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How employees use Twitter to talk about work: A typology of work-related tweets

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ABSTRACT

In organizational research employees' use of personal social media for work remains an understudied phenomenon. Yet, it is important to gain understanding of these online behaviors as they might have consequences on the individual and organizational level. We provide a typology for work-related Twitter use based on a large-scale content analysis ($N = 38,124$) of tweets sent by 433 employees across different organizations. We found that work-related topics were prevalent in 36.5% of all tweets. Employees' work-related tweets paint a picture that is consistent with the archetypical social media behaviors — i.e., knowledge sharing and socialization — identified in earlier research. Employees share profession-, organization- and work-related tweets strategically with professional contacts, enhancing horizontal communication among organization members. Furthermore, Twitter enhances the integration of personal and professional life domains, as employees often tweet about their work outside regular work hours but also tweet on a personal title while at work.

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1. Introduction

Social media use in organizations is evolving at an unprecedented pace (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). The large number of work-based friendships (Del Bosque, 2013; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013) and the notion that work is a pivotal life domain (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010) results in the use of personal social media technologies, including Twitter, for work-related purposes (Johnston, 2014). Hence, a significant amount of publicly available tweets is likely to be work or organization related (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Van Zoonen, van der Meer, & Verhoeven, 2014).

It is important to understand online work-related communication as it is often associated with employee wellbeing (Fonner & Roloff, 2012) and organizational outcomes such as corporate reputation (Helm, 2011; Van Zoonen et al., 2014). Employees' Twitter use might affect employee wellbeing because it enables horizontal communication and stimulates work group support, while it may also make it hard for employees to disengage from work after work hours (Chesley, 2014). Corporate reputations can

be positively affected (Dreher, 2014; Van Zoonen et al., 2014), as employees are authentic and credible communicators of organizational information, in turn they could also sent tweets that are detrimental for evaluations of corporate reputations (Dreher, 2014; Helm, 2011). Hence, employees' social media use can be beneficial or detrimental to both the organization and the employees. Despite its importance for organizations and employees we still lack knowledge of the actual work related content that employees share on their Twitter accounts.

Most studies on social media rely on self-reports or case studies (e.g., Charoensukmongkol, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2010). As such, these studies rely on deductive logic to examine social media practices and content. Mostly these studies focus on the antecedents or consequences of social media behaviors. While survey research and self-reports can explain why and with what consequences employees post information online, it cannot reveal *what* employees actually post online.

Research on social media content focused on the content published by journalists (e.g., Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012), politicians (e.g., Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2014; Small, 2011), news organizations (Greer & Ferguson, 2011), non-profit organizations (e.g., Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011), foreign correspondents (Heinrich, 2012) and even homeless (Koepfler & Fleischmann, 2012), but has not considered employees as distinct group.

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In addition, there is some research adopting an affordance lens to examine the use of enterprise social media (e.g., Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). Again others focus on the application of software technologies in the current 'Knowledge Society' (Lytras & Ordóñez de Pablos, 2011; Lytras, Tennyson, & Ordóñez de Pablos, 2008) or understanding the adoption and use of social virtual worlds (Zhang et al., 2014). Astoundingly, this study is the first to map employees' work related social media content, published through personally owned accounts, of employees across a variety of organizations. Scholars have argued that the adoption of social media, such as Twitter, in organizations is outpacing empirical understanding of the use of these technologies (Raeth, Smolnik, Urbach, & Zimmer, 2009; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In addition, based on a literature review of social technology use by employees, El Ouirdi, El Ouirdi, Segers, and Hendrickx (2015) conclude that there is a pronounced need for quantitative research on employees' use of social media.

Existing frameworks are usually populated by either archetypical descriptions of social media use, such as knowledge sharing or identity expression (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013) or specifically created for the purpose of the study at hand (e.g., Kruikemeier, 2014). This framework of work-related content is built on the presuppositions derived from previous studies on social media use and is independent of organization and job type. This study fills the void in current literature by content analyzing the work-related tweets that employees publish on personally owned Twitter accounts.

We look at employees' use of personal *Twitter* accounts for work purposes for several reasons. First, research suggests Twitter is the most popular channel to disseminate work-related content (Verhoeven, 2012). Second, Twitter is seen as an effective dialogue tool in organizational communication. This way, organizations and their employees are connected to each other and relevant stakeholders (Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). Third, information on Twitter is usually public-by-default and private-through-effort (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). In addition, the unidirectional connections are unique to Twitter; these non-reciprocal relations encourage the reading of tweets beyond one's personal network. Thus, making tweets accessible to a wider range of stakeholders that search organization related information. Even more so than information that is shared on other social media channels that generally reciprocal such as Facebook or LinkedIn. Finally, unlike their intra organizational counterparts, often referred to as enterprise social media, their use in organizations is controversial as it is associated with risky behaviour and wasting time (Landers & Callan, 2014). In sum, tweets are particularly interesting as they a) often include references to work; b) are publicly available (e.g., to interested stakeholders) and c) despite their omnipresence in organizational communication little is know about the tweets sent by employees.

This study contributes to theory building in the field of organizational communication by providing insight into Twitter use across employees and organizations. We propose a framework describing what type of content employees share and in what way they do so. Thus, this framework synthesizes earlier findings with respect to social media use by employees. This study adds to the current literature by being the first to conduct a large scale content analysis of work related tweets on personally owned Twitter accounts across employees from different organizations using a framework deduced from earlier that mostly relied on self-report. Most importantly, this study provides organizations with insights into what and how employees discuss their work on personal social media. The empirical focus is on answering the following research question: How do employees use personal Twitter accounts for work?

2. Theoretical framework

We articulate preconceptions about work-related Twitter content in an analytical framework. This framework, deduced from the literature, contains several tweet categories and is adopted to empirical data and grounded in an abductive logic. Notably, social media use in organizations has been extensively addressed from a theoretical perspective, yet content analysis on the specific content that employees share online is lacking. We empirically examine a typology of work-related tweets that is deduced for earlier studies in which these topics have been theorized.

There have been studies that have provided a classification of tweets. However, these studies focus on the application of Twitter in specific contexts such as libraries (Aharony, 2010), political communication (Ceron, Curini, Lacus, & Porro, 2014; Kruikemeier, 2014), journalism (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009), sports (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010) or health related communication (Chew & Eysenbach, 2010). Other content analysis studies have directed attention to mapping specific issues or events such as elections (Graham et al., 2014) or specific hash tags (Small, 2011), the analysis of personal information shared on Twitter (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013; Westman, 2010), specific crisis situations (Takahashi, Tandoc, & Carmichael, 2015) or the use of Twitter during conferences (Reinhardt, Ebner, Beham, & Costa, 2009).

Other studies focus on the antecedents or consequences of Twitter use (e.g., Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2012). Studies that have focused on Twitter use in an organizational context are scares and take a motivational approach to theorize content categories based on a deductive logic (Luchman, Bergstrom, & Krulikowski, 2014; Zhao & Rosson, 2009). These studies examine social media use with either qualitative self-reports (DiMicco et al., 2008; Zhao & Rosson, 2009) or quantitative self-report measures (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014). Again others theorize how enterprise social media can afford certain online behaviors (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). However, all these studies focus on the antecedents and consequences of usage rather than the content that is actually shared online. Several scholars note that there is a pronounced need for more quantitative research on the topics related to employees' social media use (El Ouirdi et al., 2015) and that social technology use in organizations is outpacing our empirical understanding (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Hence, to fill this void in the literature this study aims to examine to what extent these theoretically identified topics are actually present in work related social media content shared through employees' Twitter accounts. We use empirical studies on social technology use in the workplace to derive work-related tweet categories (see Table 1).

2.1. Workplace communication on Twitter: A typology

2.1.1. Work-related tweets

Social media afford employees the ability to express identities (Del Bosque, 2013; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013), share knowledge about their work or organization (Dreher, 2014) and engage in relationships with other professionals (Peluchette, Karl, & Fertig, 2013). Thus, workplace communication on Twitter involves knowledge sharing about the profession, organization and work behaviors, as these are important cues for employees' professional identities (e.g., Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Miles & Mangold, 2014; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Van Zoonen et al., 2014). In addition, workplace communication may involve the representation of the organization in terms of web care activities and persuasive communication (Helm, 2011). Finally, social media