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Understanding the consequences of public social media use for work

Ward van Zoonen^{*}, Joost W.M. Verhoeven, Rens Vliegenthart*The Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

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ABSTRACT

Social media has slowly become ubiquitous in the workplace; however, the use of these technologies has been associated with both positive and negative consequences. Using the JD-R model, this study examines these positive and negative consequences of the public social media use for work. Survey data of 421 employees is used to explore the relationship between public social media use for work and engagement, and exhaustion, through opposing mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that interruptions and work–life conflict are important demands, whereas accessibility and efficient communication are resources associated with social media use for work. These demands and resources are related to engagement and exhaustion.

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Social media are slowly becoming ubiquitous in the workplace, and research on this topic has been on the rise (El Ouidri, El Ouidri, Segers, & Henderickx, 2015). Since 2013, an increasing amount of research has been published on social technology use in organizational contexts (e.g., Bucher, Fieseler, & Suphan, 2013; Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013; Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Leonardi, 2015). However, these studies are predominantly concerned with enterprise social media (e.g., Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015; Majchrzak et al., 2013), largely ignoring the use of prominent public counterparts, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, in organizational contexts (Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart, 2016a). Social media adoption in organizations is outpacing our empirical understanding of the use of these technologies (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Van Zoonen et al., 2016a). This lack of empirical understanding is problematic, since public social media use by employees might offer some distinct individual challenges and opportunities which, consequently, could affect individual engagement and exhaustion, and ultimately, organizational functioning (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013).

This study focuses on public social media use, which are defined as social technologies (such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter) that

afford visibility, editability, persistence, and association between content and people (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Social media use for work refers to the content that is published through these platforms, which can refer to work experiences, organizational news or industry-related information sharing (Van Zoonen et al., 2016a). Two dominant streams of social media research in organizational contexts have emerged. The first stream of research focuses on social media affordances, examining how the use of social media shapes the way people communicate with one another (e.g., Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Gibbs et al., 2013). Several studies, adopting an affordance perspective, have demonstrated that social media affordances present employees with a variety of tensions (Erhardt & Gibbs, 2014; Gibbs et al., 2013; Majchrzak et al., 2013). For example, social media affordances present tensions between openness and closedness of information and knowledge (Gibbs et al., 2013), and tensions between professional and personal demands (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Importantly, affordances invite behaviors and other outcomes (Withagen, de Poel, Araújo, & Pepping, 2012), but are not the outcome itself. The presence of an affordance does not determine the consequences in social situations (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2016). Hence, an affordance approach helps to understand how technologies are enacted but provides limited insights into the individual consequences of a specific type of usage; e.g., social media use for work. This study identifies opposing consequences of social media use represented by advantages (i.e., accessibility and efficient communication) and disadvantages (i.e., interruptions and work–life conflict) that are not objects or the features of technology, but are outcomes of use

^{*} Corresponding author. University of Amsterdam, The Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1016 WV Amsterdam The Netherlands.

E-mail address: w.vanzoonen@uva.nl (W. van Zoonen).

that vary, and as such, are not affordances (Evans et al., 2016). Thus, this study aims to provide more insights into the individual consequences of public social media use for work.

The second stream of research has focused on the causes and consequences of social media use (e.g., Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Moqbel, Nevo, & Kock, 2013), adopting a deterministic view to examine the relationship between social media use and individual or organizational characteristics. In this research tradition, public social media use for work has predominantly been linked to job performance and job satisfaction (e.g., Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Moqbel et al., 2013; Utz, 2015). The only exception is Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegenthart (2016b), who demonstrated that social media use for work was related to exhaustion, through work–life conflict. Yet, the focus has predominantly been on organizational outcomes such as identification, job performance and satisfaction, and neglecting important dimensions of employee wellbeing, such as engagement and exhaustion. Additionally, to date, studies on public social media use for work provide either a positive or negative discourse to social media use for work, overlooking important nuances represented by opposing mechanisms that may mediate this relationship. Studies on general information and communication technologies (ICTs; e.g., email or smartphones) have demonstrated the value of taking opposing consequences into account (e.g., Fonner & Roloff, 2012; Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Leonardi, Treem, & Jackson, 2010; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013; Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen, & Fonner, 2016). Although these studies provide insights into these positive and negative outcomes, the extent to which the findings from traditional ICTs transpose to the context of social media use, is unknown (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

This study aims to overcome these shortfalls in the literature by using the job demands and resources model (JD-R model; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). The job demands and resources model is an overarching framework, used to explain how specific job conditions can be classified into two broad categories – job demands and job resources – that are differentially related to engagement and exhaustion. The model specifically proposes two psychological processes, the health impairment process assumes that high demands exhaust employees, leading to depletion of energy, whereas the motivational process assumes that resources foster engagement and employee performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This study contributes to the literature by examining the use of public social media in an organizational context, providing a framework to understand the opposing consequences associated with usage, and demonstrating how these consequences are related to engagement and exhaustion.

1. Theoretical perspectives

1.1. The job demands and resources model

The JD-R model is used as the theoretical framework for our hypotheses. The JD-R model is an overarching model that can be applied to various occupational settings to predict employee wellbeing – i.e., exhaustion and engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014; Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Demerouti et al., 2001; Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016). Engagement is defined as a positive fulfilling work-related state of mind, characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest efforts in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Exhaustion, in turn, represents the individual stress dimension of burnout, and refers to feeling overextended and depleted of emotional and physical

resources (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

The JD-R model makes two important propositions. First, all job characteristics can be modeled using two different categories; job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014). Job demands refer to the physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained effort, and are thus associated with psychological costs, such as exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Examples of job demands are high work pressure, unfavorable physical environment, and emotionally demanding interactions with others (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Previous studies have shown that such job demands exhaust employees' mental and physical resources, leading to burnout symptoms (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014). Job resources refer to physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of a job that help achieve work goals, reduce job demands and their associated costs, and stimulate personal growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Such job resources – e.g., increased autonomy, leader–member exchange, feedback, and task significance – are typically associated with increased levels of engagement (Bakker et al., 2014).

The second proposition of the JD-R model is that job demands and resources are triggers of two different processes, a health impairment process and a motivational process (Bakker et al., 2014). These processes suggest that demands are generally the most important predictors of exhaustion, as they require physical or psychological expenditure, whereas job resources are generally related to motivation and engagement, as they fulfill basic psychological needs (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014; Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Hofmann, 2011). Various empirical studies have supported the notion that job demands lead to exhaustion, diminished task effectiveness, and longer and more frequent sick leaves, whereas, job resources counteract these effects and increase engagement (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Bakker et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Woerkom et al., 2016). For an overview of studies adopting the JD-R model see Bakker and Demerouti (2007) Bakker et al. (2014).

Recently, Ter Hoeven et al. (2016) demonstrated that the rationale behind the JD-R model is supported when applied to email and telephone communication at work. They identified several positive (i.e., efficient communication and accessibility) and negative consequences (i.e., interruptions) and demonstrated their relationship to engagement and exhaustion. The authors conclude that the positive and negative consequences of ICT use can be understood as technology-related resources and demands (Ter Hoeven et al., 2016). Extending this line of reasoning to social media use, the JD-R model would predict that the resources associated with social media use for work (accessibility and efficient communication) fulfill basic psychological needs such as relatedness and competence representing a motivational process leading to engagement (Bakker et al., 2014; Nahrgang et al., 2011). In turn, social media related demands (e.g., interruptions and work–life conflict) basically cost effort and consume resources, therefore causing exhaustion. This study tests these assumptions in an attempt to understand how communication practices in contemporary workplaces, characterized by high levels of social media use (Bucher et al., 2013; Van Zoonen et al., 2016a,b), affect employee wellbeing.

2. Hypotheses

2.1. Social media related demands

Public social media use in the workplace engenders the notion

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