

Giving without gaining? Unpacking expert motivation in entrepreneurial knowledge sharing

Insight into the motivations of experts to voluntarily share their knowledge in Open Brains sessions organized by Bluehub.

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Abstract

This study explores why experts are willing to voluntarily share their knowledge in informal entrepreneurial support platforms. It focuses on the case of Open Brains, an initiative organized by Bluehub that connects startups with knowledgeable individuals through bi-weekly brainstorming sessions. While previous research has examined knowledge sharing in various contexts, little attention has been paid to unpaid, voluntary knowledge sharing in startup support platforms. This study applies Self-Determination Theory, Altruism Motivation Theory, and Social Exchange Theory to investigate the motives of voluntary knowledge sharing.

Using a qualitative research design, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with incidental and serial participants of Open Brains. Thematic analysis revealed that key motives for participation included competence, relatedness, recognition, professional development, and topic relevance.

In addition to these motives, hygiene factors such as session structure, continuity, autonomy, and practical accessibility influenced ongoing engagement. These findings offer practical insights for organizers of startup support platforms to attract and retain knowledgeable individuals who are willing to voluntarily share their knowledge, contributing to the sustainability and effectiveness of informal entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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1. Introduction

It has been widely recognized that entrepreneurial startups play a crucial role in driving economic growth (Davidsson et al., 1994; Storey, 1995) by fostering innovation (Kortum & Lerner, 1998), increasing productivity (Gennaioli et al., 2013), and creating employment opportunities (Decker et al., 2014; Glaeser, et al. 2015). They contribute to technological advancements and enhance the business ecosystem through innovation and creativity (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2017). However, despite their importance, the survival rate of startups remains low. Around 90% of startups fail within their first five years (Forbes, 2015; Business Line, 2017). This high failure rate presents significant challenges for entrepreneurs and has wide economic consequences, including job losses and reduced market stability (Pena, 2002). Early-stage startups often lack access to critical resources like knowledge, expertise, technology, and capital (Lichtenstein & Brush, 2001). These limitations make external resource acquisition vital (Brush, Manolova, & Edelman, 2008). Research highlights the importance of advisory networks, partnerships, and resource sharing mechanisms in helping startups overcome these barriers by providing knowledge and support (Miller & Friesen, 1984; Zahra et al., 2009).

To address these challenges, support structures such as incubators, accelerators, science parks, and startup platforms have emerged. By fostering collaboration and offering support, they help entrepreneurs develop their ideas and build sustainable businesses (Audretsch et al., 2018; Malecki, 2018). One such initiative is Open Brains, a platform that organizes bi-monthly brainstorming sessions where entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas to a small group of innovators and interested people. These participants are referred to as “experts”. This term is used by the platform itself to describe participants who voluntarily share their knowledge based on their professional expertise (*Open Brains Home - Open Brains*, 2024).

While previous research has explored advice seeking behaviors and the effectiveness of guidance (Ecken & Pibernik, 2016; Ljungkvist & Andersén, 2016), limited attention has been given to the motivations behind voluntary expert engagement in support platforms.

Understanding these motivations is essential for improving startup support platforms and ensuring their long-term success by effectively attracting and retaining participants. A deeper understanding of what drives experts, such as contributing to society, gaining recognition, developing professionally, and engaging in intellectually stimulating discussions, can help

organizers tailor opportunities that align with these motivations. This, in turn, strengthens the platform's sustainability, enhances the quality of support provided to startups, and fosters a strong entrepreneurial ecosystem.

This study aims to explore the factors that drive experts to voluntarily share their knowledge in initiatives like Open Brains. These experts contribute their time and knowledge without receiving financial compensation or having direct connections to the pitching entrepreneurs. Some experts participate infrequently and inconsistently, attending one session and then skipping several sessions before engaging again (incidental participants), while others engage consistently and frequently, attending the Open Brains session at least once every month over a period of six months (serial participants). Additionally, some experts disengage over time, not attending the Open Brains session for more than a year (lost participants).

The central research question guiding this study is: *“What factors motivate experts to voluntarily share their knowledge in startup support platforms?”* By answering this question, this study aims to provide insights into how startup support platforms, such as Open Brains, can encourage expert engagement to help ensure the long-term success of these initiatives. This is crucial for developing effective strategies to attract and retain individuals that are willing to share their knowledge, because they are the foundation on which these platforms rely. Expert input helps entrepreneurs reflect on their ideas, avoid costly missteps, and identify new opportunities. Having a sufficient and diverse group of experts is crucial to ensure relevant feedback, prevent repetition, and keep sessions fresh and engaging. This, in turn, helps the platform remain challenging and valuable for participants. By exploring what drives experts to voluntarily share their knowledge, this study aims to enhance knowledge sharing and strengthen entrepreneurial development, which can contribute to a stronger startup ecosystem.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it extends the literature on voluntary knowledge sharing by examining expert participation in startup support platforms. While prior studies on volunteering have focused on unpaid work in non-business contexts, such as blood donation (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Shye, 2010; Wilson, 2000), and online communities (Claffey & Brady, 2017; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Wiertz & De Ruyter, 2007), little is known about why experts voluntarily share knowledge in entrepreneurial settings. By

applying Self-Determination Theory, Altruism Motivation Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework to uncover the motives behind voluntary expert participation in Open Brains sessions. In doing so, it offers valuable insights for both theory and practice on how to attract and sustain expert contributions in informal entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Second, this study adds to the literature on entrepreneurial support systems by exploring the role of informal, voluntary expert involvement in startup ecosystems. Existing research has primarily focused on the role of incubators, accelerators, and formal mentorship programs in providing resources to entrepreneurs (Auerswald, 2015; Malecki, 2018; Audretsch et al., 2018). However, the informal, voluntary contributions of experts in these ecosystems remain unexplored. This study provides insights into the factors that support expert engagement in platforms like Open Brains, offering insights into how entrepreneurial support systems can be designed to encourage long-term expert support for startups.

The findings of this study are relevant for managers, policymakers, and society at large. For managers of similar initiatives, such as startup platforms, incubators, and accelerators, understanding what motivates people to voluntarily share their knowledge can help create more effective engagement strategies. Such insights can help attract, retain, and support knowledgeable contributors, thereby strengthening the long-term sustainability and impact of these programs. For policymakers, this study highlights the underexplored role of voluntary knowledge contribution in startup support platforms. By identifying motives, it provides a basis for policies that foster supportive conditions for informal knowledge exchange. For example, by promoting and funding collaborations between support platforms and universities. This, in turn, can stimulate the sustainability of such platforms and the diffusion of expertise and innovation. At a broader societal level, initiatives like Open Brains promote knowledge sharing, stimulate innovation, and create entrepreneurial opportunities. This strengthens local economies, drives innovation, and enhances social resilience in the face of rapidly evolving industries (Kalyanasundaram, 2018).

This study begins with a theoretical framework that reviews relevant literature on potential motives for voluntary knowledge sharing. Next, the methodology chapter outlines the research design, including data collection methods, data analysis approach and ethical

considerations. The results section presents the key findings from the data, which are further interpreted in the discussion chapter. This chapter connects the findings to the research question and theoretical framework, explores practical and theoretical implications, addresses limitations, and offers directions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Entrepreneurial Support Systems: Incubators, Accelerators, and Science Parks

Entrepreneurial support systems such as, incubators, accelerators, and science parks, play a critical role in fostering the growth and sustainability of startups by providing resources, mentorship, and networking opportunities (Auerswald, 2015).

Incubators are locally based institutions that encourage and support new business development (Mian, 1996). They support startups by providing tangible resources, such as office space and shared equipment, as well as intangible resources, such as mentorship, networking opportunities, and business knowledge (Hausberg & Korreck, 2018). These programs typically operate over a flexible period and are funded by government institutions, corporations, or startup contributions in the form of rent, program fees, or equity (Hausberg & Korreck, 2018). In the last decade, accelerators, as a particular form of incubators, received increasing research interest (Hausberg & Korreck, 2018). Accelerators programmes are typically fixed-term and offer structured mentorship and training to start-up teams rather than individual entrepreneurs. Lastly, science parks are physical locations that bring together startups, research institutions, and established companies to encourage innovation and technological advancement (Phan et al., 2004). By fostering collaboration between academia and industry, science parks facilitate knowledge exchange, research commercialization, and entrepreneurial activity (Colombo & Delmastro, 2002).

These structured support systems are typically characterized by formalized relationships, institutional funding, and structured training and mentorship (Audretsch et al., 2018). In contrast, newer forms of entrepreneurial support have emerged that operate more informally and flexibly. An example of this is Open Brains, a platform that enables entrepreneurs to access expert knowledge through voluntary knowledge sharing sessions. Unlike incubators or accelerators, Open Brains does not rely on formal mentoring programs, contractual obligations, or financial compensation. This type of support reflects a shift in entrepreneurial ecosystems: from formal, institution driven guidance to more decentralized and voluntary contributions by experienced individuals. Most research on entrepreneurial support systems focuses on the organizational structures and institutional roles of mentors and advisors,

rather than the individual motivations of individuals who contribute. This study addresses this gap by shifting the focus from structured support mechanisms to the motives behind voluntary expert participation in startup support systems outside these formal settings.

2.2 Voluntary knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is the intentional process by which one party transfers knowledge in a way that others can use it (Lee & Al-Hawamdeh, 2002). Voluntary knowledge sharing can be seen as an act in which individuals proactively and willingly share their expertise, insights, and information without any direct financial compensation or obligation, and without the expectation of direct reciprocity (Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Ardichvili et al., 2003; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). Voluntary knowledge sharing plays an important role in stimulating innovation in entrepreneurial settings. Entrepreneurs often face complex challenges that require creative solutions (Agarwal & Shah, 2014; Wang & Wang, 2012). By getting knowledge and expertise from a diverse group of experts, startups can gain fresh perspectives and innovative ideas that help them improve their business.

2.3 Motivation

To understand why people choose to voluntarily share their knowledge, it is important to examine the role of motivation. Motivation is the driving force behind behavior. People differ in the degree and type of motivation they have. The type of motivation refers to the underlying attitudes and goals that drive behavior, reflecting the reasons behind individuals' actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The following section will explain several motivation theories that help explain voluntary knowledge sharing.

2.4 Motivational theory

I identify three theories that can inform us about potential motives for knowledge sharing. These theories will be explained in the next sections.

2.4.1 *Self-Determination Theory*

A prominent motivation theory is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that motivation varies not only in terms of level but also in terms of quality. In motivational theory, a distinction is made between different

types of motivation based on the underlying reasons or goals that drive behavior (Vallerand, 1997). The most critical distinction is made between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. When someone is intrinsically motivated, they act out of interest, enjoyment, or the wish to be challenged, rather than external incentives, pressure, or rewards. Intrinsic motivation is a natural human drive to learn, explore, and grow (White, 1959). It is considered the most powerful form of motivation, because it is driven by internal rewards and personal fulfillment, which makes it more sustainable and impactful over time (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For this reason, it is important to identify the factors that support intrinsic motivation, and those that may undermine it, as this can help explain why experts voluntarily share their knowledge.

On the other hand, extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to an external outcome, such as monetary rewards or social approval (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While extrinsic motivation can drive behavior, it is less sustainable than intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Understanding this distinction is essential in examining why experts choose to voluntarily share their knowledge and expertise. By recognizing whether actions are driven by internal satisfaction or external rewards, we can better understand our motivations and potentially improve engagement and productivity in various activities (Gillet et al., 2009).

According to Self-Determination Theory, motivation is driven by the fulfillment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These needs are not independent but interact. Optimal motivation and well-being are realized when all three needs are equally satisfied (Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006). When these three needs are met, individuals are more likely to engage in intrinsically motivated behaviors, such as voluntary knowledge sharing. So experts who feel autonomous in their contributions, competent in their expertise, and a sense of relatedness could experience higher intrinsic motivation. This can lead to continued participation in voluntary knowledge sharing activities. On the other hand, when these needs are unmet motivation declines, which can reduce voluntary knowledge sharing.

2.4.2 Altruism Motivation Theory

Altruism is a form of intrinsic motivation, where actions are intended to benefit others without expecting any direct personal gain (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). The altruism motivation theory states that such behavior is driven by internal values such as compassion, responsibility, or moral duty (Liu, 2012). Altruistic behavior can also arise when empathic concern for another person leads to a genuine motivation to help, even in the absence of personal benefits, as long as the perceived costs are not too high and the helper feels capable of offering meaningful support (Batson, 2010; Dovidio et al., 1990). Altruism can also be driven by values such as care and solidarity. This type of behavior comes from a desire to contribute to a greater cause, and is often associated with greater satisfaction and sustained engagement (Clary et al., 1998). In the context of voluntary knowledge sharing, this suggests that when such activities align with a person's intrinsic values, they not only lead to more participation but also to long-term involvement.

2.4.3 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that human relationships are a series of reciprocal exchanges of resources, rewards, and costs whereby individuals engage in social relationships when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). Unlike economic transactions, where goods and services are exchanged with clear terms, social exchanges rely on unspoken expectations, trust, and long-term reciprocity. These exchanges shape individual behaviors, social norms, and larger community structures (Blau, 1964). According to the Social Exchange Theory, people have the expectation that their contributions in social interactions such as time, effort, or emotional support, will eventually be reciprocated (Homans, 1958). While some exchanges provide immediate benefits, others are based on trust that rewards will come later, even without explicit agreements. Over time, repeated exchanges create social bonds and norms that shape collaborative behavior and broader social structures, such as communities (Blau, 1964).

According to Social Exchange Theory, individuals are motivated to engage in voluntary behavior such as knowledge sharing when they perceive that the expected benefits outweigh the costs of their contribution (Blau, 1964). In the context of online peer-to-peer communities, this theory has been widely applied to explain why individuals voluntarily share their

knowledge (Nambisan & Baron, 2010). Two key benefits in this context are self-image enhancement and professional development. Sharing expertise allows individuals to strengthen their reputation and reinforce a positive self-image, particularly when their contributions are recognized by peers (Donath et al., 2006; Lakhani & von Hippel, 2003). At the same time, active participation provides opportunities for learning and skill development, making knowledge sharing a way to invest in one's professional development (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). These learning benefits are the greatest for individuals who engage actively in problem solving and discussion. Thus, in knowledge sharing environments, reputation, self-image, and professional development are motives from a social exchange perspective.

2.5 Motives

Based on these three theories, I identify seven motivational factors influencing voluntary knowledge sharing. Table 1 provides an overview, including definitions, key articles, theoretical streams, and whether the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic.

Table 1: Overview motives

Motive	Definition	Article	Theory/ Literature Stream	Intrinsic/ Extrinsic
Autonomy	Feeling of choice and control over one's own actions.	Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné, 2009; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997; White, 1959; Gillet et al., 2009; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006	Self-Determination Theory	Intrinsic
Competence	Feeling of effectiveness and mastery over tasks and environment.	Deci & Ryan, 2000; Bock & Kim, 2002; Gagné, 2009; Deci & Cascio, 1972; Ryan et al., 1983; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006	Self-Determination Theory	Intrinsic

Relatedness	Feeling of being connected and belonging to a group.	Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Forest, 2008; Bock & Kim, 2002; Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006	Self-Determination Theory	Intrinsic
Altruism	Willingness to help others without expecting rewards.	Batson, 2010; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Clary et al., 1998; Dovidio et al., 1990	Altruism Motivation Theory	Intrinsic
Recognition	Acknowledgment and appreciation for contributions.	Bjarnason, 2009; Nambisan & Baron, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991; Gagné, 2009	Social Exchange Theory; Self-Determination Theory	Both (Intrinsic & Extrinsic)
Professional development	Process of acquiring and applying knowledge for career advancement.	Gagné, 2009; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Nambisan & Baron, 2010; Janssen et al., 2014	Social Exchange Theory; Self-Determination Theory	Intrinsic
Self-enhancement	Desire to feel valuable, confident, and appreciated.	Clary et al., 1998; Dunning, 1999; Seo & Scammon, 2014; Janssen et al., 2014; Simpson & Willer, 2015	Social Exchange Theory; Self-Determination Theory	Extrinsic

In the following sections the key motivational factors that influence voluntary knowledge sharing are discussed.

2.5.1 *Autonomy*

Autonomy refers to a person's feeling of choice and control over their own actions. People are more likely to be intrinsically motivated when their actions are self-initiated, rather than being forced or pressured (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of knowledge sharing, meeting

the need for autonomy can lead to motivation to share knowledge because people intrinsically enjoy doing so or because they believe it is meaningful and important (Gagné, 2009; Gagné & Deci, 2005). It results in higher involvement, better performance, more positive attitudes (Breugh, 1985; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998), and higher performance and retention among volunteer workers (Gagné, 2003; Millette & Gagné, 2008). According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is one of the three basic needs that leads to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy is a relevant motive in this study, because it strengthens intrinsic motivation and thus helps explain why people are willing to share their knowledge voluntarily.

2.5.2 Competence

Competence refers to the feeling of being capable and confident in performing tasks and addressing challenges. The feeling of competence is strengthened through opportunities for skill development, positive feedback, and meaningful challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When individuals feel capable and confident in their abilities, they are more likely to share their knowledge. For example, the study by Bock and Kim (2002) found that the expectation to make a meaningful contribution, which reflects a sense of competence, was positively linked to knowledge sharing attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Positive performance feedback often increases intrinsic motivation by reinforcing feelings of competence (Gagné, 2009). In contrast, negative feedback can decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci & Cascio, 1972). The feeling of competence can be supported by providing relevant information and resources, training, constructive feedback, and the right amount of challenge. According to the Self-Determination Theory, competence is one of the three basic needs that leads to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence is a relevant motive in this study, because it strengthens intrinsic motivation and thus helps explain why people are willing to share their knowledge voluntarily.

2.5.3 Relatedness

Relatedness refers to the need of being connected to others and to belong to a social group. When this need is fulfilled, individuals experience a greater sense of connection and emotional security. This fosters engagement and knowledge sharing behaviors, as individuals feel more valued and supported in their communities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The

feeling of relatedness is enhanced through environments that promote collaboration, trust, and psychological safety (Gagné & Forest, 2008). Aligned with this, expectations to improve relationships, reflecting the need for relatedness, are positively related to knowledge sharing attitudes, intentions, and behavior (Brock & Kim, 2002). Satisfying the need for relatedness increases individuals' motivation to share knowledge, as it enhances the enjoyment and perceived value of sharing with others. According to the Self-Determination Theory, relatedness is one of the three basic needs that leads to intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Relatedness is a relevant motive in this study, because it strengthens intrinsic motivation and thus helps explain why people are willing to share their knowledge voluntarily.

2.5.4 Altruism

Altruism is viewed as a specific form of prosocial behavior, which refers to actions intended to benefit others without expecting external rewards (Batson, 2010; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Altruistic motivation is driven by a sincere intention to help others, even if it requires personal costs such as time, effort, or reduced competitive advantage (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). This type of motivation is frequently observed in knowledge sharing contexts like mentoring, academic collaboration, or open source communities, where individuals contribute without financial compensation (Clary et al., 1998). Altruism is a relevant motive in this study, as it helps explain why individuals share knowledge voluntarily, even without personal gain. In motivational theory, altruism is seen as a form of intrinsic motivation, where individuals share knowledge because they want to contribute to the well-being of others.

2.5.5 Recognition

Recognition is the acknowledgment and appreciation that individuals receive for their effort and contribution. Recognition can be shown by giving influence, making use of people's skills, and by showing approval. It highlights a person's unique value, supports their confidence and identity, and is an important form of reward in social relationships (Bjarnason, 2009). In the context of volunteering, recognition often causes enhanced self-image, social status, or a sense of belonging, which all motivate people to keep participating (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Several studies show that recognition plays an important role in motivating people to voluntarily share their knowledge. For example, Nambisan and Baron (2010) found that people who voluntarily share their knowledge in online communities and platforms

receive recognition, which enhances their motivation. It also helps them improve their self-image and gain social approval, even without material rewards. Recognition can also enhance their reputation and social status. Research on volunteering in human services found that feeling appreciated and being thanked is a key reason why people choose to volunteer (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). In addition, in formal organizational environments, recognition helps meet the psychological needs for competence and relatedness, which strengthens intrinsic motivation to continue helping or sharing knowledge (Gagné, 2009). Recognition as a motivator for voluntary knowledge sharing is thus supported by research in a wide range of voluntary contexts. It improves motivation by enhancing self-image, providing social affirmation, and supporting feelings of competence and relatedness. Recognition can be considered an extrinsic motivator when individuals seek status, approval, or reputation. However, it also has an intrinsic dimension when it strengthens feelings of competence and relatedness.

2.5.6 Professional development

Professional development is the process of acquiring, applying, and maintaining knowledge, skills, and expertise that support career advancement (Havea & Mohanty, 2019).

Professional development is an intrinsic motivator that leads to voluntary knowledge sharing (Gagné, 2009). In a study on why individuals voluntarily contribute knowledge in online professional forums, Wasko and Faraj (2000) found that participants were motivated by the opportunity to enhance their own learning and professional development. Participation enabled individuals to stay informed about innovations and developments in their field, while answering questions and solving problems was perceived as intellectually stimulating. It offered participants the opportunity to refine one's thinking and to improve their skills.

Responding to questions and comparing answers with others enabled participants to gain new insights, assess their own knowledge, and strengthen their professional skills (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Similar results were found in the study of Nambisan and Baron (2010) on virtual customer environments. Participants were motivated by learning and the desire to enhance their expertise. They perceived their contributions as opportunities to deepen their own knowledge, stay informed about product developments, and practical understanding through active engagement with peers. The process of solving problems and participating in discussions also contributed to their own professional growth. Also in the context of voluntary

mentoring, personal development is a key motivator. Mentors are driven by the desire to grow personally, develop their skills, and strengthen their professional identity (Janssen et al., 2014). In summary, professional development emerges as a relevant motive in various contexts.

2.5.7 Self-enhancement

Self-enhancement refers to the desire to see oneself in a positive light. It is driven by the need to feel valuable, confident, and appreciated (Clary et al., 1998) and it helps individuals to build self-worth and to feel good about themselves (Dunning, 1999). Self-enhancement behaviors are often driven by ego-related motives (Seo & Scammon, 2014). Therefore, self-enhancement is considered an extrinsic motivator, as it is based on the desire for social approval and positive self-image rather than the enjoyment of the activity itself. This is also reflected in the context of voluntary mentoring, where mentors reported that helping others makes them feel good about themselves and supports their sense of self-worth (Janssen et al., 2014). Similarly, self-enhancement has been identified as a key motivator for knowledge sharing in electronic communities and in virtual customer environments (Nambisan & Baron, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Overall, the desire to feel good about oneself from helping others plays a significant role in motivating voluntary knowledge sharing. Although self-enhancement and recognition are closely related, they differ in focus. Recognition is mostly about receiving appreciation or status from others, while self-enhancement is more internally focused. It is about feeling good about oneself, building self-worth, and maintaining a positive self-image. So whereas recognition depends on others' responses, self-enhancement can occur even without explicit praise, as long as the person feels they have contributed meaningfully.

While several motives for voluntary knowledge sharing have been identified in the existing literature, the context of this study is somewhat different. This research focuses on voluntary knowledge sharing in an informal, voluntary, and non-hierarchical setting. This context may influence what motivates individuals to share their knowledge. Because of this, existing theories might not fully capture all relevant motivations in this specific context. Therefore, this research is exploratory in nature, as it aims to identify new motives that may not yet be described in existing research and are relevant within this particular context.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the research methodology used in this study will be discussed. Starting with the explanation of the chosen research strategy and design. Then, the data collection process, including participant selection, recruitment, and interview procedures, will be explained. Next, the data analysis procedure and the ethical considerations will be discussed.

3.1 Research strategy

As this study was exploratory in nature and aimed to understand underlying motivations, patterns, and relationships in a relatively unexplored context, I chose to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method was particularly suitable for this study because it enabled the collection of detailed and nuanced data, which are valuable for understanding complex phenomena, personal experiences, and motivations (Bryman, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their thoughts and gave the flexibility to ask follow-up questions, which led to deeper insights (Vennix, 2019). This method is well-suited for studying subjective experiences and complex motivational drivers (Stebbins, 2001).

3.2 Data collection

The data were collected from primary sources, namely individuals who have voluntarily shared their knowledge during Open Brains sessions organized by Bluehub. Bluehub is an innovation consultancy firm founded by Bart Verlegh and Pim Deuling. It is located at the Brightlands Campus Greenport in Venlo. Bluehub specializes in advising and supporting innovative companies in the field of marketing. One of Bluehub's key initiatives is Open Brains. Open Brains is a platform that organizes brainstorming sessions in which entrepreneurs pitch their innovative ideas or challenges to a diverse community of experts. Open Brains started in 2015 and was organized on a bi-weekly basis, totaling approximately 250 pitches over the years. Since the start, more than 15,000 pieces of advice have been given to more than 200 innovators. The Open Brains community consists of over 2,500 experts and participants with diverse backgrounds (*Over Open Brains - Open Brains*, 2024).

To enhance the feasibility and quality of the study, data collection was conducted in collaboration with another researcher. This allowed for a larger and more diverse sample (23 participants), improving the depth and reliability of the findings. Because the research topics were closely related, a joint interview guide was used to ensure consistency and clarity in questions and to avoid asking participants to take part in two separate but overlapping interviews. Each researcher conducted interviews independently, which ensured the study remained feasible within the given timeframe. The final sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, meaning that interviews were conducted until the point where new data no longer provided additional insights or themes relevant to the research question (Saunders et al., 1996).

3.2.1 Population

In this research the population consisted of experts, including professionals, entrepreneurs and specialists, who participated in Open Brain sessions by voluntarily sharing their knowledge.

3.2.2 Sample

The sampling method used in this research was purposive sampling, in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experience relevant to the research topic. This method is common in qualitative research, where the goal is to gather in-depth insights from knowledgeable individuals (Saunders et al., 1996). Participants were categorized into three groups:

1. **Incidental Participants:** experts who attended Open Brains sessions infrequently and inconsistently, attending one session and then skipping several sessions before participating again.
2. **Serial Participants:** experts who showed strong engagement with Open Brains by making a conscious effort to attend sessions regularly, even when the theme was not yet known.
3. **Lost Participants:** experts who previously participated but disengaged for more than a year.

This categorization was used to explore potential differences in motivations among participants with varying levels of involvement.

3.2.3 Participant Selection Criteria

A total of 23 participants were selected for this research based on the following criteria:

1. Active participation in at least one Open Brains session.
2. Willingness to share experiences and motivations in an interview.
3. Diversity in professional background to ensure varied perspectives. Including differences in sector (e.g., agriculture, technology, education) and type of organization (e.g., startups, corporates, public institutions).
4. Diversity in Open Brains experience, including incidental, serial, and lost participants, to explore different motivational drivers among participants with varying levels of involvement.

These criteria ensured both relevance to the research topic and diversity in perspectives. Based on these criteria, one of the founders of Bluehub, Bart Verlegh, supported the recruitment process by providing access to the expert network and background information.

3.2.4 Participant recruitment and engagement

The recruitment process started with a personal invitation to participate in the study, sent by Bart Verlegh. This approach was chosen to foster a sense of familiarity and connection with potential participants. When invitees were interested to participate, their contact details were shared with the researchers in order to schedule the interview. The researchers then reached out via email or phone. Follow-up emails or text messages were sent to those who did not respond within one week. The recruitment process started on March 31 and continued until April 9.

To enhance participation, interviews were scheduled at the most convenient time for respondents to minimize time constraints and to ensure ease of participation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In addition, respondents could choose a familiar or private setting, such as joining the interview via a Teams meeting from home, to feel more at ease and open to sharing their personal insights (Bryman, 2016). Voluntary participation was prioritized, and potential participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. These efforts helped to create a supportive environment to enhance participation. The invitation used to approach participants is

included in Appendix A, and an overview of the respondents, providing background information, interview setting, and duration, is available in Appendix C.

3.2.5 Interview process

The interviews were conducted one-on-one in Dutch, allowing participants to express themselves naturally in their native language. This format facilitated a more natural conversation, giving respondents the freedom to speak openly without the pressure of a group setting (Saunders et al., 1996). The semi-structured format enabled open discussions, allowing respondents to elaborate on their thoughts and providing rich and nuanced data (Bryman, 2016).

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview format, designed to explore participants' experiences with Open Brains in an open and narrative manner. The questions were intentionally broad to encourage storytelling and allow underlying motives to come up naturally. The interview guide included four main questions: "Could you briefly introduce yourself?", "Could you tell us about the first time you heard about Open Brains?", "How has your involvement with Open Brains developed over time?" and "How do you currently experience your involvement with Open Brains?". These questions followed a chronological order to help participants think about how their involvement changed over time. This time dimension, especially in question three, helped to understand both the changes in participation and the reasons behind them. When shifts in involvement were mentioned, follow-up questions, such as "Why is that important to you?" or "What are the reasons for this change?", were used to explore the underlying motivations in more depth. In this way, the interviews allowed participants to articulate their own reasoning and values, rather than responding to predefined categories. Under each main question, several sub-questions were included to ensure that relevant aspects could be explored more thoroughly. A list of motivational themes, derived from the theoretical framework, was added to the interview protocol to serve as a prompt and ensure completeness in follow-up questioning when relevant topics arose. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

The interviews were conducted between April 10 and May 7. After the first five interviews, a reflection meeting was held with the co-researcher to evaluate the process and identify

potential improvements. Based on this meeting, minor adjustments were made to the interview guide. For example, it was decided to clearly state at the beginning of each interview that the questions specifically referred to the participant's role as expert. This clarification was necessary because some respondents were involved in sessions both as experts and as innovators, which had caused confusion during the initial interviews.

3.3 Data analysis

To answer the research question, the interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a flexible and widely used approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. It was particularly suitable for this study due to its exploratory nature. Rather than relying solely on predefined categories, this approach also allowed for the inclusion of new insights from respondents, enabling new themes to emerge from the data (Vennix, 2019). First, all interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to analyze them. The transcripts were read multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the data. Then, initial coding was used to identify key phrases, patterns, and recurring concepts in the data. This coding process followed a hybrid approach, where codes were both data-driven (inductive), allowing themes to emerge from participants' responses, while also incorporating theory-driven (deductive) elements based on the theoretical framework in Chapter Two (Swain, 2018).

Following the initial coding, similar codes were grouped into broader themes representing various aspects of participants' motivation. In the next phase, the themes were further defined and named to ensure the internal coherence of each theme and its distinction from the others. To structure the findings, the data were organized by respondent group (serial and incidental participants). Quotes were thematically clustered per group, and an Excel matrix was used to track the occurrence of each code across respondents. This visual overview helped identify patterns both within and between groups. Finally, a coherent analytical narrative was produced, supported by illustrative quotes, which is presented in Chapter Four. An overview of the codes and their categorization can be found in Appendix C.

3.4 Ethics

In this research the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct were taken into account to ensure ethical treatment of participants. Honesty, integrity, and respect for the respondents were important aspects in this research. Before participating in the research, informed consent was obtained from all respondents. The respondents received clear information about the purpose and procedures of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. They were also informed that they were not obligated to answer all questions and that recordings would be made and deleted after transcription. The invitation email sent to potential participants can be found in Appendix A.

To maintain confidentiality, data were securely stored in the university's protected storage system. Transcripts were accessible only to the researcher and their first and second examiner. No personal details were disclosed in the research, ensuring anonymity and protecting respondents' identities. However, the founder of the Open Brains sessions may have been aware of some participants' identities. While full anonymity could not be guaranteed in this regard, the data remained anonymous to external parties. Finally, the interviews were conducted in a safe and comfortable environment of the respondent's choice, ensuring that participants felt at ease throughout the process.

To support the writing process, AI-based tools were used for translating texts initially written in Dutch and for improving structure, language, and coherence throughout the thesis. The prompts used were formulated by the author, and all AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed and revised to ensure accuracy, coherence, and alignment with academic standards.

4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the study will be discussed. The data analysis was conducted using thematic coding. During the interviews, it became clear that the initial categorisation of the respondents into serial, incidental, and lost participants, did not align with practice. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, no Open Brains sessions have been organised and no follow-up communication was sent by Bluehub. As a result, participants had not attended recently, not due to a lack of motivation, but because of the absence of sessions and communication. The label 'lost participants' was therefore no longer appropriate.

Based on the insights from the interviews, the categorisation of participants was revised. In this chapter, a distinction is made between two groups: (1) serial participants, who regularly participated in Open Brains sessions in the past; (2) incidental participants, who attended one or only a few sessions. These revised categories better reflect how respondents described their involvement and provide a clearer basis for analysing their motivation and experiences. Respondents initially assigned to the lost participant category were reassigned based on their responses about past involvement.

In total, 23 respondents were interviewed. The group of serial participants consists of 9 respondents aged 32 to 63, with an average age of 47 years. Serial participants work in sectors such as consultancy, sustainability, technology, crypto, real estate, and startup ecosystems. Their roles include founders, business developers, a chief technology officer, a sustainability policy developer, and a business development manager at Bluehub. Their business experience ranges from 10 to 39 years. A defining trait is their personal and professional relationship with Bluehub's CEO. One respondent is a former co-founder of Bluehub, and another is currently employed. Participants of this group are often consistently engaged with Open Brains due to personal ties and commitment to the initiative. The group of incidental participants included 14 respondents aged between 24 and 58, with an average age of 48. The incidental participants work across diverse sectors including agriculture, sustainability and circular economy, and consultancy. Their roles include founders, business developers, policy advisors, project managers, incubation officers, and a marketer at Bluehub. Most have over 20 years of business experience (ranging from 2.5 to 33 years). Many are connected to the agri-sector or sustainability themes. Two respondents never participated in sessions, and one of them is currently employed at Bluehub. An overview of

the respondents can be found in Appendix D, and a comparison between incidental and serial participants in Appendix E.

In the analysis, a distinction was made between motives and hygiene factors, following Herzberg's dual-factor theory (Herzberg, 1987). Motives refer to the factors that stimulate people to voluntarily share their knowledge. They are the actual drivers of behaviour. These motives were identified in the data when participants explicitly described a positive internal drive they experienced through participation. Hygiene factors are conditions that do not generate motivation on their own but influence continued engagement and whose absence can lead to dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1993). When such conditions are not well arranged, they can form a barrier to participation. This may lead to frustration or withdrawal, even if the participant is otherwise motivated. In the analysis, a factor was categorized as a hygiene factor when participants did not mention it as a reason to join, but did mention it as a reason to stop attending or as a condition for continued involvement.

Based on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2, the analysis confirmed six antecedents that influenced voluntary knowledge sharing: autonomy, competence, relatedness, altruism, recognition, and professional development. The definitions of these antecedents remained consistent with those outlined in Chapter 2. Self-enhancement was included in the theoretical framework, but did not clearly emerge as a separate motive in the data. Since it overlapped with recognition and professional development, it was excluded from further analysis.

While these six antecedents aligned well with the existing theory, the interviews also showed additional factors that influenced participants' engagement. These new antecedents highlight the role of practical and contextual aspects in supporting engagement. The first of these is structure of the session, referring to the way sessions were organized and facilitated, including the setup, the use of tools, and strong moderation. Second, practical fit concerns how well the session aligned with participants' daily routines. This included factors such as short duration, convenient location, early timing, and limited preparation requirements. Third, the topic of the session emerged as an important factor. This refers to the thematic alignment between the session's content and the participant's personal or professional interests and values. Fourth, impact emerged as a meaningful antecedent. This refers to participants'

sense that their contribution or the session itself, could lead to outcomes with impact. Fifth, continuity concerns the regularity and consistency of the sessions, communication and follow-up over time. Finally, variation is defined as the degree of diversity in themes, participants, and session formats. It introduces novelty and prevents stagnation in group dynamics or idea generation. These six new antecedents highlight the importance of the practical and contextual environment in supporting voluntary knowledge sharing.

The following sections present the main findings, focusing on both similarities and differences between serial and incidental participants in terms of motives and hygiene factors. Table 2 provides an overview of these findings.

Table 2: Comparison Serial and Incidental Participants

	Serial Participants	Incidental Participants
Similarities		
Motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Competence (independent of expertise) - Relatedness - Recognition - Professional development - Topic of the session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Competence (dependent on topic & expertise) - Relatedness - Recognition - Professional development - Topic of the session
Hygiene Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structure of the session - Continuity - Autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structure of the session - Continuity (weighed more heavily on incidental participants, as it directly affected their sense of connection and relatedness) - Autonomy
Differences		

Motives	- Pure altruism (unconditional) - Impact	- Conditional altruism (win-win)
Hygiene Factors	- Variation - Practical fit (scheduling and logistics)	- Practical fit (session depth and quality)

In the following sections, these findings are discussed in more detail, supported by illustrative quotes from the interview data.

4.1 Similarities

4.1.1 Motives

Both serial and incidental participants named a broad range of motives that stimulate them to voluntarily share their knowledge. A common motive was competence, the feeling of confidence that one could contribute something meaningful to the sessions. In both groups, this feeling was related to the extent to which the topic matched their expertise. However, for incidental participants, this motivation only emerged when the topic closely matched their expertise, making topic fit a critical condition for feeling competent. As an incidental participant mentioned: *“If the topic was far from my area, I was less inclined to go [...] Then I feel that I have little to contribute”* (Interview 11). On the other hand, serial participants emphasized that they could also add value outside their own area of expertise: *“I trust that there is added value, especially in the context of the others at the table. It is not just about feedback on a pitch, but also about responding to feedback from others and building on that”* (Interview 8). So, competence was a shared motive, but for serial participants it was more stable and broadly felt, while for incidental participants it depended more on how well the topic matched their expertise.

The sense of relatedness also emerged as a motive in both groups. Participants valued the contact with like-minded people. An incidental participant expressed this as follows: *“It was a close-knit group that worked together on this initiative. That sense of connectedness really motivated me”* (Interview 14), while a serial participant noted: *“If you’re surrounded by people*

who think the same way, something special happens, friendships form and real things start to move." (Interview 19). Thus, feeling connected to others encouraged participation across both groups.

Recognition was also mentioned as a motive in both groups. Participants felt taken seriously when their input was appreciated. As an incidental participant described: *"There was always a lot of gratitude from the pitchers. That was clearly expressed, verbally or non-verbally"* (Interview 14), and a serial participant confirmed: *"You don't want to feel like you're shouting into the void. I never had that here"* (Interview 15). This helped experts to stay motivated to share their knowledge.

Professional development was also a key motive mentioned by both groups. Participants used the sessions to enrich their knowledge, gain new insights and expand their network. A serial participant described how they applied insights from the sessions within their own work: *"Within our company, we recently started actively working with the Business Model Canvas. I picked that up through Open Brains."* (Interview 23). Another mentioned that the Open Brains sessions were intentionally attended as a way to gain new knowledge: *"I actively seek out people who have knowledge I don't, or who can teach me something new."* (Interview 4). The sessions were also seen as an opportunity to enhance professional visibility: *"It's also a way to position yourself and show what you bring to the table."* (Interview 4). An incidental participant mentioned: *"I gained insights about AI from others and applied them myself. That made me understand that it is not just hype, but something really useful"* (Interview 21). Another mentioned that the sessions were also seen as valuable moments to build and strengthen professional networks: *"We started new projects, like a platform, thanks to people we met during Open Brains."* (Interview 7).

Lastly, another shared motive was the topic of the session. Participants from both groups were more likely to attend when the topic aligned with their interests or values. For example, a serial participant mentioned: *"The interest in innovation was there, and still is. That was the trigger for me to join"* (Interview 4). Likewise, an incidental participant noted: *"If the session interests me, I'll make time for it. The topic really determines my involvement"* (Interview 21). So, sessions that aligned with participants' interests or values were strong drivers of motivation across both groups.

In sum, participants were motivated by competence, relatedness, recognition, professional development, and interest in the topic.

4.1.2 Hygiene factors

In addition to motives, several practical and contextual conditions influenced participation. Although these hygiene factors did not directly motivate experts to join, they contributed to a supportive environment that encouraged continued involvement or, when poorly arranged, led to disengagement.

The first shared hygiene factor was the structure of the sessions. Participants valued the structure of the session, referring to the way sessions were organized and facilitated, including the setup, the use of tools, and strong moderation. As a serial participant explained: *“What I liked was that the session had a clear structure”* (Interview 4), and another added: *“Bart adds a lot of structure by using the Business Model Canvas. That gives direction, even for people who don’t know how to approach it”* (Interview 23). The role of the moderator also contributed: *“The session was well facilitated. The moderator asked deep questions that really got people thinking.”* (Interview 19). This was also valued by incidental participants: *“I liked that it was always short and to the point, no endless discussions. Someone pitches, and you give your insights and tips. That worked well”* (Interview 7). Another added: *“There were clear rules, like when someone gives feedback, don’t interrupt or jump in. That was really enforced, and I think that’s crucial for how it works”* (Interview 11).

Second, continuity was an important hygiene factor for both groups. This included continuity in communication, scheduling, and follow-up. While it was not a direct reason to join Open Brains, it strongly influenced whether participants stayed involved over time. The first shared aspect was communication. For both serial and incidental participants declining communication was a key reason for reduced engagement. When invitations and updates became irregular, Open Brains simply fell off their radar. As a serial participant mentioned: *“The fixed planning has become less clear. It used to be at a set time every month, now that’s less consistent, which makes it easier to drop it from your agenda”* (Interview 23). Another mentioned: *“It wasn’t so much that something changed back then, but rather that there was a decline in how consistently the invitations came and how regularly the sessions*

were actually held." (Interview 6). Incidental participants experienced this as well: *"It wasn't so much that something changed back then, but rather that there was a decline in how consistently the invitations came and how regularly the sessions were actually held."* (Interview 6). Participants from both groups mentioned that they no longer receive updates or did not know whether Open Brains was still active: *"I just don't know if it still exists. If someone reached out, I'd be open"* (Interview 20). An incidental participant even remarked: *"If it weren't for this interview, I probably wouldn't have heard anything"* (Interview 7). A second element was the lack of follow-up or feedback after sessions. Participants from both groups expressed frustration about the absence of updates on what happened with their input. As a serial participant mentioned: *"There was no follow-up. I had no idea if something happened with our input"* (Interview 4). An incidental participant confirmed: *"You give your advice and then you hear nothing, that makes you question the value"* (Interview 5). Although both groups noted the absence of follow-up as a barrier to participation, it seemed to weigh heavier on incidental participants. For incidental participants in particular, this lack of follow-up affected their sense of recognition and meaning. Some even linked the absence of continuity to a declining sense of relatedness: *"Open Brains hasn't been organised in a while, and my last session was almost half a year ago. Since there haven't been recent sessions and I don't have ongoing contact with the people I met there, I now feel less connected"* (Interview 17). Others suggested that continuity could also strengthen recognition, for example through follow-up or more consistent involvement between sessions. Lastly, both groups mentioned the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point in continuity. Sessions were paused, the regular rhythm was lost, and for many, the connection to Open Brains faded. A serial participant reflected: *"Before COVID, it was a real campus event that brought people together. Now it feels more fragmented"* (Interview 19). An incidental participant added: *"In recent years, I've hardly seen any sessions."* (Interview 18).

Autonomy was another shared hygiene factor. Both groups appreciated the freedom to contribute in their own way. An incidental participant mentioned: *"Everyone had the chance to speak"* (Interview 11), and another added: *"You can say whatever you want without any limitations, but you decide for yourself what you do with it"* (Interview 13). Serial participants shared this view: *"I never felt a blockage not to share certain things"* (Interview 8). Although autonomy was not mentioned as a reason to participate, it created a safe and open environment that made the sessions more enjoyable and inviting for both groups.

So, these hygiene factors such as structure, continuity and autonomy shaped the environment in which serial and incidental participants engaged with Open Brains. They were not direct reasons to join but influenced whether participants stayed involved depending on how well they were arranged.

4.2 Differences

4.2.1 Motives

Altruism emerged as a motive only among serial participants. They described a genuine desire to give back, support others, and help startups avoid mistakes they had made themselves: *“You’re there to give something. You hope someone can take that and do something with it, so they don’t fall into the same trap you once did”* (Interview 4). While they appreciated learning something in return, this was not a condition: *“If I know it also brings me something, that’s a bonus. But it’s not a condition”* (Interview 3). In contrast, incidental participants did not name altruism as a standalone motive. Instead, they viewed their contribution as part of a mutual exchange, where helping others also bought something valuable in return. A participant mentioned: *“It’s a win-win. I like helping, but I also gain new insights, meet interesting people, and stay sharp”* (Interview 13). So, while both groups valued the act of helping, only serial participants were driven by altruism in its pure form. For incidental participants, helping made sense when it was reciprocal.

The possibility to make impact through knowledge sharing emerged as a motive for serial participants. In the interviews, a strong intrinsic desire to contribute to broader societal or environmental change was mentioned, particularly in areas related to innovation and sustainability. As a respondent said: *“I’m particularly drawn to sessions that focus on societal or sustainability objectives, that’s important to me”* (Interview 8). These participants valued the opportunity to engage in system-level innovation and saw Open Brains as a platform to co-create meaningful outcomes: *“If you can do something where you create something great together, give form to ideas and set them in motion... yes, I really value that”* (Interview 15). So for serial participants, creating impact and contributing to something bigger was a motive to stay involved.

In summary, serial participants were more often driven by intrinsic motives such as altruism and a desire to create societal impact, whereas incidental participants tended to focus more on extrinsic motives like reciprocal benefits and personal relevance.

4.2.2 Hygiene factors

Variation, in terms of topics and participants, was mentioned by serial participants as a factor that influenced their continued engagement. While some familiarity was appreciated and helped build trust, repeated exposure to the same people and ideas over time was seen as limiting: *"It sometimes feels like the network has thinned out. You constantly need fresh input"* (Interview 3). The lack of renewal led to declining interest: *"You hear the same ideas or the same person's hobbyhorse every session, that makes me skip it sometimes"* (Interview 15). For these participants, variation was not a motivator in itself, but its absence made it less appealing to keep attending.

Next to variation, practical fit was an important hygiene factor for both groups, but the way it influenced their participation varied. Incidental participants emphasized the importance of sessions fitting into their daily schedules, being easy to attend, and requiring little preparation. Morning sessions of around an hour were especially appreciated: *"It was short and in the morning, that made it easy to fit in. By 10 o'clock, you were back to your regular work"* (Interview 9). The short duration of the sessions and convenient timing made it easy to fit into participants' schedules: *"Because it was short and not too formal, it didn't get in the way of the rest of my day. That made it easier to say yes"* (Interview 11). For this group, practical barriers such as work, family obligations, and travel distance often determined whether they could attend. As a participant said: *"At the moment, no. I have a young family and only work 21 hours a week. That's already tight with everything I have to do"* (Interview 22). The location could also be limiting: *"I work in Maastricht, traveling to Venlo would be a hurdle"* (Interview 22). To reduce such barriers, some suggested combining sessions with breakfast or lunch to make them more appealing: *"With a little breakfast, I might be more inclined to join"* (Interview 7).

Serial participants also valued the accessibility of the sessions, but in a different way. Participants mentioned that attending the sessions was easy because of schedule flexibility or physical proximity to the location: *"I have relatively much time, so I can just get in the car"*

and go” (Interview 5); *“I’m based on campus, so it’s easy for me to join”* (Interview 23). They also appreciated the informal design and early timing: *“The short and informal setup made it easy to join, it didn’t interfere with my day”* (Interview 11). However, some serial participants noted that this low-threshold format sometimes reduced the depth of the discussions. Because sessions were designed to be accessible and informal, they occasionally lacked clarity or focus. This acted as a barrier to continued participation: *“Sometimes I wonder, what exactly is the question we are trying to solve here?”* (Interview 15). Others expressed a preference for deeper one-on-one conversations after the session: *“Then you get more depth than with a group of five or ten who all want to give input”* (Interview 4) . So, while practical fit supported participation for both groups, incidental participants were more affected by logistical constraints, whereas serial participants were more sensitive to the depth and quality of the sessions.

This section showed how hygiene factors influenced participation differently across groups. For incidental participants, practical conditions like timing, location, and preparation were more decisive, while for serial participants, a lack of variation and session depth reduced their motivation to stay engaged.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, the main findings of the study are interpreted and discussed in light of the research question and theoretical framework. In addition, the practical and managerial implications are addressed. This is followed by a discussion of the study's limitations, and the chapter concludes with suggestions for future research.

5.1 Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the following question: *“What factors motivate experts to voluntarily share their knowledge in startup support platforms?”* By investigating the case of Open Brains, this research provides insights into the drivers and conditions that support expert engagement in collaborative knowledge sharing environments. Based on 23 semi-structured interviews with former participants, a revised distinction was made between serial participants, who regularly attended sessions, and incidental participants, who joined only once or a few times.

The findings show that expert engagement is driven by a combination of motives and hygiene factors. Across both participant types, key motives included competence, relatedness, recognition, professional development, and topic relevance. However, the way these motives were experienced varied. Serial participants felt confident contributing regardless of the topic, whereas incidental participants only felt competent when the topic closely aligned with their own expertise. There were also differences in the types of motives expressed by serial and incidental participants. Serial participants were especially motivated by altruism and a desire to make societal impact, whereas incidental participants emphasized reciprocal value, whereby their willingness to contribute depended on gaining new insights or networking opportunities in return. Although self-enhancement was included in the theoretical framework as a potential motive, it did not clearly emerge from the data as a distinct factor. Participants' reflections related to this theme were already captured within recognition and professional development. As such, self-enhancement was not further analysed as a separate motive.

In addition to these motivational drivers, hygiene factors shaped the conditions for sustained engagement. While not direct motivators, their absence could hinder participation. For both

groups, key hygiene factors included session structure; continuity, such as regular communication and follow-up after session; and autonomy in how and when participants could contribute. Continuity, in particular, was more crucial for incidental participants, as it affected their sense of connection and relatedness. Differences also emerged between the two groups. Serial participants were sensitive to a lack of variation and session depth, whereas incidental participants were more affected by practical constraints such as timing, travel distance, and session length.

In conclusion, this study shows that experts are motivated to share their knowledge in startup support platforms like Open Brains by both motives and hygiene factors. Key motives such as competence, relatedness, recognition, professional development, and topic relevance drive participation, while altruism and impact are especially important for serial participants. These motives reflect mainly intrinsic motivation, such as competence, relatedness, altruism, and a desire to make societal impact, particularly among serial participants, who are driven by personal fulfillment and the desire to contribute meaningfully. Extrinsic motivators, such as recognition and reciprocal learning, were mentioned by incidental participants. These motives had both extrinsic and intrinsic dimensions. Recognition, in particular, often reinforced psychological needs like competence and relatedness, thereby strengthening intrinsic motivation (Gagné, 2009). As no strong extrinsic drivers emerged beyond this, it can be concluded that voluntary knowledge sharing in this context is primarily driven by intrinsic motivation.

5.2 Interpretation of findings in light of the theory

The three theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Altruism Motivation Theory, and Social Exchange, are all reflected in the data, but their relevance differs across participant types.

Self-Determination Theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how intrinsic motivation underpins voluntary knowledge sharing. The core needs defined by Deci and Ryan (2000), autonomy, competence, and relatedness, were all present in the data. Competence was a strong motivator for both serial and incidental participants, although it was more conditional for incidental participants, as it depended on how well the topic aligned with their expertise. Relatedness also emerged as a shared motive, highlighting the importance of social connection and belonging. Both groups appreciated the opportunity to engage with like-minded individuals and felt more motivated when they experienced a sense of community. It was confirmed that this sense of relatedness was stronger in environments that encouraged collaboration, trust, and psychological safety (Gagné & Forest, 2008). Autonomy did not emerge as a motive, but was described as a condition that made participation enjoyable. Even though in this context autonomy was not a motive, the findings are consistent with SDT's proposition that all three psychological needs are important for engagement.

Altruism Motivation Theory was particularly relevant for serial participants. Their participation was often driven by a desire to give back or help others avoid mistakes they had made. This form of pure altruism, helping without expecting anything in return, is in line with the Altruism Motivation Theory (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In contrast, incidental participants expressed more conditional altruism. Their helping behavior was often mentioned as a win-win situation, suggesting that altruism may be conditional in their case, rather than purely intrinsic. This distinction demonstrates how altruistic motives may vary not only by personality but also by the depth of involvement and duration of engagement.

Social Exchange Theory helps explain why recognition and professional development were motives for both serial and incidental participants. These motives reflect the expectation that knowledge sharing leads to benefits such as appreciation, visibility, or learning opportunities. As the theory suggests, people are more likely to contribute when the perceived return is

worth the effort (Blau, 1964; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Especially for incidental participants, recognition and learning were important drivers. While these motives align with the theory, self-enhancement did not clearly emerge as a separate motive in this context.

In addition to these motivational theories, the findings highlight several practical conditions, such as clear session structure, consistent communication, and logistical fit, that influenced whether experts stayed involved over time. These are not motivators by themselves, but their absence led to frustration or withdrawal. This fits with Herzberg's two-factor theory (1987), which states that certain 'hygiene factors' are essential to prevent dissatisfaction.

Finally, the motive of creating impact, suggests that intrinsic motivation can also come from a sense of purpose or contribution to a bigger goal, such as innovation or societal change. This is not explicitly addressed in the used motivational frameworks.

In summary, the results present elements of SDT, Altruism Motivation Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, but also show where these theories fall short. They overlook certain practical conditions and do not fully capture all motives like creating impact. This suggests that a more complete understanding of voluntary expert engagement should include both contextual factors and a broader range of motives.

5.3 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of voluntary knowledge sharing by shifting the focus from formalized and institutionalized support mechanisms to informal, self-initiated expert engagement. While existing literature has predominantly examined knowledge sharing in formal organizational settings, structured mentoring programs, or online communities (e.g., Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Claffey & Brady, 2017), this research adds to the underexplored domain of informal, offline support platforms such as Open Brains.

By applying Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) and Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg, 1987), the study deepens the understanding of the interplay between motivational and contextual factors in voluntary knowledge sharing. It demonstrates that knowledge sharing is primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, rooted in psychological needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy, while extrinsic motivators played a limited

role. The study also identifies hygiene factors (e.g., session structure, continuity, and accessibility) that, although not direct motivators, are essential for sustained participation. This extends the application of SDT to a novel context and refines Herzberg's framework by showing its relevance in a voluntary, non-contractual environment beyond traditional employment or online settings. This dual-theoretical perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms behind voluntary knowledge sharing in entrepreneurial ecosystems and adds to emerging literature on informal startup support structures.

Furthermore, the findings challenge the assumption in the literature that formal incentives or institutional arrangements are necessary in startup support (Audretsch et al., 2018). The study shows that individuals are willing to contribute their time and knowledge when certain psychological and contextual conditions are met, even in the absence of material rewards. This insight expands existing theoretical models of entrepreneurial support, which often overlook informal, self-initiated support efforts.

5.4 Practical implications

This research offers several practical implications for managers of startup support platforms, such as Open Brains, as well as for policymakers and organisations involved in fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems. By identifying what motivates experts to voluntarily share their knowledge, the findings can be used to design initiatives that better match the needs and expectations of these contributors. This is crucial for developing effective participation strategies that improve the quality, strengthen the credibility, and ensure the continuity of such platforms.

The findings show that experts are motivated by factors such as competence, relatedness, recognition, topic relevance, and professional development. To support these motives, platform organisers should ensure that session topics align with the participants' expertise and interests to enhance the feeling of competence. Creating space for informal interaction, such as organising social moments like a lunch, or setting up ongoing communities outside the sessions, can help build a sense of community and connection among participants. Recognition, through a personal thank you or feedback on how input was used, helps

reinforce engagement and encourages continued participation. Clear communication of session topics in advance and offering space for learning and exchange of knowledge further support professional growth and repeated engagement.

In addition to these motivational drivers, several contextual conditions influence sustained participation. Platforms should offer a structured session format, clear and consistent communication, and flexibility in how and when individuals can contribute. Low-threshold, time-efficient formats can reduce practical barriers, while variety in topics and participants, as well as thematic depth, helps maintain engagement.

Particularly important are regular scheduling, timely invitations, and follow-up communication. These elements help participants stay informed, feel valued, and see the impact of their input, increasing their willingness to return.

A flexible approach, with low-barrier entry options and meaningful follow-up opportunities, is essential for supporting varying levels of participation and ensuring platform success. This contributes to a stable and diverse knowledge base and supports the long-term success of the platform.

Policymakers can use these findings to design support measures that strengthen informal knowledge sharing ecosystems. This may include funding programs that link startup platforms to universities and regional institutions, or integrating informal knowledge contribution as a criterion in innovation funding schemes. Stimulating public-private partnerships and publicly acknowledging voluntary contributors, for example by giving them visibility in events or involving them in regional advisory roles, can further legitimize and strengthen informal knowledge networks. In doing so, policymakers contribute to broader goals such as knowledge diffusion, inclusive innovation, and regional economic resilience.

5.5 Limitations

This study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research focused on a single case, namely Open Brains. While this provides rich and context specific insights into factors influencing voluntary knowledge sharing within a startup support platform, it limits the generalizability of the findings to other initiatives with

different structures, cultures, or regional contexts, such as online knowledge sharing platforms.

In addition, the data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which carry a risk of self-reporting bias. Participants in face-to-face interviews may have provided socially desirable answers, which could affect the accuracy and reliability of the findings (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This may have led to an overrepresentation of positive responses and an underrepresentation of more critical or negative perspectives on the sessions. To reduce this risk, participants were assured of confidentiality and informed that there were no right or wrong answers. However, this limitation remains relevant, especially since three participants were current or former employees of Bluehub, the organization behind Open Brains. This dual role could lead to potential role conflict and entangled interests. Their responses may have reflected organizational loyalty or strategic positioning, which might have resulted in biased representations of their motivations or experiences.

Another important consideration is the use of thematic analysis, given that this method involves interpretive limitations. The categorization and interpretation of the data may have been influenced by the researcher's own perspectives and assumptions.

The composition of the sample also presents a limitation. Participants were recruited through an internal network, which may have led to selection bias. Those who agreed to participate were likely already motivated to share knowledge and those with lower engagement in voluntary knowledge sharing may be underrepresented, potentially skewing the findings.

Lastly, although the data were anonymized in reporting, full anonymity could not be guaranteed. Since one of the organizers was known to participants, some respondents may have limited their openness due to concerns about being recognized. However, the data remain anonymous to external readers, as all personal identifiers were removed.

5.6 Future research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research can be suggested. Since this research focused on a single initiative (Open Brains), future studies could examine voluntary knowledge sharing across different startup support platforms with varying structures, cultures, or delivery formats. Comparative research could reveal which motivational factors are context specific and which are more widely applicable.

Given the interpretive nature of thematic analysis, future research could benefit from a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to improve the quality of the findings. Quantitative methods, such as surveys or experiments, could be used to test the relationship between specific motivational factors and participation behavior, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

Another important consideration is the potential influence of role conflict or entangled interests when participants are affiliated with the organising platform. Future studies may reduce this type of bias by including only independent contributors who have no organisational ties.

Finally, future research could explore the impact of implementing changes inspired by this study's insights. Such research would help determine whether these adjustments lead to measurable increases in motivation and participation, providing valuable feedback for both researchers and practitioners

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7. Appendix

7.1 Appendix A – Invitation potential participants

Dear [First Name],

Thank you very much for your willingness to speak with us about your participation in the Open Brains sessions.

As mentioned earlier, we, Annemijn and Joëlle, are master's students at Radboud University. As part of our master's thesis, we are conducting research on what motivates experts to participate in the Open Brains sessions and to voluntarily share their knowledge.

Your experiences and insights will help us better understand why people choose to engage in an initiative like Open Brains and why they are willing to contribute their expertise on a voluntary basis. With this, we hope to contribute valuable insights to help Open Brains further engage and motivate its expert community.

The interview will take approximately 60 minutes and can be conducted online. We would like to schedule the conversation with you between April 14 and April 25. We are flexible with dates and times and are happy to accommodate your schedule.

Important information about the interview:

- Participation is entirely voluntary; you may stop the interview at any time or skip any questions.
- Your answers will be treated confidentially and processed fully anonymously.
- With your permission, the interview will be recorded and used solely for analysis by us as researchers.

Could you please let us know which date(s) and time(s) would be convenient for you? We would be happy to schedule the interview accordingly.

Thank you in advance!

Kind regards,

Annemijn and Joëlle

7.2 Appendix B – Interview guide

Thank you for participating in this interview. The interview will take approximately one hour. The questions will focus on your experience as an expert during the Open Brains sessions, where you shared your insights and provided feedback on the presented business models. Before we begin, I would like to remind you that your participation is entirely voluntary and that you may stop the interview at any time. Your answers will be anonymised and used solely for academic purposes. As agreed, the interview will be recorded.

-Could you briefly introduce yourself?

- Age
- Professional background (Years of experience in business, sector, self-employed: yes / no, current position)
- Educational background
- Place of residence and work

-Could you tell us about the first time you heard about Open Brains?

- What made you decide to participate or seek more information?
- Have you previously taken part in an initiative similar to Open Brains?
→ Could you tell us more about that? Why did you (not) participate?
- What were your expectations when you first participated?
- Can you describe how you experienced your first session?
- What did you find positive about that experience, and were there any aspects you were less enthusiastic about?
- Did you feel you had enough freedom during the sessions to determine how and what you contributed?

-How has your involvement with Open Brains developed over time?

- Are you still actively participating in Open Brains?
-If yes: How long have you been involved?

-If no: What made you decide to stop, and how do you look back on your time with Open Brains?

- Would you say your involvement has changed over time?
-If yes: What changed in you, or in the initiative itself?
-Is there anything you started to enjoy more or less over time?
- How do you currently experience your involvement with Open Brains?
- What could make the difference for you in becoming (or staying) more actively involved?

-How do you currently experience your involvement with Open Brains?

- What do you currently find valuable about your participation?
- Do you see your participation mainly as a contribution to others, or as something from which you personally benefit?
- How confident did you feel about your knowledge or ability to contribute during the sessions?
- Did you feel like you were contributing to someone's development?
- Did participating make you feel knowledgeable or competent?
- Did you learn anything during a session that you have since applied in your own work?
- Did Open Brains connect you with people or ideas that have been valuable to you?
- What role does the feeling of connection with other participants play in your involvement?
- Did you feel appreciated for your contribution to Open Brains?
- Did helping others or sharing your knowledge in this way make you feel good about yourself?
- Did you feel satisfied after participating in Open Brains sessions?

Follow-up questions

- Could you elaborate on that?
- (If a specific motive is mentioned): Why is that important to you?
- Could you give an example of that?
- Other participants mentioned [theme] is this something you also recognise?

- Has your level of involvement changed over time? What are the reasons for this change?

Motivational themes (if relevant in follow-up prompts):

- Autonomy
- Competence
- Relatedness
- Altruism
- Recognition
- Professional development
- Self-enhancement
- Networking

Closing questions

- Looking back, what was the main reason for you to participate in Open Brains?
- Would you consider participating again in the future? Why or why not?
- Are there any aspects we haven't discussed that you feel are important in understanding your (decreased) participation in Open Brains?

7.3 Appendix C – Ordered codes and themes

Codes	Themes
Coercion	Autonomy
freedom to contribute	Autonomy
Freedom of expression	Autonomy
Opportunity to voice perspective	Autonomy
Confidence based on domain expertise	competence
Perceived relevance of own expertise	competence
Perceived competence misalignment	competence
Self-perceived contribution value	competence
Perceived development of competence	competence
Experienced sense of connection	Relatedness
Perceived community membership	Relatedness
Perceived collective identity	Relatedness
Informal interpersonal ties	Relatedness
Experienced group belonging	Relatedness
Active formation of social connection	Relatedness
Enjoyment derived from social connection	Relatedness
Development of friendships	Relatedness
Intention to help others	Altruism
Desire to protect others from failure	Altruism
Knowledge sharing to support others	Altruism
Sharing resources for others' benefit	Altruism
General intention to contribute	Altruism
Voluntary contribution without expectation of return	Altruism
Mutual support	Reciprocity
Contribution aiming at mutual benefit	Reciprocity

Reciprocity expectation	Reciprocity
Balanced reciprocity	Reciprocity
Receiving acknowledgment of one's feedback	Recognition
Receiving expressions of gratitude	Recognition
Feeling appreciated by others	Recognition
Recognition from peer contributors	Recognition
Feeling heard and taken seriously	Recognition
Exposure to new ideas	Professional development
Being intellectually stimulated	Professional development
Exposure to new valuation models	Professional development
Development of open-mindedness	Professional development
Experiencing learning opportunities	Professional development
Gaining market insights	Professional development
<i>(Visibility as professional positioning strategy)</i>	Professional development
Expanding professional network	Professional development
Exposure to different perspectives	Professional development
Gaining new insights	Professional development
Establishing professional relationships	Professional development
Engaging in professional networking	Professional development
Session structure	Structure of the session
Presence of a moderator	Structure of the session
Use of tools during the session	Structure of the session
Informal social moments	Practical fit
Short session duration	Practical fit
Low perceived barrier to entry	Practical fit
Alignment with personal schedule	Practical fit
Accessibility of location	Practical fit
Required preparation time	Practical fit

Perceived topic relevance or appeal	Topic of the session
Interested in innovation and sustainability	Topic of the session
Alignment with professional role	Topic of the session
Contributing to system innovation	Impact
Participation in co-creation	Impact
Feeling of making a meaningful impact	Impact
Quality of communication	Continuity
Receiving feedback	Continuity
Receiving follow-up information about participants	Continuity
Impact of COVID-19 on participation	Continuity
Diversity of participants	Variation
Innovation in session format	Variation
Repetition of similar sessions	Variation
Clear thematic focus	Variation

7.4 Appendix D – Overview respondents

Respondent number	Category	Age	Function	Entrepreneur	Business experience (years)	Interview duration	Location	Interviewer
1	Incidental participant	55	Founder Fruit Tree nursery Fleuren	Yes	33	00:45:23	Online	Annemijn
2	Incidental participant	60	Founder Bokashi & Provinos	Yes	32	00:41:24	Online	Joelle
3	Incidental participant	55	Founder & Managing Director of Blue Engineering	Yes	32	00:18:29	Online	Annemijn
4	Incidental participant	58	Founder bureau 5	Yes	32	00:27:13	Online	Joelle
5	Incidental participant	58	Founder Brandaris	Yes	30	00:20:59	Online	Joelle
6	Incidental participant	54	Founder Botany	No	29	00:12:22	Online	Joelle
7	Incidental participant	47	Business Incubation Officer	No	23	00:22:53	Online	Annemijn

8	Incidental participant	44	Business developer	No	19	00:28:44	Online	Annemijn
9	Incidental participant	39	Co-owner Blue Engineering	Yes	16	00:18:09	Online	Annemijn
10	Incidental participant	41	Business Manager Circularity	No	16	00:22:07	Online	Annemijn
11	Incidental participant (never participated)	40	Policy Advisor & Project Manager	No	16	00:13:44	Online	Annemijn
12	Incidental participant	54	Founder Pharox	Yes	15	00:18:04	Online	Joelle
13	Incidental Participant	47	Co-founder WolkyTolky	No	12	00:15:28	Online	Joelle
14	Incidental participant (never participated)	24	Marketeer Bluehub	No	2.5	00:24:39	Online	Annemijn
15	Serial Participant	63	Founder it4all, Author ChatGPT & Crypto Investments	Yes	39	00:48:44	Online	Joelle

16	Serial Participant	60	Founder Abundanism (Co-founder Open Brains)	Yes	38	00:40:35	Online	Joelle
17	Serial Participant	60	Co-Founder eco broker	Yes	30	01:22:10	Online	Joelle
18	Serial Participant	48	Business Developer Startup Ecosystem	No	26	00:23:14	Online	Annemijn
19	Serial participant	54	Founder DeltaVU consulting	Yes	25	00:35:09	Online	Annemijn
20	Serial participant	38	Co-owner AgroWizard (Former Co-owner Bluehub)	No	20	00:20:58	Online	Joelle
21	Serial Participant	34	Business Development Manager Bluehub	No	18	00:31:46	Online	Joelle
22	Serial Participant	38	Chief technology officer	No	13	00:36:46	Online	Annemijn
23	Serial Participant	32	Sustainability Policy Developer	No	10	00:11:21	Online	Joelle

7.5 Appendix E – Comparison between incidental and serial participants

Characteristic	Incidental Participants (n=14)	Serial Participants (n=9)
Age	24–58 years (avg. 48)	32–63 years (avg. 47)
Participation	Occasional; 2 never participated	Regular; all participated
Employees Bluehub	1 currently employed	1 currently employed, 1 former co-founder
Entrepreneurship	7 out of 14 are entrepreneurs	4 out of 9 are entrepreneurs
Experience	2.5–33 years	10–39 years
Professions	Founders, business developers, policy advisors, project managers, marketers, incubation officers	Founders, business developers, CTOs, sustainability policy developers, consultants
Sectors	Agriculture, sustainability, circular economy, consultancy, engineering, marketing, innovation	Consultancy, sustainability, technology, crypto, real estate, startup ecosystems