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HOW MICROBLOG FOLLOWER NETWORKS AFFECT OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE PROJECT SUCCESS

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Successful open source software (OSS) projects require efficient communication means and a steady supply of voluntary developers. Microblogging, as well as the follower network it generates, is becoming increasingly popular as an emerging Web 2.0 communication technology in many online OSS communities. However, little is known about how microblogging follower networks affect OSS project success. Based on theories drawn from the social network domain, OSS and virtual team research,we hypothesized two follower network mechanisms – preferential attachment and structural holes – which may significantly affect OSS project success, by improving knowledge sharing and attracting more skillful developers. We plan to empirically study a microblog follower network in a large online OSS community, aiming to examine the impacts of the two hypothesized follower network mechanisms on OSS project success. Our potential findings may provide insights for OSS project managers to better manage microblog communications and thereby achieve project success.

Keywords: OSS, microblogging, preferential attachment, structural holes, project success

Introduction

In recent years, the technical and commercial success of many open source software (OSS) projects such as Linux, Mozilla Firefox and MySQL has demonstrated the market legitimacy of the OSS model for software development (von Hippel 2001; von Hippel and von Krogh 2003). In this community-based model, a large number of developers who are geographically dispersed and rely heavily on various Internet-based communication technologies, rather than face-to-face interactions, for collaboration form project teams as they create open source software. The lack of face-to-face interactions in online OSS development environments means that electronic communications are crucial for efficient virtual collaborations among developers and thereby OSS project success. Previous studies about OSS project success mainly focused on factors such as project participation (Grewal et al. 2006), developers' motivations (Roberts et al. 2006) and interpersonal trust (Bhattacharya et al. 1998; Dirks 1999; Dirks 2000; Stewart and Gosain 2006). However, the impacts of electronic communication technologies have been rarely studied.

Microblogging as an emerging Web 2.0 communication technology is becoming increasingly popular in various online collaborative communities, including OSS communities. Microbloggers can publish short online text updates (e.g., up to 140 characters on Twitter) to a group of subscribers who are known as 'followers'. Microbloggers and their followers form a unique and informal communication network where microbloggers and their followers are 'nodes' and the "following" relationships between them are 'links'. We define such a network as the follower network which is one of the important features of microblogging. In this network, followers select one or more microbloggers with whom they may share similar interests, experiences, or opinions about OSS development and whom they wish to follow. Therefore, the follower network provides a stable infrastructure that enables follower developers to constantly receive a stream of OSS development information from the set of microbloggers whom they selected to follow.

Another feature that significantly distinguishes microblogging from other traditional electronic communication channels such as email is its tagging capabilities. User-generated tags are mostly used to categorize the huge amount of unorganized information on the Internet. Many Web 2.0 websites allow the users to categorize their contents by attaching tags – one-word descriptions (e.g., Flickr for photos). The microblogging system provided by the OSS community in our study allows the users to attach two types of tags to their messages – project and account. The project tag is used to identify the name of the OSS project mentioned in the microblogging message and provides the followers with the hyperlink to the project homepage. The account tag help to identify the OSS developer account in the message and also can direct the followers to the account home pages. Together they provide an efficient navigation process for the follower developers to accurately locate the OSS projects and developer accounts involved in the microblogging messages. In addition, this tagging feature reflects the information structure and relationships that the microbloggers use which is crucial for the microblog content analysis in our study.

In this research, we focus on studying how a microblogging follower network affects project success in a real-world online OSS development community called Ohloh (www.ohloh.net). In this follower network, OSS developers (project members) can be microbloggers by publishing short text messages to their followers. At the same time, they can also be followers by subscribing (following) other developers' microblogs. We describe how microblogging is used by OSS developers through the follower network by adopting the framework of microbloggers' general intentions developed by Davidson and Vaast (2009). Firstly, OSS developers post updates on microblogs about individuals' current status, activities and development progress of the projects they are working on (e.g., releases of new versions or breakthroughs in solving development problems). Senior developers with many followers may attract and motivate these followers to contribute to their projects through such microblogs. Secondly, developers tend to use microblogs to express their most current thoughts and opinions about others (e.g. appreciation of another developer's contribution to their common project). Such microblogs may promote the feeling of trust and closeness among OSS developers – and their followers. Thirdly, microblogging in an OSS community can facilitate efficient knowledge sharing. OSS developers may post questions and problems they encounter in the development process and ask for help from their followers. Fourthly, developers may use microblogs to release their emotional tension (Nardi et al. 2004). From the followers' perspective (i.e. OSS developers in the same development community), they can access most recently updated and relevant information such as answers to specific programming problems or development progress of the OSS projects they are interested in.

However, follower networks that are embedded in the microblogging technology are still a relatively new phenomenon and have rarely been studied. In particular, there is a lack of understanding on the potential impacts of the follower network on OSS group performance and project success. In this research-in-progress paper, we aim to take a step in this direction by empirically investigating a microblogging follower network in a large online OSS

community – Ohloh - which contains information about 435,000 projects and 636,000 developers. We take a social network perspective to study how the follower network affects OSS project success in Ohloh. More specifically, we draw upon open source, social network and communication research and hypothesize two mechanisms of the microblogging follower network – preferential attachment and structural holes – which will facilitate OSS project success. For the preferential attachment mechanism, we examine if OSS projects containing more popular microbloggers (i.e. developers who have a large number of followers) are more likely to succeed. In addition, we examine if an OSS developer's access to the structural holes of the follower network will affect the success of the project(s) in which he or she participates.

We claim three major contributions for this research. First, this research contributes to the growing stream of studies on microblogging and follower networks. Second, we gain a better understanding of how a microblogging follower network as an informal communication network affects OSS project success. Thirdly, our empirical analysis may provide insights for OSS project managers to better manage informal communications like microblogging among developers to improve group performance and thereby project success.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we review relevant studies and develop the research hypotheses. The third section describes the dataset we used. The fourth section introduces our research design. Finally, we suggest the possible results and discuss their implications and potential contributions.

Research Background and Hypotheses

OSS Project Success and Communication

Open source project success is one of the most widely used dependent variables in open source research since it is directly related to the market and technical legitimacy of the OSS development model. Studies about OSS project success mainly focus on its measurements and determinants. Crowston et al. (2003) reviewed studies about OSS project success measurements from three perspectives – system and information quality, user satisfaction and use - based on the framework of information system success developed by DeLone and McLean (1992; 2002; 2003). Corresponding to these three perspectives, they identified three types of common project success measures from the OSS literature: 1) coding (Mishra et al. 2002; Stamelos et al. 2002) and documentation quality (Crowston et al. 2003), 2) user ratings and opinions (Guinan et al. 1998), and 3) system/software use factors such as number of users and downloads (Stewart and Ammeter 2002). We also adopted this classification of OSS project success measurements in our empirical analysis and mainly focused on the latter two types.

Another stream of research aims to discover the determinants of OSS project success. Subramaniam (2009) examined two types of determinants: technical characteristics of the open source software such as choices of programming languages, and social factors such as users' and developers' interests of the software. Furthermore, Grewal et al. (2006) found that the network embeddedness of an OSS project affects its success. In addition, other researchers have found that the restrictiveness of open source licenses plays an important role in OSS project success (Lerner and Tirole 2005; Stewart and Gosain 2006). However, while existing OSS research has examined the impacts of a wide range of social and technical factors on project success, the impacts of communication are largely overlooked.

Communications in the OSS development environment rely heavily on electronic media (e.g., forum, mailing lists) rather than face-to-face contact (Yutaka et al. 2000). Electronic communication has been found to significantly affect the performance of virtual teams through trust (Jarvenpaa and Leidner 1999), organizational identification (Wiesenfeld et al. 1999), and communication network structure (Ahuja and Carley 1999). Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) found that that when faced with technical or task uncertainty, teams with high levels of trust are able to solve problems when they are limited to computer-mediated communication. On the contrary, teams that did not achieve task-focus in their communication reported low levels of trust. In addition, Wiesenfeld et al. (1999) found that electronic communication are particularly important in the creation and maintenance of a common identity among decoupled virutal teams. From the network perspective, Ahuja and Carley (1999) found that the fit between virtual group/organization task and communication network structure is associated with members' perceived group performance. In general, these studies have established strong links between communication and virtual team performance. However, there is little research on the impacts of communication on virtual OSS project groups.

Microblogging and OSS Development

Microblogging as a new internet communication technology has drawn more and more academic attentions in recent years. Existing microblogging studies mainly focus on two aspects. One is about the microbloggers' motivations (Java et al. 2007; Zhao and Rosson 2009). Davidson and Vaast (2009) explores the benefits of microblogging by professional technology bloggers. Zhao and Rosson (2009) argue that, comparing with other digital communication technologies (e.g., IM, email, and blog), microblogging can promote collaborations in professional relationships through strengthened common grounds, a feeling of connectedness, and exchanging acknowledgements through follower networks. The other types of research manly focused on the design and usage of microblogging technologies (Courtenay Honeycutt 2009; Jansen et al. 2009). However, there is little research about the impacts of microblogging and its follower network on team performance, especially in OSS projects.

A Social Network Perspective on How Microblogging Communication Affects OSS Project Success

In recent years, as more and more OSS developers choose to communicate and collaborate with each other in a network form through online communities (Hahn et al. 2008), social network analysis (SNA) has become an important approach for modeling and analyzing various relationships (Crowston and Howison 2003; Grewal et al. 2006; Hu and Zhao 2008a; Hu and Zhao 2008b; Jin et al. 2005; Madey 2002; Wagstrom et al. 2005). SNA is particularly useful in modeling and analyzing factors that are associated with dyads (i.e., a pair of nodes) rather than individuals. In SNA studies, two network mechanisms – preferential attachment and structural holes – have received great attention and have been suggested to affect the formation and performance of virtual teams. Thus, we propose that these two mechanisms in the microblogging follower network will influence OSS project success. We explore how the follower network relates to these two network mechanisms and as a consequence affects project performance in more detail below.

Preferential Attachment

In social networks, preferential attachment (Albert and Barabasi 2002; Wasserman and Faust 1994) refers to the process that nodes already having many links are more likely to attract new links. In other words, a node with a high degree (i.e. the number of the links a node has) will receive more new links than a node with a low degree. This process, also referred to as "the rich get richer", will eventually generate a network with a power-law degree distribution. Barabasi and Albert (1999) first proposed a mathematical model for the (degree) preferential attachment process, assuming the probability $\prod(k_i)$ that a new node will form a link to node *i* depends on (is linear in) the degree k_i of node *i*. Based on this model, several studies (e.g., Hu and Zhao 2008a; Hu and Zhao 2008b) examined the degree distributions of OSS collaboration networks using regression techniques and found that these distributions follow the power law. Networks which have power law degree distributions are described as having scale-free toplogy.

Recent research has discovered scale-free topology in many OSS developer collaboration networks (Hu and Zhao 2008a; Jin et al. 2005; Madey 2002). Madey (2002) conducted one of the first empirical investigations on the topology of an OSS developer network extracted from SourceForge.net. He modeled the developers working on projects as a collaboration network and found that this network displays features of scale-free topology. A more recent topological analysis (Jin et al. 2005) of the collaboration networks in SourceForge.net also discovered similar scale-free features. These findings indicate that a preferential attachment mechanism may have a great impact on OSS developers' project participation choices (Hu and Zhao 2009) and thereby may significantly affect OSS group performance and project success (Hahn et al. 2008; Roberts et al. 2006).

Based on the above findings, we conjecture that preferential attachment process in microblogging networks also positively affect OSS project success by boosting project participation. In the preferential attachment process, prestigious microbloggers with large numbers of followers may attract more new followers than common OSS developers. Since most microblog updates are about "what I (the microblogger) am doing" (Zhao and Rosson 2009), the new followers are largely exposed to the project development activities of these prestigous microbloggers through their suscribed microblogs. These real-time updates enable the followers to develop more accurate and timely perceptions of the microblogger developers (Zhao and Rosson 2009) and the projects they work on. Such perceptions are critical for OSS developers' project participation choices (Hahn et al. 2008; Hu and Zhao 2009). Over time, some of these new followers may become curious about the projects and decide to participate and

contribute to these projects. Through this process, the more followers an OSS project has, the more potential participants it may have in the future. These projects then can greatly benefit from this steady supply of participants and their contributions, thus having a higher chance to succeed in the long run. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1. *The success of an OSS project is positively related to the average number of followers its microblogger developers have in the follower network.*

Accumulated Advantage

Preferential attachment process is largely based on the "Mathew effect" in sociology which is also often termed as "accumulated advantage" effect. The accumulated advantage phenomenon is that individuals who already own certain economic or social resources can leverage them to gain more resources. This phenomenon was first coined by Robert K. Merton to describe how famous scientists often get more credit than a relatively junior researcher with similar work (Merton 1968). In social networks, this effect enables nodes with accumulated advantages in certain attributes to be more likely to attract new links. In our study, such attributes are defined as *accumulative advantage factors*.

Unlike previous research about accumulated advantage which mainly focused on its effects on the whole community (Merton 1988; Merton 1968), we focused on the impacts of OSS microbloggers' accumulated advantages on their followers. This is because the assumption is that an individual under the influence of another person's accumulated advantages must know about that person and his/her advantages first. The microblogging follower mechanism in an OSS community is a strong and clear indication that the follower has certain knowledge about the microblogger he follows (suscribes). Thus we conjectured that prestigous microbloggers with accumulative advantages (e.g., OSS coding experiences, community reputation) may attract more followers and have a stronger positive influence on their followers' project participation decisions than can common (not prestigious) developers. This effect can boost project participations among these followers and thereby contributes to project success over time. At the project level, this effect can be summrized as - the higher the average levels of accumulated advantage (per microblogger) a project has, the more likely this project will succeed. Therefore, we hypthesize that:

H2. *The success of an OSS project is positively related to the average level(s) of accumulative advantage(s) its microblogging developers have within the follower network.*

Structural Holes

Structural holes theory suggests that a team member's ability to access a variety of information and resources in a social network strongly affects the team's performance (Burt 1992; Burt 1997; Burt 2004). Such information and resources from a diversity of sources provides network benefits that are often additive rather than overlapping to the team (Burt, 1992) especially when nodes are connected through weak ties. A series of organizational studies have discovered the positive effects of network structural holes on organizational performances in terms of innovation (Ahuja 2000; Johnsson 2000) and learning (Hinsz 1990; Walsh 1995). In the context of OSS development, Tan et al. (2007) have explored the effects of structural holes in collaboration networks on project success. Contrary to the findings in related organizational studies, they found that developers' access to brokers in the collaboration network is negatively related to project success. They argued that, unlike organizational networks, the relationships in OSS collaboration networks represent "channels that diffusely and imperfectly facilitate knowledge and information spillovers". The OSS developers who have access to a variety of resources would not have brokerage benefits as structural holes theory suggested in organizational studies, but would incur costs of transferring knowledge across project groups. However, their empirical analysis on structural holes, as well as many other network studies on OSS phenomenon, suffers from a major limitation by only focusing on collaboration relationships/links. These collaboration links are often derived by the joint participation in a common OSS project between two developers. When the project is very large (e.g. Linux), it may contain thousands of developers generating tens of thousands of collaboration links. Most of these developers may not even know each other. Therefore, such derived collaboration links may not effectively represent the underlying social relationships among OSS developers.

In this study, we focused on microblogging follower links rather than collaboration links for two reasons. Firstly, follower links are directly set by follower developers indicating stronger underlying social relationships than collaboration links. Secondly, the flows of OSS related information and knowledge are directly associated with the follower link since it is derived from microblogging communication relationships, while information flows within

the OSS collaboration networks are often difficult to measure. We suggest the structural holes in follower networks affect OSS project groups in the following way. An OSS project member may gain innovative ideas or useful resources from individuals outside his close circle (often project members). This is because such individuals often possess information and resources rather different from what the group members already had and thereby may facilitate innovations.

Therefore, we still follow the findings of related organizational studies on structural holes and hypothesize that:

H3. *The success of an OSS project is positively related to the level of its members' access to brokers through structural holes in the microblogging follower network.*

To measure a node's access to the structural holes in a network, we utilized the network constraint measure developed by Burt (1992), which effectively measures a node's lack of access to brokers in a network. *The access to brokers through structural holes* is calculated as one minus a node's network constraint value. The function we use to calculate the access to broker measure is $1 - \sum_j (p_{ij+} \sum_q p_{iq} p_{qj})^2, q \neq i, j$, where p_{ij} is the proportion of

i's direct links invested on j, and $\sum_q p_{iq} p_{qj}$ represents the sum of i's indirect links in contact with j via q.

Dataset

The dataset used for this study was collected from a large online OSS community - Ohloh - through its Web 2.0 based application programming interface (API) (Allen et al. 2009). Ohloh is a community and a free public directory of OSS projects and developers. It collects various kinds of information about OSS projects and developers from public software version control systems such as CVS and Subversion and provides underlying software metrics based on that information. For example, Ohloh collects project activity data and keeps track of every change made in an OSS project, including what was changed, when it was changed, and who made the change. Based on that information, Ohloh calculates software metrics such as the total number of changes (commits) and comment ratio. In addition, Ohloh encourages developers to add, edit and discuss OSS projects in its online social-networking community. As of April, 2010, Ohloh listed information about 435,000 OSS projects involving 636,000 developers. It was reported as the largest directory for open source software projects in 2009 (Cook 2009). These projects range from well-known open source software such as MySQL and Mozilla Firefox to lesser-known efforts such as CakePHP. Most of Ohloh data such as kudo links all has time information indicating when the data is created or collected. Ohloh also keeps historical data on many data items such as project activity information and lines of codes. Such information is crucial for our longitudinal analysis on the preferential attachment process in Ohloh microblogging networks.

Ohloh is owned and operated by Geeknet, Inc., which also operate several other top open source web sites such as Sourceforge.net - the world's largest open source software development and distribution environment. However, Ohloh is not a forge and does not host open source projects as Sourceforge.net does. It focuses on retrieving, maintaining and analyzing publicly available information about open source software projects and developers. Therefore, it provides a comprehensive and unique set of OSS development-related information which is not available at any other OSS web sites including Sourceforge.net. Such information includes OSS developers' project participation choices, location, nationality, programming language preferences, development activities, and project statistics such as total lines of codes.

Ohloh Microblogging Data

In addition, Ohloh provides a microblogging tool which enables developers to publish short text microblog messages to the community. Figure 1 is the entity-relation diagram which shows the relationships among the major data items in the Ohloh microblog dataset we collected. We describe these relationships in detail as follows:

■ An Ohloh developer can choose to subscribe (follow) any microblogger in whom he or she is interested.

■ All the microblog messages published by microbloggers will be included in the follower's news feed.

■ All microblog messages are in XML format. All the names of Ohloh projects and developers can be tagged by the XML tags - <project> and <account>. Therefore, an Ohloh developer can also choose to follow a specific project and subscribe to all the microblog messages which contain the name of that project.

Figure.1. The Entity-Relation Diagram of Ohloh Microblogging Data
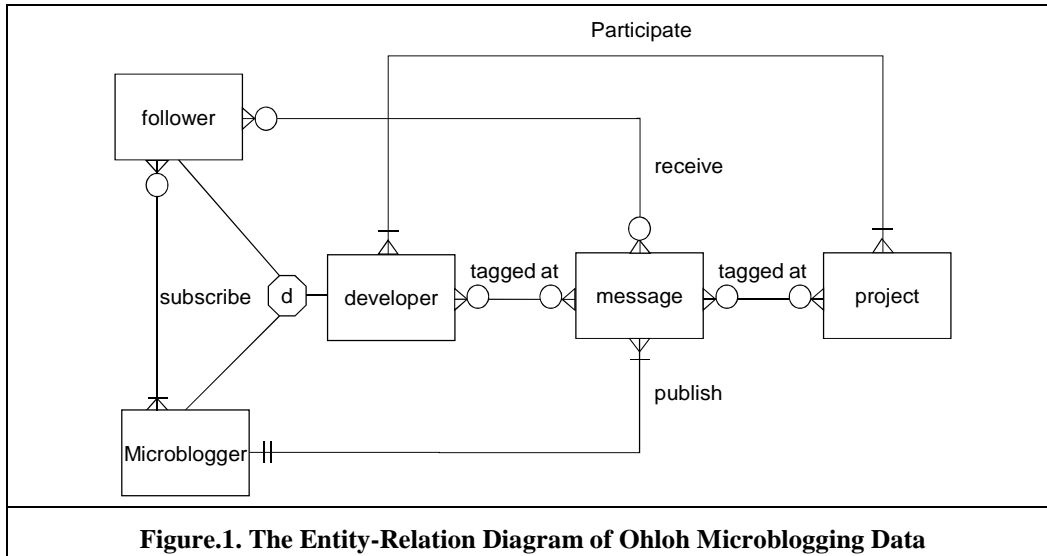
Along with other OSS relevant information such as project activity information, we use statistical methods to analyze the relationships between the two types of hypothesized network factors and OSS project success.

Data Collection

We developed a set of Java programs to automatically query and retrieve data through the API provided by Ohloh. Figure 2 shows the sample data for microblog messages subscribed by a developer in the Ohloh community. Since all retrieved data items are in XML format, a parser program was developed to parse them into a database.

Figure 2. Sample Microblog Data Retrieved through Ohloh API

Research Design

In this study, we propose to use statistical (regression) techniques for analyzing the impacts of the two types hypothesized network factors – preferential attachment factors, accumulative advantages and structural holes factors – on OSS project success. We then extracted a set of control factors from Ohloh dataset based on previous research on OSS project success. We also plan to adopt a stepped regression model to examine size of effects explained by the two hypothesized network factors. In addition, we will take a longitudinal perspective on these constructed

variables in our analysis since it would be necessary in studying the impacts of preferential attachment process on OSS project success. Here we introduce the dependent and independent variables constructed using data from Ohloh community.

Dependent Variables

We constructed several dependent variables using Ohloh data based on previous studies (Crowston et al. 2003; Crowston et al. 2006; Mishra et al. 2002; Stamelos et al. 2002) to measure OSS project success. We mainly follow the set of the system use measures developed in Crowston et al. (Crowston et al. 2003). System use factors measure usability and user satisfaction of the open source software. We will adopt and apply these measures in the Ohloh dataset to construct the dependent variables including the number of users, average rating score, and rating response rate for an OSS project. Sampling time periods for data collection will be conducted our Ohloh dataset that we have captured the data that record relevant indicators for analysis on project-level one time every month. Those data could help and enable us to conduct longitudinal analysis as it is recorded once a month.

■ Average Rating Score: A floating point value from 1.0 to 5.0, representing the average value of all ratings by Ohloh community members. 1.0 is the lowest possible rating and 5.0 is the highest possible rating.

■ Number of Users: The number of Ohloh community members who used this OSS software project. (Each Ohloh member can specify the OSS software he or she used in his or her profile web page.)

■ Rating Response Rate: The fraction of the Ohloh users of an OSS project who rated it.

Independent Variables

First, we construct the Ohloh follower network by including the developers (both microbloggers and followers) as nodes and their subscription (following) relationships as links. In the Ohloh community, the microblogging tool only allows microbloggers to post messages to the followers, limiting information flows from microbloggers to the followers in the follower network. We define that a link in the follower network always points from the followers to the microbloggers. . In addition, we constructed two types of network-related factors from this follower network - preferential attachment factors and structural hole factors - along with a set of control variables for each OSS project in our dataset as the independent variables.

Preferential Attachment Factors

Average project follower in-degree: It is calculated as the average number of followers a microbolgger haswithin the OSS project under study.

Accumulated Advantage Factors

Density of project follower network: Density is calculated as the number of follower in-links divided by the number of possible links within an OSS project.

Average coding experience of microblogger: It is calculated as the average number of commits (i.e. contribute in writing source code for one time) per microblogger in this OSS project. The assumption is that projects with more experienced microblogger may attract more skillful developers through the microblogging follower network.

Average OSS community experience: It is calculated as the average number of months per microblogger contributing for this OSS project.

Microblog message counts: It is calculated as the number of microblog messages which contain a specific project's name. Thus, more message counts may indicate a project's better publicity.

Average updates counts: It refers to the average number of messages published by the microbloggers in an OSS project. This measurement may indicate the level of microblogging activity within an OSS project.

Follower network age: It is calculated as the average number of months of mircoblogging activity per microblogger within an OSS project.

Structural Hole Factor(s)

We constructed the structural hole related independent variable using "*the access to brokers through structural holes*" measure reviewed in the research background section. This variable represents the level of a developer's positional advantage in accessing the structural hole of the follower network in order to gain novel and useful knowledge. It is calculated as the average value of the access to brokers per node in the follower network within a project.

Control Variables

The selected control variables are mainly project characteristics and have been studied in previous research on OSS project success. In our analysis, these variables/measures are calculated at the project level (per project). They include the total lines of codes, total time efforts and total number of commits invested by all participating developers, comment ratio (i.e., the fraction of total lines of code which are comments, measures the maintainability of source code), number of participating developers, length of project description, types of licenses, etc.

Discussion and Future Work

In summary, this proposed research aims to examine the impacts of two microblog follower network mechanisms – preferential attachment and structural holes – on OSS project success. Our study is based on theories from multiple domains including communication, OSS project success, social network theory, and virtual team performance. In addition, we conducted an empirical investigation of the follower network in a large online OSS community. Our proposed research has both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it contributes to the research about the impacts of communication on virtual team performance. It also helps us better understand the mechanisms of the follower network and the microblogging phenomenon in general. Empirically, our study may provide insights for OSS project managers to better manage microblogging communications, aiming to promote project publicity, attract more quality developers, and gain more useful and novel knowledge through structural holes. The long term goal is to achieve better OSS project success by building more influential and resourceful microblog communication.

Our future work consists of three parts. Firstly, we need to finish data collection from the Ohloh community and process data to construct the follower network and the variables. Secondly, we will statistically analyze the relationship between the OSS project success variables and the two types of proposed independent variables. Thirdly, based on the findings from the statistical analysis, we plan to devise effective strategies for OSS project manager to better utilize microblogging tools in Ohloh, in order to promote project publicity, attract participation, and improve knowledge sharing, eventually achieving better project success.

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