# The Process of Crossing Legitimacy Thresholds among Community of Practice

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## Abstracts

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the process of crossing legitimacy thresholds among community of practice based on a theoretical perspective of effectuation and causation iteration.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The CMS Community of Practice in the School of Management at the University of Leicester, UK was selected as the research object and a longitudinal case study approach, consisting of secondary data, semi-structured interviews and informal face-to-face or telephone interviews, was adopted to collect and analyze the qualitative data.

**Findings** – The findings reflect that the accumulation of the legitimacy of the community of practice consists of four stages: external and internal cognitive legitimacy, and external and internal normative legitimacy. In the startup stage, the accumulation processes of the internal and external cognitive legitimacy of the CMS CoP take place in parallel and complement each other. In the development stage, the accumulation processes of the internal and external normative legitimacy of the CMS CoP occur progressively, and the accumulation of external normative legitimacy becomes a means of input, creating a prerequisite for the subsequent crossing of internal normative legitimacy.

**Originality/value** – This paper proposes the theoretical model explaining the CoP's internal and external legitimacy thresholds crossing mechanism. The results contribute to the literature by providing a reference for the future study of informal communities' legitimacy thresholds crossing and for expanding the applicable scenarios of effectuation and causation theory.

**Keywords**: Community of Practice; Legitimacy Thresholds; Effectuation and Causation Iteration; External and Internal Cognitive Legitimacy; External and Internal Normative Legitimacy; Informal Interaction

## Introduction

Legitimacy means that stakeholders evaluate the appropriateness of the evaluated actor (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Suchman, 1995; Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011), thereby helping it gain more resources, increase its chances of survival, and achieve faster development (Singh *et al*., 1986; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). The accumulation of legitimacy is a process of gradually obtaining support and recognition from the environment. In this process, there exist "multiple legitimacy thresholds" (Fisher *et al*., 2016). Only when its legitimacy level exceeds the threshold at each stage, can the evaluated actor accumulate legitimacy and gain access to resources and opportunities, otherwise, it will struggle to survive or even perish.

In regards to this emerging area of research, scholars have conducted significant inquiry at both theoretical and empirical levels. For instance, Rutherford and Buller (2007) have complemented and validated the concept of universal legitimacy threshold through multi-enterprise case studies. Nagy *et al*. (2017) have developed a legitimacy threshold scale using mixed methods. Xu *et al*. (2018) have explored processes of crossing legitimacy thresholds in entrepreneurship with a single-enterprise case study. Moreover, through vertical case studies, Chang *et al*. (2020) have examined how Internet startups achieved strategic transformation by seizing opportunity windows to cross legitimacy thresholds. Although considerable achievements have been made in these studies, many questions remain unanswered, such as "If the evaluated actor is not a formal organization, but an informal one, is there still a question of legitimacy?", "How does such an actor cross the legitimacy thresholds?", and "Does the legitimacy thresholds have to be crossed with rational choice? Or will an unexpected effect be good, too? Or both?" In order to answer these questions, this paper adopts a theoretical perspective of effectuation and causation iteration, and conducts an in-depth analysis of the community of practice's legitimacy thresholds crossing process through a longitudinal observation of the selected case.

Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people informally bound together by shared interests, aspirations or abilities in practice and seeking to enhance individuals' knowledge and skills in the relevant field through continuous communications and exchanges by means of legitimate marginal participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al*., 2002; Baran and Cagiltay, 2006; Thomas *et al*., 2011; Harden and Loving, 2015). Such a community is not necessarily confined within a single organization, but may exist across a range of organizations or the boundaries of different fields (Shao and Wei, 2011; Dai, 2013; Chung *et al*., 2020). The problems encountered by CoP in accumulating legitimacy are different from actors at the organizational level. Apart from the lack of records needed for social evaluation, there is also no basis for recognition within the organization. The dual obstacle gives rise to the complexity and uniqueness of CoP's legitimacy thresholds crossing process, which is worthy of further study. Therefore, this study adds to the growing body of literature by focusing on the following question:

RQ1: how does the community of practice in higher educational institution cross its legitimacy thresholds based on a theoretical perspective of effectuation and causation iteration?

The following sections cover the literature review, methodology, data analysis and discussion of empirical results, and finally the conclusion of the study.

## Literature Review

### 1. Legitimacy Accumulation of CoPs

Legitimacy refers to stakeholders' general perception and evaluation of the appropriateness of the evaluated actor (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002 ; Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011; Scott, 2014). The accumulation of legitimacy is a prerequisite for the sustained survival and development of the evaluated actor (Singh *et al*., 1986; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Delmar and Shane, 2004; Tornikowski & Newbert, 2007; Guo *et al*., 2020). However, because of the "disadvantages of new entrants" (Su, *et al.*, 2015; Chang *et al*., 2020), CoPs have innate deficiencies, lacking all the records needed for internal and external evaluation in the initial stage of growth. Consequently, they have a low level of initial legitimacy, and therefore need to continuously accumulate recognition from evaluators through legitimation processes (Zott and Huy, 2007), and cross multiple legitimacy thresholds, in order to obtain resources to sustain their survival and development (Singh *et al*., 1986; Stevens and Newenhanm-Kahindi, 2017).

The existing research on the legitimacy of actors at the organizational level cannot fully explain CoPs' mechanism of crossing the legitimacy thresholds. To a certain extent, CoPs are subject to the effect of the resource logic and survival logic (Xu *et al*., 2018), nevertheless, as their structure, internal and external environment and evaluator identity are very different from those of actors at the organizational level, a fresh perspective is needed in the research on CoPs' legitimacy accumulating process and behavioral logic.

### 2. Causation Logic and Effectuation Logic

The term "causation" was first put forward by the philosopher and logician Arthur Burks in 1977 (Long and Tang, 2015). It stresses a behavioral logic of setting a clear goal and formulating a plan based on surveys of the current market, then implementing the strategy according to the plan, and constantly making adjustment and improvement in the process (Dew *et al*., 2009; Berends *et al*., 2014; Reymen *et al*., 2017; Wang *et al*., 2019). Sarasvathy (2001, 2008) introduced it into entrepreneurship research, emphasizing the behavioral logic of achieving goals through planning, analysis and projection under the principle of profit maximization while being goal-oriented, with the assumption that entrepreneurs' behavior is a rational choice. This mindset focuses on clear business intentions, plan formulation, resource acquisition, and conscious identification and utilization of opportunities.

Under the influence of the rational thought of limited decision-making, "effectuation" in entrepreneurship research is a behavioral logic that emphasizes the uncertainty of the environment faced by entrepreneurs (Zhang *et al*., 2011; Long and Dong, 2016; Yang and

Gabrialsson, 2017), their limited knowledge, experience and ability (Qin, 2012; Politis *et al*., 2012), and the unpredictability of the changeable environment (Milliken, 1987). As such, entrepreneurs are unable to be goal-oriented (Wang and Zhang, 2017; Ranabahu and Barrett, 2019), and must use the existing means and resources as the premise to deliver different results (Yu and Tao, 2018). This mindset stresses starting from the existing means, including those relating to the questions 'who am I', 'what do I know' and 'whom do I know'. The question 'who am I' concerns the entrepreneur's identity and personality traits; the question 'what do I know' involves the entrepreneur's educational background, knowledge and experience; and the question 'whom do I know' is related to the entrepreneur's social network and relationships. These questions are not mutually exclusive or independent, but interdependent and mutually complementary.

This study brings a theoretical perspective of effectuation and causation iteration into the research on legitimacy thresholds crossing and intended to deeply analyze the process of crossing legitimacy thresholds among community of practice.

## Research Methodology

### 1. Research Method

When it comes to exploring the process of crossing legitimacy thresholds among CoP and answering the 'how' and 'what' questions, a longitudinal case study approach possesses great advantages (Yin, 2003), allowing us to conduct an in-depth analysis of typical cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). In addition, in the existing literature, the qualitative longitudinal case study design is often used in the research on legitimacy thresholds (e.g. Xu *et al*., 2018; Chang *et al*., 2020). As such, this study employs this method to collect and analyze the relevant data to help explain the CoP's legitimacy thresholds crossing process.

### 2. Research Context

This study takes the Critical Management Studies Community of Practice (CMS CoP) in the School of Management at the University of Leicester, UK as the research object to explore the legitimacy thresholds crossing process. This CMS CoP was founded by Prof. Peter and Prof. Bruce in 2008 to advance CMS research. Thanks to their hard work over the years, the CMS CoP has been widely recognized by its peers, host organization and the academic communities. It has published hundreds of academic articles, conference papers and books, and participated hundreds of academic seminars, workshops and international conferences. Moreover, it was known as one of the leading CMS research groups in academic communities, and hosted the CMS International Conference in 2015. Its research achievements, development scale, academic influence and contribution to CMS research are highly representative in UK, making it an ideal research object. Its development process and key events are shown in Figure 1.
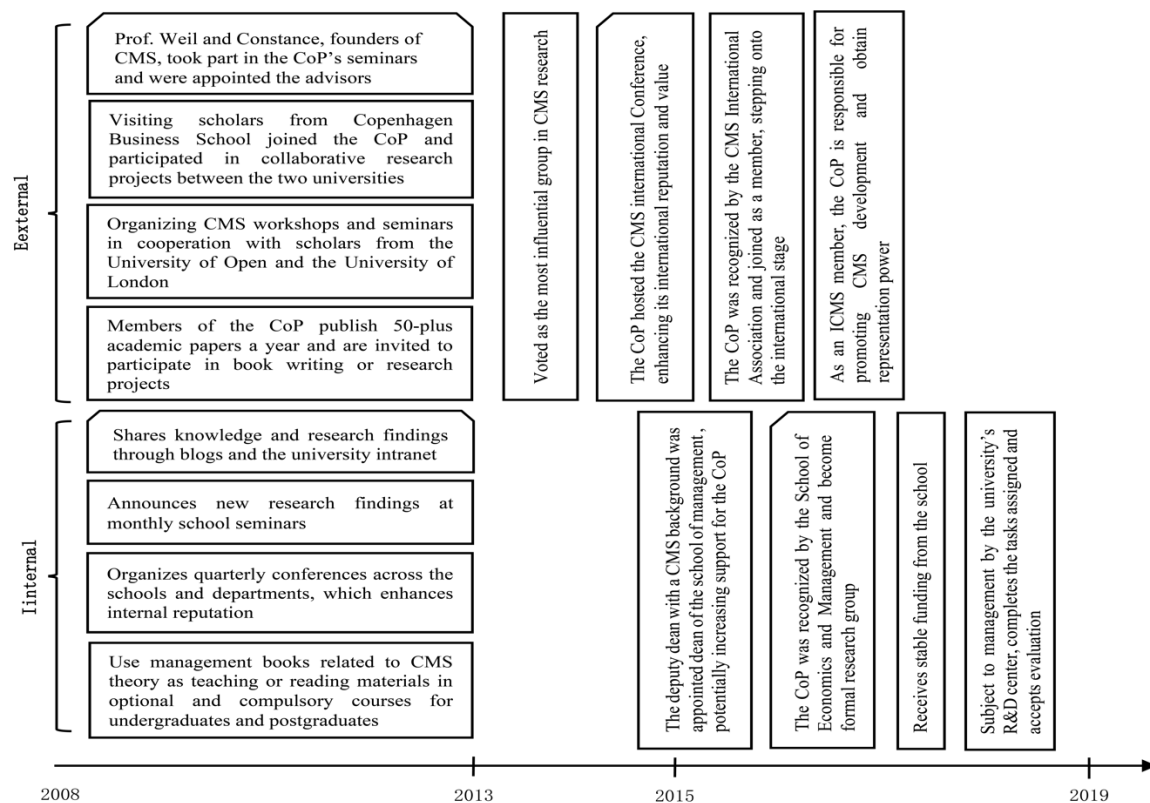
**Figure 1 CMS CoP's Development History and Key Events**

### 3. Sample and Data Collection

This study collects data through a variety of channels, including secondary data, semi-structured interviews and informal face-to-face or telephone interviews, to ensure data validity and reliability. Firstly, secondary data include members' public speeches and media interviews, the relevant reports and promotional materials on the school's official website, published academic papers, conference proceedings and workshop manuscripts, internal and external announcements, and texts and recordings of conversations between bloggers and members or stakeholders. After eliminating repetitive data, this study collated secondary data containing a total of about 120,000 words. Secondly, the semi-structured interviews were primarily intended to further confirm the key events and behaviors discovered during data collection, as well as the CMS CoP's development process and stakeholder evaluation. A total of 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with several members of the CMS CoP, including Prof. Peter and Prof. Bruce themselves, to ensure the integrity of the research context and to explore typical and extreme events and stories. Interviews lasted for an hour to 90 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently fully transcribed (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The extracts presented in this paper are taken from the original transcripts and the names of the participants are all replaced with pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity. Finally, a total of 11 informal one-on-one or telephone interviews were conducted with the stakeholders

and internal and external evaluators involved in the CMS CoP's development, in order to verify the doubtful points which had been detected during the analysis process. Data accuracy was enhanced using the triangulation method (Eisenhardt, 1989). The data sources and interview questions are summarized in Table II.

**Table II Data Source and Outline of Interview Questions**

| Data Category | Data Source | Outline of Interview Questions |
|---|---|---|
| Primary Data | Semi-Structured Interviews | 1. How did the CMS CoP start and what did you do in the beginning?<br>2. What are the stages of the CMS CoP's development? And why is the development divided into these stages?<br>3. What were the key problems encountered in the CMS CoP's development and how were they solved?<br>4. What important individuals, groups or organizations have helped the CMS CoP's development?<br>5. Are there any interesting stories that you still remember in the process of the CMS CoP's development?<br>6. Have you ever thought about quitting or shutting down this CMS CoP? Why? What happened at last?<br>7. How would you rate the CMS CoP's development and status today?<br>8. What do you think has driven you to persevere in different stages? What is your motivation? |
| | Informal Face-to-Face or Telephone Interviews | 1. How did you get in touch with this CMS CoP in the first place? Can you tell me what you think of it? What have you done for it? Or what you have gotten out of it?<br>2. What do you think of this CMS CoP? Do you think it contributes to CMS development? Could you explain it in detail? |
| Secondary Data | | Secondary data include members' public speeches and media interviews, the relevant reports and promotional materials on the school's official website, published academic papers, conference proceedings and workshop manuscripts, internal announcements, and texts and recordings of conversations between bloggers and members or stakeholders. |

## 4. Data Analysis

This study holds that qualitative research is an act of explaining phenomena, without presupposing any propositions or hypotheses, focus should be placed on the phenomena and adjustments be made with the progress of data collection and analysis, thus allowing the relevant topics to gradually emerge by themselves. As such, open coding, axial coding and theoretical coding were conducted to analyze the data sentence by sentence (Charmaz, 2006; Guo and Zhou, 2018), thereby constructing a database of historical key events. The data was then compared with other data and related literature to find the concepts and relationships that had the strongest explanatory power and a theoretical basis. At the same time, the researcher made every effort to avoid placing personal beliefs or experiences into data analysis, and constantly made introspections before the study and during the analysis to minimize subjective and potential biases in the study (Whetten, 1989, 2009; Alvesson, 2003). The implementation of each phase is described in more detail below.

### Open coding

During this phase of coding, the researcher attempted to concentrate on incidents that reflect action and events and strove to continue to be open to potential themes shown by the data. Interview transcripts were examined sentence by sentence, by which means the researcher

became immersed in the data. This was followed by a process where the initial codes were named.

*Axial coding*

In this phase, the researcher began to explore the relationships between categories, using both inductive and deductive thinking to make connections between them.

*Theoretical coding*

Theoretical coding involved systematically relating categories to one another. This might indicate some further requirement for refinement and manipulation of other categories, such as moving them, creating new ones and amalgamating or dividing them (Gibbs, 2002). Theoretical coding was used to combine the categories around the core category and develop the theoretical framework.

Throughout the process of data analysis, the researcher maintained close touch with the participants to obtain their feedback, thereby ensuring the accuracy of data analysis results. The next section presents the empirical findings from the case community, with regard to its legitimacy thresholds crossing process.

## Results

In this study, through the sentence-by-sentence coding to achieve initial conceptualization of the raw data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a total of 27 sentences and 16 concepts were obtained; the 16 concepts appearing in the coding were then merged with concepts in the same category, and 14 sub-categories were eventually obtained. The open coding analysis is presented in Table III.

| Stage | Typical Evidences | Initial Conceptualization | Sub-category |
|---|---|---|---|
| Startup Stage | Prof. Bruce joined hands with scholars from Open University and London University to organize CMS workshops and seminars to promote cutting-edge research, attracting like-minded scholars to visit, exchange views and put forward cooperation requests. Dr. Chris was invited to join Dr. Allen's research project at the Manchester University's School of Management. | With their strong expertise, the founding members received many collaboration requests from outside the university. | External collaboration requests |
| | After half a year of close interaction among the members, the CMS CoP's published research output has doubled. The thesis of a doctoral student of Prof. Bruce regarding CMS theory won the 'Best Dissertation' Award, attracting the attention of many students and young scholars. Several of founding members kept blogging and writing on Weibo or other social media platforms to frequently exchange views and share knowledge with others. | With its increasing research output, the CMS CoP attracted attention and recognition from many scholars. | Peer attention and recognition |
| | Through his person social network, Prof. Peter invited Prof. Weil, a prominent scholar in CMS research and a co-founder of CMS, to participate in the symposium on the CMS CoP's first anniversary, where he exchanged views with CoP members and was appointed advisor. At the request of Prof. Peter, Prof. Weil invited Prof. Constance, another eminent scholar in CMS, to give a lecture. Thanks to the support of the two influential scholars, the CMS CoP drew increasing attention from academic circles, and with Prof. Weil's lecture, many scholars took part in the CoP's activities in one way or another. | With the involvement and support of leading CMS scholars, the CMS CoP drew increasing attention and obtained more collaborative research opportunities. | Key audience support |
| | All founding members of the CoP are good orators who are also adept at setting up stages for themselves to present their views. They brought the CoP's startup stories, research findings, history and long-term goals into classrooms, seminars and interviews, as well as into all exchange programs with the outside world. Prof. Peter was interviewed by journalist about CMS's cutting-edge research and the CMS CoP history. The group's value and influence were also raised through publicity in the press. Prof. Lee and Prof. Sarah both used CMS-type cases in their classes to explain management phenomena and the limitations of management theory. | Value publicity and promotion enhanced the CMS CoP's influence and image. | Reputation building |
| | Prof. Peter is a respected name in the field of CMS. He has worked in several management schools and has rich research experience, and therefore enjoys a prestigious reputation at University of Leicester School of Management. In the CoP's early stage of development, his personal influence played a great role in gaining internal recognition and attracting participants. | In the startup stage, the CMS CoP's influence largely derived from its key members' personal renown. | Individuals' influence within the school |
| | In the School, monthly seminars were organized for scholars to exchange ideas, and CMS CoP members often took advantage of these events to discuss ideas with the scholars, which enhanced the CoP's reputation within the school. The CMS CoP organized quarterly seminars across the schools and departments to share research findings and cutting-edge developments in the field, and it also shared knowledge and research findings through blogs and the school's intranet. | The CMS CoP regularly organized interdisciplinary forums, seminars and blog discussions within the school. | Internal communication channels |
| | Prof. Lee from the School of Management, Prof. Catherine and Prof. Max from the School of Philosophy worked together for a university-level research project. Prof. Simon wrote and published books about CMS with several colleagues in the school. | Regular research collaboration at the individual level with scholars within the school. | Intra-school collaboration opportunities |
| Development Stage | The CMS CoP participated in several academic symposia organized by other universities in region, and published academic papers, rated as the most influential CMS research group. The CMS CoP participates the British CMS Symposium for three years on end. | The most influential research group and regional representative in CMS research | Regional representative |
| | Since 2008, the CMS CoP has attracted many researchers and produced significant research output, attracting great attention and winning positive reviews. In the process, it built up an extensive social network, laying the foundation for its subsequent hosting of the CMS Annual Meeting. In 2015, the CMS CoP hosted the CMS International Conference, attracting the attention of global scholars, academic institutions and media attention. | With its track record of research output and strong reputation, the CoP won the right to host the CMS International Conference. The success of the event further raised the CoP's profile in global academia. | Eligibility for hosting international events |
| | With years of hard work, the CMS CoP was eventually recognized by the CMS International Association. Through a series of processes, it became a member of the CMS International Association, stepping onto the global stage. | The CMS CoP became a member of the CMS International Association. | Recognition by industry association |
| | In line with the regulations of the CMS International Association, the CoP took part in the Association's management and promotion. As a member of ICMS, the CoP took on the task of promoting CMS theory, understanding the development trends of CMS research, and increasing its voice in the field. | Under ICMS's rules, the CoP advanced the development of CMS theory and increase its voice in the field. | Representation power |
| | The Associate Dean with a CMS background was promoted to Dean of the School, reflecting the importance attached to the CMS CoP by the school. | The leadership's recognition of the value of CMS research had a direct impact on the school's attitude towards the CoP. | Leadership support |
| | The School recognized the CMS CoP's research output, value for the literature and community. The CMS CoP thus became a formal part of the school and began to receive research funding. | The CoP became a formal research group of the school, receiving regular researching funding. | Organizational recognition |
| | The CMS CoP is expected to complete the research tasks assigned by the school, such as apply for research grants at the institutional, provincial and national levels, give lectures, publish papers, etc. | After becoming a formal research group, the CoP is under tremendous pressure to complete its research tasks. | Normative pressure |

Through in-depth analysis of the relationships among the sub-categories, significant differences were discovered in the classification; for instance, "external cooperation needs", "peer attention and recognition", "key audience support" and "reputation building", these four sub-categories clearly reflected the process of that the CMS CoP started with existing means at its initial stage to obtain the external cognitive legitimacy. Based on this pattern, the 14 sub-categories were summarized, and 4 main categories were finally developed. The axial coding is shown in Table IV.

**Table IV Axial Coding Analysis**

| Conceptual Definition | Main Categories | Sub-categories |
|---|---|---|
| External cognitive legitimacy is established when the actor becomes known to the external public, enjoys a reputation and gains recognition (Scott, 1995) | External cognitive legitimacy | External collaboration requests<br>Attention and recognition from peers<br>Key audience support<br>Reputation building |
| Internal cognitive legitimacy is established when the actor is widely understood and accepted by other members of the organization (Scott, 1995). | Internal cognitive legitimacy | Individuals' influence within the school<br>Internal communication channels<br>Intra-school collaboration opportunities |
| When its behavior falls in line with the social values and moral norms widely accepted by the public, the actor is considered to have attained external normative legitimacy (Scott, 1995). | External normative legitimacy | Regional representative<br>Eligibility for hosting international events<br>Recognition by industrial associations<br>Representation power |
| When its behavior falls in line with the social values and moral norms widely accepted by members of the internal organization, the actor is considered to have attained internal normative legitimacy (Scott, 1995). | Internal normative legitimacy | Leadership support<br>Organizational recognition<br>Normative pressure |

Based on the coding analysis, the four main categories, namely "external cognitive legitimacy", "internal cognitive legitimacy", "external normative legitimacy" and "internal normative legitimacy" were obtained, which constituted a complete logical chain to steer the CMS CoP to cross the legitimacy thresholds and gain opportunities for survival and development. It laid the foundation for further exploration of the complete mechanism.

### 4.1 Accumulation of Internal and External Cognitive Legitimacy based on Effectuation Logic

In its early days, the CMS CoP was not accepted by its host school, and operated more like a hobby group. All its activities were also impromptu, and the topics of discussion were put forward by its members on their own initiative. Passion for knowledge and CMS research brought the members together and gave rise to random "performances" without planning. During this period, the CMS CoP did not develop along the line of thinking in causation, but followed effectuation logic that started with the means. There was no clear stage, no definitive audience, and no script, but thanks to the effect of effectuation logic, the CMS CoP overcame the various problems it encountered in the initial stage, such as a low level of attention received, shortages of resources, lack of sustained motivating force, and the heavy pressure of cognitive legitimacy.

#### 4.1.1 Means of Effectuation Logic

Prof. Peter is a prolific researcher in the field of CMS. Before he joined the School, he had already established a prestigious reputation and was an influential person in academic circles; he was therefore valued and supported by the school. Although back then the school's recognition was largely nominal, the renown of Prof. Peter added considerable prestige to the CMS CoP in its initial stage and generated a lot of opportunities for cooperation, paving the way for its initial activities.

The CMS CoP's founding members all have rich research experience and boast considerable expertise and scholarly output in their respective fields of study. In the CMS CoP's early days, these individuals' knowledge, experience and ability did not exert a positive influence, and there was even divergence of views among them. However, as their interaction

increased, the members reconciled their differences and built up mutual trust. Their knowledge, experience and research capabilities began to integrate. In the open group environment, their ideas came into contact with each other and blended, triggering a huge 'chemical reaction' and resulting in a huge amount of research output including academic papers, monographs, conference papers and research project reports, and so on. The CMS CoP demonstrated great potential for knowledge creation, drawing the attention of its peers and winning considerable recognition internally and externally.

In the CMS CoP's early days, to promote growth and carry on the principle of being means-oriented, Prof. Peter also took advantage of his personal social network to invite Prof. Hugh Weil from the University of London School of Management, a very influential scholar in CMS research, to participate in the symposium on the CMS CoP's first anniversary. At the symposium, Prof. Weil spoke to the members and discussed ideas with them. After learning more about the CMS CoP's growth and research output, Prof. Weil agreed to serve as an advisor to the CMS CoP who would take part in regular discussions and share cutting-edge research outcome with the members. In addition, Prof. Weil also introduced Prof. Constance, another CMS expert, to the CMS CoP members. Prof. Constance subsequently gave a lecture. The visits of the two leading scholars generated significant publicity for the little-known CMS CoP and brought in massive information. As a result, many ambitious young scholars were drawn to the CMS CoP. Therefore, it can be said that the smooth development and legitimacy accumulation in the CMS CoP's early days were closely related to Prof. Peter's personal social network. The typical coding examples of the means of effectuation logic, as well as the coding results, are presented in Table V.

**Table V Typical Coding Examples of Means of Effectuation Logic and Coding Results**

| Typical Evidences | Conception | Coding Results |
|---|---|---|
| Prof. Peter is a prolific researcher in the field of CMS, boasting a prestigious reputation and considerable academic influence. | Renowned scholar Academic influence | Identity |
| The CMS CoP's founding members all have long years of work experience in the UK's educational sector, and most have worked for several schools of management or social sciences, boasting rich research experience, as well as considerable expertise and scholarly output in their respective fields of study. | Rich research experience and large research output | Knowledge foundation |
| Prof. Peter took advantage of his social network to invite two highly influential scholars in CMS research to take part in the CMS CoP's regular conferences and serve as advisors. | Key audience Stakeholders' positive reviews | Social network |

### 4.1.2 Effect of Effectuation Logic

In the startup stage, the effect of the CMS CoP's effectuation logic was manifested in the significant research output and rising influence and recognition in the relevant field of research after years of hard work. It was also reflected in the attraction of many outstanding talents and the creation of many cooperation opportunities inside and outside the school. As the CMS CoP drew increasing attention and its internal and external cognitive legitimacy continued to accumulate, it crossed the initial legitimacy threshold and completed the primary accumulation. During this stage, the CMS CoP's legitimacy accumulation was the by-product

of its founding members' identity, social network and knowledge base. The role and mechanism of effectuation logic during this stage were to help CMS CoP obtain kinetic energy and accumulate legitimacy in the uncertain environment. The accumulation of legitimacy was the result of being "non-goal-orientated". At the same time, as the level of legitimacy rose, more resources were obtained and the CoP's influence increased. This enabled the CMS CoP to gain more development opportunities and attract the attention of more stakeholders. As a result, the CMS CoP was able to accumulate a large amount of institutional capital and transform from an informal hobby group to a formal research community in the School of Management at the University of Leicester. The CMS CoP's accumulation process of internal and external cognitive legitimacy is shown in Figure 2.
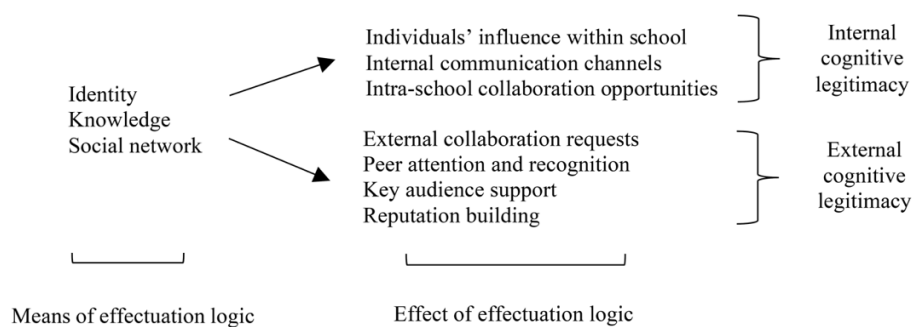


**Figure 2 CMS CoP's Accumulation Process of Internal and External Cognitive Legitimacy**

### 4.2 Accumulation of Internal and External Normative Legitimacy based on Causation Logic

Shortly after it stabilized, the CMS CoP ran into new legitimacy obstacles. To elaborate, different from the mainstream management research, Critical management studies is a discipline that deals with management theory and management phenomena from a critical perspective. It challenges the rigid thinking in traditional management concepts, and critiqued the soil that gave birth to these rigid ideas – business schools. In the beginning, it was not accepted by mainstream management researchers and business schools. The prejudice of the academic society became the biggest situational constraint and normative pressure on the CMS CoP. Thus, the crucial objective for the CMS CoP in the subsequent stage was to overcome the obstacle, change the stereotype, and obtain the recognition and support of the internal and external environment of the host organization. This objective had a direct impact on the CMS CoP's survival and development down the road. To achieve this objective, the CMS CoP took a series of rational measures.

*4.2.1 Strategy of Causation Logic*

For the CMS CoP in its development stage, publicity was no longer an impromptu performance, but a purposeful strategic means of gaining greater understanding from the external environment and eliminating prejudices. All founding members of the CMS CoP were outstanding orators. They brought CoP's startup stories, research output, values and management philosophy into classrooms, media outlets and academic symposia. They were constantly changing the stereotypes of the outside world, building up an image as "a major research force in the exploration, development and promotion of CMS research and theories which has started out as an informal community based at the University of Leicester School of Management but brings together academics and experts in many fields of study and from different universities and research institutes and is widely recognized in the academic society in UK".

Furthermore, the University of Leicester School of Management was a type of "special audience" for the CMS CoP. It could be either a bystander or a key stakeholder. Winning the support of the University of Leicester School of Management during this stage would mean steady funding support and guarantee for the further development. Therefore, in order to achieve this goal, the CMS CoP took a series of initiatives, including hosting the CMS International Conference in 2015, joining the CMS International Association as a member in 2017, and formally participating in the international promotion of CMS in 2018 to increase its voice in the field. Through the goal-oriented strategy, the CMS CoP consciously demonstrated its value and established a reputation to earn the support from its host organization, so as to leapt over the legitimacy threshold.

As it continued to develop, the CMS CoP came into touch with more and more research institutes, scholarly associations, government organizations and universities, its reputation, representation power and recognition in the field reached new heights. Prof. Simon, who has a background in CMS research, was appointed the dean of the School. During his term of office, the CMS CoP received unprecedented support and recognition. Finally, in the evaluation of the research workload of the schools and departments every years, several CMS CoP members who published in top journals contributed enormously to the School research output. Amid the favorable internal and external environment, the CMS CoP continued to surge forward. Taking advantage of the surging positive reviews and increased attention, the CMS CoP successfully applied to join the formal research establishment at University of Leicester School of Management, and received research funding from its host organization. This allowed the CMS CoP to shed its label as a self-sufficient informal hobby group and become a formal research community with steady funding support and considerable representation power in the field. The typical coding examples of the strategy of causation logic and coding results are shown in Table VI.

**Table VI Typical Coding Examples of Strategy of Causation Logic and Coding Results**

| Typical Evidences | Conception | Coding Results |
|---|---|---|
| The CMS CoP brought its startup stories, research output, values and management theory concepts into classrooms, BBC interviews, international academic symposia and publications. These efforts provide the answers to these questions: "Who are we?", "Where do we come from?", "What do we do?", "Why are we doing this?", "How are we different from others?", and "Where is our value?" | Promoting itself on different "stages" to build up its reputation | Image building |
| The CMS CoP engaged in a collaborative project with the US CMS Division, published research findings in top international journals, voted as one of the leading CMS research groups in UK, hosted the CMS International Conference, and joined the CMS International Association as a member. | Demonstrating its achievements and value by engaging in international academic collaboration, publishing in top journals, securing the "leading research group" title, and hosting the CMS International Conference. | Value demonstration |
| In the evaluation of the research workload of the schools and departments in the past few years, several CMS CoP members who published in top journals contributed enormously to the School of Management's research output. CMS research gained increasing acceptance and recognition in mainstream academic circles. Amid the favorable internal and external environment, the CMS CoP continued to surge forward. With positive reviews and increased attention, the CMS CoP successfully applied to join the formal research establishment at University of Leicester School of Management, and received research funding from the university. | Taking advantage of the surging positive reviews and the steadily improving megatrends, the CMS CoP shed its label as an informal hobby group and become a formal research group with steady funding support and considerable representation power in the field. | Sustaining the momentum |

### 4.2.2 Effect of Causation Logic

In its growth stage, the CMS CoP adopted the strategy of causation logic, consciously implementing the legitimation strategy to build a positive image to society. It also sought to demonstrate its value, take advantage of the megatrends to cross the legitimacy threshold, and win the support of the key stakeholders. During this stage, the CMS CoP's accumulation of legitimacy was the result of rational choice. The role and mechanism of causation logic during this stage was to help the CMS CoP set clear goals on the larger stage, formulate strategies, accomplish strategic goals purposefully and step by step, and overcome legitimacy obstacles. This type of goal-oriented accumulation of legitimacy is different from the impromptu performance of effectuation logic, and is a result of deliberate causation. During this stage, the CMS CoP's accumulation of legitimacy became a means of input, creating the right conditions to cross the legitimacy threshold. The CMS CoP's accumulation process of internal and external normative legitimacy is shown in Figure 3.
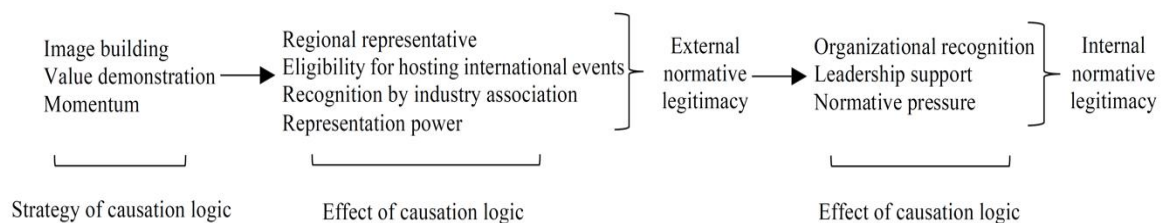
**Figure 3 CMS CoP's Accumulation Process of Internal and External Normative Legitimacy**

## Discussion

### *Theoretical Implications*

The main theoretical contributions of this study are as follows:

(1) This study explores the process in which the CMS CoP in the School of Management at the University of Leicester crossed the legitimacy thresholds. It describes the entire legitimation process in which the CMS CoP transformed from an informal hobby group into a formal research community recognized by its host organization and academic society. The existing research on legitimacy thresholds crossing is mainly focused on the external legitimacy of the actors, while studies on the actors' crossing mechanism for internal legitimacy are few and far between. This study contributes to the literature by complementing and advancing the theory from the perspective of internal legitimacy, extending the applicable scenarios of the existing theory, and interpreting the CoP's mechanism of crossing internal and external legitimacy thresholds.

(2) This study brings the theoretical perspective of effectuation and causation iteration into the research on the CoP's crossing of legitimacy thresholds. It points out that the legitimacy thresholds crossing process took place in two stages – startup and development, and consisted of four subprocesses of attaining external cognitive legitimacy, internal cognitive legitimacy, external normative legitimacy, and internal normative legitimacy. In the startup stage, the attainment of legitimacy was mainly focused on the cognitive level. In this process, the accumulation of legitimacy was a by-product of the CoP's behavior and was an unexpected effect of effectuation logic. In the stage of development, the attainment of legitimacy largely took place at the normative level. The accumulation of legitimacy in this process was the result of the CoP's strategic choice and was an effect of deliberate causation.

(3) This study identifies the problems, key events and behavioral choices faced by the CoP in different stages of growth. It enriches the existing literature on legitimacy thresholds research. In the startup stage, as the CMS CoP was just getting off the ground, it had a loose structure, and lacks unified management, clear goals, fixed audience and a rehearsed script. Consequently, a freewheeling manner defines the main behavioral logic in this stage. The recognition and attention obtained by members through impromptu performances are superimposed to form the main source of legitimacy accumulated. Therefore, during this stage, the attainment of legitimacy was dominated by accumulation on the part of individual members. In the stage of development, the CMS CoP built up a certain scale, a reputation and research output. Its influence as a research community in the locality was established. At this point, relying solely on the unstable accumulation on the part of individual members could no longer meet the CMS CoP's needs, and more stable and predictable support was required to ensure the CMS CoP's survival and sustainable development in this stage. Therefore, during this period, the accumulation of legitimacy was a process in which collective behavior was brought into line with public normative values.

### *Crossing Internal and External Legitimacy Thresholds*

Based on the development history and legitimacy accumulation process of the CMS CoP in the School of Management at the University of Leicester, UK and referencing the model developed by Fisher *et al*. (2016), this paper proposed the theoretical model explaining the CoP's internal and external legitimacy thresholds crossing mechanism, as shown in Figure 4.
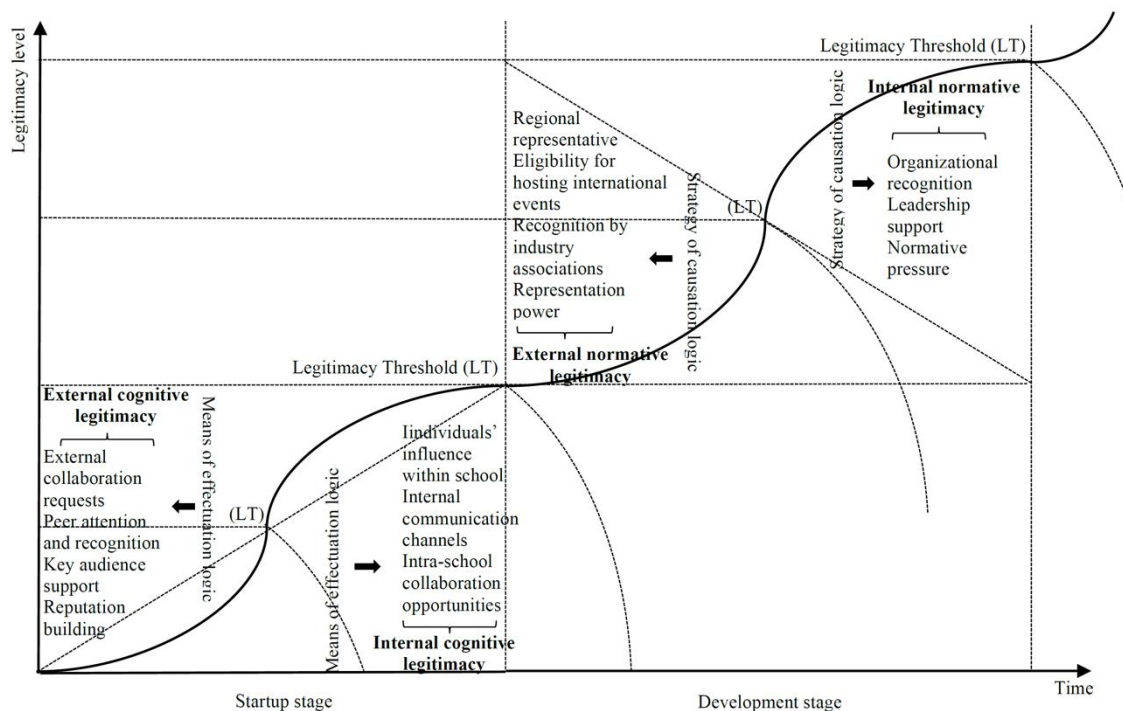


**Figure 4 The Theoretical Model of the CoP's Internal and External Legitimacy Thresholds Crossing Mechanism**

Along with the key events that influenced legitimacy kept taking place and key stakeholders continued to emerge during its development process, the CoP's level of legitimacy showed a gradual upward trend. Amid this change, the CoP in its startup period remained in its infancy, with very limited influence and renown. There was no attention from internal stakeholders, while the public awareness of CMS CoP remained low. The biggest constraint on the CMS CoP stemmed from the pressure of internal and external cognitive legitimacy. Internally, through interaction at the individual level and the formal academic exchange mechanism within the university, the CMS CoP expanded its role and enhanced its reputation by conducting inter-departmental lectures and research projects. Externally, taking advantage of its founding members' social networks and academic resources, the CMS CoP invited the CMS research leading scholars to take part in its initial activities, attracting public attention and drawing many talented people. With rising renown and recognition, the CMS CoP kept accumulating internal and external cognitive legitimacy and eventually crossed the initial

legitimacy threshold. During this stage, the accumulating processes of internal and external cognitive legitimacy took place simultaneously and complemented each other.

During its development stage, the CMS CoP increased its influence and renown, began to approach key internal stakeholders, and gained more recognition from the public. The biggest constraint on the CMS CoP was no longer at the cognitive level, but came from the pressure of normative legitimacy, i.e., how to adjust its own development model to match the normative requirements of the academic society and the host organization and obtain the recognition and resource support of those key stakeholders. Externally, the CMS CoP won the international association's recognition and support by expanding its regional influence and representation power and hosting the CMS International Conference. Internally, the CMS CoP gained recognition from the University of Leicester School of Management and became a formal research community, thanks to the rising acceptance of CMS research in mainstream academia, the support of the internal leadership, and its own significant research output. During this stage, the CMS CoP accumulated internal and external normative legitimacy in an incremental manner, and the accumulation of external normative legitimacy became a means of input, paving the way for the subsequent crossing of the internal normative legitimacy threshold.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate CoP's legitimacy thresholds crossing process. This study takes the CMS CoP in the School of Management at the University of Leicester, UK as the research object, introduces the theoretical perspective of effectuation and causation iteration, and proposes the theoretical model of the CoP's internal and external legitimacy thresholds crossing mechanism through a longitudinal case analysis. The conclusions drawn by this study provides a reference for the future study of informal communities' legitimacy thresholds crossing and for expanding the applicable scenarios of effectuation and causation theory.

This study also has some limitations: (1) This single-case study inevitably has the problem of lack of universality, but the generality of its findings can be further improved by comparing with multi-case studies. (2) Through qualitative coding analysis, this paper reveals the mechanism of crossing legitimacy thresholds in the CoP's legitimation process, but did not test it at the statistical level, further exploration can thus be made in the future. (3) This study is focused on a research target in the context of higher education institution, and therefore its findings and outcome are not necessarily applicable to research objects in other contexts. As such, future exploratory studies may be extended to the community of practice in a more broader context in order to draw more comprehensive conclusions regarding the applicability of the theory.

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