level knowledge hiding behavior forms more easily due to the absence of core conditions, whereas reducing this behavior requires the simultaneous presence of both supplementary and complementary fit.

This study' s conclusions have both theoretical significance and practical implications. Theoretically, based on person-environment fit theory, this research conducts a configurational analysis of knowledge hiding behavior in Q&A communities. Previous studies primarily used statistical analysis and structural equation modeling to examine individual factors' effects, whereas this study uses fsQCA to focus on the combinations of different factors and their impact on knowledge hiding behavior in Q&A communities, further deepening our understanding of this phenomenon. Practically, the findings can guide platform strategies to promote users' knowledge sharing behavior. First, platforms should recognize the critical impact of needs-supplies fit deficiency on knowledge hiding behavior and investigate users' needs and analyze the causes of fit deficiency. Second, platforms should realize that both supplementary and complementary fit are indispensable. Therefore, community construction should address multiple aspects: on one hand, platforms should strengthen cultural construction and value promotion to create a positive community atmosphere, and enhance social functions to increase intimacy among members, thereby attracting users, fostering their sense of belonging, and encouraging active participation and knowledge sharing; on the other hand, communities should optimize the design of incentive functions and Q&A recommendation systems, such as organizing Q&A competitions to enhance community appeal and pushing Q&A content that matches users' abilities to strengthen their sense of competence.

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study inevitably has certain limitations: (1) The research uses Zhihu platform users as the study object, and the generalizability of the findings to other Q&A platforms requires further investigation; (2) The research data were obtained through questionnaires, with users self-reporting their knowledge hiding behavior characteristics, which may differ from actual behavior and cannot deeply explore the behavior' s mechanisms. Therefore, to further deepen the research, two aspects need to be addressed: (1) Obtain data from multiple platforms to investigate the applicability of research findings and enhance credibility; (2) In the future, use experimental methods to obtain users' actual behavioral data or employ interviews to qualitatively explore the causes and mechanisms of knowledge hiding behavior.

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Author Contributions

Lu Xinyuan: Conceptualized the research, supervised manuscript revision.
Xu Xiaoqing: Designed and implemented the research plan, drafted the manuscript.
Wang Xuelin: Conducted data analysis and assisted with manuscript revision.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.