Understanding social media use for work

Content, causes, and consequences

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Dissertation overview
Introduction

In 2016 there was a growing user base of 9.6 million Facebook users, 4.2 million LinkedIn users, and 2.6 million Twitter users in the Netherlands (van der Veer, Sival, & van der Meer, 2016). The integration of social media into society (Bode & Vraga, 2015) and the workplace are rapidly spreading (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), reshaping the nature of the workplace and of work itself (Bucher, Fieseler, & Suphan, 2013). Social media affordances may affect several communication processes in organizations such as socialization, knowledge sharing and power processes (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), others have noted that public social media use for work is on the rise due to outcomes such as increased job satisfaction and performance (e.g., Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Moqbel, Nevo, & Kock, 2013). Studies also conclude that social media offer new and exciting ways of interacting with coworkers and other target groups, sharing knowledge and showcasing one’s expertise (Bucher et al., 2013; Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013; Utz, 2015).

With social media becoming pervasive in all aspects of daily life, including work, research interest in the topic has been on the rise (El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2015), with an increasing amount of studies being published since 2013 (e.g., Bucher, et al., 2013; Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Treem, et al., 2015). Notably, most of these studies are concerned with enterprise social media (e.g., Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015; Gibbs, et al., 2013; Majchrzak, et al., 2013; Treem, et al., 2015), largely ignoring the use of prominent public counterparts such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter in organizational contexts. Those studies that do address this use are typically conceptual in nature (e.g., Bucher, et al., 2013; Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2012), with some exceptions, such as Moqbel and colleagues (2013) and Utz (2015), who examined the relationship between public social media use and job performance. This lack of empirical understanding is problematic since public social media use by organizational members might offer some distinct challenges and opportunities for employees and organizations. For example, public social media are often used outside the direct control of organizations and generate complex boundary management issues for employees. This, in turn, could potentially affect individual well-being and ultimately organizational functioning.
The implications of these new technologies for employee outcomes – e.g., engagement and exhaustion – are still poorly understood. This dissertation seeks to accomplish four primary tasks. First, this dissertation aims to provide insight into the amount and content of work-related messages posted, distributed, and exchanged through employees’ public social media accounts. Understanding the content of communication serves as a springboard from which to theorize on the causes and consequences of these communication practices. Second, the studies presented here heed the call for more empirical work to better understand the adoption of social media in the workplace (El Ouirdi, et al., 2015; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Specifically, this dissertation aims to contribute to our understanding of the causes of employees' work-related social media content. Third, the studies presented here identify the individual psychosocial consequences – such as work/life conflict, work pressure, engagement, and exhaustion – of using these technologies in an organizational context.

Using the insights from these empirical studies we then commence our fourth task, which is to draw implications from these insights and inform theory and practice of the content (Chapter 1 and 2), causes (Chapter 2 and 3) and consequences (Chapter 3 through 6) of employees’ public social media use for work.

Before we continue it is important to define the phenomenon under study since there is a plethora of different social media technologies and even more definitions. In the context of organizational communication, the distinction between enterprise social media and public social media is important. The term ‘social media’ was first used in print in 1997, by AOL executive Ted Leonsis, to describe a place where consumers can be entertained, communicate and participate in a social environment (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In lieu of consensus on a definition of social media, the default approach in many academic writings has been to define social media by pointing toward the types of technologies or specific platforms that people recognize as social media i.e., blogs, wikis, social networking sites. Regardless, most definitions on social media include the creation and publication of user-generated content and the ability to connect to other users (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

We explicitly differentiate between public social media use (e.g., Facebook) and enterprise social media use (e.g., Yammer) for work. Enterprise social media are defined as: “Web-based platforms that allow workers to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization; (2) explicitly indicate or
implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and (4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing” (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013, p. 2). This definition is used to refer to technologies such as Yammer, Lync or more organization-specific platforms such as IBM’s Connections and Bluekiwi from Atos (ibid). These platforms are for internal use and are confined within the organization context, so are not of interest in the studies presented here.

The public social media we refer to are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). This definition is commonly used to describe social media applications such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. In this dissertation, these applications are used as prominent examples of public social media. Central to this dissertation is the work-related use of these public social media by which we mean that these tools are used to share information related to employees' work, their industry or their organization, with both professional and personal contacts in their social networks.

Focus of this Dissertation

This dissertation advances academic research and practical knowledge on public social media use in organizations by presenting an examination of its content, causes, and consequences. The focus is on the work-related use of public social media because, despite the ubiquitous nature of these technologies in the workplace, little is known about how and why these technologies are used in organizational contexts and with what consequences.

However, the importance of exploring the mechanisms associated with work-related social media content extends far beyond the fact that social media are frequently used in organizational contexts. A review of the literature reveals that public social media use in organizational contexts has been subject to some theoretical elaboration (e.g., El Ouirdi, et al., 2015; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2012), albeit receiving less empirical attention. In the pivotal conceptual work of Treem and Leonardi (2012) social media have been
positively associated with organizational communication processes such as information sharing, socialization, and collaboration. Furthermore, despite these positive associations ascribed to social media use at work, research also identifies some challenges associated with social media. For instance, Ollier-Malaterre and colleagues (2013) theorize on the challenges social media bring forth by further blurring the boundaries between work and life domains. Other challenges associated with social media use at work are information overload, increased interruptions, distractions and increased work-life interference (Bucher, et al., 2013). It is important to note that these assumptions have been theorized but are not thoroughly tested in empirical research.

The adoption of enterprise social media has been subject to more academic scrutiny over the past years. Some studies critique the ideology of openness supposedly associated with enterprise social media use (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). Other research directed attention to the meaning employees attribute to enterprise social media (Treem et al., 2015) and the impact of enterprise social media in communicative activities through which work is accomplished (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). However, public social media use in the workplace lacks a similar research tradition. It is unknown to what extent these findings may extrapolate to the use of public social media.

Some studies have examined the relationship between social media use for work and job performance, suggesting a positive correlation between the two (Letheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Moqbel, et al., 2013). In addition, Utz (2015) showed that employees derive informational benefits from the use of LinkedIn and Twitter, which aid professional success. However, many empirical questions about the use of social media remain unanswered. How (content) are public social media used for work related purposes? Why (causes) do employees use public social media for work? And to what extent (consequences) do employees experience benefits from using these technologies?

This void in the literature is addressed by exploring the content, causes, and consequences of social media use for work. This dissertation provides a strong empirical basis by including the first extensive content analysis of employees’ tweets (Chapter one), a multi-method study combining content analysis data and survey research (Chapter two), a field study (Chapter five), cross-sectional panel research (Chapters four and six), and a longitudinal panel study (Chapter three). The studies presented in this dissertation inform theory and practice.
content, causes and consequences of social media use for work. The contribution of the dissertation in each of these areas is more thoroughly discussed in the following paragraphs.

Content

To understand the causes and consequences of employees’ online behaviors we must first fully grasp the extent and nature of work-related social media use. The use of a content analysis is particularly appealing to examine online behaviors because the examination of narrative texts – such as social media interactions – allow the unobtrusive study and observation of employees' social media utterances that are otherwise difficult to obtain. Although research on social media use has focused on the content such as that published by journalists (Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012), politicians (Graham, Jackson & Broersma, 2014), news organizations (Greer & Ferguson, 2011), non-profit organizations (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012), and even the homeless (Koepfler & Fleischmann, 2012), public social media content by employees have not been considered. The content analysis presented in Chapter one contributes to our understanding of work-related social media content. The objective of this study is to develop a typology of work-related public social media messages to advance our understanding of employees’ online behaviors. This is done by examining employees’ public Twitter accounts. Twitter is used because 1) Twitter is an effective dialogue tool in organizational communication, connecting organizations and employees with relevant stakeholders (Schultz, et al., 2011), and 2) tweets are mostly public-by-default and private-by-effort (Marwick & boyd, 2010), making tweets accessible and relevant to broad audiences. The central research question reads as follows: How do employees use public Twitter accounts for work?

To answer this research question Chapter one summarizes the preconceptions about work-related Twitter use in an analytical framework deduced from the literature and grounded in an abductive logic. The framework is then applied by manually coding 38,124 tweets sent by 433 employees. Results show that eight in every ten employees uses their public Twitter account to talk about work-related topics. More than one-third of all tweets are work-related, and most of these work-related tweets are sent on weekdays, often outside regular office hours -- 56% is sent between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. Most of the tweets sent by employees are neutral or
positive, with only a few tweets with a negative tone of voice. Most tweets refer to information about the industry, the organization, or individual work experiences and daily routines.

This study does not only provide insights into the frequency and content of employees’ social media use. It also provides a first step in understanding the causes and consequences. For instance, information shared on Twitter is found to reflect individual experiences or knowledge versus organizational information. This suggests that employees’ work-related social media use might be driven by individual or collective mechanisms (Chapter two). Additionally, the finding that many work-related tweets are sent outside regular work hours suggests that work-life boundaries may be blurring, which could affect employee well-being (Chapter six).

**Causes**

This dissertation also examines *causes* of public social media use for work by explicitly taking the organizational context into account. From research on social media use (e.g., Hogan, 2010; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012) and enterprise social media use (Erhardt & Gibbs, 2014), we know that (organizational) identification is an important motivational influence on behavior. Moreover, research has demonstrated that the organizational context is important when examining employees’ behaviors (e.g., Fuller Hester, Frey, Relyea, & Beu, 2006). Chapter two of this dissertation explores employees’ use of public social media accounts for work from a social identity perspective. This study shows status evaluations (i.e., pride and respect) are important *causes* of overall work-related social media use. More importantly, this chapter demonstrates that organizational identification and work motivation underlie different types of work-related social media messages.

Chapter two presents a multi-method study to explore the influences on employee’s posting and sharing of social media messages. Based on the content analysis presented in Chapter one, employees seem to attribute meaning to their association with the organizations or to themselves as competent professionals. Chapter two combines survey data from 430 employees with the content analysis data presented in Chapter one. The findings confirm our assumption that employees are motivated to use social media by both self-serving and altruistic needs. Specifically, this study suggests that altruistic needs can be conceptualized as organizational identification and self-serving motivations refer to individuals’ desire to
succeed professionally. For instance, the publication of organization related messages on social media is primarily driven by organizational identification, whereas profession-related messages are primarily driven by employees’ desire to succeed. Organizational identification and the desire to succeed are in turn positively associated with status judgments – i.e., pride and respect (Fuller, et al., 2006). Hence, both individual and contextual factor can drive the use and content of social media.

Subsequently, Chapter three places social media center stage in examining its role as a mediator between boundary management strategies and employee engagement. As we have learned from the results presented in Chapter one, work and non-work content are mixed on public social media accounts. Indeed, the blurring of boundaries between work and life domains on social media platforms is one of the most widely discussed phenomena in organizational communication studies about information and communication technology use (Bucher, et al., 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Chapter three suggests that employees’ boundary management strategy is likely to affect their social media use, to the extent that employees who want to integrate work and life domains actively use their public social media accounts to share work-related content because such use allows them to conduct both work and life activities in both domains.

In lieu of closely controlled experimental conditions, a longitudinal study of employee boundary management preferences, social media use for work, and engagement can help to tease apart causality and rule out alternative explanations. To that end, Chapter three makes an important contribution in establishing causal ordering among these variables, and by extension, sheds new light on the causes and consequences of social media use for work.

**Consequences**

The consequences of social media use for work are examined by demonstrating the causal relationship between social media use and employee engagement. However, despite these findings, research on communication technology use in organizations has suggested that the relationship between technology use and engagement might be more complex as technologies tend to produce paradoxical consequences (Arnold, 2003; Ter Hoeven et al.,
To address these issues the *Chapters four* through *six* aim to provide a more detailed understanding of the relationship between social media use for work and engagement and exhaustion.

The increasing adoption of communication technologies – i.e. email, smartphone, laptop – over recent years has been linked to employee wellbeing – i.e., engagement and exhaustion – in multiple studies (e.g., Chesley, 2014; Ter Hoeven, Van Zoonen, & Fonner, 2016). *Chapter three* adds to these findings by demonstrating that public social media use for work leads to changes in engagement.

The integration of social media in the workplace is both as enticing as it is vexing for employees, organizations, and communication scholars (Buscher et al., 2013). Social media afford behaviors that were difficult or impossible to perform before these technologies entered the workplace (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), yet the ways in which these technologies are used can be psychologically demanding. For instance, social media can be experienced as intrusive since it challenges sociotemporal boundaries (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013). As Gibbs and colleagues (2013) noted, the social media affordances identified by Treem and Leonardi (2012) may create tensions for how these technologies are used. Additionally, social media are associated with positive outcomes such as increased performance (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014), while other research hints at challenges such as increased work pressure (Bucher et al., 2013; Mazmanian et al., 2013). The tensions associated with social media use, characterized by a trade-off between positive and negative consequences of use, are explored in *chapters four* through *six* to gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between social media use and employee well-being.

Specifically, *Chapters four* and *five* adopt a tension-based lens to identify some tensions – e.g., communication effectiveness vs. interruptions, and autonomy vs. work pressure – that characterize the utilization of social media tools (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Vitak, et al., 2012). In other words, the advantages associated with social technology use may come at, and with, a cost (e.g., Bucher et al., 2013; Ollier-Malaterre et al, 2013).

To grasp the potential consequences of social media use for work *chapters four* and *five* consider opposing meditational effects. Additionally, *chapter five* adds an examination of contextual factors that might influence the positive and negative effects. Specifically, *Chapter*
fives examines the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian, et al., 2013) in the context of social media use and adds the role of responsiveness. On the one hand, social media offer employees more leeway in how they organize their work, whilst on the other hand, this autonomy simultaneously increases work pressure. The need to be responsive to others’ expectations of one’s social media use for work might increase perceptions of work pressure and reduce feelings of autonomy.

Finally, Chapter six draws on boundary theory to explore the potential dark side of social media. As demonstrated in Chapter three, boundary management preferences are an important factor determining how work and life roles are enacted on social media. Chapter six builds on this idea to examine potential boundary conflicts and shows that the use of public social media for work cause work to life and life to work conflict, which is in turn related to exhaustion. This study also examined the potentially mitigating role of social media policies in these negative relationships. However, the presence of social media policies in organizations was not found to mitigate the relationship between public social media use for work and boundary conflicts. This suggests that social media policies do not address these individual consequences, or fail to adequately do so.

In sum, this dissertation contains six empirical chapters that address the work-related content shared on social media, causes of these behaviors, and the consequences associated with social media use for work. Figure 1 illustrates the outline of this dissertation representing the leading themes and the chapters in which these themes are examined. These chapters start with an abstract, followed by the introduction, theoretical perspectives, research method, results and finally a discussion paragraph.
Discussion

This dissertation focuses on public social media use – i.e., Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Since the purpose of social media is to connect people and share information, the default technical structure and philosophy of social media technologies has been – and appears will continue to be – disclosure to a broad audience (Boyd, 2008; Donath, 2007; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Marwick & Boyd, 2010). These connections and information sharing capabilities of social media allow employees to influence the impressions others form of them and help shape different aspects of their lives – e.g., work – and their roles in it. The insights presented on the content, causes and consequences of social media use for work inform organizational communication theory in several ways. Using social media for work will present employees with tensions related to perpetual connectivity, and between professional and personal boundaries. Although the technology itself may evolve, changing the tactics employees use, the underlying motives, consequences and archetypical behaviors we outline in this dissertation will likely endure. In the following paragraphs, we discuss how the findings presented in this dissertation inform organizational communication theory on social media use in organizations.
Theoretical Implications

First, this dissertation provides a categorization of work-related social media messages. The results indicate employees frequently utilize public social media channels to share work-related information. This supports the notion that social media collapse public and private contexts, and further blur the boundaries between private and professional roles (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2010). Most of these messages can be classified as professional experiences, organizational news, and industry related information. The work related information that is shared online often actively includes coworkers into the conversation by mentioning them in the posts.

Chapter one shows that almost half of the work related tweets are sent outside of regular office hours. Eight out of every ten employees use public social media to share such messages and 36 percent of the messages on public social media are in some way work-related. These findings have important implications for our conceptualizations of organizational communication in a networked society (Castells, 2007). Work is no longer isolated within in the context of a singular office or office hours; rather it is situated within a broader stakeholder environment where work communiqués become public and observable by anyone and at any time through social media. Today, work and productivity involve dynamic interactions across social media platforms and time throughout the day, including those not defined by regular work hours.

Second, the categorization of social media messages provided important insights into the potential causes of these online behaviors. The categorization suggests that employees may present themselves as being knowledgeable and competent by sharing professional experiences and knowledge of the industry, or employees may share organizational news and product and service information shared online. These two different types of information sharing seem to be driven by two distinct motivations. First, professional experiences and advocating individual knowledge is likely to be driven by personal motivations such as the desire to succeed. However, organizational news and product information are related to collective goals, hence assumed to reflect employees’ identification with their organization.

The findings presented in Chapter two confirm these assumptions, suggesting social media use for work is a means to obtain personal goals or contribute to collective ones. Specifically, the findings suggest individualistic motivations, such as a desire to succeed
professionally, are associated with sharing more personal experiences and knowledge. This is in line with research that suggests that social media are vehicles for self-expression and impression management (Erhardt & Gibbs, 2014; Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012; Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013; Walton & Rice, 2013). To obtain professional success, employees need to create an appearance of competence and expertise (Yun et al., 2007); social media offer the possibility to do so for a broad audience.

Additionally, the findings suggest that employees who identify strongly with the organization reciprocate by sharing information – e.g., organizational news, information about products and services – to contribute to organizational goals, such as promoting new products. The findings suggest that employees with strong social identities vis-à-vis their organization are motivated to facilitate the viability and success of their organizations (e.g., Tyler & Blader, 2003). Hence, the findings are in line with social identity theory; professional social identities are enacted on public social media by making work-related conversations a salient part of the online discourse.

Third, a prevalent issue in the field of social media and organizational communication research is the notion that contemporary communication technologies collapse private/public contexts and blur professional/personal boundaries (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Boundary management has become a more profound organizational challenge since the adoption of social media in the workplace (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013). This dissertation suggests that social media have made boundaries more permeable, weakened the separation between interpersonal and mass communication, and destabilized the enactment of domain-specific roles in time and space. Boundary theory suggests that individuals attempt to maintain their preferences for segmenting or integrating elements from work and other life domains (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). The findings in Chapter three indicate that employees’ boundary management preferences are enacted as technological boundaries on social media. Specifically, employees who have a desire to integrate different life domains use public social media to communicate about personal and professional issues. Although prior research has shown that employees with segmentation preferences used communication technologies to enact these preferred boundaries (Park, et al., 2011), this study is the first to show this relationship in a longitudinal research setting.
Social media cause a context collapse, merging work-related content with personal content and merging audiences that were once separated by physical and temporal boundaries (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2010). Boundary theory pertains that this might cause spillover effects between life domains (Ashforth, et al., 2000). Indeed the findings presented in Chapter six indicate that using public social media for work opens up the possibilities for time-, strain-, and behavior-based role conflicts. Conversations on social media never end, as also demonstrated in Chapter one; hence the likelihood that personal conversations continue during work and work conversations continue beyond regular work hours increases with the use of social media. Additionally, the processing of information on social media distracts individuals from current role demands, causing strain. Furthermore, information and online behaviors on social media cause role conflicts as professional and personal contacts are merged into one broad, amorphous audience, which may complicate role transitions. These findings can be explained by resource drain theory and the conservation of resources theory, which suggest that individuals have a finite amount of resources – i.e., time, attention and energy – available (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Small & Riley, 1990; Staines, 1980). The resources allocated to each domain, or in this case the processing or publication of work-related content on public social media, subtract from the resources available to individuals (Michel, et al., 2011) to address demands in another domain.

Fourth, an important aim of this dissertation was to examine the consequences of public social media use for work for individual outcomes. The findings add to the literature on the consequences of social media use by progressively deepening our understanding of the relationship between social media use and engagement. Chapter three demonstrated the causal relationship between social media use for work and engagement. Subsequently, in Chapter four the opposing mediation mechanisms are considered, thereby acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between technology use and individual outcomes such as engagement. Whereas Chapter five considers a condition (i.e., the norm of responsiveness) under which the positive or negative effects might be stronger or weaker.

The findings presented in Chapter three show tentative support for the notion that social media use for work causes engagement. Importantly, this is the first longitudinal study in the context of public social media use for work and engagement providing strong evidence for the relationship between boundary preferences, social media use, and engagement. These
findings are important since engagement is associated with overall employee well-being and an important counterforce for coping with job-related strain, stress, and anxiety. The results are in line with recent studies that demonstrate positive correlations between public social media use and other individual outcomes such as job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Charoensukmongkol, 2014; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Moqbel, et al., 2013; Utz, 2015).

This relationship between social media use for work and engagement can be explained by viewing communication as constituting engagement. As employees continue to use public social media to share information about work projects, organizational products and services, industry initiatives, and daily work activities, they communicatively construct their engagement with their work. The findings are an important first step in understanding the causal relationships between social media use and engagement.

This dissertation, however, also acknowledges that the relationship between social media use and individual outcomes might be more complex, as evidenced by the opposing causal processes linking these constructs presented in Chapters four and five. Communication technologies have been seen as paradoxical in terms of their use and consequences (e.g., Arnold, 2003). Drawing on a rich body of literature on technological paradoxes (e.g., Mazmanian, et al., 2013), demands and resources (e.g., Demerouti, et al., 2001), and social media tensions (e.g., Gibbs, et al., 2013), this Chapter further clarifies the relationship between social media use for work and engagement.

The challenges and advantages demonstrated build on previous studies on the impact of enterprise social media (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2013: Leonardi, et al., 2010) and communication technology use (CTU) at work (e.g., Chesley, 2014; Fonner & Roloff, 2012; Matusik & Mickel, 2011; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Perlow, 2012; Ter Hoeven et al., 2016). Notably, most of these tensions have been theorized (e.g., Javernpaa & Lang, 2005; Perlow, 2012) or supported by qualitative data (e.g., Gibbs, et al., 2013; Leonardi, et al., 2010) but lack support from quantitative studies, which mostly find support for one of the opposing pathways (e.g, Fonner & Roloff, 2012). The findings presented in Chapter four demonstrate the complexities that employees encounter when using social technologies for work.

Specifically, this dissertation showed that social media use for work produces several demands – e.g., work-life conflict and interruptions – and resources – e.g., efficient
communication and accessibility – that are associated with engagement and exhaustion. Chapter four is the first quantitative study in the field of organizational communication to demonstrate that the job demands and resources model is a useful framework to examine the tensions produced by public social media use for work. By drawing on organizational psychology theory (i.e., the job demands and resources theory, Bakker & Demerouti, 2014), this study provides additional insights into the underlying mechanisms through which social media are related to engagement and exhaustion. The job demands and resources theory distinguishes between the health impairment process and the motivational process. The health impairment process refers to the detrimental effects of the demands on exhaustion, whereas the motivational process refers to the positive effects of resources on engagement (Bakker et al., 2014). The findings presented in Chapters four and five provide support for these processes, as the effects of social media related demands and challenges – i.e., work intensification, work-life conflict, and interruption – on exhaustion outweigh the effects of the social media resources and advantages on exhaustion. Moreover, the effects of social media related resources – i.e., autonomy, communication efficiency, and accessibility – on engagement are generally stronger than the effects of demands on engagement. Thus public social media use in organizations plays a different role for exhaustion compared to engagement.

Although the notion that technologies are paradoxical is not new (e.g., Arnold, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005) its application to study public social media use in the workplace is. Social media research often draws on affordance theory to suggest the presence of several tensions, mostly associated with enterprise social media use (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2013; Majchrzak, et al., 2013 Treem & Leonardi, 2012). These tensions refer to how individuals interact with the technological features of the medium, which might result in a trade-off between, for instance, visibility-invisibility, engagement-disengagement (in this case referring to attention allocation), and sharing-control (Gibbs, et al., 2013). Our findings add to current understanding of social media tensions by suggesting that the tensions do not merely exist in choices of openness and closedness of information or of public versus private information. Rather, tensions of work-related use of public social media are a product of its use reflected in advantages and challenges that can be viewed as resources and demands. This is important as these resources and demands are associated with engagement and exhaustion.
Finally, this dissertation demonstrates a condition – i.e., the norm of responsiveness – under which advantages – i.e., autonomy – and challenges – i.e., work pressure – of public social media use for work are stronger or weaker. Specifically, Chapter five provides support for the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian, et al., 2013) by demonstrating that social media use for work simultaneously induces autonomy and work pressure, which is in turn related (though differentially) to engagement and exhaustion. The findings suggest that the norm of being responsive to social media messages reduces perceptions of autonomy. Previous studies have suggested that when coworkers are aware of the possibility of the technological infrastructure to maintain connectivity, they often expect immediate responses (Leonardi, et al., 2010). The findings contribute to the paradox literature by demonstrating its applicability in a social media context and examining the conditions under which these mechanisms are stronger or weaker.

Importantly, this finding suggests that taking a collective perspective is crucial for understanding how individual employees experience the use of social media. The organizational context and social expectations make social media use a relational dynamic. An employee cannot simply ignore or refuse to respond social media messages if (s)he is committed to succeeding in a social environment that expects responsiveness and connectivity. This is also in line with findings of Mazmanian (2013) who suggested that the experiences of communication technology use are situated in the context of use. Thus, strong expectations of responsiveness would make it difficult for employees to have control over their activities.

Practical Implications

Scholarly research and business press have applauded social media for its potential to revolutionize the way we do business. This led to all kinds of bold proclamations about the role and potential of social media in organizational settings. These claims include statements such as “social media will change your business” (Baker & Green, 2008), “social media are the new hybrid element of the promotion mix” (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), or “organizations that are not on social media, actually say that they don’t want to answer the phone” (van Vught, 2016).

Whether one agrees with these claims or not, the findings presented here suggest that many employees use social media to talk about their work, industries and the organization. As such social media are likely to affect organizational processes (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). As
information about the organization and work becomes public, many organizations try to control the information streams on social media that could either benefit or harm the organization. Contrary to the use of enterprise social media, public social media has been associated with risky behavior (e.g., sharing sensitive information, reputational damage) and wasting time (e.g., cyberloafing) (Landers & Callan, 2014). Organizations continuously negotiate tensions between the benefits and risks of employees’ public social media use (Dreher, 2014; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Managerial efforts and social media policies are primarily directed at protecting organizations from legal liabilities, avoiding productivity losses and protecting the organization’s reputation, intellectual property and other proprietary information (Dreher, 2014; Linke & Zerfass, 2012; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Hence, although this dissertation primarily focuses on the consequences at the individual level, the results have some important implications at the organizational level as well.

First, employees frequently use public social media in organizational contexts. In particular, the 430 employees studied here had a total of 186,139 followers and had sent a total of 1,541,855 tweets. This suggests that employees embody enormous communication potential by sharing organization and work related information to a broad audience.

Second, the findings show that employees' tone of voice in work-related social media utterances is primarily neutral. Employees withhold negative as well as positive emotions, suggesting they might be aware of the potential consequences of their social media utterances in terms of the perceptions others form of them and the organization, especially if their personal and professional identity is available with their postings. Also, these social media utterances are driven by a desire to succeed and identify with their organization, making negative content and harmful content unlikely to be shared publicly.

Third, the findings show that most social media policies are ineffective in hampering the negative consequences of these behaviors at the individual level. One explanation is that social media policies and guidelines are predominantly directed at appropriate and lawful social media use (Dreher, 2014), rather than educating employees and protecting them from negative individual consequences of social media use. Importantly, the findings of this dissertation suggest that managerial efforts should also be directed at the individual consequences of social media use, as these affect employee well-being. When organizations encourage employees to use social media, they should be aware of the potentially detrimental
effects on individual well-being and ultimately on organizational performance. The findings show that employees continuously negotiate tensions between social media related advantages (e.g., autonomy) and disadvantages (e.g., work intensification), and between professional life and personal life demands. These tensions can affect their wellbeing – i.e., engagement and exhaustion. Therefore, in addition to the issues commonly addressed in social media policies or governance programs, organizations should direct attention to the complexities of managing the tensions associated with social media use. Without paternalistically confining employees’ freedom in taking advantage of the resources social media may offer them in their daily work.

Fourth, the findings discussed earlier strongly echo many researchers’ suggestions that professional and personal boundaries are blurring. As such, organizations that aim to govern employees' social media use should not address work-related social media use as isolated or independent of private social media use. Both life domains are strongly intertwined on social media, and messages intended for or generated from, one life domain easily spills over to another.

Fifth, in many popular and professional debates organizations and communication consultants, rush in to talk about the benefits of having employees on social media (e.g., Newman, 2014). However, this dissertation supports the call to prevent the uncritical acceptance of the normative assumption that being on social media is unambiguously good for business (e.g., Gibbs, et al., 2013). In fact, at the individual level being on social media for work seems far less beneficial. Managerial efforts should focus on helping employees to capitalize on the positive consequences of social media and protect them from the negative ones, for instance by offering employees additional resources such as training directed at improving digital literacy. This may help employees improve their social media skills and further improve their efficiency, while also helping to organize the increased information flow, which may reduce perceptions of pressure. Also, it is very likely that some employees, in general, are better able to deal with the tensions social media use impose on them than others. For instance, employees who are less burdened by a perceived need to be responsive are better able reap the benefits of social media use.

Sixth, Chapter five showed that work intensification was an important consequence of social media use. This has also been identified as an important consequence of more traditional technologies such as email use (Barley, et al., 2011). Many organizations have taken measures
to avoid overload and work pressure as a result of technology use. A popular example that received wide attention is the no-email policy of Volkswagen. In 2011, Volkswagen decided to stop its servers sending emails to its employees when they are off-shift (Tsukayama, 2011). Similarly, in the context of social media use, managerial efforts could be directed at creating a healthy environment and countering the normative assumptions of responsiveness and perpetual connectivity during off-time. However, organizations should remain cautious with such interventions as these might also reduce the benefits employees experience from use, such as autonomy and accessibility.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this dissertation provides answers to many questions, the findings presented here also present some new questions that may direct future research efforts. First, a much-needed categorization of social media messages is presented in Chapter one. Importantly, this categorization is based on employees’ Twitter content. Although Twitter affords similar behaviors as other social media outlets, there are some important differences as well. For instance, users are restricted in the length of the messages that they can share. Furthermore, the connections on Twitter are often unidirectional in nature, which means that people in a network do not necessarily have to know each other, which is typically the case with Facebook and LinkedIn connections. This raises the question whether the classification presented in Chapter one holds true for other social media accounts. Future research may explore the applicability of this framework in the context of Facebook and LinkedIn and distinguish between medium-specific and general content characteristics.

Second, more research is needed to understand the factors influencing social media use for work. Although this dissertation identified two important mechanisms, and the importance of boundary preferences underlying social media use for work, many empirical questions remain unanswered. What are specific organizational or individual characteristics causing social media use? The findings suggest that employees act on behalf of their organization when they show higher levels of organizational identification. This implies some form of reciprocity in which employees go beyond their job requirements if they identify with their organization. This argument of a ‘natural’ balance in the relationship between employees and the organizations is frequently used to explain employee behaviors, for instance, in terms of a
psychological contract between employees and the organization (Rousseau, 1989). In a psychological contract view, the organization takes on an anthropomorphic identity as a party to the psychological contract. This contract holds that both parties have obligations vis-à-vis each other. The extent to which the organization has fulfilled its obligation toward the employment relationship determines the extent to which employees engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (Robinson & Morrison, 1995). Similarly, in explaining cyberloafing and digital deviance the metaphor of the ledger has been introduced (Garrett & Danziger, 2008). This metaphor implies that when employees justify their own deviant behaviors because they feel they have put more effort in than the organization compensated them for (Siponen & Vance, 2010). Given the importance of the organizational context in understanding employee behaviors and social media use such a relational view on employment might help explain variation in individual social media use for work.

Third, this dissertation emphasizes the consequences of social media use for work. Studies on communication technology use, whether they adopt a paradoxical view of technology, a tension-based lens (Fonner & Roloff, 2012; Gibbs, et al., 2013; Ter Hoeven, et al., 2016), or the JD-R framework (e.g., Ter Hoeven, et al., 2016) provide abundant evidence for opposing consequences of communication technology use. This dissertation demonstrates similar consequences in the context of public social media use for work. Importantly, research on the conditionality of these effects is lagging behind. This is either because there simply has been more interest in establishing main effects, or because interaction effects are difficult to detect, or perhaps both (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Although this dissertation has explored the role of social media policies and the norm of responsiveness as moderators in these indirect mechanisms, these studies only scratched the surface of conditions that could potentially affect these mechanisms. Other potential moderators that could be considered at the individual level are for instance digital literacy (Buscher et al., 2013) or, at the organizational level, communication climate. Further examination of moderators is important as these interaction effects could tip the balance in favor or against using social technologies in the workplace. These conditions may inform us about which individuals are most likely to benefit from social media use or be harmed by it. In other words, as we now know, social media inherently evoke benefits and challenges. Hence the question becomes, can we limit the bad without compromising the good? Additional research into the moderating conditions and resources that
could be offered to help mitigate the negative effects might help to answer this question. Future research might consider the organizational context (e.g., communication climate, organizational support) as well as individual characteristics (e.g., digital literacy) as moderators.

Finally, a few limitations of the studies presented in this dissertation should be acknowledged. First, research on public social media use for work lacks a well-validated scale to adequately capture the spectrum of employees’ online behaviors. The different operationalizations found in the literature make it difficult to draw any overarching conclusions about the causes and consequences of social media use for work. Although we developed a measure for social media use for work, based on the content analysis data, much more research is needed to further develop and validate a measure for public social media use for work. Second, many studies rely on cross-sectional data, making causal inferences impossible. Especially in research where indirect mechanisms are proposed, longitudinal research designs are necessary. Third, the data presented in this dissertation has only been collected in the Dutch context. Additionally, except for the data presented in Chapter five, respondents were recruited in panels managed by research companies – i.e., I&O Research and PanelClix. It is unknown to what extent the findings presented here translates to other contexts, such as specific countries, professions, organizations, or cultures. Fourth, especially with respect to the work-related content shared on social media, the framework presented in Chapter one prohibits a deeper understanding of the way in which work-related topics are discussed beyond the general categories proposed here. Furthermore, since the framework has not been applied to Facebook and LinkedIn content, it is unknown to what extent these categories can be generalized to other platforms. Notably, Facebook and LinkedIn offer some similar affordances to users as Twitter does. However, there are also some differences between these platforms that could affect the way in which content is shared, such as the length of the messages and the options to make content visible only to specific users. Further research is needed to understand how these differences may affect the sharing of work-related information.

Despite these limitations and the new questions this dissertation might raise, valuable additions to the field of organizational communication have been made. First, this dissertation heeds the call to provide understanding in a widespread yet understudied phenomenon in contemporary workplaces: the increasing use of social media technologies. Second, many
studies focus on enterprise social media or general communication technologies, often overlooking the use of public social media in the workplace. The studies that do address these technologies are focused on the consequences for organizations (e.g. Dreher, 2014), such as performance (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014), but not much on individual consequences. Finally, the results provide a better understanding of the prevalence of social media use and its paradoxical consequences as well as the conditions under which these consequences may prevail.


