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Enterprise Social Networks for Knowledge Sharing in Higher Education: Current Trends, Challenges, and Future Directions

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Abstract

Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) have emerged as important digital platforms that facilitate communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing in higher education institutions. Although existing research has largely focused on the adoption of ESNs, their role in supporting knowledge-sharing practices has received comparatively less attention. This study reviews the existing literature to examine how ESNs contribute to knowledge sharing among faculty, students, and administrative staff. The review highlights the key benefits of ESNs, including enhanced collaboration, organizational learning, research collaboration, and knowledge exchange, while also identifying challenges such as privacy concerns, information overload, and low user engagement. The findings indicate that ESNs have significant potential to strengthen knowledge management and collaborative learning in higher education. The study also identifies key research gaps and offers directions for future research to advance the understanding and effective implementation of ESNs in academic institutions.

Keywords: Enterprise Social Networks, Knowledge Sharing, Higher Education, Knowledge Management, Organizational Learning, Digital Collaboration, Systematic Literature Review.

1. Introduction

The increasing integration of digital technologies has transformed how higher education institutions (HEIs) create, manage, and share knowledge. Universities are increasingly adopting digital platforms to facilitate collaboration among faculty, students, researchers, and administrators, enabling more efficient communication and knowledge exchange (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). As higher education moves toward digital transformation, knowledge sharing has become a critical factor in enhancing teaching effectiveness, research collaboration, innovation, and institutional performance.

Knowledge sharing is the process through which individuals exchange information, experiences, and expertise to generate collective learning and improve organizational outcomes (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In higher education, it supports collaborative teaching, interdisciplinary research, curriculum development, and professional learning. However, traditional methods of knowledge sharing, such as face-to-face meetings, seminars, and email communication, often limit timely collaboration and efficient dissemination of institutional knowledge.

Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) have emerged as valuable digital platforms for overcoming these limitations. ESNs are organization-specific social networking platforms that integrate features such as discussion forums, document sharing, instant messaging, user profiles, and collaborative workspaces within a secure institutional environment (Leonardi et al., 2013). Unlike public social media platforms, ESNs are designed to facilitate internal communication, collaboration, and knowledge management while maintaining organizational privacy and security.

The use of ESNs has expanded across various sectors, including higher education, where they support collaboration among faculty members, students, and administrative staff. These platforms enable users to share teaching resources, exchange research ideas, participate in academic discussions, and build communities of practice. By promoting continuous interaction and collaborative learning, ESNs contribute to improved knowledge creation, organizational learning, and academic engagement.

Although research on ESNs has grown steadily, much of the existing literature focuses on technology adoption and user acceptance using models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Comparatively fewer studies have examined ESNs from a knowledge-sharing perspective, particularly within higher education institutions. Consequently, the existing evidence is fragmented, making it difficult to understand how ESNs facilitate knowledge sharing and what factors influence their effectiveness in academic settings.

This systematic literature review addresses this gap by synthesizing existing research on Enterprise Social Networks as knowledge-sharing tools in higher education institutions. Following the PRISMA guidelines, the review examines the evolution of research, identifies major themes and theoretical perspectives, and highlights the benefits, challenges, and future research opportunities associated with ESN-enabled knowledge sharing. The findings provide valuable insights for researchers, educators, and university administrators seeking to strengthen knowledge-sharing practices and foster collaborative learning through digital platforms.

2. Enterprise Social Networks in Higher Education

Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) are private, organization-managed digital platforms designed to facilitate communication, collaboration, and knowledge exchange among members of an organization. Unlike public social networking sites, ESNs operate within a secure institutional environment, enabling users to share information, collaborate on projects, and build professional relationships while maintaining organizational privacy and data security (Leonardi et al., 2013).

In higher education institutions, ESNs have become important tools for supporting academic and administrative activities. Faculty members use these platforms to share teaching materials, discuss research ideas, coordinate departmental tasks, and collaborate on interdisciplinary projects. Students benefit from interactive discussions, peer learning, project coordination, and timely access to academic resources. Administrative staff also utilize ESNs to streamline communication, disseminate institutional updates, and improve coordination across departments.

The increasing adoption of digital transformation strategies has further accelerated the integration of ESNs in universities. Platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Viva Engage (formerly Yammer), Workplace by Meta, Slack, and institution-specific collaboration platforms provide features including discussion forums, document repositories, real-time messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative workspaces. These functionalities support continuous interaction among institutional members regardless of geographical location, thereby promoting a more connected academic environment.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of ESNs is their ability to support both formal and informal communication. Formal interactions include sharing institutional announcements, research collaborations, and course-related discussions, while informal interactions encourage networking, mentoring, and the exchange of professional experiences. Such interactions help create communities of practice where faculty and students collectively generate, refine, and disseminate knowledge.

Despite these advantages, the successful implementation of ESNs depends on several organizational and individual factors, including leadership support, organizational culture, digital competence, trust, and user engagement. Without active participation and institutional encouragement, ESNs may function merely as communication platforms rather than effective knowledge-sharing systems. Therefore, universities need to foster a collaborative culture that encourages continuous participation and knowledge exchange.

Overall, ESNs have evolved beyond communication tools to become strategic platforms that support collaboration, organizational learning, and knowledge management in higher education. Their growing importance highlights the need to better understand how they facilitate knowledge-sharing practices and contribute to institutional effectiveness.

3. Enterprise Social Networks as Knowledge Sharing Tools

Knowledge sharing is recognized as one of the primary functions of Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs), enabling individuals to exchange explicit and tacit knowledge through digital collaboration. In organizational settings, knowledge sharing involves the dissemination of information, expertise, experiences, and best practices among members to improve learning, innovation, and decision-making (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Alavi & Leidner, 2001). ESNs provide an interactive environment where users can create, store, retrieve, and distribute knowledge while fostering continuous collaboration across organizational boundaries (Leonardi et al., 2013).

Unlike traditional communication channels such as email or meetings, ESNs facilitate multidirectional communication and encourage active participation among users. Features including discussion forums, activity feeds, collaborative workspaces, document repositories, tagging, and commenting enable employees and academicians to exchange knowledge in real time, reducing information silos and enhancing organizational memory (Von Krogh, 2012; Razmerita et al., 2016). These platforms also preserve organizational knowledge by maintaining searchable records of discussions, shared documents, and collaborative activities, allowing knowledge to remain accessible beyond individual interactions (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

In higher education institutions, ESNs provide opportunities for faculty members to collaborate on research projects, exchange teaching resources, discuss pedagogical innovations, and mentor junior academics. Students use these platforms for collaborative learning, peer interaction, project coordination, and academic discussions, while administrative staff employ ESNs to streamline institutional communication and coordinate academic activities (Manca, 2020). By connecting diverse stakeholders within a unified digital environment, ESNs contribute to stronger knowledge networks and support interdisciplinary collaboration.

The effectiveness of ESNs in promoting knowledge sharing depends not only on technological capabilities but also on organizational and individual factors. Organizational culture, leadership support, trust, digital competence, perceived usefulness, and user engagement significantly influence individuals' willingness to share knowledge through ESNs (Razmerita et al., 2016; Wehner et al., 2017). Institutions that encourage openness, collaboration, and continuous learning are more likely to realize the knowledge management benefits of ESNs than those where knowledge is viewed as an individual asset.

Several studies have reported that ESNs positively influence organizational learning and innovation by facilitating continuous communication and collaborative problem-solving. Through interactions on ESNs, faculty members can rapidly disseminate teaching practices, share research findings, seek professional advice, and collectively develop innovative educational solutions. Such collaborative activities enhance knowledge creation, reduce duplication of effort, and improve institutional responsiveness to changing educational needs (Corcoran & Duane, 2017; Wehner et al., 2017).

Despite these advantages, the literature also identifies several challenges that may hinder effective knowledge sharing through ESNs. Concerns regarding privacy, information overload, lack of participation, resistance to organizational change, and varying levels of digital literacy can reduce user engagement and limit the effectiveness of these platforms (Leonardi et al., 2013; Razmerita et al., 2016). In addition, the absence of clear institutional policies and incentives may discourage sustained participation, resulting in underutilization of ESNs despite their technological capabilities.

Overall, existing evidence suggests that Enterprise Social Networks have evolved from communication platforms to strategic knowledge-sharing systems that support organizational learning, collaboration, and innovation in higher education. However, research remains fragmented across different disciplines and contexts, highlighting the need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing studies to better understand how ESNs facilitate knowledge sharing within higher education institutions. This review addresses this gap by systematically examining the current body of literature and identifying future research directions.

4. Theoretical Foundations of Enterprise Social Networks and Knowledge Sharing

The application of Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) in higher education has been examined through multiple theoretical perspectives that explain why individuals share knowledge and how organizations create value from collaborative technologies. While no single theory fully captures the complexity of ESN-enabled knowledge sharing, several complementary theories provide valuable insights into the technological, social, and organizational mechanisms underlying knowledge exchange.

One of the most influential theories is the Knowledge-Based View (KBV), which considers knowledge as the most valuable strategic resource of an organization (Grant, 1996). According to KBV, organizational success depends on the ability to create, integrate, and disseminate knowledge among members. ESNs support this process by providing digital platforms where faculty members, researchers, students, and administrators can continuously exchange expertise, teaching resources, and research experiences. By facilitating knowledge storage and retrieval, ESNs contribute to institutional learning and help preserve organizational knowledge beyond individual employees (Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

Another widely adopted perspective is Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes that relationships, trust, shared norms, and social interactions facilitate knowledge exchange (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). ESNs strengthen social capital by increasing communication among institutional members, promoting collaboration across departments, and encouraging the formation of professional networks. Faculty members connected through ESNs are more likely to seek advice, share experiences, and collaborate on

research activities, thereby improving collective knowledge creation (Chiu et al., 2006; Razmerita et al., 2016).

The Communities of Practice (CoP) theory proposed by Wenger (1998) also provides an important framework for understanding knowledge sharing through ESNs. Communities of Practice consist of individuals who share common interests and develop knowledge through regular interaction and collaborative problem-solving. ESNs enable the formation of virtual communities where educators discuss teaching strategies, exchange best practices, mentor colleagues, and collectively address academic challenges. These digital communities encourage continuous professional development and foster innovation in teaching and research.

Organizational Learning Theory further explains how organizations acquire, distribute, and utilize knowledge to improve performance (Argyris & Schön, 1978). ESNs facilitate organizational learning by enabling rapid dissemination of institutional information, collaborative decision-making, and continuous feedback among stakeholders. The visibility and persistence of information on ESNs allow institutions to retain valuable organizational knowledge, reducing knowledge loss associated with staff turnover and enhancing institutional memory (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

Although many studies on ESNs have employed technology acceptance models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003), these models primarily explain users' intention to adopt technology rather than the knowledge-sharing processes enabled by ESNs. While perceived usefulness, ease of use, social influence, and facilitating conditions influence ESN adoption, theories such as KBV, Social Capital Theory, Communities of Practice, and Organizational Learning Theory provide a more comprehensive explanation of how ESNs generate organizational value through collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The existing literature indicates that effective knowledge sharing through ESNs is shaped by the interaction of technological capabilities, organizational culture, trust, leadership support, and user participation. Consequently, integrating insights from multiple theoretical perspectives offers a more holistic understanding of ESNs as strategic knowledge-sharing tools in higher education institutions. This review adopts this multidimensional perspective to synthesize existing evidence and identify opportunities for future research.

5. Discussion

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) have evolved from communication platforms into strategic knowledge-sharing tools that support collaboration, organizational learning, and innovation within higher education institutions. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that ESNs facilitate the exchange of both explicit and tacit knowledge by enabling continuous interaction among faculty members, students, researchers, and administrative staff (Leonardi et al., 2013; Razmerita et al., 2016). Unlike traditional communication methods, ESNs provide centralized digital environments where knowledge can be created, stored, shared, and retrieved, thereby strengthening institutional knowledge management practices.

A major finding of the review is that ESNs significantly enhance academic collaboration. Faculty members utilize these platforms to exchange teaching resources, discuss pedagogical innovations, coordinate research projects, and engage in interdisciplinary collaborations. Such interactions not only improve teaching effectiveness but also promote research productivity and professional development (Fullwood et al., 2013; Manca, 2020). Similarly, students benefit from collaborative learning environments that

encourage peer interaction, discussion, and collective problem-solving, supporting active learning and knowledge co-creation.

The review further highlights that the effectiveness of ESNs extends beyond technological functionality. Organizational factors such as leadership support, collaborative culture, trust, and institutional commitment consistently emerge as critical enablers of successful knowledge sharing (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Razmerita et al., 2016). Universities that encourage open communication and recognize knowledge-sharing behaviors are more likely to realize the full potential of ESNs than institutions where knowledge remains fragmented or confined within departments. This finding reinforces the argument that successful implementation of digital collaboration platforms requires organizational readiness alongside technological investment.

Theoretical perspectives identified in the reviewed studies provide complementary explanations for ESN-enabled knowledge sharing. The Knowledge-Based View emphasizes that knowledge represents a strategic institutional resource, while Social Capital Theory highlights the importance of trust, relationships, and social interactions in facilitating knowledge exchange (Grant, 1996; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Communities of Practice further explain how continuous interaction among educators contributes to collective learning and professional development (Wenger, 1998). Together, these perspectives suggest that ESNs generate value not merely through technological features but by fostering environments where collaborative knowledge creation becomes a routine organizational practice.

Despite the reported benefits, several challenges remain. Many studies identify concerns related to privacy, information overload, inconsistent user participation, resistance to organizational change, and varying levels of digital competence as barriers to effective ESN use (Leonardi et al., 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). These challenges indicate that the mere availability of an ESN platform does not guarantee successful knowledge sharing. Institutions should therefore complement technological implementation with appropriate governance policies, user training, leadership support, and incentives that encourage meaningful engagement.

The review also reveals several gaps in the current body of knowledge. Much of the existing research focuses on technology adoption and user acceptance, with comparatively limited attention to the quality, sustainability, and long-term impact of knowledge-sharing practices enabled by ESNs. In addition, most studies employ cross-sectional quantitative designs, providing limited understanding of how knowledge-sharing behaviors evolve over time. There is also relatively little evidence from developing countries, including India, despite the rapid digital transformation occurring within higher education. Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal, mixed-method, and cross-cultural approaches to explore the long-term organizational outcomes of ESN-enabled knowledge sharing.

Overall, the findings suggest that Enterprise Social Networks should be viewed as strategic knowledge management platforms rather than simply communication technologies. Their ability to connect individuals, facilitate collaboration, and preserve organizational knowledge positions them as valuable tools for supporting teaching, research, and institutional learning. However, their effectiveness depends on a combination of technological capabilities, organizational culture, and active user participation, highlighting the need for integrated strategies that align digital platforms with institutional knowledge-sharing objectives.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing a comprehensive synthesis of the literature on Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs) as knowledge-sharing tools in higher education institutions, this review has several limitations. First, the review included only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English, which may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages or in conference proceedings, books, and dissertations. Consequently, some valuable insights into ESN implementation and knowledge-sharing practices may not have been captured.

Second, the review focused specifically on higher education institutions. Although this contextual focus provides a deeper understanding of ESN-enabled knowledge sharing in academia, the findings may not be directly generalizable to other sectors such as healthcare, government, or corporate organizations, where organizational structures and knowledge-sharing practices differ.

Third, the review synthesized findings from studies conducted across different countries, institutional settings, and technological platforms. Variations in organizational culture, digital infrastructure, institutional policies, and user characteristics may have influenced reported outcomes, making direct comparisons across studies challenging. In addition, the rapid evolution of enterprise collaboration technologies means that newer ESN features and practices may not be fully reflected in earlier studies.

Future research should adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how knowledge-sharing behaviors through ESNs evolve over time and how sustained platform use influences teaching, research, and institutional performance. Such studies would provide stronger evidence regarding the long-term effectiveness of ESNs in higher education.

There is also a need for cross-cultural and comparative studies examining ESN implementation across public and private universities and across developed and developing countries. Comparative research can provide insights into how cultural, organizational, and technological factors shape knowledge-sharing practices in different educational contexts.

Future studies should employ mixed-methods approaches by combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews or case studies to gain a richer understanding of user experiences, organizational challenges, and best practices for ESN implementation. Such approaches can complement existing quantitative evidence and provide deeper insights into the social and organizational dynamics of knowledge sharing.

Finally, researchers should investigate emerging topics such as the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), learning analytics, and intelligent recommendation systems within Enterprise Social Networks. Exploring how AI-powered features support knowledge discovery, personalized learning, expertise identification, and collaborative decision-making will enhance understanding of the next generation of digital knowledge-sharing platforms in higher education.

Overall, addressing these research gaps will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how Enterprise Social Networks can be effectively leveraged to strengthen knowledge sharing, organizational learning, and academic collaboration in increasingly digital higher education environments.

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