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The role of trust in sustainability of knowledge-sharing social groups: the case of Stack Exchange Q&A communities

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Knowledge-sharing communities are fundamental for the development and evolution of any knowledge-based society. Their emergence, function, and disappearance determine the course of evolution of a knowledge-based society. The sustainability of these groups is crucial for the success of the knowledge-transfer process in modern societies and the efficiency and success of this process. This work explores the role of the structure of social interactions and social trust in the emergence of sustainable knowledge-sharing communities. We combine tools and methods from complex networks theory, statistical physics, computer science, and sociology to explore roles mentioned in the sustainability of StackExchange communities on four different topics: astronomy, physics, economics, and literature. StackExchange is one of the most successful online knowledge-sharing networks that hosts more than 150 communities on various topics. To control the influence of the subject, we select a pair of active and one closed community for each topic and analyze and compare their early evolution. We adapt the dynamical reputation model to quantify the change in social trust in these communities. We analyze the evolution of the social interaction network and social trust between members during the first 180 days of their existence. Our results show that sustainable communities have higher local cohesiveness and develop stable, more strongly connected cores. The social trust between members is more heightened in sustainable communities. In these communities, the trust between core members develops early and remains high over time. This work shows that the emergence of a stable, trustworthy core may be determining factor in building a sustainable knowledge-sharing community.

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