

JYU DISSERTATIONS 433

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**Kaisa Pekkala**

# **Social Media and New Forms of Communicative Work**

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## ABSTRACT

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Advances in communication technology have had fast and fundamental impacts on human behavior and organizational functioning. In light of the resultant communicatization of working life, organizations are becoming increasingly dependent on their members' communicative activity and ability. Seeing organizations as dynamic systems consisting of multiple interrelated components, which together contribute to the organizational representation, foregrounds the need to understand the distribution of communicative work as systemic change.

Within the field of corporate communication, this dissertation focuses on the communicatization of working life and the subsequent distribution of communicative work within a corporate communication system. Overall, the dissertation draws attention to a shift in communication management research from a focus on managing communications as content and symbols, to managing organizational members who communicate, and asks how corporate communication as a management system is changing in relation to the communicatization of working life.

The dissertation utilizes a mixed methods approach to explore the meanings ascribed to change by organizational members, both managers and employees. The managerial cognitions towards the distribution of communicative work are discussed through managerial expectations and valued managerial practices. Relatedly, employees' cognitions are examined by studying their beliefs regarding communicative roles and social media communication self-efficacy. Taken together, the understanding of these views, and the mechanism affecting how they are formed and how they affect employee behavior, contributes to understanding the distribution of communicative work as a systemic change.

An overarching summary and five research articles comprise the dissertation. Two of the articles (sub-studies I and II) discuss the conceptual foundations of the phenomenon and explore employees' communicative role and competence in communication systems related to organizational representation. The third article (sub-study III) is an empirical, qualitative study (n=23) focusing on the management of employees' communication behavior in six Finnish organizations operating in the professional service sector. The study identifies three management approaches in use and categorizes enabling and motivating processes that are used in engaging employees in work-related social media use. The last two articles (sub-studies IV and V) are quantitative studies (n=1,179) aimed at increasing understanding of employees' perceptions of their communicative role and ability,

the mechanisms through which these perceptions are formed, and how they affect employees' actual communication behavior.

Based on the results of the sub-studies, I propose a conceptualization of communicative work, and discuss changes in the cognitions of management and employees in relation to work-related social media use. In addition to the main thesis that corporate communication is undergoing a change at the systems level and that communicative work is becoming increasingly distributed within organizations, I posit that 1) Communicative action and ability have increased their significance in contemporary work environments; 2) Communicative work is contextual and purposeful in nature and many knowledge workers do not feel confident about their abilities to take on these new work roles; and 3) Managing corporate communications includes a new sub-area that deals with managing communicative human resources.

The practical value of the dissertation relates to advancing understanding of how communicative action is embedded into contemporary knowledge work, how corporate communication is changing, and - perhaps more importantly - how it should be changed in the future to enhance the positive aspects of this development, and to mitigate the negative aspects through managerial work and public policy.

Keywords: corporate communication, communicative work, social media, employees' communication behavior, knowledge work, professional work

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Pekkala, Kaisa

Sosiaalinen media ja viestintätöön uudet muodot

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Viestintäteknologian nopea kehitys on muokannut niin yksilöiden käyttäytymistä kuin organisaatioidenkin toimintatapoja. Viestinnän ja vuorovaikutuksen merkitys on kasvanut, ja etenkin asiantuntijaorganisaatiot ovat tulleet yhä riippuvaisemmiksi työntekijöidensä viestintäaktiivisuudesta ja -kyvykkyydestä. Sosiaalista mediaa hyödynnetään yhä enenevässä määrin ammatillisiin tarkoituksiin. Työntekijät edustavat siellä itsensä lisäksi organisaatiotaan ja rakentavat viestinnällään kuvaa omasta työnantajastaan.

Tämä väitöskirja keskittyy työelämän viestinnällistymiseen ja viestintätöön jakautumiseen asiantuntijaorganisaatioissa. Tutkimus nostaa esiin viestinnän johtamisen muutoksen, jossa johtamisen keskiöön on noussut viestivän henkilöstön johtaminen. Väitöskirjan tutkimuskysymyksenä onkin, kuinka viestinnän johtaminen organisaatioissa muuttuu työelämän viestinnällistyessä.

Väitöskirjan tutkimusote on monimetodinen ja se tarkastelee millaisia merkityksiä ja käsityksiä työntekijät ja organisaatioiden johtohenkilöt liittävät muutokseen. Johdon näkemyksiä kartoitetaan selvittämällä odotuksia ja johtamisen käytänteitä, työntekijöiden näkemyksiä tutkitaan rooleihin ja kyvykkyyksiin liittyvien käsitysten avulla. Yhdessä nämä näkemykset ja niiden taustamekanismit, sekä vaikutukset työntekijöiden viestintäkäyttäytymiseen lisäävät ymmärrystä viestintätöön jakautumisesta organisaatioissa osana systeemistä muutosta.

Väitöskirja koostuu tästä yhteenvedosta ja viidestä tutkimusartikkelista. Ensimmäiset kaksi artikkelia (osatutkimukset I ja II) tarkastelevat tutkimuksen konseptuaalisia lähtökohtia ja työntekijöiden viestintäroolia ja -osaamista osana organisaatioviestinnän kokonaisuutta. Kolmas artikkeli (osatutkimus III) on puolestaan empiirinen, laadullinen tutkimus (n=23), joka keskittyy työntekijöiden viestintäkäyttäytymisen johtamiseen kuudessa suomalaisessa palvelusektorilla toimivassa asiantuntijaorganisaatiossa. Artikkelissa tunnistetaan kolme käytössä olevaa johtamismallia ja luokitellaan johtamisen prosessit mahdollistaviin ja motivoiviin prosesseihin, joiden avulla työntekijöitä voidaan ohjata ja auttaa hyödyntämään sosiaalista mediaa työssään. Viimeisessä kahdessa artikkelissa (osatutkimukset IV ja V) tutkimusote on määrällinen, ja ne pohjautuvat kyselytutkimuksen dataan (n=1179). Näiden artikkelien tavoitteena on lisätä ymmärrystä työntekijöiden käsityksistä, jotka liittyvät työntekijöiden viestintärooliin ja -kyvykkyyteen, sekä mekanismeista, jotka vaikuttavat näihin käsityksiin sekä työntekijöiden käyttäytymiseen sosiaalisessa mediassa.

Tässä yhteenvedo-osuudessa ehdotan määritelmää viestintätöölle ja tarkastelen sitä johtamisen ja työntekijöiden näkökulmasta. Osatutkimusten tulosten

pohjalta ehdotan, että viestinnän johtaminen muuttuu osana systeemistä muu-  
tosta ja että viestintätyö jakautuu työyhteisössä viestintäteknologian mahdollis-  
tamana yhä useammalle. Lisäksi esitän, että 1) viestintäteot ja viestintäkyvyk-  
kyys ovat kasvattaneet merkitystään nykypäivän työympäristössä, 2) viestintä-  
työ on luonteeltaan kontekstuaalista ja tavoitteellista ja että monet tietotyön teki-  
jöistä eivät koe omaavansa valmiuksia toimia tällaisessa uudessa työroolissa ja 3)  
organisaatioiden viestinnän johtamiseen on syntynyt uusi osa-alue, joka vastaa  
viestivän henkilöstön johtamisesta.

Väitöskirjan käytännöllinen hyöty liittyy ymmärryksen lisäämiseen siitä,  
miten viestintä sisältyy osana tietotyöhön. Lisäksi väitöskirja pyrkii tekemään  
näkyväksi viestinnän johtamisen muutoksen, ja ehkä tätäkin tärkeämpänä sen,  
mitä johtamisessa tulisi ottaa huomioon nyt ja tulevaisuudessa, että se edistäisi  
muutoksen positiivisia vaikutuksia ja vähentäisi muutokseen liittyviä negatiivi-  
sia vaikutuksia.

Avainsanat: viestinnän johtaminen, viestintätyö, sosiaalinen media, työn-  
tekijöiden viestintäkäyttäytyminen, tietotyö, asiantuntijatyö

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Espoo, September 2021  
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Many of us contemporary knowledge workers think that communication on social media about our work, profession or organization is becoming an integral part of working life. Many of our employers encourage us to create and share content, and to participate in public discussions on social media. Many of us also consider that by demonstrating our knowledge and expertise through communication on social media, we may have a chance to advance our careers and promote our organizations and their causes. These considerations reflect a fast and fundamental change in which employees are becoming regarded as influential communicators. The increased use of social media for professional purposes has duly led to the formalization of employees' communicative role (Andersson, 2019; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2017), and the corresponding distribution and spread of communicative work within organizations. This ongoing change shapes not only the conceptualization of knowledge work and the required competences of the individuals involved, but also “necessitates a shift in thinking about the underlying principles of corporate communication” (Cornelissen, 2017 p. 38).

Recent reports indicate that social media, similarly to many other digital technologies, has swiftly entered working life and disrupted the way organizations operate and employees conduct their work. For example, in the EU area in 2019, 75% of companies that employ more than 250 people were using social media as a part of their operations, primarily to support image building and product marketing, to build and maintain customer relationships, and to recruit new employees (Eurostat, 2020). A recent study in Finland found that 35% of employees working in the private sector had used public social media (such as Twitter and LinkedIn) for work-related purposes (Lyly-Yrjänäinen, 2019). The main purposes of these uses were knowledge sharing, information retrieval, networking and collaboration, customer service, and sales and marketing (ibid.). The Finnish technology provider Smarp reports that an average employee has 420 friends on Facebook, 400 connections on LinkedIn, and 360 followers on Twitter, which makes over 1,000 contacts per employee in total (Smarp, 2019). When realizing the potential of these connections, it is hardly surprising that it

has been estimated that companies may be able to raise the productivity of knowledge workers by 20 to 25 percent by using social technologies (McKinsey, 2012).

What this indicates is that social media has become omnipresent and influential in many areas of working life. The change has been particularly pertinent among knowledge workers, whose ability to make their expertise visible through communicative action is often considered to have currency in the knowledge economy (Alvesson, 2004). This means that organizations operating in the professional sector are inherently dependent on their employees' communicative action, and that employees' communicative ability is not only relevant for organizational functioning, but is also crucial for overall organizational competitiveness (Fisher, 2019). Hence, these organizations have been keen to adopt social media to benefit their business. One aspect of this has been to engage employees in using public social media such as LinkedIn and Twitter for professional purposes.

This dissertation discusses the embeddedness of this type of communicative action within knowledge work, and provides empirical evidence that work-related communication on social media is increasingly perceived as being an integral part of work, particularly in certain types of contexts such as knowledge work in the professional service sector, and that it has required organizations to reconfigure their communication management to realize the communicative capability of their human resources. It also demonstrates that not all employees are confident in their abilities to take on these new responsibilities, and the level of social media use differs among knowledge workers. The results of the studies comprising this dissertation also show that organizations have an important role in enabling their employees to acquire the skills, knowledge and tools to participate in an increasingly digital professional life.

Corporate communication, conceptualized as a management function responsible for managing all communications of an organization (Christensen and Cornelissen 2011, p. 386), has traditionally been the exclusive responsibility of corporate communication professionals and dedicated spokespersons. Therefore, from the corporate communication disciplinary viewpoint, the wider distribution of communicative work challenges the traditional paradigmatic thinking in two major ways. The first relates to the functioning of the communication system in relation to agency and where it is located, as organizations have become "communicative", meaning that members of the organization increasingly represent and shape the organization and its causes for external stakeholders through their communicative actions. In other words, they constitute organizational realities and representations communicatively across organizational boundaries. The concepts that have recently been developed to describe this type of distributed agency include employee advocacy (e.g. Men, 2014; Sakka & Ahammad, 2020) and employee ambassadorship (e.g. Gelb & Rangarajan, 2014; Xiong, King, & Piehler, 2013). The second change concerns defining the purpose of corporate communication as a management function, practiced by communication professionals, where the ongoing change has led to

a shift in focus from the management of communication and symbols toward the management of communicative human resources, as I propose in this dissertation (see also article III). Together, these transformations are affecting corporate communication at a systems level, and hence are addressed in this dissertation not only as a paradigmatic change but as a systemic change.

This dissertation adopts a systems perspective to study the distribution of communicative work, its antecedents and consequences. The concept of systemic change has its origins in systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968), and refers to the change of *modus operandi* of a system, in a way that most parts of the system are affected by the change. For organizational and management research, this means that the systems perspective examines individual behavior as well as the change of the whole system, including the environment with which the system interacts (Sandaker, 2009). Therefore, applying this approach, the dissertation seeks to identify the role of systemic structures and forces in shaping employees' communication behavior. Here, the system under examination is the corporate communication system, which is regarded as a set of interdependent components and structures, such as technology, management practice and communicative roles, that form an organized entity for organizational representation. Within this system, the dissertation focuses in particular on employees' work-related communication behavior and its organizational conditions created by management. The corporate communication system, similar to other organizational systems, is disrupted by the rapid development of communication technology, in this case social media (Cornelissen, 2017). When change occurs quickly, attempts to look at the phenomenon holistically can advance understanding of not only specific behaviors but also the system as a whole.

In particular, the adoption of social media in organizations has increased the salience of employees' work-related communication toward external stakeholders, and has driven the formalization of employees' communicative role in the work domain (Andersson, 2019; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2017). Social media has enabled individuals to communicate about their work, profession and organization across organizational boundaries. Public social media, such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook have become increasingly important media for professional knowledge sharing and branding. When the number of individuals using social media increases and their networks expand, the value of their communication grows. This is often explained by Metcalfe's law, which proposes that the value or utility of a network is proportional to the number of users in the network (Metcalfe, 1995). Both individuals and organizations are affected by the increased value of social media networks. For organizations selling products or services, for example, this means that the greater the number of customers using social media, the more valuable those networks become for their business performance, and the more important it becomes to be present and active in those networks. Research has confirmed this notion in both the business-to-consumer and the business-to-business sectors (Fisher, 2019; Minsky & Quesenberry, 2016).



The process describing the mechanism by which the value of communicative work increases has been defined as communicatization (Knoblauch, 2020). Communicatization refers to a process in which communicative action not only coordinates and contributes to production, but can actually “produce products, perform services, create structures, and develop basic social differences and affiliations” (Knoblauch, 2020 p. 240). Of particular relevance for this dissertation is the notion that communicatization is characterized by the increase in significance and amount of communicative work for individuals involved in using communication technologies. Organizations are therefore becoming communicative, meaning that each employee becomes a potential communicator in today’s mediatized and polyphonic environment (Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn, 2011), and each employee’s communicative action and ability, or lack thereof, consequently becomes a constituent of organizational representation.

## 1.1 Research objective and questions

The research objective of this dissertation is to explore the distribution of corporate communicative work from a systemic perspective. More specifically, the aim is to shed light on how employees’ communicative role and related ability are perceived and how employees’ communicative action and capabilities are managed in the professional sector. To this end, the dissertation seeks to contribute to the understanding of *how corporate communication as a management system is changing in relation to the communicatization of working life*.

At the core of this doctoral research is the change in corporate communication, particularly the meanings ascribed to change by organizational members, both managers and employees. Instead of focusing solely on functional change or discussing the disruption caused by digital communication technology, this dissertation explores how the change is experienced by individuals in different organizational positions with different interpretations and expectations, and what this informs us about the development of and change in corporate communication as a field of practice and research. To summarize, in this dissertation, systemic thinking offers a way to find new perspectives to theoretically understand the distribution of communicative work and the systemic change in corporate communication. The aim, then, is to acquire new perspectives and understanding.

Considering the limited amount of research focusing on the management of employees’ work-related communication to date, the objective of the dissertation can be characterized as an exploration of novel organizational phenomena. To understand these phenomena in depth, I considered it necessary to study the views of both managers and employees – allowing me to offer a descriptive account of how organizations and their members are currently dealing with these phenomena within this specific sector, and the kind of realities and prospects they are facing in their current situation. Given the overall research objective, the

research questions related to the research articles comprising this dissertation are as follows:

*RQ1. How have employees' communicative role and related competences evolved?*

This question is answered based on a review of previous literature (article I). When starting the dissertation project in 2016, literature explaining how employees' communicative role was perceived in organizations was rare. However, literature explaining the valued competences of organizational representatives did exist and hence provided a gateway to the related literature. Therefore, the project got underway with a literature review and conceptual analysis focusing on the evolution of individuals representing their collectives, and an exploration of competences that have been associated with these behaviors. Reviewing the literature from the past and from the perspective of multiple disciplines such as rhetoric, organizational communication and media studies (article I) allowed me to assess the actual impact of the current upheaval on employee communicators and their ideal competences and qualities; in short, to distinguish between revolution, evolution, and what may merely be a passing fad. The literature review also revealed that while there are a number of more or less explicit descriptions and definitions of communication competence, many of them tend to be rather generic in the sense that the desired competence is not considered in relation to the role and context of the actor. In contrast, this dissertation is built on the premise that communicative competence should be looked at in relation to the respective communicative role and context.

*RQ2. How do employees constitute organizational representations through their communication?*

This question is answered based on a review of previous literature (article II) and on the conducted empirical research (article III). Analyzing the current literature in light of organizational sensemaking and sensegiving (article II) provided insights into the cognitive processes behind employees' communicative action, and rooted employees' communicative role in the theoretical framework of the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), which guided the following parts of the study. Identifying the objectives of employees' communication management (article III) helped in refining the answer by providing insights into the outcomes that organizational managers value and expect.

*RQ3. How is employees' communication behavior managed?*

The previous literature related to this question was scarce, which meant that the question was approached inductively by relying on the interview data (N=23) collected from organizational managers (communication and HR leads) in six organizations operating in Finland (article III). Based on the conducted research, it

became clear that the management of communicative human resources had become a significant field within the communication management practice, and that there were certain drivers and contextual factors that affected the types of management approach and related processes that were in use in the studied organizations. In light of this, I sought to convey the managerial perspective of the phenomena, which entails designing the conditions that enable and motivate employees' communication behavior.

*RQ4. How do employees perceive their communicative role, and why is this important?*

To answer this question, I turned to role theories. These theories have not been focal in the corporate communication literature, and hence they provided a novel avenue for studying employees' work-related communication behavior, and for examining it from the managerial point of view. The extant literature has often conceptualized employees' work-related social media communication as voluntary, extra-role behavior that is not a formal part of their work (e.g., Helm, 2011). This study (article IV) challenged this assumption, and opted for a more dynamic conceptualization of these behaviors that takes into account the context of the work. The study explored how employees perceive their communicative role (i.e. whether they perceive these behaviors as being a part of their work or not), explaining the consequences of the communication role perception for their communication behavior, as well as the mechanism leading to their varying role perceptions. Based on the research conducted, consisting of survey data (N=1,179), it is possible to discuss the current state of communicative role perceptions, as well as their consequences and antecedents within knowledge work in the professional service sector.

*RQ5. How do employees perceive their communicative ability in using social media for professional purposes?*

To answer this question, I turned to social cognitive theory and the related literature. This theoretical lens provided a novel avenue for acquiring new knowledge about how prepared and confident employees feel in their abilities to take on new communicative roles and conduct those tasks successfully. The survey data (N=1,179) used for this study (article V) was collected at the same time as the data for article IV. Through this study, the aim was to gain understanding of how confidence about communicative ability in using social media for professional purposes is related to actual social media use, and how organizations, accountable for maintaining and developing the skills of the workforce, can enhance their employees' efficacy beliefs, and how these efforts subsequently affect employees' communication behavior.

By reflecting on the answers to these five research questions, the aim is to meet the objective of the dissertation in assessing how the communicatization of working life and the increased significance of communicative work are shaping

corporate communication at a system level. The dissertation comprises five research articles (I-V) that constitute the basis for this summary. Two of the original articles (I, II) discuss the theoretical foundations for employees' communication behavior as corporate communicators and conductors of communicative work. The other articles (III-V) are empirical, studying the expectations and perceptions toward communicative work among both managers and employees. Figure 1 presents the framework for the dissertation and how the five sub-studies comprising it contribute to the overall framework.

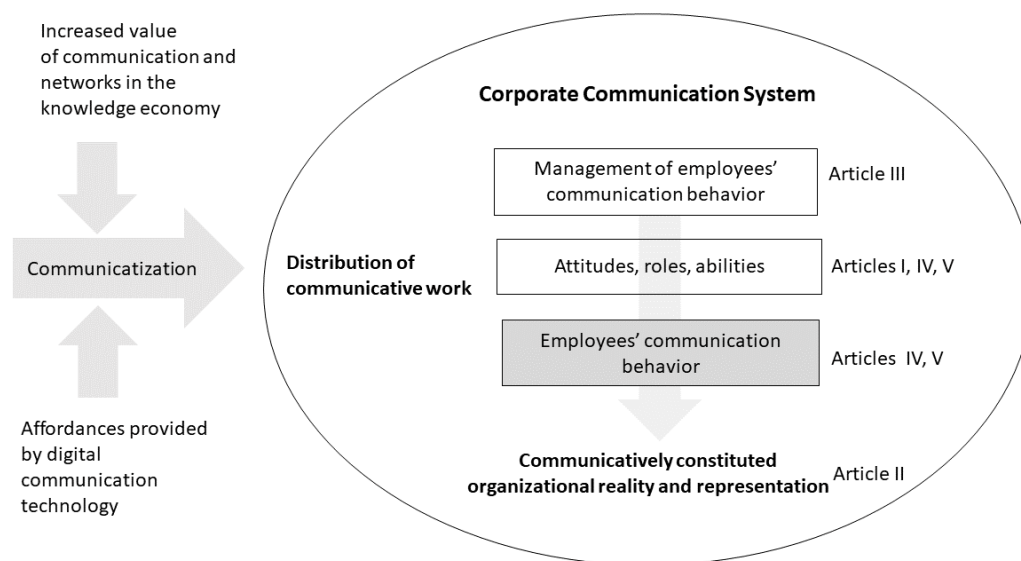


FIGURE 1 The framework for understanding the distribution of communicative work within a corporate communication system.

## 1.2 Empirical context

### 1.2.1 The knowledge economy

The context for the empirical studies that comprise this dissertation is the knowledge economy. The knowledge economy refers to an economic system in which production is based on knowledge-intensive activities (Powell & Snellman, 2004). Within this study, the concept of knowledge intensity indicates “that production of a firm’s output relies on a substantial body of complex knowledge” (Von Nordenflycht, 2010, p. 159), and knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) refer to “organizations that offer to the market the use of fairly sophisticated knowledge or knowledge-based products” (Alvesson, 2004, p. 17). These products can be plans, services or mass-produced products where the development or maintenance costs outweigh the manufacturing expenditure (ibid.). The production of

these outcomes is dependent upon the intellectual and interactional skills of the workforce deployed in product development, sales, and customer service. Therefore, organizations defined as knowledge-intensive can operate in a variety of fields and industries (Alvesson, 2004; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). The related terms 'professional service firm' (PSF) or 'professional organization' are often used in a similar manner. Alvesson (2004, p. 38) suggests that "KIF includes what is referred to as PSF...but the former category covers a broader field and is not so focused on whether a group or an organization is 'professional' (i.e. belongs to the true or acknowledged professions)". Instead of using these interchangeably, Von Nordenflycht (2010) has suggested talking about degrees of professional service intensity within knowledge-intensive firms. In line with Alvesson (2004) and Von Nordenflycht (2010), this dissertation views knowledge-intensive firms as a broad category including so-called professional organizations.

Knowledge, and consequently the ability to win, serve and retain customers with this knowledge is seen to be embodied in individuals (Alvesson, 2000) and embedded in organizational processes, relationships and routines (Morris & Empson, 1998). KIFs with high service intensity are often characterized by their difficulties in proving a specific output due to the lack of any clear product (Alvesson, 2011). The ambiguous character of knowledge work and organizations highlights the significance of rhetorical skills and acts for "the constitution of the company, its workers, activities and its external relations" (Alvesson 2004, p. 82). Therefore, the defining feature of the knowledge economy is an assumption that knowledge possessed by organizational members and, in particular, how they make knowledge visible through communication, is the primary strategic resource for organizations (Alvesson 2004; Grant, 1996; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). KIFs are thus inherently dependent upon their employees' communicative action, through which they demonstrate their expertise (Treem, 2016).

Knowledge work has been used as an umbrella term to describe work that processes and produces knowledge. Knowledge work and professional work are overlapping terms, and in many contexts synonymous, as in this dissertation, although knowledge work is considered to cover a broader area (Alvesson, 2004). The common conceptualization of a "knowledge worker" is an employee whose main capital or product is knowledge (Davenport, 2005). Knowledge work is characterized by its focus on "non-routine" tasks requiring convergent, divergent, and creative thinking (Reinhardt, Schmidt, Sloep, & Drachsler, 2011). It is worth noting that knowledge work requires individuals to continually develop themselves to respond to the constantly changing business context (Drucker, 1994). This means that workplace roles and related competences in the knowledge economy are in a constant state of flux as organizational expectations change in response to these contextual changes, and knowledge workers themselves craft their jobs in order to exert control over these changing expectations (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

As framed above, in this dissertation I lean on a relatively broad conceptualization of KIFs based on the definitions by Von Nordenflycht (2010) and Alvesson (2004). Of particular relevance for this dissertation is the observation that, for

KIFs, communication about their expertise is a fundamental part of their functioning, and they are therefore dependent upon their employees' collective ability to demonstrate their knowledge and expertise through communicative action. During the past decade, the context in which knowledge work is conducted has changed rapidly. This change has been accelerated by the evolution and increased adoption of communication technologies such as social media in organizations, increasing the importance and amount of communicative action at work (Knoblauch, 2020). Due to the increased importance and extent of this so-called communicative work, the significance of communicative abilities in conducting knowledge and professional work has consequently increased, as argued in this dissertation.

### **1.2.2 Social media**

The technological context and one of the systemic elements of the dissertation is digital communication technology, particularly social media, which allows anyone "to create, circulate, share, and exchange information in a variety of formats and with multiple communities" (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017 p. 150). Social media builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 as a platform, which has evolved from being merely a communication channel to a platform on which content is created and modified by users in a participatory and collaborative manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media platforms in organizational contexts that include a networking function can be divided into public social-networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, and enterprise social networks (ESNs) and internal social media (ISM), which both refer to web-based communication arenas for employees (such as Yammer, Slack, and Facebook's Workplace) (Chin, Evans, & Choo, 2015; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016).

In this dissertation, the focus is primarily on the use of platforms that are public, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. On these platforms, employees communicate through their personal social media profiles, over which they have individual rights and responsibility. These profiles are often public and personally identifiable. This means that employees have their identities at stake when communicating on social media for work and professional purposes. When communicating about work or related topics on social media, employees are encouraged to affiliate themselves with their organizations (see article III). When employees link their employer to their social media profiles, they become representatives and ambassadors of their organization and its cause (Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019).

Social media is not simply a technology, but also represents a context that differs in important ways from traditional (e.g., face-to-face) and other digital (e.g., email) ways of interacting and communicating (Baym & boyd, 2012; Boyd & Ellison; 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein; 2010; Mcfarland & Ployhart, 2015). One perspective for describing these differences between social media and other types of media has been the affordance perspective, which offers "a theoretical grounding in the relationships between users and technology, and therefore a middle path between deterministic and constructivist stances" (Rice et al., 2017 p. 107). The

affordance approach does not describe the features of technology as such but relationships between people and the objects they use (Gibson, 1986; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Media affordances refer to “relationships among action possibilities to which agents perceive they could apply a medium (or multiple media), within its potential features/capabilities/constraints, relative to the agent’s needs or purposes, within a given context” (Rice et al., 2017 p. 109). A literature review of enterprise social technologies by Treem and Leonardi (2013) reveals that these technologies demonstrate four types of affordances, namely visibility, persistence, association and editability. These affordances seem to both enable and constrain social action (Laitinen & Sivunen, 2020). The affordance approach has also been applied to the work-related use of external social media (e.g. Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019), and in this dissertation it is considered one of the key mechanisms explaining the social media disruption of the corporate communication system.

### **1.3 Scope and structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation explores communicative work within the corporate communication system. The impetus for the research stemmed from curiosity about how social media use by employees is affecting the corporate communication system, and the type of consequences it has, not only at individual and organizational levels, but also at a societal level. In the field of management, the societal impact of research is often reflected in managerial practice (Bartunek & Rynes, 2010). Following this line of thinking, scoping this dissertation included the prioritization of aspects that were considered to be relevant, as well as advancing knowledge in the field of corporate communication management (and society by extension).

In this dissertation ‘management’ refers to the process of using authority to design conditions for conducting work. The process of management includes managers as well as those who are influenced by the management. Therefore, to generate new knowledge that would provide breadth and depth for the purposes of practical impact (i.e. relevance), it was important to include both managers’ and employees’ point of view in the studies comprising this dissertation. This made it possible to identify the common ground and gaps between employees’ current state of beliefs and action, and management’s perspective on role expectations and managerial practices in use.

This concludes the introduction, which has aimed to describe the research objective and phenomena of interest, and has sought to position the dissertation in the current academic discussion. It has also briefly summarized the research contexts of the appended research articles, relating them to the ongoing changes in the corporate communication system. In chapter 2, the focus will be on outlining the literature that has informed the dissertation, ranging from management

to organizational behavior and social psychology, with the aim of briefly explaining the theoretical frameworks and characteristics that are of relevance to the research. Chapter 3 will include a brief discussion on the philosophical foundations and methodological choices for this research compilation, as well as details about the methods employed in the research articles. Chapter 4 consists of summaries of the appended research articles and reflections on the findings in relation to the prior literature. Chapter 4 concludes by reflecting on the key findings with regard to each of the research questions, RQ1–RQ5. Lastly, in chapter 5, the conclusions and implications of the dissertation are discussed, arguing that employees’ communicative action and ability have increased their significance in corporate communication systems, particularly in specific contexts, and have required organizations to reconfigure their communication management systems. These arguments increase understanding of the current systemic change within corporate communication, in which new technology and new ways of working are shaping work roles and related competences, and ultimately the management of the whole system. This discussion attempts to help practitioners, scholars and policymakers by drawing their attention to the effects of communicatization in working life. Finally, Appendices 1–5 include the original research articles upon which the dissertation is built. The research articles and author contributions are introduced in Table 1.

TABLE 1 The articles included in the dissertation and author contributions

<b>Article</b>	<b>Research problem and literature</b>	<b>Research design and data</b>	<b>Analysis, results, and writing</b>
I) Pekkala, K., Valentini, C., & Luoma-aho, V. Communication competence as a precondition for communication behavior – Tracing the history of communication competence of organizational advocates. (Book chapter - accepted for publication.)	Mainly responsible for the research problem and literature review.	Mainly responsible for the research design and conceptual work.	Mainly responsible for structuring and writing the article.
II) Pekkala, K. (2018). Employees constituting corporate voice as sensemakers and sensegivers. (Conference paper presented at the 68th Annual International Communication Association Conference, Prague, Czech Republic.)	Solely responsible for the entire research article.	Solely responsible for the entire research article.	Solely responsible for the entire research article.
III) Pekkala, K. (2020). Managing the communicative organization: a qualitative analysis of knowledge-intensive companies. <i>Corporate Communications: An International Journal</i> , 25(3), 551-571. doi:10.1108/CCIJ-02-2020-0040	Solely responsible for the entire research article.	Solely responsible for the entire research article.	Solely responsible for the entire research article.



<p>IV) Pekkala, K., &amp; Van Zoonen, W. Is it my job or not? Employees' perceptions of their communicative role, its antecedents and relationship to work-related communication in social media. (Submitted manuscript.)</p>	<p>Solely responsible for the research problem and literature review.</p>	<p>Mainly responsible for the conceptual development of the research design and data collection.</p>	<p>Shared responsibility in analyzing the data and interpreting the results.</p> <p>Shared responsibility for explicating the theoretical contributions, and for writing the research article.</p>
<p>V) Pekkala, K., &amp; Van Zoonen, W. (2021). Work-Related Social Media Use: The Mediating Role of Social Media Communication Self-Efficacy, <i>European Management Journal</i>. (ahead-of-print) doi:10.1016/j.emj.2021.03.004</p>	<p>Solely responsible for the research problem and literature review.</p>	<p>Solely responsible for the conceptual development of the research design and data collection.</p>	<p>Mainly responsible for analyzing the data, interpreting the results, explicating the theoretical contributions and writing the research article.</p>

An external service provider transcribed the majority of the interviews conducted for research article III. The author reviewed the interview transcripts to ensure that they provided an accurate account of the interviews.

Language editing services were used for all of the research articles. The author reviewed every change made by the professional editor, correcting possible misunderstandings.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Seeking to understand systems and their change often calls for dealing with a range of different perspectives spanning several academic disciplines (Clarke & Crane, 2018), as is the case with this dissertation, particularly the compilation part in hand. The following literature review draws on multiple disciplines such as communication, management, organizational behavior, sociology and social psychology in order to understand the embeddedness of communicative action within knowledge work and the related systemic change in the field of corporate communication.

The overview of the literature begins by describing the theoretical foundation of the dissertation, namely the communication-centric approach to organizing. The communicatization process as an extension of the mediatization of today's society is also introduced, and one of its outcomes defined, namely communicative work in the context of this dissertation. Second, the literature and recent research related to employees' communication behavior on social media is discussed. This is followed by the conceptualization of employees' communication behavior on social media as reasoned behavior, and an elaboration of the rationale for the conceptualization used in this dissertation. Thirdly, an overview is provided of the body of literature from the field of management, which creates a foundation for understanding the management of employee communicators. The overview concludes by examining how these above-mentioned elements are linked to corporate communication at a system level.

### 2.1 Communication-centric view

This dissertation is compiled from a perspective that places communication at the center of all human functioning, including the functioning of organizations. This communication-centric perspective highlights that "human beings are fundamentally communicating and organizing creatures", and define themselves

largely through various communicative connections and organizational memberships (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019 p. 3). Therefore, the dissertation views employees' communication as constituting organizational realities and representations, and hence follows the thinking of the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), particularly a structuration view of it, which is based on Giddens's structuration theory (ST) (McPhee, & Zaug, 2000). The structuration view of CCO belongs to the family of system theories and emphasizes individuals' communicative agency in organizing (McPhee 2015; MCPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam & Mumby, 2014). According to MCPhee (2015), "ST's main tenets are that agents – always necessarily human – are not only situated in but also produce and reproduce a spatiotemporal context including knowledge and material resources; relations with others whose acts and strategies can affect their plans and resources; and broader environmental and social-structural features" (p. 3). Following this line of thinking, this dissertation suggests that "employees' communicative role is not static; instead, it is constantly produced and reproduced based on the demands of the communicative environment and the organizational and individual communication goals" (article II p. 10).

The structuration view of CCO provides a theoretical starting point for analyzing employees' communicative action and its constitutive function in corporate communication outcomes, such as corporate identity and reputation. The CCO perspective also provides a fruitful lens for examining the distribution of communicative work. Over the last few decades, the neoliberal transformation of production has reshaped how communicative action is valued, and has increased the interdependence between individual communicative action and organizational function (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). Hence, CCO provides a perspective with which to assess the embeddedness of communicative action within knowledge work, and the outcomes of such communicative action in relation to organizational performance and competitiveness. Within this view, employees, through their communicative action, constitute organizational realities by linking individuals together, establishing boundaries, shaping operations, adapting interaction, and situating the organization in its environment (McPhee, 2015; MCPhee & Zaug, 2000). In this dissertation, this approach is applied in the context of employees' social media communication with external stakeholders within the knowledge economy.

Cooren et al. (2011) point out that there is an intersection between CCO and management and organization theory. In their opinion, the application of the CCO approach can advance the research in these areas by providing an alternative approach to looking at "the reasons for a firm's existence, its logics of internal operations, the locations of its boundaries, and its sources of competitive advantage" (Cooren et al., 2011 p. 1157). They also point out that despite the proven relevance, communicative theorizing has not yet been able to provide explanatory resources for understanding transaction costs and governance, institutionalized cognitive rules and practices, and evolving competencies and capabilities from the organization and management theory point of view. This dissertation aims to address some of the gaps mentioned by Cooren et al. (2011) by exploring

how employees' communication behavior, which is assumed to constitute organizational realities and representations, is managed in contemporary organizations.

## **2.2 Communicatization and communicative work**

Following the systemic change perspective, the development and the increased use of digital media, particularly social media, which allows anyone "to create, circulate, share, and exchange information in a variety of formats and with multiple communities" (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017), can be seen to disrupt (for its part) the functioning of the corporate communication system, and requires at least some "reinvention" in regard to how it is approached in academia (Cornelissen, 2017 p. 39). One of the ways to explain this disruptive mechanism has been through the concept of mediatization, which is used to analyze "the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other" (Couldry & Hepp, 2013 p. 197). When the formalization of employees' communicative role is understood as an element of a systemic change, it becomes clear that work as such is undergoing changes in conjunction with an evolving media environment. Hence, this dissertation relies on the concept of mediatization and its recent extension – "communicatization" – to serve as a sensitizing device in efforts to identify the ongoing changes.

Mediatization is perceived as an overarching phenomenon describing the relationship between changes in media and society (Knoblauch, 2020). The recent extension of mediatization is characterized by "digitalization, interactivation and the spread of communication work", to which end it has been proposed that it should be termed communicatization (Knoblauch, 2020 p. 234). Communicatization is a process in which communicative action becomes a source of productivity. Within this view, communicative action as such "can produce products, perform services, create structures, and develop basic social differences and affiliations" (Knoblauch, 2020 p. 240). It is worth acknowledging that communicative action has always contributed to these processes. The concept of communicatization, however, suggests that the value of these processes is materialized largely through communicative action. Reflecting communicatization, communication – which has typically been relegated to a secondary status in management and organization studies thinking – is increasingly understood as a key site of value production (Dean, 2014; Kuhn et al., 2017; Mumby & Kuhn, 2019; Rensstam & Ashcraft, 2014).

Communicatization – particularly in regard to its characteristic of interactivation – is related to affordances of digital communication technology as it "turns technology into a communication technique and any workings of technologies turn into communication... For the people involved, it results in a transformation of more and more work into communication work" (Knoblauch 2020, 242). To conceptualize communicative work, this study draws upon Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) to capture the formal nature of communicative work produced

through managers' or peers' expectations, and to define it as "a set of communication activities that an employee is expected to perform" (p. 146). In line with Thomas (1999), (communicative) work can also be initiated by the expectation the person places on herself/himself. Accordingly, *communicative work is defined in this dissertation as communicative action conducted intentionally, driven by expectations and requiring some effort or resource from an individual.*

Although the characteristics and some of the consequences of communicatization have been described in the literature, little empirical research has focused on how employees and managers deal with communicatization, and particularly the increased significance and amount of communicative work. When aiming to understand the changes in the corporate communication system, communicatization is used as a key anchoring concept within this literature review. The focus is particularly on characteristics of the communicatization process that relate to affordances of social media. In this vein, the next section introduces some of the literature focusing on employees' work-related communication behavior on social media, and demonstrates how communicatization is shaping behavior. Understanding employees' communication behavior will duly broaden knowledge of how these behaviors can be managed, as discussed in section 2.4.

### **2.3 Employees' communication behavior on social media**

Employees' communication behavior on social media has received increasing attention among communication scholars, largely because of its effects on important organizational outcomes such as organizational reputation (Helm, 2011; Kim and Rhee, 2011), increased visibility of corporate products and services (Dreher, 2014), increased sales performance (Ancillai et al., 2019), enhanced employer brand (Mangold and Miles, 2007), and the generation of new knowledge (Mazzei, 2014).

When using social media for work-related purposes, employees represent their organizations online through their personal social media profiles (Dreher, 2014). The literature calls employees who engage in this activity employee advocates, ambassadors, external communicators, or corporate communicators (Andersson, 2019; Cornelissen, 2017; Cervellon & Lirio, 2017; Dreher, 2014; Huotari et al., 2015; Men, 2014). More explicitly, Men (2014, p. 262) defines employee advocacy as "the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products or brands by an employee externally". Similarly, Gelb and Rangarajan (2014) define a brand ambassador as an employee who represents, gathers information, and defends the organization. By engaging in these activities, employees likewise engage in communicative action. Hence, these constructs can be seen to be built on Kim and Rhee's (2011, p. 246) idea of "megaphoning", which refers to "employees' positive or negative external communication behavior about their organizations".

An employee ambassador or advocate may have a variety of ways to communicate on behalf of their organization and contribute to its goals on social media. Vos (2017), for example, has suggested that individuals can draw attention to a topic, influence the direction of the debate, show accountability to maintain legitimacy or gain acceptance, educate publics and engage social media users to provide input and participate in joint problem-solving (Vos, 2017 pp. 18-19). Through these activities, employees enact communicative roles through which they embody, promote and defend their organizations, scout for information and insights about the operating environment, and build and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019) (see also article III). Many of these behaviors and roles are new to employees, and require resources and competences that they did not need before the advent of social media in the workplace.

The literature explains that communication on social media, through its affordance of visibility, demands some level of self-disclosure, referring to the “revelation of personal information that is consistent with the image one would like to give” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010 p. 62). As a consequence, social media communication is inherently strategic and relational as it allows its users to enact in processes of “seeing and being seen” alike (Brighenti, 2007 p. 325). Following the earlier literature suggesting that work-related social media communication is strategic by nature (e.g., Andersson, 2020), I elaborate on an assumption that these behaviors are also intentional. Therefore, the literature review part of this dissertation builds on the framework of the Reasoned Action Approach (RAA), which is the most current form of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), in order to understand the communication behaviors of employees. With this in mind, Figure 2 depicts employees’ work-related communication as a reasoned action, and its relationship to the management of employees’ communication behavior and communicatively constituted organizational reality (applied from the reasoned action model by Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

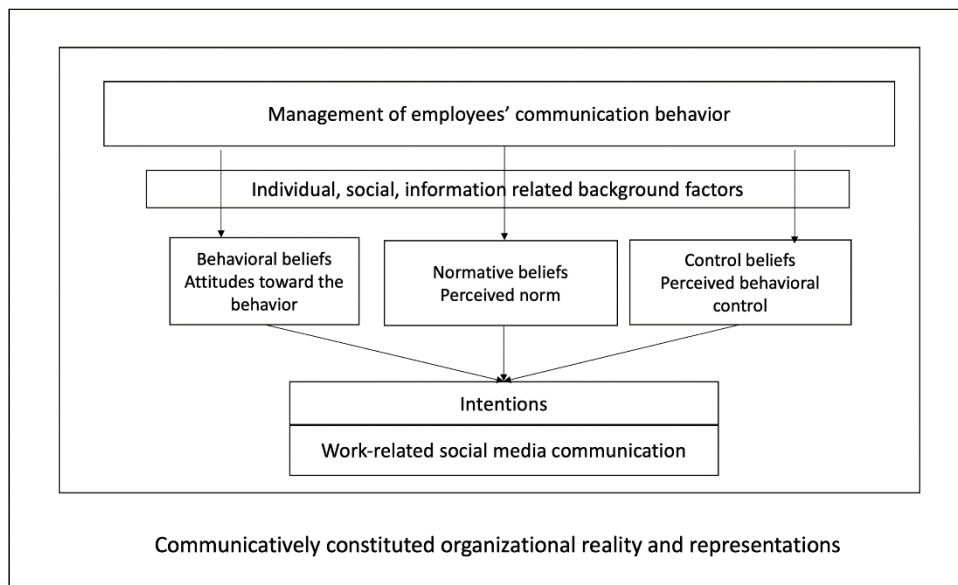


FIGURE 2 Work-related communication as reasoned action, applied from the reasoned action model by Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010.

The TPB has been widely applied in the field of communication (Ajzen, 1991), and has been used to study individuals' social media use (e.g., Baker & White, 2010; Pelling & White 2009, Van Zoonen et al., 2014). Moreover, the TPB has been successfully applied to explain new technology use and information sharing among knowledge workers (Lewis, Agarwal and Sambamurthy, 2003). According to the theory, three factors influence behavioral intentions and subsequent behavior: (a) attitudes toward the behavior, (b) normative guidance regarding the behavior, and (c) perceived behavioral control (i.e. self-regulation) over performing the behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

The most recent form of the TPB is called the reasoned action approach (RAA). Within this framework, the background factors determine the beliefs toward the behavior, while the beliefs determine the attitudes and perceived norms and control related to the specific behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Attitudes refers to the reasonableness of the respective behavior – for example attitude beliefs may imply how useful or salient employees perceive their social media use for their work; normative guidance refers to the perception of the extant normative environment such as expectations related to the particular behavior – for example whether an employee perceives that social media use for work is an expected part of their work; and the perception of self-regulation over the behaviors refers to whether an individual believes the behavior in question is personally achievable, namely how self-efficacious they feel.

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (2010), it is not possible to design effective management interventions for any system dependent on human action without a thorough understanding of the factors that determine human behavior. This

perspective is also promoted within the behavioral management tradition discussed in section 2.4. Hence, I apply the framework of the reasoned action approach (RAA), which “encourages the incorporation of unique constructs from divergent disciplinary perspectives” (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010 p. 2) within this chapter to discuss attitudes (perceived opportunities and risks), normative environment (expectations and roles) and behavioral control (self-efficacy) related to employees’ communication behavior on social media. These constructs are at the heart of the RAA, which offers insights into the ways in which people think about the behavior, about its likely consequences, the demands placed on them by others, as well as the required resources.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the literature focusing on employees’ communication behavior on social media, and particularly communicative action for work-related purposes, has been emerging, widening and deepening rapidly during the past decade (El Quirdi et al., 2015; Lee, 2020). In the next sections of this dissertation, I will focus in particular on the literature related to factors within the RAA, mainly drawing on the literature of organizational and corporate communication, sociology and social psychology.

### **2.3.1 Behavioral beliefs and attitudes (opportunities and risks)**

According to RAA, people hold beliefs about the positive or negative consequences they might encounter if they performed a particular behavior. Consequently, these beliefs influence individuals’ attitudes toward personally performing the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010, p. 20). The actual performance of the behavior is hence perceived to result in more positive than negative outcomes.

Previous research on employees’ beliefs about the positive consequences of their work-related communication on social media indicates that they consider it increasingly important for organizational and individual performance (Falkheimer et al., 2017). More explicitly, empirical studies have found that the majority of employees think that they have an important role in building organizational reputation (Schaarschmid & Walsh, 2020), and that through social media employees are able to enhance their employability and career development through personal branding in an increasingly precarious labor market (Khedler, 2019; Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Van Zoonen & Treem, 2019). This is at least partially due to employees’ perception that they can use social media to enhance their positive self-image and promote self-relevant information, thereby generating favorable impressions (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013; van Zoonen et al., 2018). Such impression management can be seen as particularly relevant in the knowledge sector, where it is important for employees to make their experience and expertise visible to others (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Van Zoonen et al., 2016). Employees are also increasingly aware that employers are gathering information from online sources via social media and search engines to help them decide whom to recruit, hire, promote or fire (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Additionally, individuals who experience stronger professional or organizational identities are more likely to combine social and work connections in social media networks



(Fieseler et al., 2015). Moreover, Leftheriotis and Giannakos (2014) found that enjoyment and other hedonic values are considerably related to employees' usage of social media at work, such as communicating with colleagues or sharing work-related knowledge.

Although an extensive body of literature has identified that individuals have positive beliefs related to social media use for work purposes, an increasing amount of literature is acknowledging the negative consequences that may affect employees' beliefs and attitudes toward work-related social media use. Social media and its use across contexts is suggested to be blurring the traditional boundaries between private and public, and personal and mass communication (Baym & boyd, 2012), duly challenging the ways in which individuals are used to managing these. The recent literature has, for example, identified that employees are often concerned about their privacy when communicating on social media, and have therefore been found to evaluate the benefits and risks before disclosing any personal information (Ashurin, Dvir-Gisman, & Halperin, 2018). Additionally, the research focusing on social media use and employee wellbeing has found that employees may perceive social media use as stressful, due to the inability to cope with technology-related demands such as work-life conflict, over-supply of possibly relevant information, and constant connectedness and interruptions (Ayyagari, Grover, & Purvis, 2011; Bucher et. al., 2013; Oksa, Saari, Kaakinen & Oksanen, 2021; van Zoonen, Verhoeven & Vliegenthart, 2017). The stress individuals experience related to their use of information and communication technologies has been referred to as technostress, a "modern disease of adaptation caused by an inability to cope with new computer technologies in a healthy manner" (Brod, 1984). Understanding the negative consequences of social media use and how they could be mitigated becomes increasingly important when communicative work becomes more distributed.

Empirical studies have also found that beliefs toward communication behavior have a relational dimension, and when employees perceive that their relationship with their organization is good, their intentions to share work-related information on their personal social media accounts increases (Lee, 2020). Interestingly, when employees feel pride in their employer's online image, their awareness that they can contribute to how external stakeholders, such as customers, evaluate the company, increases (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020). Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that the perceived importance of social media communication positively influences employees' predisposition toward taking communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019). However, some scholars have highlighted that all employees may not necessarily be aware of this, and therefore not prepared to take an active communicative role themselves, which is seen to indicate a research gap and a managerial challenge (Helm, 2011, p. 657)

In summary, the extant literature suggests that employees have both positive and negative attitudes toward work-related social media use. Given the increased use of social media for work-related purposes, it seems that the benefits of work-related social media use often neutralize the negative beliefs in the minds of employees, particularly in relation to branding being a "neoliberal imperative"

(Kuhn, Ashcraft & Cooren, 2017 p. 181), which increasingly calls for making our expertise and connections visible (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). As Mumby and Kuhn (ibid.) posit, “we are socialized into thinking and acting as individual enterprises” (p. 153), which indicates that the normative environment is encouraging individuals to engage in social media. Given that social media use for professional purposes is a relatively new phenomenon, it is also worth noting that attitudes toward it may change constantly, as people learn about the different types of uses and their consequences.

### **2.3.2 Normative environment (expectations and roles)**

According to the RAA, individuals’ perception of the normative environment is one of the key constructs that predict their intentions and behavior. Norms refer to mental representations of appropriate (i.e. acceptable or permissible) behavior in a group or society (Parsons, 1964), and therefore guide one’s behaviors. For example, the symbolic interactionist tradition (e.g., Goffman, 1958) suggests that norms provide meaning by structuring the situation and providing guidelines regarding appropriate or inappropriate behavior. This dissertation follows the thinking of Fishbein & Ajzen (2010) in viewing norms as perceived social forces that influence whether an individual is likely to perform a given behavior or not.

In the literature of reasoned action, one of the central constructs is the subjective norm (Ajzen 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), which refers to an individual’s perception of how important others (e.g. managers) or groups prescribe, desire or expect the performance or non-performance of a specific behavior. These types of norms have also been conceptualized as injunctive norms (what should or ought to be done) and descriptive norms (whether others are performing the behavior in question or not) (Cialdani, Reno, Kallgren, 1990; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) highlight that although injunctive norms are perceived at an individual level, they often concern a behavioral rule or prescription that applies equally to all members of the population that are in a particular role, position or social environment (p. 134). When studying norms and expectations in an organizational context, it is particularly important to understand the collective nature of norms. These collectively formed beliefs and expectations toward social media use at work can be assumed to evolve as knowledge about the different types of uses and their consequences increases.

When studying work-related communication behavior, it is important to acknowledge the contractual nature of work and particularly workplace roles that convey normative beliefs. Here, role theory (Biddle & Thomas, 1966) becomes helpful in explaining how the changes in norms and expectations affect changes in beliefs and behavior among knowledge workers. According to role theory, roles emerge from expectations within a particular context (Katz & Kahn, 1978). In the context of work, roles have typically been divided into two categories. In-role behaviors refer to expected behaviors that directly contribute to the core production of the organization (Katz, 1964; Van Scotter et al., 2000). On the

other hand, employees voluntarily enact extra-role behaviors, which are not formally required by the job (Bolino, 1999; Grant and Mayer, 2009). Behaviors that include exceeding formal job requirements are often referred to as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), meaning “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (Organ, 1988 p. 4).

Employees’ communication on social media is largely viewed as voluntary, extra-role behavior (e.g. Helm, 2011; Lee, 2020), and it is often defined as an extension of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Schaarschmidt & Könsen, 2019). This is not to say that organizational expectations or other sources of normative guidance have not been acknowledged in the existing literature. Studies certainly suggest that employees may be extrinsically guided to use social media for work-related purposes (e.g., Hansen & Levin, 2016; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014) and may feel normative pressure to do so (Walden, 2018), but despite these recent findings, employees’ communicative role has still been predominantly conceptualized as extra-role behavior, meaning behavior that the employee voluntarily chooses to enact or not.

This dissertation identifies two main reasons why the conceptualization has not been questioned before (see also article IV). The first relates to the history of employees’ communicative role, which has changed fundamentally in recent years in accordance with the post-Fordist organization and the emergence of digital communication technologies (Alvesson, 2004; Andersson, 2020). The second reason relates to the history of the conceptualization, which can be traced back to an article by Van Dyne, Graham & Dienesch (1994), where they discuss representative behaviors and conceptualize them as OCB. Since then, employees’ communication behavior has been predominantly conceptualized in the literature as an extra-role behavior (Organ, 1977), and one that is seldom included in formal job descriptions.

However, the recent literature suggests that the entanglement of social media in working life has created new expectations toward employees’ social media use for work-related purposes (Andersson, 2019; Walden, 2018; see also article III), which has further driven the formalization of employees’ communicative role (Andersson, 2019; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2017). As Andersson (2020) posits, “employees’ communication role and communication responsibility increasingly explicitly present dimensions of employees’ work, regardless of whether or not management attempts to formalize the communication role” (p. 17). This indicates that the normative environment is changing, and hence the time is ripe to examine whether the increased normative guidance to enact these behaviors has led employees themselves to perceive their behaviors as an expected part of their work (in-role behavior), or as voluntary behaviors that exceed job requirements (extra-role behavior), in order to understand the motivational basis of employees’ communication behavior (Morrison, 1994). This research gap has been addressed in article IV.

### **2.3.3 Behavioral control (self-efficacy)**

According to the RAA, perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived control over performance of the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010 p. 154). The idea is based on Bandura's concept of self-efficacy, which in turn has its roots in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1991, p. 257) has defined perceived self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning, and over events that affect their lives. This belief is argued to take into account the availability of information, skills, opportunities, and other resources required to perform the behavior (Bandura, 2007; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

Bandura's self-efficacy theory posits that self-efficacy affects the selection of activity, such that individuals who perceive themselves as having the ability to successfully engage in a given behavior will be more likely to perform that behavior. Conversely, individuals are not willing to engage in behaviors if they believe they will end in failure. Therefore, self-efficacy influences the respective behavior (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy differs from competence in that the former is an individual's belief in their own ability (Bandura, 1986), whereas competence is often regarded as another person's evaluative judgement of one's behavior (Roloff & Kellerman, 1984). This dissertation focuses on social media communication (SMC) self-efficacy, referring to employees' beliefs about their communication abilities on social media, as a predictor of their work-related social media communication behavior (see also article V).

Self-efficacy and Bandura's (1997) socio-cognitive theory have been used to understand the role of self-efficacy in relation to digital technology use (Hocevar, Flanagin & Metzger, 2014; Kim, & Glassman, 2013; Mew & Money, 2010; Sun & Wu, 2011; Xu, Yang, Macleod, & Zhu, 2019). The majority of studies have predominantly focused on users' technical abilities instead of communication and content creation capabilities. Additionally, research that would center on employees' social media use in a work context has been lacking. In this dissertation the focus is primarily on efficacy beliefs that are related to content creation and the strategic use of social media for professional purposes (van Deursen et al., 2019). By addressing employees' social media communication self-efficacy (article V), it is possible to gain knowledge as to whether employees consider themselves to be prepared and capable of taking over the new communicative roles described in the previous chapter. Hence, this will provide important insights into current communicative capabilities in relation to new communicative forms of knowledge work.

## **2.4 Management of employees' social media communication**

This dissertation focuses on employees' work-related communication on social media, examining this type of communicative work from a corporate communication management perspective in particular. The term management is broadly

defined here as including leadership (Mintzberg, 2009) and is understood as a function of design, in the sense that authority is used to create conditions for individual behavior in an organizational context (Kuhn, 2008; see also article III p. 552). To understand the constantly evolving environment in which organizations are functioning, it is helpful to look at the field of management as a continuum of several paradigms, as each paradigmatic approach offers its own solutions to questions such as the division and organization of labor, and the roles of employer and employee. Hence, giving a short overview of different management paradigms will provide an explanation for why the systems perspective was considered suitable in analyzing the changes in corporate communication in this dissertation.

The classical management approach consisting of writings by Taylor (1911), Fayol (1916) and Weber (1947) can be seen as the beginning of organizing work and its content. This is often called traditional organizing and the focus is on the planning of work and the improvement of productivity through management control. During the 1920s, greater attention began to be paid to the social factors at work and to the behavior of employees within an organization. A new paradigm duly emerged and the human relations approach began to evolve, with writers such as McGregor (1960), Maslow (1943) and Herzberg (1966) focusing on motivation at work, with the result that these fields of practice are commonly called behavioral management. The principal idea in these approaches was that managing personnel requires detailed knowledge of individual employees in terms of their attitudes and emotions, for instance.

The third management approach introduced here, the systems approach, emerged with an attempt to reconcile the earlier approaches (classical and human relations) in order to encourage managers to view the organization both as a whole and as a part of a larger environment. Systems theory as such has its origins outside management science and the term was used for the first time in 1951 by biologist Ludvig von Bertalanffy. He later named his approach general systems theory (GST). The systems approach provides a holistic lens with which to examine organizational behavior and its management because it recognizes the role of the interdependencies between agency, material and social in organizing and constructing reality. According to the approach, a system is made up of components that function systemically, meaning that a change in one system can have an effect on the entire system. In contemporary organizations operating in the knowledge sector, in which the employees' agency and autonomy are central to organizational survival, the components or sub-systems also include the systems in which employees are held accountable through values, meanings and structures that they have initiated through role-taking. Communicative work conducted by employees and the management of related behaviors can hence be understood as components of a corporate communication system. Consequently, employees can be seen to enact agency in this system through their reasoned (communication) behavior.

More explicitly, this dissertation views corporate communication as a socio-technical system (Trist et al., 1963). The socio-technical system approach considers an organization to be composed of a technical system, including both the tools and the knowledge needed to perform the work, and a social system, which results from the combination of people, relationships, culture, and management methods of working in the organization. As the technical system and the social system are highly interdependent, the design of the production system as a whole must consider the impact of technology on the social system in order to achieve maximum effectiveness (Pasmore & Khalsa, 1993 p. 556). For example, in relation to this study, in the digitalized working environment the social and technological systems enable enhanced connectivity, which highlights the role of visibility in organizational and individual performance (Leonardi & Treem, 2020), and which should therefore be taken into consideration when designing conditions for contemporary knowledge work. It is worth noting that the socio-technical approach differs significantly from a pure technology approach (Walker & Guest, 1952) toward systems as it does not regard technology per se as a determinant of behavior.

One of the core principles in systems theory relates to equifinality, which refers to the feature of an open system in which “a system can reach the same final state from differing initial conditions and by a variety of paths” (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p. 66). In practice, this means that although the functioning of the system is disrupted, the change in components or so-called sub-systems may enable the system to reach its goal. This idea has provided an interesting avenue for this dissertation to explore the way in which organizational representation is established although the system’s functionality has been changing in the form of the reorganization of communicative work.

The contingency approach, an extension of the systems approach, suggests that an organizational structure and system of management is dependent upon the contingencies of the situation for each particular organization. Contingency thinking could be seen to foster the emergence of strategic management approaches. Indeed, some of the early texts on strategic planning were written by prominent systems scholars, such as Ackoff (1970), Ansoff (1965) and Churchman (1968) (Mingers & White, 2010). The strategic planning approach emphasized the role of set objectives in directing organizations, and went on to become one of the most central processes in modern management practice (Mintzberg, 1997).

The communication management literature has drawn for the most part on two management literature streams: strategic management (e.g. Mintzberg 1997) and the related excellence approach (Peters and Waterman, 1982), focusing on continuous improvement. According to both of these theoretical frameworks, employees have been seen as important assets for organizations, but their motivation has not been the locus of the literature among these frameworks (see also article III). Hence, despite the increased interest in employees’ work-related communication, its antecedents and contributions to organizational performance and

outcomes, a holistic understanding of how companies manage employees' communication behavior in social media has been lacking. The literature focusing on social media policies (Banghart et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019) and "social media governance" to guide employees' social media use (e.g. Felix et al., 2017; Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012; Walden, 2018) provides only a narrow view of the ways in which organizations manage their employees' communication, as this type of framework views employees typically either as contributing to or as damaging the organizational reputation (Stohl et al., 2017), and has not taken into account how employees are motivated and enabled to communicate on social media for professional purposes. Article III in this dissertation is among the first to explore the type of management practices that are used to motivate and enable employees' communication behavior, the type of opportunities and threats these new communicative roles pose to organizations, and how contemporary organizations are dealing with these.

### **3 METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

The first subsection of this methodology chapter introduces the philosophical underpinnings of the study as a whole. The research approach is then discussed, along with the methods for data collection and the analysis carried out in the empirical studies comprising the dissertation. Finally, the chapter discusses matters pertaining to the selected research strategy in order to assess the quality and ethics of the process in which the knowledge is produced.

#### **3.1 Pragmatism as a worldview - a foundation for the research**

The purpose of this dissertation is to generate new knowledge about employees' work-related social media communication and its management, in order to understand the distribution of communicative work within the corporate communication system. I look at this phenomenon from the management perspective, and hence this study considers that the field of corporate communication is a subfield of management science. My professional background in corporate communication management has allowed me to experience at first hand some of the transformation within the corporate communication system that relates to the adoption of social networking tools in organizations, and particularly their use among organizational members. Therefore, for me, it was clear that the goal of this study would be to contribute to the resolution of genuine problems that have emerged in conjunction with this change, and to equip managers and employees with knowledge about the embeddedness of communicative work within the knowledge economy, and the challenges and opportunities it creates for organizations.

The nature of this scientific inquiry builds on a pragmatist worldview characterized by its focus on research having a practical value (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). The common commitment of founding pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead was the development of a philosophy of science that is relevant to, and informed by, human



experience and practice (Simpson, 2009). Such pragmatists admit that the knowledge of reality is socially bound and each individual is a participant in the social world. So irrespective of whether we are researchers or practitioners, we all “continuously construct and re-construct the social meanings that shape our thought and actions” (Simpson, 2009, p. 1333). Therefore, taking a pragmatist stance in this dissertation, I admit that my previous experience in corporate communication management and other social engagements constantly shapes my thinking as a researcher, and has affected the ways in which I have explored and reconstructed meanings within this dissertation.

Pragmatism has been gaining traction among management and organizational researchers in recent years (e.g. Kelemen, Rumens, & Vo, 2019; Martela, 2015; Watson, 2010). One of the reasons for its increasing popularity is that it allows scholars to move beyond the clash between (post-)positivist and constructivist research methodologies used in management and organization studies, and to overcome their ontological dichotomies through emphasizing the value of knowledge, with the contention that whether knowledge is, in fact, knowledge can be judged by assessing how useful it is (Wicks & Freeman, 1998). As Sayer (1992) states: "...to be practically adequate knowledge must generate expectations about the world and about the results of our actions that are actually realised..." (p. 69).

One of the key features of a pragmatist worldview entails viewing the world and the systems in it as continuous. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), one of the above-mentioned ‘classical pragmatists’, introduced the term *synechism* to refer to a perspective in which the world is viewed in terms of continua rather than binaries, explaining it thus: "The word *synechism* is the English form of the Greek (*synechismos*), from (*syneches*), continuous..., . . . Thus materialism is the doctrine that matter is everything, idealism is the doctrine that ideas are everything, dualism is the philosophy which splits everything in two. In like manner, I have proposed to make *synechism* mean the tendency to regard everything as continuous."

Viewing the world as continuous explains many of the principles of pragmatism. These include rejecting dichotomous either-or thinking, agreeing that knowledge is generated from person-environment interaction, and viewing knowledge as both constructed and as resulting from empirical discovery. Additionally, pragmatism takes the ontological position of pluralism with its attempt to interconnect the subjective, intersubjective and objective parts of the world, and the epistemological position that there are multiple routes to knowledge. Scholars espousing the pragmatist worldview often make “warranted assertions” rather than claims of unvarying truth, which arises from an idea that knowledge is evolutionary (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

According to Johnson & Grey (2010), pragmatism is generally considered to be a liberal philosophy that rejects dogmatism and allows the actual research question to drive the scientific inquiry. It thrives on learning from differences and encourages multidisciplinary scientific work. It also recognizes the benefits of the balance and compromise that enable decision-making based on the best possible

route to knowledge in each unique moment and setting (ibid.). In light of this, a pragmatist position allows me to look at the embeddedness of communicative action within knowledge work as part of corporate communication from the systemic perspective.

However, this liberality should not be misunderstood as an “anything goes” approach. Instead, akin to Andersson (2020), I perceive it as an aspiration to accept multiple perspectives and to constructively engage with them, rather than simply rejecting or disqualifying them due to a disagreement over the nature of their claims (p. 54). According to the pragmatists, by doing this, members of academia are able to continually modify our webs of belief in the pursuit of “usable knowledge and social justice” (Johnson & Grey, 2010 p. 89).

Founded on the worldview of pragmatism, this dissertation comprises five individual studies, some of which are more constructivist, while others, especially the quantitative ones, are more positivist in their methodological orientation. In this compilation part, these studies become interconnected and together contribute to the multiple perspectives of the phenomena of interest, with the aim of generating practical value. I acknowledge that although my aim is to look at these phenomena holistically from a systemic perspective, this will only provide a partial view of them. However, I believe that this multidisciplinary and multi-method research approach will allow me to grasp knowledge that has value in terms of practice and future theorizing.

### **3.2 Mixed methods research – an overarching methodological strategy**

In order to gain in-depth and broad knowledge of a novel phenomenon, this dissertation adopts a mixed methods research methodology and follows its guiding principle – methodological eclecticism – which refers to selecting and synergistically integrating the most appropriate research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) to thoroughly investigate a phenomenon of interest (Johnson et al., 2007; Teddie & Tashakkori, 2010).

According to Smith (1975), different methods may illuminate different aspects of a phenomenon, and he posits that we might indeed make better judgments if we could pool information on multiple aspects at the same time. For practitioners of mixed methods research, often having either a pragmatist or a critical realist mindset (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornill, 2016), the nature of the research question, the research context and likely research consequences are driving forces determining the most appropriate method choice. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are valued and the exact choice will be contingent upon the nature of the research (Molina-Azorin, 2018).

As this dissertation comprises separate studies focusing on different aspects of the same phenomena, the collective work can be perceived as a mixed methods

program in which “the mixing occurs across a closely related set of studies” (Johnson et al., 2007 p. 123). The common denominator for all of the studies in this dissertation is employees' work-related communication on social media, and the spread and expansion of corporate communicative work.

The relative liberty offered by the pragmatist position in terms of “acceptable” methods and data warranted the use of multiple methods. Hence to provide different perspectives or, in Smith's (1975) terms, aspects of the phenomenon, the studies that comprise this dissertation apply both inductive and deductive research approaches. The potential ways of attaining knowledge were evaluated in terms of what was perceived as useful (Wicks & Freeman, 1998), which meant that the ways in which data was gathered and analyzed evolved during the research process. The data collection and analysis methods are summarized in Table 2. In the following sub-sections, I will elaborate on the research approach, as well as the data collection and analysis methods, focusing on how methodological principles were reflected in the research, and the type of considerations I needed to take into account.

### **3.3 Data collection and analysis**

Adopting a mixed methods approach as my overall methodological strategy enabled me to collect data based on what I considered would be most suitable for achieving the overarching aim of this dissertation, namely to explore the distribution of communicative work within a corporate communication system. Given the multidimensionality of the research questions, it was clear to me from the outset that in order to approach the phenomenon more broadly, it would be necessary to include different perspectives, namely the managerial view and the employee view. In including the management perspective, the aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the related expectations and managerial practices that guide employees' communication behaviors. On the other hand, I wanted to explore how employees perceive the work-related social media communication in terms of whether they consider it part of their jobs and whether they feel that they are prepared to conduct these activities, as well as the mechanism leading to these perceptions. Hence, the starting point for the research was “acceptive”, demonstrating that I adhere to pragmatism and thereby admit the existence of multiple routes to knowledge. At the same time, I realized that my research questions actually encouraged me to explore, explain and embrace the possibility that the social world might simultaneously be objective and relative.

Overall, the empirical data collected for the studies comprising this dissertation included 23 interviews and 1,179 survey responses. The data based on interviews with organizational managers allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the changes in the management processes and practices that have led to the current organizational conditions, and the expectations that created the normative environment that guided the behaviors of organizational members.

On the other hand, the survey data collected from employees enhanced understanding of the related mechanisms and was instrumental in explaining the relationship between the organizational and individual factors that formed employees' perceptions of their communicative role and competence, and their work-related social media use. Together, these two datasets and approaches supported the assessment of how both managers and employees perceived the communicative action in the work domain, as well as the acquisition of knowledge about the factors that shaped their perceptions and the consequences of these perceptions. The data was collected mainly for the purposes of this dissertation project and the collection process was conducted by the author. Support from the participating organizations enabled the data collection and its eventual use for these academic purposes.

### 3.3.1 Qualitative data and analysis

In the qualitative study (article III), the focus was on exploring how organizations manage their employees' work-related communication on social media. For this purpose, I interviewed 23 managers from six different organizations operating in the professional service sector in Finland. The rationale for focusing on this particular sector is that an employee's role as an organizational communicator and advocate has become important specifically in firms defined as knowledge-intensive, such as law firms and management consultancies, as their success is inherently dependent upon their employees' ability to gain and demonstrate expertise (Alvesson, 2004; Treem, 2016). The six companies participating in the study operated in the fields of management consulting, legal services, and financial and insurance services, and employed a total of 22,996 employees (on average in 2019).

The criteria for selecting the case organizations followed Bryman (2016), who argues that the selection of samples should be based on their "appropriateness to the purposes of the investigation" (p. 12). In this case, the selection criteria included characteristics such as companies operating in the professional service sector, in which the employees' communicative role is inherent (Alvesson, 2004), and which had supporting systems for their employees' communication in place, and were willing to give access to their processes through interviews and by providing internal documents such as social media policies. In the first instance, I contacted the communication leads of these companies and after they agreed to participate in the study, the compilation of interviewees in each organization was determined together with the respective communication lead. In selecting the interviewees, particular attention was paid to the respondents' central role in employee communication programs in their respective organizations.

The study was approached with an inductive strategy, and the technique selected to analyze the interview transcripts was grounded theory, with its coding methods and process of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). Hence, although an inductive strategy was selected, the process was iterative and involved weaving back and forth between data and theory (Bryman, 2016). To ensure the rigor of the analysis, I followed the three-step process suggested by Gioia,

Corley, and Hamilton (2013). Throughout the process, I interrogated the data, relevant literature, and emerging theory to develop a deeper understanding of the management processes as they transpired. With an applied inductive stance, theory is the outcome of the research (Bryman, 2016) and in this case the outcome was a framework for managing the communicative organization.

### 3.3.2 Quantitative data and analysis

In the quantitative studies (articles IV and V), the focus was on examining how employees experience their communicative role and ability. The findings of the qualitative research guided the design of both quantitative studies, in which I was particularly interested in examining the mediating effect of these variables between organizational and individual factors, and employees' work-related communication behavior. In order to gain knowledge of these relationships, a quantitative study with a dataset collected from knowledge workers from multiple organizations was considered to paint the most rigorous picture of the current realities.

The data for these studies was collected from three organizations that allowed me to conduct an employee survey among their personnel. All of these organizations had also participated in the qualitative study described earlier. The organizations operated in the management consultancy, banking and insurance services sectors in Finland. Part of the employees worked in a business-to-business environment and some in a business-to-consumer setting. Employees in these organizations were regarded as knowledge workers – whose main capital is knowledge (Davenport, 2005) – and many of them also worked in customer service and sales, which is typical of knowledge work today.

An invitation to participate in the online survey was sent to employees (n=9,786) in the respective organizations through email and internal communication channels. The survey included questions that related to employees' social media use, communication role perception, and perceived ability. Both multiple choice questions and open-ended questions were included. Additionally, the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were mapped by enquiring about age, professional role, position in the organization and social media experience. A total of 1,179 employees completed the survey between November 20, 2019 and January 12, 2020.

Both hypothesized models included a mediator so both studies included a mediation analysis and related statistical tests. The data was analyzed using regression analysis (article V) and structural equation modelling (SEM) (article IV). The hypothesized model in article V included observed variables, which led to the use of path modelling (linear regression) in this study. Structural equation modelling was used in article IV, in which the hypothesized model included latent variables, with the benefit provided by the sophisticated estimation of SEM.

### 3.3.3 Conceptual analysis

In articles I and II, a conceptual approach was adopted to analyze the evolution of communication competence and the employees' communicative role as organizational representatives in the light of the extant literature. The primary reason for using conceptual analysis was to understand the meaning of the concepts and to determine how they related to other concepts. In other words, conceptual analysis focuses on the integration of information, linking existing theories across various disciplines (Gilson & Goldberg 2015), and is used to "bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking" (Gilson & Goldberg 2015, p. 128). Conceptual analysis refers to observing and analyzing knowledge and information from existing studies without empirical examination, so within articles I and II, previous literature and studies were used as data for the analysis.

The core of the conceptual approach is aimed at making sense of concepts, their various characteristics and components, and their associations with other concepts. According to Jabareen (2009), "every concept has a history that originates from other concepts... and relates back to others" (p. 50). Hence, the conceptual analysis can facilitate the formulation of ideas that support the development of new theories, or interpret existing theories from a new perspective. Therefore, it is often used to serve as the basis for validating or redirecting the conduct of research by providing an overview of the areas that have yet to be examined. This is particularly relevant in novel research fields and when studying phenomena where there are few empirical findings available.

Overall, articles I and II served as background studies for the dissertation, helping to provide perspective on the characteristics of employees' communicative role and competence (concept), and to reflect on them in light of the current phenomenon of knowledge workers acting as organizational representatives on social media (context). Reviewing the literature from the past and from the perspective of multiple disciplines made it possible to identify the specific variables related to the studied issue, and to generate a conceptual framework to facilitate the following phases of the research.

TABLE 2 Methodological approach, data and analysis in the research articles

Article	RQ	Object of the study	Data	Collection of the empirical data	Analysis method
I	1	Evolution of communicative roles and related competences	Literature	-	Conceptual analysis
II	2	Contributions of communicative action	Literature	-	Conceptual analysis
III	2, 3	Management practices and expectations	23 interviews (Communications and HR managers)	Between April 2019 and June 2019	Qualitative analysis (grounded theory)
IV	4	Communicative role perceptions	1,179 survey responses (Employees)	Between November 2019 and January 2020	Quantitative analysis (SEM)
V	5	Communication self-efficacy	1,179 survey responses (Employees)	Between November 2019 and January 2020	Quantitative analysis (regression)

### 3.4 Reflections and methodological evaluation

First, I cannot over-emphasize the extent to which this research project has been a learning journey. Looking back, I am proud of all the work accomplished. At the same time, I can clearly see the learning curve, and the fact that some decisions and selections were made in light of current knowledge that has increased exponentially during this journey. Below, I will discuss some of the decisions that may be considered when evaluating the reliability and validity of the studies comprising this dissertation.

Generating reliable, valid and relevant knowledge is the guiding principle and an ultimate aim of scientific research. Reliability refers to the consistency of the research procedures and repeatability of the results. On the other hand, validity reflects how accurately research is able to address the intended phenomenon (Bryman, 2016; Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). Relevance, instead, refers to the importance of the topic within its substantive field (Hammersley, 1992). Reliability and validity have different emphases in the qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Quantitative research underlines the quality of the measurement instruments in ensuring reliability and validity. Qualitative research, based on socially induced knowledge and subjective interpretation, emphasizes instead the quality of the research process and trustworthiness as criteria for assessing

research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In both research traditions, the repeatability of the research is a cornerstone of reliability. Within all of the empirical studies comprising this dissertation, the details of the data collection were described in order to enable the repeatability of the research.

The research data was collected through interviews and self-report surveys. Both methods were considered most appropriate for their particular purpose. Interviews with managers provided in-depth explanations related to the significance, managerial practice and perceived consequences of the phenomenon in question. On the other hand, the survey was designed to collect a relatively large dataset of multiple measurement items, which helped to uncover some of the mechanisms that affect employees' work-related communication on social media.

The interview data was collected through semi-structured interviews that allowed me to focus on the same central themes within each interview, but also permitted the interviewees to include those aspects that they considered relevant and important (Bryman, 2016). I attempted to act upon the qualities suggested by Kvale (1996), to ensure clarity, sensitivity, and openness during the interviews. Following the pragmatist position, the interviews were conducted as a means of identifying valuable knowledge of the current organizational realities. Saturation was reached in relation to research question RQ3, which strengthened confidence in the interview protocol. To validate the inductive approach in studying the management of employee communicators, the study addressed the explanations based on the interview answers. The Gioia method, with its three-step process (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013), was used to ensure the reliability of the analysis process. During the process, the theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was constantly assessed. The iterative analysis process included constant comparison between data and theory. The knowledge gained during the acquisition and analysis of the interview data helped me to develop the research design for the quantitative study.

The quantitative data collection was conducted through an online self-report survey, using established constructs with slight adaptation to the respective context. Although much of social science research relies on these types of self-reports rather than direct observation of behavior, there are some important criteria that must be met to ensure the reliability of the self-report data (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010 p. 33). The most important criterion is that all participants must have the same definition and understanding of the category of behavior in question, which matches that of the researcher (*ibid.*). I tried to ensure this common understanding through two main procedures: pre-testing the survey and introducing the phenomena under examination at a general level to the survey respondents in the invitation letter. Based on these steps, I expected most of the participants to define and understand the behaviors in question in the same way, although I acknowledge that there is always a risk of alternative interpretations.

Additionally, self-report surveys always run the risk of self-presentation biases, particularly in cases dealing with behaviors that are socially desirable or undesirable (Singleton & Straits, 2018). These biases can be reduced by motivating participants to tell the truth by assuring them of confidentiality or anonymity



(Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010 p. 37). These suggestions were implemented in the studies covered in this dissertation and all of the respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, the reliability of the measures used was assessed based on the consistency of the measurements. Guided by Singleton & Straits (2018), the reliability of the multi-item measures was established statistically at the beginning of the data analysis by calculating Cronbach's alpha (article V) and composite reliability scores (article IV). The scale reliability coefficient varied between .80 and .95, which is well above the recommended threshold of .70 (Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2010).

Regarding the validity of the quantitative studies, the following considerations should be noted. During the research design phase, the familiarity of the research topic helped when it came to assessing the face validity of the operational definitions, and content validity of selected measures, relating to the inclusion of all relevant facets of the concept (Singleton & Straits, 2018). Construct validity indicates how well the measured construct represents the particular theoretical concept and how it compares to other constructs (Ping, 2004; Singleton & Straits, 2018). In quantitative research, construct validity is commonly addressed by exploring the convergent and discriminant validities of the measured constructs (Singleton & Straits, 2018). Convergent validity is established when items representing the same latent construct are highly correlated and share a common variance, whereas discriminant validity is established when the latent constructs in the nomological network are shown to be distinct. Overall, these results of the validity tests indicate that adequate convergent and discriminant validities were established in both quantitative studies.

Of relevance to all empirical studies, much time was invested in learning ways to collect the data and conduct the analyses to the highest standards. Previous professional experience in the field of communication management, and familiarity with the concepts and how they might function in practice, helped me to come up with research questions, and to assess the practical value of these, at least to some extent. The previous experience was also invaluable when it came to conducting the interviews and designing the hypothesized models. On the other hand, familiarity with the research topic always entails the risk of the researcher making fundamental assumptions based on how things function in practice, and that might distort one's perspective, particularly in relation to unexpected results. Being cognizant of this risk throughout the research process, I have tried to constantly question my thinking, and discuss the decisions made with people both with and without practical experience in all major phases of the research.

## **4 FINDINGS AND SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES**

This section provides summaries of the appended research articles and elaborates the key findings with respect to the research questions. Each article is also related to the concept of communicative work and reflected against prior corporate communication research.

### **4.1 Article one – Understanding the evolution of communicative roles and related competence**

This conceptual article focuses on the concept of communication competence and provides a historical review of related literature, particularly from the perspective of individuals communicating on behalf of collectives and organizations. The contribution of this paper lies in its integrative approach. Although there is a large quantity of extant literature on communication competence, many of the conceptual foundations of the existing literature rely on an interpersonal communication understanding of competence. Research exploring competence related to specific communicative roles such as those performed by organizational advocates has been rare, and hence I hope that this article provides inspiration for further studies to advance knowledge on communication competence, particularly in the work domain.

The article focuses on the evolution of communicative roles and related communication competence in the light of development of the communication medium – which has evolved from an oral, directly vocal medium to today's digital media. The article also highlights that as new modes of communication and media were introduced, older ones were not abandoned, but coexisted and interacted with new modes of media and advocacy, meaning that the communicative environment has become more complex and requires individuals (particularly in working life) to excel in communicating via multiple media. By tracing the historical development of communication competence associated with organizational advocates (such as orators, spokespersons and employee advocates) from

the fourth century BC onwards, the article is able to demonstrate that this current period, characterized by digital communication and the affordances and challenges it provides for individuals representing their organizations, more closely resembles a continuum rather than a revolution.

The findings of the article indicate that media have always been of significance in societal, economic and political development, and the level of competence in using these media has caused inequalities among the population. For example, according to Innis (1950), competent users of each communication medium have created a “special class”, which has controlled the production of time-binding media. When aiming to understand communicative work and its management, these historical writings should be considered carefully to avoid competence gaps among the working population that would cause such inequalities.

“While not a new phenomenon, the need to understand and develop the communication competencies of organizational members across functions and roles has received renewed impetus, due in part to the increased use of social media by organizations for external and internal communication purposes” (article I, p. 1).

Overall, the findings of this conceptual study demonstrate that individuals have always acted as organizational advocates and their communication role and competence have evolved along with the developments in communication media and societal and organizational systems. The communication competence of organizational advocates continues to be of great importance for organizations, and the competence attributes have become more complex, particularly due to the increased number of available media requiring close attention, and particularly at a time when an increasing number of individuals are enacting these types of communicative behaviors due to the distribution of communicative work within the corporate communication system.

## **4.2 Article two – Understanding how employees communicatively constitute organizational representations**

This conceptual article focuses on employees’ communicative role in constituting the corporate voice, and reviews related literature, particularly from the perspective of sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). The article addresses research question RQ2 by elaborating how employees collectively construct corporate identity through sensemaking and sensegiving processes in today’s digitalized and social communication environment and, on the other hand, how these sensemaking and sensegiving processes affect employees’ communication behavior, and employee advocacy in particular.

The sensemaking literature has focused for the most part on how meanings are created inside an organization and among organizational members. However, this article focuses on interactions between organizational members and external stakeholders. The article identifies that employees may engage in sensemaking

when they interact in social media due to the fact that they are often aware that they represent not only themselves but also their organizations. When communicating on social media, employees face constant tension between revealing and concealing, which relates to the goals set for personal and organizational identities. External stakeholders are found to guide this sensemaking process when they communicate their expectations or views, which are assumed to reflect the reputation they have in mind when considering the organization.

Sensegiving, referring to the purposeful process of influencing the sensemaking and cognitions of others (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), has been largely treated as a privilege of corporate management and the communications function, studied in the context of how organizational leaders or managers strategically shape the sensemaking of organizational members (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Instead of seeing the sensegiving process as a management-centric activity, this article adheres to the idea put forward by Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) that actors at any level of an organization, or outside its boundaries, may engage in sensegiving with others. The paper argues that due to social media, and particularly its ability to grant communicative power to employees (Men, 2014), the role of these actors as sensegivers increases.

Finally, the paper argues that employees' communication behavior on social media, particularly advocacy behavior, is based on the constant circulation of sensemaking and sensegiving activity, and that employees engage in these processes based on their preferred social media user role in each specific forum they select for their participation. Therefore, the findings of this conceptual article advance understanding of the cognitive processes behind communicative work and demonstrate that when communicating on social media, employees have not only their organizations' identities but also their own personal identities at stake, which should be taken into consideration when managing communicative work.

### **4.3 Article three - Understanding the management of communicative work**

The findings of this qualitative study answer research question RQ3, relating to the management of employees' work-related communication on social media and they also contribute to RQ2 in identifying the objectives of employees' communication management. According to the previous literature in the fields of corporate and strategic communication, as well as public relations, employees have been deemed important communicative assets for organizations, but their ability and motivation to communicate on behalf of an organization has not been a focal point in these streams of literature. In this article, it is argued and empirically demonstrated that introducing the behavioral management approach to the communication management discussion can advance understanding of how organizations can manage employees' communication behavior.

The data on which this study is based consisted of 23 interviews among communications and human resource managers. The semi-structured interviews created a rich and informative dataset that resulted in the formulation of a theoretical management framework – management of the communicative organization. The framework demonstrates that depending on the organizational differentiating factors, organizations apply different management approaches. The management systems in all of these identified approaches were based on processes and practices that enable and motivate employees to communicate for work-related purposes. The enabling processes and motivating processes were categorized based on their functioning. Enabling processes do not increase performance but, if they are absent, they can hinder an employee’s communication. On the other hand, motivating processes can have a positive effect on behavior and serve to encourage employees to enhance their performance.

The findings of this study suggest that in addition to managing corporate communication content, communication management is transforming into the management of people who communicate. Therefore, the traditional custom of corporate communication practice whereby messages are released through a medium to build and maintain a reputational position among key stakeholder groups (Cornelissen, 2017 p. 40) is changing, particularly due to the increased importance of employees’ communicative role within corporate communication. This means that corporate communication management includes not only managing content, media and key stakeholders, but also managing employee communicators. This change is illustrated in Figure 3, which demonstrates how the traditional “triangle” of key elements (content, media and stakeholders) within the scope of corporate communication management has become a quadrangle, including a new element of employee communicators that need to be taken into consideration when managing corporate communications, particularly in organizations operating in the knowledge sector.

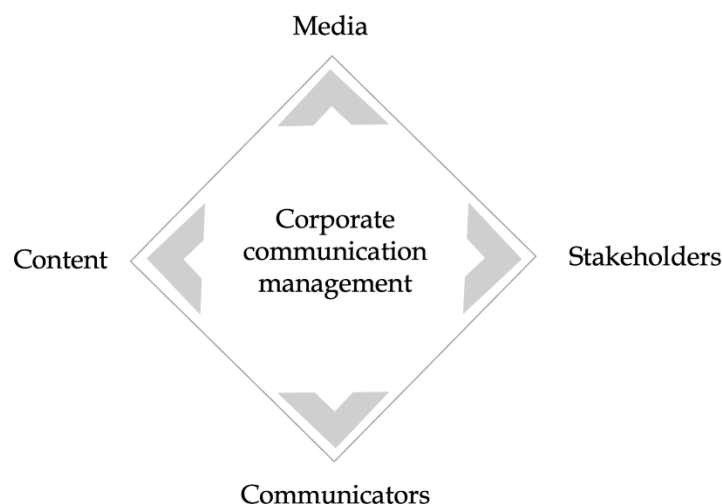


FIGURE 3 Key elements in the management of communicative organizations

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of taking the contextual factors into consideration when designing the conditions for employees' communication in each organization. This shows that institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), which has characterized the early phases of social media adoption in corporate communication systems, may not be the best alternative for organizations. Instead, organizations would benefit from understanding their unique differentiating factors and designing the management approach accordingly.

The findings of this study advance the field of corporate communication management by empirically demonstrating that organizations increasingly manage their employees' work-related communication, and that the management processes and practices identified derive from the behavioral management tradition. Another important finding is that there is no one approach that could fit all organizations, and that companies vary instead based on contextual factors in relation to how they manage their employees' communication. Finally, the most significant finding of the study is that communication management is transforming into the management of individuals who communicate. This is not only a paradigmatic change but an element of a systemic change that further affects not only the processes and practices, but also the competence requirements of both communication professionals and individual employees.

#### **4.4 Article four – Understanding employees' communicative role perceptions**

The fourth study focuses on the antecedents and consequences of employees' communicative role perceptions. The empirical evidence on which this study relies consists of 1,179 survey responses from knowledge workers in three organizations operating in the professional service sector. The quantitative study applies structural equation modelling (SEM) to gain an understanding of the relationship between role perceptions, their antecedents and employees' work-related communication behavior on social media.

The extant literature has predominantly conceptualized employees' communicative behavior on social media as discretionary and extra-role, or as a particular form of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (e.g., Erhardt & Gibbs, 2014; Fieseler, Meckel, & Ranzini, 2015; Helm, 2016; Men, 2014). Behaviors within the category of OCB are seldom considered a formal part of the reward, training or promotion system (Organ, 1988), indicating that employees enacting these behaviors are expected to enact them based on their individual initiative, resources and abilities. Andersson (2019) posits that the current conceptualizations overlook the way in which employees themselves perceive communicative-role expectations and the corresponding responsibilities, and whether they deem communication action as one of their expected obligations. One of the recent attempts to understand employees' communication responsibility is the qualitative study

by Andersson (2019b), which indicates that employees increasingly view the ambassador role as part of their work role and as a responsibility of a professional employee. However, to my knowledge, no previous quantitative studies have tested the relationship between role perceptions and work-related communication behavior, although that is fundamental when aiming to understand communicative work and related managerial interventions.

In addition, in order to manage organizational behavior in a sustainable manner, it is important for managers and employees to have a shared understanding of expected behavior. The previous literature cautions that contradictory role expectations may lead to role stress, for example through role overload if employees feel that work requirements are so excessive that they exceed the limits of their time and/or ability (Kopelman et al., 1983).

This particular study draws attention to the conceptualization of employees' social media use for work and questions how far the citizenship behavior construct, which is by definition extra-role and proactive and derives from employees' discretionary decisions to exceed work expectations (Organ, 1988), can be extended to include new forms of knowledge work, such as work-related communication on social media, which emerge in conjunction with digital technologies and changes in the functioning of the knowledge economy. Based on the findings of this study, a new conceptualization of employees' work-related communication is proposed.

#### **4.5 Article five – Understanding employees' preparedness to conduct communicative work**

The fifth article focuses on employees' perceptions of their social media communication ability, namely their self-efficacy beliefs. The study centered on efficacy beliefs particularly in relation to content creation and the strategic use of social media to achieve professional and organizational goals. This was considered particularly relevant in the current situation in which employees are increasingly guided to communicate on behalf of their organizations, as article three demonstrates. On the other hand, previous research found that social media skills varied considerably among the working population and that organizations had not developed supporting systems at the same rate at which they had taken new digital tools into use (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017; Marsh, 2018; van Laar et al., 2018). Acknowledging this paradox was one of the key inspirations for this study.

The social cognitive theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) was applied as a theoretical foundation for the study and guided the development of the conceptual model and related hypotheses. The article examined the role of communication self-efficacy as a mediator between individual and organizational factors and employees' work-related communication behavior. These antecedent factors

included social media experience, social media training, organizational commitment toward employees' communication on social media, and clarity of communicative roles.

The quantitative study was based on the survey data from 1,179 respondents. The findings highlight the importance of self-efficacy in understanding employees' work-related communication on social media, showing that the more efficacious the employee, the more frequent social media communicators they were. Notably, only 16.37% of respondents felt some level of confidence in their ability to use social media strategically to achieve professional and organizational goals. This indicated that only less than one-fifth of employees currently feel prepared to conduct communicative work on social media.

Taken collectively, the results of this study suggest that employees' self-efficacy beliefs play an important role in their work-related social media communication behavior in a context such as knowledge work. This study also demonstrates that organizations operating in the knowledge sector have an important role in creating conditions in which employees can enhance their self-efficacy and work-related communication behavior.

#### **4.6 Summary of the findings – connecting the dots**

In this section, I will summarize the contribution of the findings of the studies comprising this dissertation by offering simplified answers to the initial research questions and linking them to the concept of communicative work. The purpose of this summary, following the pragmatist tradition, is to capture the findings with the most value for practice. As providing such simplified versions of the answers inevitably calls for selectivity, I therefore recommend reading each study in full.

*RQ1: How have employees' communicative role and related competences evolved?*

Organizations have always depended on their individual members' ability to communicate and voice their opinions. The communicative role and competence of individuals representing their organizations have evolved in conjunction with the media and the societal environment. Competent users of media have derived the most benefits, and have dominated the generation of knowledge. The need to understand and develop adequate communication competences in the working population has received renewed impetus, in part because of the increased use and importance of social media in society, including organizational life, which has led to the wider distribution of communicative work.

*RQ2: How do employees constitute organizational representations through their communication?*

When employees communicate about work-related issues on social media, the cognitive processes of sensemaking and sensegiving are triggered. Employees



engage in sensemaking due to the fact that they are often aware that they represent not only themselves, but also their affiliation to their organization through their online identity. On the other hand, employees are becoming important sensegivers, meaning that they purposefully influence the sensemaking and cognitions of external stakeholders in their online networks. Based on the findings, communicative work crosses the boundaries of personal and professional identities and spheres, which should be taken into consideration when designing organizational conditions for communicative work.

*RQ3: How is employees' communication behavior managed?*

Companies manage the communication behaviors of their personnel by creating conditions that enable and motivate employees to enact intended behaviors. Three management approaches, namely individual-oriented, corporate-oriented and business-oriented, were identified. The selected management approach determines the extent to which communicative work is distributed among organizational members. The management of employees' communication behaviors has emerged as a new sub-area within corporate communication and public relations practice, meaning that communication professionals are not only managing the content of corporate communication, but they are also increasingly managing individuals who communicate on behalf of their corporations.

*RQ4: How do employees perceive their communicative role and why is this important?*

In order to understand the motivational basis of employees' communication behavior on social media, it is crucial to understand how employees perceive their communicative role. By drawing attention to the role perceptions and the context in which they are formed, it is possible to gain new knowledge on the embeddedness of communicative action within knowledge work, such as work-related communication on social media, which emerges in conjunction with digital technologies and changes in the functioning of knowledge-based organizations.

*RQ5: How do employees perceive their communicative ability in using social media for professional purposes?*

Most of the employees participating in the study lacked confidence in their abilities to use social media strategically for professional purposes. Employees who are confident in their communicative abilities are more active users. The social media experience, social media training, organizational commitment toward employees' communication, and clarity of communicative roles increase employees' efficacy beliefs and consequently their work-related social media use. The wider allocation of communicative work requires investments in learning and the development of communicative human resources.

In the following section, I will highlight the importance of these findings in understanding the systemic change in corporate communication and deepen the discussion on their implications for research and practice.

## 5 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

So how is communicatization shaping knowledge work? What is changing precisely when knowledge workers communicate for work-related purposes on social media? How do organizations deal with this type of work-related communication behavior? And importantly, how is the formalization of employees' communicative role and increased significance and amount of communicative work within organizations affecting corporate communication at a system level? These are the questions that inspired this dissertation, and questions which have not yet been debated thoroughly in the field of corporate communication management, despite the fact that they have become critical and foundational in understanding how organizational representation is constituted in contemporary organizations.

The objective of this dissertation was to generate new knowledge about the distribution of communicative work within the corporate communication system and to understand how work-related social media communication is embedded in contemporary knowledge work. In this way, the dissertation aimed to contribute to the understanding of how corporate communication as a management system is changing in relation to the communicatization of working life.

The question was approached from a management perspective, and the objective was to gain valuable knowledge that would allow organizations to develop their management systems in a responsible and sustainable manner. Hence the approach followed the pragmatist tradition. The overarching research question was approached from the systemic perspective, aiming to understand the interplay between employees' perceptions and behaviors and managerial expectations and practices, with the changes within these being regarded as systemic changes in relation to the process of communicatization.

## 5.1 Summarized conclusions

The concluding part of the dissertation elaborates on the knowledge generated through the five studies comprising this dissertation, by identifying and discussing elements that describe the distribution of communicative work within the corporate communication system. Based on the appended articles, three conclusions can be drawn: 1) Communicative action and ability have increased their significance in contemporary work environments; 2) Communicative work is contextual and purposeful in nature and many knowledge workers do not feel confident about their abilities to take on these new work roles; and 3) Managing corporate communications includes a new sub-area that deals with managing communicative human resources. These conclusions are not based on one specific article; instead, they emerge from a holistic evaluation of the findings reported in the appended studies.

1. Communicative action and ability have increased their significance in contemporary work environments.

The neoliberal transformation of production in knowledge economies has reshaped the way in which communicative action is valued, and has increased the interdependence between individual communicative action and organizational function (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019). Furthermore, the integration of information and communication technologies (Cao, Guo, Vogel, & Zhang, 2016; Korzynski et al., 2020; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Okkonen, Vuori, & Helander, 2018), which afford a new type of participation and visibility (Treem, Leonardi & Hooff, 2020), the increased value of professional networks (Ancillai et al., 2019), and the change in the normative environment related to the use of social media for work (article III; Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019; Walden, 2018) have increased the amount and significance of the communication activity of individual employees. Consequently, this has reconfigured knowledge work through the increased embeddedness of communicative action. Therefore, the first conclusion of this dissertation is that in our current society and economy, communicative action and communication ability have increased their significance in contemporary work environments and new forms of communicative work have emerged.

2. Communicative work is contextual and purposeful in nature and many knowledge workers do not feel confident about their abilities to take on these new work roles.

Communicative work is contextual in nature, and hence the distribution of such work depends on the organizational setting and work circumstances, which may strengthen the salience of social media for one's work. Communication in these contexts has become a type of currency in economic transactions, requiring in-

vestments (such as allocation of time, development of skills and knowledge; acquiring technologies and tools) and yielding potential returns on those investments, both for individuals and their organizations (e.g. increased sales performance or gaining thought leadership). In such contexts, communication has become a part of the work roles, as it is expected either by external others or by employees themselves.

Communicative work includes behaviors that are intentional in the sense that employees have a reason when communicating on social media for work-related purposes. Understanding communicative work behaviors as intentional behaviors helps to predict these behaviors within an RAA framework. This means that it is possible that both employee communicators and the management enact agency when organizational realities and representations are created through communicative action.

The increased embeddedness of social media communication within knowledge work calls for the acquisition of new competences and resources, to which end, not all employees feel efficacious in using social media strategically for professional purposes. This is an important finding because it means that not all employees are capable and confident when it comes to conducting communicative work. It also implies that organizations have an important responsibility to support their employees in attaining the ability to take part in an increasingly digitalized professional life, and safeguarding them against technostress, which is often experienced when technology use challenges one's ability to cope with technology-related demands (Ayyagari, Grover, & Purvis, 2011), and avoiding digital divides with regard to how the benefits of social media use are distributed among the working population (van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2019).

3. Managing corporate communications includes a new sub-area that deals with managing communicative human resources.

Traditionally, corporate communication and its management has been the exclusive task of organizational leaders, whose guiding principles in communications toward external publics have been the univocality and consistency of communications (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011). From this perspective, employees' communicative role has been relevant mainly in the internal organizational context. In this dissertation, it is argued that the increased importance of social media in work-related communication, the formalization of employees' communicative role as external advocates, and the increased amount of communicative work conducted by employees has shaped corporate communication at a system level and transformed it as a management function.

A new sub-system of corporate communication has emerged in which communication management includes the management of people who communicate. The dissertation proposes that introducing the behavioral management approach to the communication management discussion can advance understanding of how organizations can manage their employees' communication behaviors online. The behavioral management approach focuses on human motivation and

on how organizations can best motivate their employees to work willingly and effectively. In applying this approach, the practices of communication management and human resource management are becoming intertwined.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the corporate communication system is adaptive, and although the functioning of the system has been disrupted by the emergence and increased use of new communication technology, the change in its sub-systems has enabled the system to reach its goal. Secondly, this means that work-related communication has moved under the definition of work, at least in some contexts, as it has become expected, it requires effort, and it is assumed to create economic value. Based on the conclusions above, it becomes clear that organizational communicative capability resides increasingly in individual employees who communicate on behalf of their organizations, and hence communication management increasingly entails managing individuals who communicate, and who engage in communicative work. The communicative action of employees constitutes organizational realities and representations, not only inside the organization but also across organizational boundaries, shaping how the organization is perceived by external stakeholders. This deduction contributes to the objective of the dissertation in understanding how the corporate communication system changes when communicative work is more widespread. This dissertation provides a novel application of the CCO approach in demonstrating how communicative theory can be used to explain sources of competitive advantage for organizations (e.g. Cooren et al., 2011).

In 2017, corporate communication scholar Joep Cornelissen wrote that it may be too early to see the consequences of changing media in corporate communication and estimated that “Whatever the long-term changes of these developments may be, approaches to corporate communication will require at least some reinvention as these new media continue to evolve” (p. 38). Now, four years later, we are starting to get to grips with some of the changes in the corporate communication system, although the development of communication technologies has continued to evolve at an accelerating pace.

Aiming for a cohesive understanding of corporate communication's systemic change, this doctoral research has focused on communicative work in the form of employees' work-related social media use and the meanings ascribed to it by organizational members – managers and employees alike. When aiming to understand the diffusion of new technologies, and the socioeconomic changes related to them, there is often a tendency, especially in the early stages of theorizing, to overestimate short-term advantages, ignoring the long-term consequences that accompany the use of these new and highly praised technologies (Baccarella et al., 2020; Spitzberg 2006). It has been suggested that the complexity of technology and human relationships tends to require some degree of retrospection before the right questions can even be asked, much less the most accurate understandings formed (Herring, 2004). Based on the results of the studies comprising this dissertation, I contend that we are approaching a moment at which we will start to see system-level changes in relation to social media, and I hope this study will contribute to that field of research. I also hope that I have

been able to include some retrospection in this dissertation, although the phenomenon in question is still relatively novel. I likewise hope that the results of this dissertation will inspire future research that examines the changes in organizational phenomena, particularly in the field of communication and management, from a systemic perspective.

## **5.2 Practical implications**

The findings of the studies appended to this dissertation advance understanding of how communicative action is embedded in contemporary knowledge work, how the corporate communication system is changing and – maybe more importantly – how it should be changed in the future. Based on this understanding, I am able to discuss some of the implications and recommendations for practice, as the results could conceivably be used in organizations and in the development of public policy. To this end, the aim of the dissertation is to draw the attention of scholars, practitioners and policymakers to the ongoing changes and their coordination, in anticipation that it could contribute to making working life more equal, participative and transparent.

By understanding the perceptions, practices and structures associated with work-related communication on social media, we are able to advance knowledge of what constitutes communicative work, how it is conducted within organizations, and what kinds of meanings are associated with it. These perceptions of managers and employees together shape how communicative work is treated in working life. By increasing the understanding related to these beliefs, processes and structures, and how they are changing as a system, it might be possible to enhance the positive aspects of this development and impede their negative aspects through managerial work and public policy. At the same time, it is important to enhance the knowledge of individuals regarding their own perceptions in relation to work-related communication and its relationship to their jobs. It is also important that employees are aware of the effects of their communication or lack thereof. By introducing the concept of communicative work, I hope to make these work-related communicative tasks visible and draw attention to their direct and indirect consequences.

One of the practical implications relates to the importance of creating a shared understanding of communicative roles and responsibilities between employer and employee. Study IV draws attention to employees' perception of their communicative role and whether they perceive work-related communication as an expected part of their work or not, and highlights the importance of considering both the managerial and employee perspective with regard to workplace roles. Study III demonstrates that managers in corporate communication and HR regard communication on digital platforms as an important aspect of work. Previous studies have found that if managers have broader role definitions than their employees, they may take behaviors for granted although their employees

may regard them differently. This gap in perceptions might lead to the emergence of role stress, for example through role overload if employees feel that the work requirements are too demanding (Kopelman et al., 1983), or to role ambiguity if employees feel uncertain about what is expected of them (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970). Therefore, it is necessary to formally agree on the expectations related to this novel aspect of knowledge work, namely communicative work on social media.

The second practical implication relates to the importance of the constant development of communicative capability among the working population, to ensure that employees, when willing, have equal opportunities to participate in an increasingly digital professional life. Given that work-related social media may enhance the employability and career development of competent communicators, organizations should ensure that they provide support accordingly and equally. Moreover, organizations can enhance employees' confidence in their communication through explaining the purposes and goals of communicative work, as clarity on communicative expectations increases employees' self-efficacy, which in turn increases work-related social media engagement as shown in study V. This does not mean that organizations should expect communication from all employees, but rather that employees should be made aware of how they can communicate in their current position, what their responsibilities are if they choose to engage in communicative work, and what benefits and risks exist in social media communication on public platforms. In certain work roles communication is increasingly expected, and hence this should be made explicit, and employees offered support within these roles in order to take advantage of opportunities and to overcome potential risks.

The third practical implication relates to the contextual nature of communicative work and highlights the importance of finding a suitable management approach for each organization. Management processes are at the core of each management approach, and the task of communication management is to design the most appropriate combination of processes for each organization. This includes enabling processes and motivating processes, in line with Herzberg's (1966) dual-factor theory (see article III for specific processes). Hence the findings of this research show that instead of following the normative mechanisms of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), organizations would benefit from identifying the most suitable management approach for managing their employees' communication in their unique context. As Miles and Mangold (2014, p. 406) have posited, "managing employees' voice in the social media era begins with ensuring that an appropriate organizational context is provided."

### **5.3 Limitations and future research**

This dissertation and the studies comprising it have several limitations. First of all, although aiming to look at the phenomena holistically and integrating two

empirical perspectives (managerial and employee), I am aware that there are perspectives that remain unexplored, and hence the findings should be seen as providing only a partial view of the phenomena. Following the pragmatist stance, I also aimed at generating knowledge with the most practical value. I started with conceptual and inductive approaches and followed up with more deductive research designs. This strategy allowed me to learn from the past conceptual work and practice, generate new ideas emerging from the qualitative data, and then finally test these ideas by integrating extant theoretical frameworks into the novel models in the quantitative studies. However, this strategy generated a number of interesting research avenues and consequently entailed difficult decisions on the inclusion and exclusion of topics and an assessment of what would contribute the most practical value, particularly for whom. Here, I based my decisions on values associated with pragmatism such as usable knowledge and social justice (Johnson & Grey, 2010). Furthermore, given the managerial lens in this dissertation, my decisions on valuable knowledge are based on the development of knowledge that would help managers to create organizational conditions that support the above-mentioned values.

Moreover, the empirical data for this dissertation was gathered at one point in time. In this respect, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Additionally, the empirical data was collected in one particular industry sector in Finland, which means that the results are not readily generalizable and should be tested in other cultural and industrial contexts. That said, I hope that the dissertation will provide inspiration for further studies.

I assume that work-related social media communication will continue to increase in importance and continue to strengthen the formalization of employees' communicative role, and subsequently the spread of communicative work within organizations. This means that the importance of employees' communicative abilities will increasingly affect not only individual but also organizational performance. Thus, further research should put emphasis on addressing communicative work from the employment and educational point of view. For example, how it is rewarded in organizations and how future employees in universities and other institutions are equipped to operate in the type of working environments in which new forms of communicative work are embedded.



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## **ORIGINAL PAPERS**

### **I**

#### **COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AS A PRECONDITION FOR COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR – TRACING THE HISTORY OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL ADVOCATES**

by

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(Book chapter – accepted for publication)

### **Communication Competence as a Precondition for Communication Behavior**

Competence in communicating is fundamental to social functioning, and the ability of individuals to reach their goals in social life depends to a large extent on their communication competence (Hannawa & Spitzberg, 2015; Rickheit et al., 2008). Similar to Spitzberg and Cupach, (1984), in this chapter, communication competence refers to the overall set of skills, abilities, and knowledge about what, when, and how to communicate in diverse situations, to diverse stakeholders, and for diverse purposes. Organizations have always been dependent on the ability of their individual members to communicate and voice their opinions (Pels, 2000 p. xiii). And in almost every phase of organizational functioning, individual communication abilities affect the ways in which people go about doing their work (Sypher, 1984). Hence, communication can play a constitutive role in that it shapes the very essence of any organization (McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). From this perspective, communication competence forms the foundation for organizational functioning (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). While not a new phenomenon, the need to understand and develop the communication competencies of organizational members across functions and roles has received renewed impetus, due in part to the increased use of social media by organizations for external and internal communication purposes. With the rise of social media, employees have amplified opportunities to play active communication roles that can either contribute to organizational goals or harm organizational interests if employees do not have the right competencies (Heide & Simonsson, 2011; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019; Pekkala & Luoma-aho, 2017; Snyder & Honig, 2016).

This chapter reviews literature on the communication competence of individuals representing specific collectives and organizations. It examines communication competence in light of different communication environments and roles that are referred to as advocacy archetypes. The focus is particularly on competencies that enable individuals to produce a

positive megaphoning effect (Kim & Rhee, 2011) and communicate on behalf of their collectives as “orators,” “spokespersons,” and “advocates”. Kim and Rhee (2011) define the megaphoning effect as “the likelihood of employees’ voluntary information forwarding or information sharing about organizational strengths (accomplishments) or weaknesses (problems)” (p. 246).

To achieve these goals, the chapter traces the historical evolution of the communication competence of organizational advocates in western societies across different periods of time, from 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onward, with the purpose of challenging assumptions that the current period we are experiencing today is something extraordinary. In general, as we will see throughout history, individuals have always acted as organizational advocates, and their communication roles and competencies have evolved along the developments of communication media and societal and organizational systems.

This chapter borrows insights from multiple disciplines, such as classical rhetoric, media studies, public relations, corporate communications, organizational communications, and human relations literature. It presents and discusses changes in advocacy by looking at individual members of collectives and organizations and their communication competence (e.g., what competencies were valued), as well as the organizational context (e.g., who has been permitted to act as an organizational advocate) and media landscape. It should be noted that as new modes of communication and media were introduced, older ones were not abandoned, but often coexisted with new modes of organizational advocacy. Before discussing the historical outlook, we begin by defining what communication competence is and why it is important for modern corporate communication, public relations, and organizational communication activities. Next, we review and discuss the history of individuals speaking on behalf of and advocating for their organizations, which dates back to

ancient times and orators (Marsh, 2013). The chapter concludes with discussion of the key findings from the review and suggestions for further research.

### **What Communication Competence Is and Why It Matters**

Communication competence has been the subject of many theoretical and empirical approaches and, as a consequence, research on this topic is rich and diverse (Rickheit et al., 2008). Although the perspectives for communication competence are diverse, they are generally more complimentary than contradictory (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015 p. 397). Central to these diverse perspectives is the general agreement that communication competencies are important in an organizational context, can be developed, influence many organizational and group outcomes, and are subjected to various types of perceptions and evaluations (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 397). Competence is thus inherently an evaluative judgement of a behavior, rather than a skill or trait possessed by an individual. In other words, an individual becomes a competent communicator only when s/he has been judged to be so by a perceiver (Roloff & Kellerman, 1984). Communication competence is also contextual (Spitzberg, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002) in that it varies by cultural, chronological, relational, environmental, and functional factors (Spitzberg, 2000; Spitzberg & Brunner, 1991), and by the means through which it is delivered. As a matter of fact, one of the key contextual factors for communication competence is the medium of communication, which has evolved from oral, direct, vocal media to the digital media of today.

Spitzberg (1988) argued that once contextual factors are implied, so is the concept of appropriateness or acceptability in that given context. Morreale et al. (2013) describe appropriate and effective communication as occurring “when you act in ways suitable to the norms and expectations of contexts and situations you encounter. Effective communication occurs when you are able to achieve the most desirable objectives or outcomes in contexts” (p. 5). Similarly, Rubin (1994) has stated that “communication competence requires

knowledge of appropriate and effective communication behaviors, a repertoire of skills which correspond to that knowledge, and the motivation to perform those skills in a socially appropriate and effective manner” (p. 75).

Over the years, scholars studying communication competence have attempted to identify how competence is constituted, as variations in its performance can affect perceptions of effectiveness and appropriateness (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). Overall, the literature on communication competence in organizational contexts can be divided into three categories, depending on their unit of analysis: 1) individual; 2) group and team; and 3) macro organizational levels (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). Acknowledging the diversity of specialization in the field of communication and the contextual nature of communication competence, this chapter focuses on the individual level and spotlights the process of an individual communicating on behalf of an organization or collective to the public as an advocate and a spokesperson (Elsbach, 2003).

Although there is a large amount of extant literature on communication competence, many of the conceptual foundations of the existing literature rely on an interpersonal communication understanding of competence. Research exploring the specific skills and knowledge that form competence in diverse roles, processes, and for specific performance goals has been rare (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). Additionally, the rapid evolution of information communication technologies as an integral medium for communicating has required establishing new competencies as the divisions between interpersonal and mass communication have increasingly dissolved (Hwang, 2011; Spitzberg, 2006). These new forms of mediated and participative communications through, for instance, social media platforms, have created new avenues and needs for communication competence research.

In this chapter we argue that studying communication competence continues to be of importance. Increasing understanding of communication competence in each different time



period and media environment allows us to understand how organizations and ultimately, our society, have been developing further. When looking at the development of organizational spokespersons and their competence, we aim to demonstrate how organizational communication has evolved in different time periods and media environments, and we hope this will help scholars and practitioners gain a deeper understanding on the current communication roles of individuals in different organizational positions.

### **The history and evolution of organizational advocates and communication competence**

The tradition of individuals advocating for a cause, position, or the wellbeing of a collective dates back to ancient Greek and Roman orators who are known to have spoken on behalf of their collectives (Elsbach, 2003). Institutional settings and channels of communication have changed since ancient times, but new forms of institutions, including modern organizations, still communicate through individuals (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). Organizations thus depend on the many voices of individual speakers (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011) and their communicative competence. As with any form of organizing, the way that organizations communicate in the public sphere is guided by normative ideals that vary from one era to another (Deetz, 1992). According to Deetz (1992), all conceptualizations of communication share the common goals or ideals of participation and effectiveness, and whichever ideals are perceived as predominant vary depending on historical eras. How communication is conceptualized in each era is closely linked to the media landscape of each time period. Media has always mattered to societal, economic, and political development, and it has been argued that each communication medium has tended to create a monopoly of knowledge, in which competent users create a “special class” that controls the production of time-binding media (Innis, 1950). On the other hand, these monopolies eventually face challenges to their power, especially with the arrival of new mediums (Innis, 1950).

In the following sections, three different advocacy archetypes are introduced and discussed, namely: ancient orators (Classical era), organizational spokespersons (Industrial era), and employee advocates (Information era). The ancient orators provide a natural starting point for analysis, as the historical roots of theoretical traditions and frameworks for organizational communication competence began with classic rhetorical traditions (Backlund & Morreale, 2015; Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). Organizational spokespeople are then explored, who in the communication competence literature emerged in conjunction with the rapid growth of industrialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, employees as organizational advocates are discussed, particularly in the context of digital media, which has enabled unprecedented increases in the communicative power of employees and required new communication competencies. The purpose of discussing these three archetypes is to identify and map out the competencies that literature has presented as essential when communicating on behalf of a collective.

### **Ancient Orators: Establishing the Foundation for Communication Competence**

The origin of advocacy lies in ancient Greece over 2,500 years ago, when so-called “orators” were protecting and managing the images, identities, and reputations of their collectives (Elsbach, 2003). Interestingly, the historical roots of theoretical traditions and frameworks for organizational and group communication competence also began with classic rhetorical traditions (Hannawa & Spitzberg 2015). During antiquity, rhetoric was viewed as a civic art of public speaking and persuasion through words. Public oratory in assemblies or courts of law provided a forum in which individual speakers attempted to oppose and persuade the mass audience (Ober, 2007). Thus, in ancient Greece, citizens’ participation in public debate played an essential role (Torp, 2011), and oratory (speech) was primarily used to serve humanistic ends. As Cicero (1876) expressed it:

It is by this one gift [the spoken word] that we are most distinguished from brute animals, that we converse together, and can express our thoughts by speech. Who therefore would not justly make this an object of admiration and think it worthy of the utmost exertions, to surpass mankind itself in that single excellence by which it claims superiority over brutes? (p. 187)

Communication competence as a concept has been linked to rhetorical traditions beginning with the sophists around 467 BC and continuing with the influence of ancient philosophers and rhetoricians, such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015). Quintilian defined an orator as “a good man speaking well” in his book series *Institutes of Oratory* (95 AD) and created a link between individual and communication ability. Cicero mentioned in his book series *On the Orator* (55 BC) that the ideal orator is trained in rhetoric, philosophy, law, and all knowledge, is morally upright, and is an active participant in public life (Kennedy, 2011). Isocrates also saw the individual as a source of values influencing society at large, and believed that successful orators embodied and exemplified those values (Marsh, 2013). The orator’s power lay in his speaking ability, which was at least partly a product of specialized education (Ober, 2007).

In ancient Greece, rhetoric was considered a craft (*tekhnē*) (Habinek, 2005), and its varied forms were introduced in several handbooks written by ancient philosophers. One of the best-known books is Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (384–322 BC), in which he introduced three proofs of persuasion: *logos* (logical arguments), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *ethos* (ethical appeals or a person’s character, which strengthens the rhetor’s credibility) (Ihlen, 2013). Aristotle argued that *ethos*, or character, “may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion,” thus *ethos* is particularly important when discussing an individual’s reputation (Ihlen, 2013). Isocrates (436–338 BC) emphasized the importance of the “natural aptitude” of a speaker, by which he meant the inherent ability for political discourse. He mentioned that

all speakers can be trained through instructing, practice, and performance, but success also requires natural talent (Marsh, 2013). In the words of Isocrates:

I say to (students) that if they are to excel in oratory or in managing affairs or in any line of work, they must, first of all, have a natural aptitude for that which they have elected to do; secondly, they must submit to training and master the knowledge of their particular subject, whatever it may be in each case; and finally, they must become versed and practiced in the use and application of their art; for only on these conditions can they become fully competent and pre-eminent in any line of endeavor. (Antidosis 187)

Rhetoric also provoked criticism. Plato (424–348 BC), who was Aristotle’s teacher, argued that rhetoric was a performance that aimed to win over the audience by playing on their emotions rather than a deeper search for philosophical truth (Bailey, 2019; Foss et al., 1985). Plato has thus been described as the world’s first media critic (Poe, 2011). Aristotle responded to Plato’s criticism, stating that a skillful rhetorician must use logic, reasoning, and ethical arguments, and must also pay attention to an audience’s probable emotional responses (Bailey, 2019). This tension between the substance of speech and the style in which it is conducted can still be identified in communication studies today (Bailey, 2019). Habinek (2005) also mentions that ancient orators themselves thought that the size of the crowd gathered to the door of the senate was a direct indication of a speaker’s talent and following.

In the ancient times, spoken oratory was the most prominent medium and communication competence was mainly perceived to be enacted through public speaking. Isocrates was the first who wrote a document for the public’s own reading. This was an innovation in 4<sup>th</sup>-century Athens because the previous oratory productions were meant to be speeches in courtrooms (Marsh, 2013). For a long time, writing was seen merely as a means of fixing the spoken word (Martin, 1981). The understanding that written messages would

remain for future generations has continued to influence thinking about what would later become known as organizational advocates.

For over 2,000 years, rhetoric has continued to be as “the organizing principle in discussions of competent communication” in western society (Backlund & Morreale, 2015, p. 13). Backlund and Morreale (2015) argue that although the contents and contexts of communication have changed over the centuries, the ideals of the ancient rhetoricians have remained remarkably resilient.

During the Middle Ages, rhetoric shifted from political to religious discourse, and communication competence became a qualification for leaders of the church. Medieval Europe, like ancient Greece, has been viewed as an essentially oral culture and preaching was an important way of spreading information (Briggs & Burke, 2009; Foss et al., 1985). Visual art was also considered to play a significant role as didactic media in the mostly illiterate society (Briggs & Burke, 2009). Gradually, from the 11th century onward, writing began to be employed by popes and kings, but the trust in writing developed slowly (Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 9).

The print revolution in Europe started in approximately 1450 when Johannes Gutenberg, a German craftsman, originated a method of printing using movable type. In China and Japan, printing had been practiced for a longer time, from the 7th century (Briggs & Burke, 2009). The practice of printing spread throughout Europe, and by 1500 there were approximately 250 places in which presses had been established. The invention of printing was epoch-making and as Samuel Hartlib wrote in 1641, “the art of printing will so spread knowledge that the common people, knowing their own rights and liberties, will not be governed by way of oppression” (Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 15). However, as only a minority of the population could read and even fewer could write, oral communication continued “to predominate in the so-called age of the printing-press” (Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 64). At the

same time, competent communicators (in this case readers and writers) were able to gain power in society. As Poe (2011) described, the elite could read and write, but commoners couldn't, which gave the elite its own "private channel." This situation continued until literacy became a mass phenomenon.

Historical records reveal both the importance of public discussion and of printed media in provoking those discussions. The media landscape from the Middle Ages to early modern times supports the so-called "two-step" theory of communication, developed by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955), which explains how people form their opinions not only by reading messages from mass media outlets, but thereafter through the personal influence of local opinion leaders in face-to-face contact (Briggs & Burke, 2009). In this way, the public sphere continued to emerge and it has been argued that the involvement of the people in the Reformation, for example, was both the cause and consequence of the involvement of the media (Briggs & Burke, 2009).

During the Renaissance, rhetoric shifted emphasis onto aesthetics with a central focus on proper conversational delivery, or "decorum", which refers to adapting the delivery to the context with appropriate discretion (Backlund & Morreale, 2015; Foss et al., 1985; Mohrmann, 1972). The elocutionary approach was particularly popular in the mid-1700s (Bailey, 2019). For example, effective speaking was defined as "the just and graceful management of the voice, countenance, and gesture in speaking" (Sheridan, 1762, p. 11). Historians have argued that by the 18th century, conversation was the most important arena for the cultivation (Cameron, 2000). In particular, the ability to display "politeness" was considered a quality that characterized interaction among cultivated persons (Cohen, 1996, p. 42). This emphasis implied that "the competent communicator was one who 'fit in and made the right impression'" (Backlund & Morreale, 2015, p. 14).

Reviewing the literature related to ancient orators, early rhetorical theory and its practical applications leads us to understand the communication competence of orators in the Classical era as having speech skills, argumentation skills, empathy, and character, and being morally upright and an active participant in public life. The assessment of communication competence during the time of orators was made according to effectiveness (how well the orators were able to influence the court) and participation, such as how big of a crowd they were able to gather (Habinek, 2005). In summary, ancient orators established the foundation for the practical and theoretical frameworks of communication competence, and their heritage lives on in contemporary thinking on the topic. The development of media in the Middle Ages and early modern period changed the media landscape, and communication competence became multimodal instead of just about oral skill. The importance of technical competence, such as writing and reading, also increased in importance.

### **Organizational Spokespeople: Institutionalizing Communication Competence in an Organizational Context**

During the mid-16th century and onward, newspapers first appeared as single-event newsheets that quickly evolved into periodicals (Poe, 2011). Literacy rates grew as well. The first newspapers contained business information, literary writings, and political polemic (Krause, 2011). It was only during the latter part of the 19th century that “modern journalism” emerged with values such as objectivity and public service (Krause, 2011). This new journalistic approach, which included active news-gathering, created new expectations for organizations to be present in the public sphere. It also required organizations to create operative functions to be responsible for media relations and public information. This development led to the rapid entrance of public relations functions, and the role of organizational spokespersons became critical, particularly in the areas of media relations, crisis communication, and issues management (Troester, 1991; Troester & Warburton, 2001).

Concurrently, the emergence of industrial organization created new relationships between people and organizational structures (Perrow, 1986). The organization of work and, therefore, work work-related communication in early industrial organizations was highly influenced by then-emerging concepts of division of labor. Essentially, the separation of tasks into discrete units and a hierarchy with a vertical arrangement of power and authority distinguishing managers from employees led to new forms of organizational communication (Eisenberg et al., 2007). The rapid growth of industrialism also demanded more effective methods for management and communicating, and theories of management evolved in the beginning of the 19th century. One of the fundamental books of that time was Frederic Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1913. Taylor's time can be seen as the beginning of organizing work and its contents. His thinking led the path to the development of a normative environment that supports efficiency in all functions of an organization, including communication.

This kind of thinking in an organizational setting continued for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and heavily influenced the early notions of the communication discipline. In organizational settings, this basically translated into an increased preoccupation with identifying the factors and characteristics of an effective communicator and organizational spokesperson (Grunig, 1992, p. 537). From the organizational spokesperson point of view, the period of time was characterized by a focus on issues close to the speech communication discipline. Traditionally, speech communication understands "competence" in speaking as either the competence to speak effectively or the competence to speak meaningfully, that is, to be understood as one intends (Sanders, 2015). This focus on oral communication led to the first journal published by the National Communication Association, the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1915 to present). From the beginning, the journal's purpose has been to gain



knowledge and develop the instruction of public speaking, and to analyze the rhetoric of public figures (Morreale et al., 2014, p. 347).

At that time, many corporations began to organize speech communication trainings for their executives to enhance their speaking skills. These trainings were initiated in part by the popularization of the topic through Carnegie's famous 1936 book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Redding & Tompkins, 1988). Altogether, the new hierarchical form of organizations, efficiency as a normative ideal in organizations, increased attention to speech communication, and the increased importance of the news media (Briggs & Burke, 2009) created a need for organizations to communicate with external stakeholders, such as the media. Thus, the role of organizational spokespersons gained momentum and became institutionalized.

Organizational spokespeople were expected to deliver consistent messages and speak with the same voice and tone (Ihlen, 2013), realizing the vision of contemporary corporate communication to manage all communication as one entity (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). Ihlen (2013) supports this view by noting that spokespeople mainly represent organizations and their interests instead of themselves. Spokespeople are actors, agencies, and instruments who represent a company's organized interests to the audience (Crable, 1990). Troester and Warburton (2001) created a list of principles relevant for organizational spokespersons as follows:

- Understanding the nature and kinds of "public" in public relations, including the multiplicity of message recipients
- Recognizing the respective attitudes in publics
- Accepting emotion as a communication variable
- Responding to the differences between controlled and uncontrolled media
- Handling the dynamic and fluid nature of public relations process (p. 243)

Troester and Warburton (2001) highlighted that an “effective communicator—regardless of content, medium or objective—must have an accurate understanding of those to whom the message is directed” and be aware of the need for different messages and message styles when addressing various publics (p. 244). Thus, the communication competence of an organizational spokesperson was and still is related to their appropriateness and ability to convey organizational messages. Additionally, Troester and Warburton (2001) highlighted that communicating appropriately so that the message is understood is not enough; effective public relations must also address each public strategically so that they will be influenced by the information provided.

Contemplating Troester and Warburton’s principles for organizational communication competence brings us to the conceptualization of competence attributes. Littlejohn and Jabusch’s (1982) define organizational communication competence as having four basic components: knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values. Knowledge in this model refers to the ability to understand the organizational communication environment, including technical competence, situational awareness, analytical capability, and message production and reception. The sensitivity component is described as an ability to sense organizational and environmental meanings and feelings accurately. Skills competence is characterized as an ability to analyze organizational situations accurately and initiate and consume organizational and environmental messages effectively. Lastly, values competence refers to the importance of taking responsibility for effective communication, thereby contributing to organizational excellence (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 401).

An organizational spokesperson has often been a visible leader or a public relations practitioner (Elsbach, 2003; Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2011), building relationships with media, communicating during a crisis, and influencing public opinion through issues

management (Troester, 1991). The literature has also emphasized the role of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) as an organizational spokesperson (Troester, 1991; Men, 2015; Park & Berger, 2004; Zerfass et al., 2016). CEOs have been seen as personifying the organization, acting as the highest-level corporate spokespeople, and setting the tone for internal communications practice, thereby influencing employee attitudes, trust in leadership, and performance (Men, 2015; Park & Berger, 2004; Zerfass et al., 2016). As Arnold (1989) stated: “the modern CEO has become a public persona—not because he or she wants to be a media star but because the company’s survival and success demand effective communication strategies and tactics” (p. 335).

However, some of the recent research is contradictory on this regard and we argue that this is due to the measuring communication competence without taking the communicative role of the individual spokesperson into consideration. For example, Kaplan et al. (2012) found that the performance of CEOs was more related to their general abilities and execution skills than their communication competence. “As with the buyout sample, there is no evidence that interpersonal or communication-related skills are positively related to performance. In fact, teamwork tends to be negatively related to performance” (Kaplan et al., 2012, p. 996). Kaplan et al. (2012) is an example of a competence study in which the role, context, and performance goals have not been sufficiently taken into account when measuring competence. The communication competence of CEOs was assessed through interpersonal communication competence measurements, not taking into account their role as a spokesperson and related competencies, where effective and appropriate communication means being capable of communicating organizational messages in a strategic manner to a variety of publics.

Until the emergence of social media, the ideal of one unified voice and message was a central concern in public relations and corporate communication. The “human voice” was

seen mainly as an instrument to influence organizational goals. Efficiency in communication was considered the normative ideal. Today, organizational spokespersons continue to be of importance for organizations, specifically in times of crises. Yet, the emergence of additional organizational advocates, such as employees, has changed the role of organizational spokespersons. Other attributes of communication competence have also emerged. As Shockley-Zalabak (2015) highlights, competence research should specify relationships with other characteristics, experiences, and contexts in order to better grasp the dynamics and impact of communication competence.

### **Employee Advocates: Renewing the Importance of Individuals' Communication Competence**

The most recent developments in organizational behavior and communication pertain to digital communication and social media use by organizations. This line of inquiry has introduced significant changes in organizational life (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). Social media platforms have become an intricate component of individuals' personal and professional communications (Dreher, 2014). Today, employees can share their work experiences to a wide audience outside the organization by using social media (Miles & Mangold, 2014), increasing the importance of their role as communicators for organizations. This idea of employee advocacy (Men & Stacks, 2013) much resembles Kim and Rhee's (2011) idea of "megaphoning," which refers to "*employees' positive or negative external communication behavior about their organizations.*" (p. 246). Employee advocacy can be seen as word-of-mouth behavior, which entails the promotion or defense of a company or brand (Walz & Celuch, 2010).

It is worth mentioning that the trend toward employee participation in organizational communication evolved before the introduction of social media. In 2001, Stohl and Cheney stated that "worker participation, in many forms, has moved from the periphery to the center

of corporate philosophies and organizational restructurings” (p. 350). The increasing emphasis on participative communication, that is communication in which any actor can contribute, accelerated in conjunction with the emergence of social media.

Social media technologies proliferated among the general public and in personal communication almost a decade prior to their adoption in organizations (Treem et al., 2015), meaning that individual employees have more experience in using social media in their private lives than professional lives. The delayed adoption of social media in organizations may relate to the perceived benefits and risks of social media. On the one hand, organizations have perceived social media and its participative nature as an opportunity to engage with stakeholders, but on the other hand, as a risk to their reputation and business because they can lose control of communication flows (Gruber et al., 2015). As there are no pre-set rules in social media, organizations and employees have been “learning by doing” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). In this realm, the role of employees’ competence to communicate and create a positive megaphoning effect has become critical. Inconsiderate or incompetent social media use may negatively affect organizational reputation (Ivens & Schaarschmidt, 2015), and there are many examples where employees’ social media use has tarnished their employer’s reputation and affected their organization’s performance (Walsh et al., 2016). Hence, Miles and Mangold (2014) have asserted that this form of “employee voice can be a source of competitive advantage or a time bomb waiting to explode” (p. 402).

Social media has thus “changed how organization-related content is created, distributed, and used, transferring the power to define corporate images from corporate communicators to stakeholders’ online networks” (Men & Tsai, 2014, p. 417). As one of the key stakeholders, employees have increasingly been involved in producing and sharing organization-related content.

Social processes in the social media environment have often been explained using two behavioral concepts related to how an individual is acting: self-presentation and self-disclosure (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Self-presentation refers to people's desire to control the impressions that other people form of them (Goffman, 1959), but people present themselves through self-disclosure, which is the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information that is consistent with a person's desired image (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Self-disclosure is an area that has been identified in communication competence literature; however, literature that would explain the competence attributes related to the role of employees in organizational-level disclosure is rare. Studies on employees' awareness of their impact on corporate reputation (e.g., Helm, 2010) can be seen advancing the knowledge in the area, particularly from a cognitive point of view. The actual behavioral competence attributes have not been studied in our understanding.

In a recent article, Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) identified the following eight communication roles employees are expected to enact in a social media environment: the embodier, the promotor, the defender, the scout, the sensemaker, the innovator, the relationship builder, and the critic. More empirical research is needed to map the competence attributes for each of these roles.

The generic (not role specific) literature related to competence in using digital media technology has been flourishing for over a decade. In 2006, Spitzberg postulated a theory of computer-mediated communication (CMC) competence, which suggests that when CMC competence increases, co-orientation, appropriateness, effectiveness, satisfaction, and preferred relational outcomes are more likely to occur. "Competence, in this sense, is based on some of the same variables or components of competence as in face-to-face interactions, with the addition of media as an intervening factor" (Backlund & Morreale, 2015, p. 27). Later on, Alber et al. (2015) introduced the concept of social media competence (SMC),

which refers to an individual's capability of using social media appropriately as a means of sharing information, engaging with others, and encouraging conversation and participation in a relevant community. Yet, Walsh et al. (2016) realized that even with the widespread recognition that employees' social media use can shape a company's reputation, no concept would describe employees' competence to communicate in a way that would positively affect organizational reputation. Therefore, they developed a construct that they named reputation-related SMC, referring to "an employee's explicit and tacit knowledge, skills, and behavior that give him or her the ability to use social media in ways that do not harm the employer's reputation" (Walsh et al., 2016, p. 46). Reputation-related SMC includes the following five distinguishable dimensions: employees' social media-related technical competence, visibility awareness competence, knowledge competence, impact assessment competence, and social media communication competence (Walsh et al., 2016, p. 49). Thus, the reputation-related SMC construct provides an opportunity to empirically study employee advocates and their competence in the contemporary media landscape.

To conclude, social media provides a public sphere in which individual employees can communicate and share opinions, regardless of corporate-level communication strategies (Agresta & Bonin, 2011). Employee advocacy transforms employees into influential communicators who convey both organizational and individual messages with their individual voices. As employees can and will wield their communication power on social media, their communication competence is a critical success factor for today's organizations and includes multiple dimensions (Walsh et al., 2016). However, as novel phenomena, it deserves more empirical studying and testing of measurements.

## **Discussion**

Organizational advocacy, sometimes called corporate advocacy, is concerned with the management of issues on behalf of an organization (Heath, 1980). The idea of advocates

using persuasive argumentation has classical origins as it “reflects a belief that ideas, opinion, understanding, and judgement may be refined through open and vigorous debate” (Heath, 1980, p. 370). Organizational advocacy conducted by individual advocates has existed as long as organizations, since organizations do not have any other means of communication than through their individual members. This chapter’s objective is to increase the understanding of communicative competence and how it has been conceptualized and manifested in three different periods of time by tracing the history of communication competence as an antecedent for different individuals’ communication behaviors from ancient orators to today’s employee advocates. By looking at past organizational advocacy archetypes and an emerging employee-advocacy archetype, the chapter shows that the communication competence of organizational advocates continues to be of great importance for organizations. Success in communicating effectively and appropriately also depends on the socio-cultural environment and media. Old and new modes of communication have coexisted and interacted with new modes of organizational advocacy, thus the competence attributes have become more complex, particularly due to the increased number of media outlets available. Advocates need to have the knowledge and technical competence for each medium and public. Table 1 summarizes the features of the three advocacy archetypes identified in the literature.

**Table 1**

*Advocacy Archetypes by Context, Media, and Competence Attributes*

<b>Advocacy Archetype</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Competence Attributes</b>	<b>Assessment of Competence (From Organization’s Point of View)</b>
Orator	“A good man speaking well” Quintilian, c. 95 AD	Public oratory in ancient assemblies or courts of law	Oral	<i>Logos</i> (logical argumentation skills), <i>pathos</i> (ability for emotional appeal), and <i>ethos</i> (ethical appeals or a person’s character (Aristotle))	Effectiveness and appropriateness: how well the orators were able to influence the court, but also according to participation (how big of a crowd orators were able to gather).



<b>Advocacy Archetype</b>	<b>Definitions</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Competence Attributes</b>	<b>Assessment of Competence (From Organization's Point of View)</b>
Organizational Spokesperson	“Organizational spokespersons convey or explain symbolic actions to organizational audiences. Spokespersons include anyone who is perceived by an audience member as representing the organization” (Elsbach, 2003)	Organization in industrial era	Oral, written	Knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values (Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982)	Effectiveness and appropriateness: how well the spokespersons were able to convey their message to different stakeholder groups
Employee Advocate	A person who enacts advocacy referring to “a behavioral construct, that is, the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or brands by an employee externally” (Men, 2014, p. 262)	Organization in Information era	Oral, written, visual, on- and offline	Employees’ social media-related technical competence, visibility awareness competence, knowledge competence, impact assessment competence, and social media communication competence (Walsh et al., 2016, p. 49)	Effectiveness and appropriateness: how well employees are able to engage their networks for organizational contents in different contexts

The first ancient-orator archetype embodies competencies that relate to public speaking, argumentation, ethics, and planning. The organizational-spokesperson archetype is characterized by public speaking skills and the ability to communicate with an organizational tone. The most recent employee advocacy archetype consists of technical, conversational, and reputational competencies. It should also be added that each advocacy archetype includes an interplay of multiple factors, such as media and audience characteristics, which influence the communication behavior of each archetype (Howes & Sallot, 2013).

It has been argued that social-media communication—being relational, interactive, communal, and personal—mimics traditional face-to-face interpersonal communication

(Men, 2015) with the addition of media as an intervening factor. In this light, it can be said that rhetoric techniques matter in the new digital environment, more than many of us might realize. Although similar practices and techniques are used, recent technological developments that enable the sharing of virtual content provide a fundamentally different context than traditional interpersonal communications. Development toward employee advocacy via social media has changed corporate communication practices from top-down, managerially controlled communications into a bottom-up, shared responsibility with many different organizational actors. This approach de-emphasizes the idea of “one voice” and allows organizations to speak with many different voices simultaneously (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). Scholars have suggested that conventional structures that allow only single actors (e.g., the official spokesperson) to communicate on behalf of an organization may not be functional in today’s dynamic and complex external hypermodern environment, characterized by polyphony and diversity (Christensen et al., 2008; Linke & Zerfass, 2013). Thus, this ongoing change that enhances participation requires a better understanding of competencies, not only at the individual level (i.e., employees), but also at the organizational level. An important task for communication practitioners in the era of social media is to educate and build an organization-wide competency base (Gregory, 2013).

## **Conclusions**

This chapter offers an historical review of the main attributes of communication competence as they have been taught and applied in different periods of time. Essentially, this chapter presents and discusses the competence of individual organizational advocates and links it with the contexts, the purposes, and the means of communication (mediums) that have emerged across eras. Three archetypes of communicators have been identified and their specific communication competencies discussed. These three archetypes offer the reader salient elements to understand the different roles of organizational members as organizational

advocates. They also showcase the main skills and abilities that literature indicates as paramount to perform adequately in the role of an advocate. Finally, this chapter shows how the competence attributes needed to speak on behalf of a collective have become more varied and complex, particularly with the event of new forms of mediated communication, such as those introduced by social media. The management of organizational communication competencies, understood as a stock of communication competencies that employees across functions, seniority, and units may need to master, has become a rather important, yet, delicate task. Given the increasing volatility and complexity of organizational environments, it is expected that understanding, developing, and managing communication competencies will become an even more important factor in organizational matters. This will require individual employees to develop their roles as communicators, and companies to reinvent their management strategies and practices to support employees in developing the required competencies. For communication professionals, this move will require new facilitation, monitoring, and verification skills, and it will put their previous roles as mentors and coaches to the test.

Similar to Eisenberg et al. (2007), we note that all historical writings have limitations that can be explained with the three P's. More specifically, all historical writings are partial, partisan, and problematic, including this review. First, in a book chapter format, we are not able to articulate a complete account of the history of communication competence; therefore, our account is necessarily partial. Second, we write this chapter under the limitation of partisanship, meaning that the knowledge we present here is shaped by the theories and interpretations we use to make sense of the world. Finally, we write this chapter knowing that the content we present here is problematic: "the answers it does provide are based on what is currently known rather than all that could be known" (Eisenberg et al., 2007, p. 64). We are mindful that these limitations exist, but we have chosen to write this chapter as we think it

illustrates the grounds of and interdependence of role (organizational advocate) with communication behavior (advocacy) and communication competence. The latter element is, in our view, the least studied, but timely due. We hope this chapter will stimulate further discussion and suggest novel avenues for expanding communication competence research. There are several topics related to communicative competence that could benefit from more detailed analysis in moving to the stages of employee advocacy. For example, future research could study different processes of employee learning to use social media to identify and assess the benefits of such engagement in terms of personal, company, and community-level benefits (Horn et al., 2015).

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## II

### **EMPLOYEES CONSTITUTING CORPORATE VOICE AS SENSEMAKERS AND SENSEGIVERS**

by

Kaisa Pekkala, 2018

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of employees in corporate communication as sensemakers and sensegivers. The communication landscape is evolving fast and new digital media emphasize the part played by individual employees in constituting corporate-level communication. The aim of the paper is to shed light on how empowered employees construct meanings and corporate identity through sensemaking and sensegiving in contemporary organizations, and how these sensemaking and sensegiving processes affect employees' communication behavior, specifically employee advocacy. The findings of this conceptual paper increase understanding of corporate voice dynamics in the era of social media.

*Keywords:* corporate communication, employee communication behavior, sensemaking, corporate identity, issue arenas, employee advocacy

### **Employees constituting corporate voice as sensemakers and sensegivers**

It has been argued that we are living in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is driven by new digital technologies that are fundamentally changing the way we live, work and relate to one another (Schwab, 2016, World Economic Forum). The pace at which technology changes today has been reported to challenge the ability of humans, organizations and public policy to adapt (Deloitte, 2017). Individuals struggle to make sense of what is happening in the world as the change is occurring at an accelerating pace (Deloitte, 2017). People are relying on peers and social networks as a primary source of information (Men and Muralidharan, 2017), and industry reports show that individuals surpass institutions in credibility (Edelman Trust Barometer 2018).

In order to survive in this dynamic and polyphonic environment, organizations need to take an active role in managing the ongoing change. Sensemaking through communication becomes crucial for organizational resilience, helping organizations and individuals to better understand the changes in their internal and external environments, and to negotiate the possible consequences (Vos, 2017). Thus, to survive in today's digitalized and social communication sphere, organizations may benefit from increased understanding of how meanings are created in a polyphonic organizational context. In this conceptual paper, I aim to shed light on (1) how employees collectively construct corporate identity through sensemaking and sensegiving processes in the era of social media, and (2) how these sensemaking and sensegiving processes affect employees' communication behavior, specifically employee advocacy.

The contemporary understanding of corporate identity is that identities are in a constant state of flux (Balmer, 2017), which means that identities are continuously negotiated with



stakeholders inside and outside organizational boundaries (McPhee and Zaug, 2009). Corporate identity as a theoretical tradition is distinct from other collective identity constructs (such as social and organizational identity) as it considers that identity is constructed when an organization's values are communicated externally through symbolism, communication and behavior (Cornelissen, 2017). Corporate identity has its roots in organizational identity, which denotes organizational members' shared meaning of what they are as a collective (Cornelissen, 2017). According to Balmer (2017), external and internal stakeholder behavior confirms or disconfirms corporate identity and duly influences a stakeholder's image and the reputation of the organization. With the emergence of social media, the importance of employees' interactions with stakeholders and their role in identity construction has increased in importance. Looking at corporate communication management from this perspective, it becomes apparent that one of the key tasks is to ensure that corporate identity is "grounded on the core values and traits that members of the organization themselves associate with the organization and that define the organization's mission and vision" (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 92).

Building on Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005), this paper seeks to demonstrate how sensemaking, as a process of social construction, aims to bring "order into flux" through communication and collective interpretation (p. 414). A multidisciplinary approach is followed, bringing together an array of diverse concepts from multiple fields, ranging from public relations and corporate communication to organizational psychology. The structure of the article is as follows. It begins by discussing the impact of social media on corporate voice dynamics and corporate identity construction. It goes on to illustrate how the concept of issue arenas facilitates sensemaking as a place of enactment. After that, employees' role as sensemakers and sensegivers is introduced, followed by a discussion on how employees' communication behavior can be

understood through these processes. Finally, the part increasingly being played by internal communication in orchestrating employees' sensemaking and sensegiving processes in the organizational context is discussed.

### **Social media empowering employees and enabling multivocal communications**

Digital technology, particularly social media, has enabled new patterns of communication and interaction that seem to be blurring many traditional boundaries between personal and professional lives (Baym and boyd, 2012). The adoption of social media has been rapid, and recent industry reports show that social media is more integrated into people's work than ever before (McKinsey 2017).

In the organizational context, the changes are manifold. One of the profound changes is that communication in the organizational context is shifting from univocal to multivocal (Huang & Galliers, 2013). Digital arenas enable multiple voices to communicate to, with, against, and about each other (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Interaction with stakeholders is moving from organizations toward issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), which implies that an organization's communication is no longer conducted by the management function. Instead, the communicative power resides in the voice of organizational members who have the skills and confidence to communicate their opinion.

Furthermore, Huang et al. (2013, p. 121) suggest that social media allows organizations to gradually eliminate trade-offs inherent in traditional models of voice mechanisms that are based on central control, and posit that the emergence of social media allows for "multiple voices as well as targeted communication", along with "simultaneous wider reach and richness", and

finally “combined consumption and production of rhetorical content”. This relocation of communication power challenges contemporary models of corporate communication management (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012), particularly the ideal of the monolithic corporate voice (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011).

Social media has empowered individuals to become public communicators, who actively and collaboratively shape corporate identity and reputation, and create relationships through their communication on social networking platforms (Baym & boyd, 2012; Park & Abril, 2016; Men & Tsai, 2012). The adoption of social media in the workplace and its empowering characteristics are duly affecting employees’ communication behavior. From a public relations perspective, employee advocacy in particular has increased in importance in today’s communication landscape.

Employee advocacy has been defined as “a behavioral construct, that is, the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products, or brands by an employee externally” (Men, 2014, p. 262). Most often, employees conduct an advocacy type of communication in their social media networks but, regarded as professionals in specific topics, they are increasingly encouraged by their organizations to participate in public discussion outside their own networks, and to brand themselves as trusted advisors (Barry & Gironda, 2019). By engaging employees to act as advocates, companies aim to enhance their role as thought leaders, meaning that they can “reshape industry thinking in ways that benefit the brand” (Barry & Gironda, 2019, p. 2). Employee advocates are influential actors in public relations and it has been argued that they have more communication power than ever (Men, 2014). Organizations have been adopting employee advocacy as part of their social media programs at a rapid pace, and an industry report recently found that 82% of survey respondents had an employee advocacy program in place

(Institute for Public Relations, 2017). Acting as an advocate, an employee's communication role extends to include communication with external publics, and hence their role in corporate identity construction increases.

### **Employees entering interactive issue arenas**

In today's complex communication landscape, it is issues and discussions, not organizations, that drive communication (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). The concept of issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) has become valuable in describing the communicative environment of contemporary organizations. An issue arena is a place (in virtual/traditional media) where public debate about an issue is conducted (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). What makes these arenas so important for today's organizations is the notion that stakeholders' expectations formed in the various issue arenas increasingly guide the way in which the organization is perceived (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Luoma-aho and Vos (*ibid.*) note that in order to be able to communicate with the right stakeholders, organizations need to know the issue arenas where relevant issues are discussed. There are often multiple issue arenas, and an organization might be active in one arena, while being part of the passive public in another at the same time (Luoma-aho & Vos 2010). Being present in the right arenas requires active monitoring but, more importantly, the ability to participate in discussions and act swiftly, as issues can evolve extremely fast in the social media environment. Communication and public relations functions cannot manage the participation in multiple issue arenas alone, which is why new management approaches are needed to engage more employees to communicate on behalf of the organization. This is in line with Christensen and Cornelissen's (2011, p. 402) notion that organizations are ultimately dependent on the many voices of individual speakers.

The publics in these social networks value authenticity, humanity and personality, and individual employees are perceived as neutral and credible (Men & Stacks, 2013). Employees are thus more welcome in the issue arenas, and can enter into a dialogue more easily than official corporate accounts. However, this extends the communicative role of employees and requires new skills and competencies. Vos (2017) has described in more detail how actors, in this case employees, act in interactive issue arenas in that they:

- create attention for a topic in order to place it on the agenda;
- influence the direction of the debate by promoting a viewpoint;
- show accountability and explain their actions to maintain legitimacy or gain acceptance;
- educate publics to enhance risk awareness and crisis preparedness;
- call for the input of publics, such as through online polling or crowd sourcing (soliciting contributions from the public, thereby gaining input of social media users); and
- arrange a negotiation of interests or joint problem solving (Vos, 2017, pp. 18-19).

In issue arenas, employees act as curators of social media interactions and content, selectively deciding when the organization should participate in a conversation on a social media platform (Kieztman, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre 2011). When employees interact and negotiate with stakeholders in issue arenas inside and outside their organization, they need to continuously think who they are as an organization and how they should act as members of this organization (Madsen, 2016). In this way, employees engage in corporate identity construction when identity is seen as a way for individuals and organizations to define themselves in relation to others (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This thinking follows the social constructivist perspective, which holds that identity is constantly under construction. The concept of corporate identity considers that identity is constructed when an organization's values are communicated externally

through symbolism, communication and behavior (Cornelissen, 2017). Employees entering the public sphere as organizational spokespersons require adequate communication skills and an understanding of social media logics (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Moreover, employees should be aware of their influential role in constructing meanings through their communication behavior as corporate identity ultimately influences a stakeholder's image and the reputation of the organization.

### **Employee communication behavior and the sensemaking and sensegiving process**

Christensen and Cornelissen (2011, p. 395) suggest that corporate communication is no longer only a managerial project, but the “ideal that is shared and kept alive by many different actors inside and outside the organization”. In particular, the increased use of social media among employees has shifted the communication power and thus the responsibility for corporate communication outcomes to individual employees communicating on behalf of their employer in the public sphere (Men, 2014). This has recently encouraged scholars in public relations and corporate communications to study employees' communication behavior. The public relations literature has explored the organizational antecedents that support positive communication behavior (e.g. Kang and Sung, 2017; Men, 2013) and key processes in employees' communication behavior (e.g. Kim & Rhee, 2011). Kim and Rhee (ibid.) conceptualized employee communication behavior into two categories, which they called megaphoning and scouting. Megaphoning refers to “employees' positive or negative external communication behaviors about their organization” (p. 246) and it has also been conceptualized as employee advocacy (Men, 2014). Scouting refers to “employees' voluntary communication efforts to bring relevant information to the organization” (p. 247). In the above-mentioned conceptualizations,

the role of employees has been mainly instrumental in that they have been viewed as spokespersons and organizational agents communicating on behalf of the organization. This paper takes a different perspective in viewing employees' communication as constituting organizational realities, and follows the thinking of the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), which emphasizes the formative effect of language and speech on collective sensemaking. Communication is seen as a dynamic process, with the social context of speaking and interactions with others affecting the construction of meaning. "Organizations, as social or macro phenomena, are recursively implicated in local acts of communication and sensemaking" (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011, p. 400). Hence, this paper suggests that employees' communication role is not static, and is instead constantly produced and reproduced based on the demands of the communicative environment and organizational and individual communication goals.

CCO provides a theoretical starting point for analyzing employees' communication behavior and its constitutive role in corporate communication outcomes, such as corporate identity and reputation. In particular, the Four Flows Model, one of the schools in CCO and based on Giddens's Structuration Theory, emphasizes human agency (Putnam & Mumby, 2014) in the communication process. The Four Flows Model theorizes communication as constituting organizations through four subprocesses: (1) communication integrating people as members (membership negotiation), (2) communication structuring the organization (reflexive self-structuring), (3) communication contextualizing particular coaction (and transforming structural resources) (activity coordination), and (4) communication positioning the organization in larger social systems (institutional positioning) (McPhee, Poole, & Iverson, 2014, p. 80). In all of these flows, the central question concerns the way in which meaning is socially produced by members

at all levels of an organization and, further, how that meaning influences their communication behavior, and organizational identity as a consequence.

### **Sensemaking and sensegiving in an organizational context**

Sensemaking is commonly understood as a process in which individuals or groups attempt to interpret novel and uncertain situations (Weick, 1995). “Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious way to engage the world” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Collective sensemaking occurs as individuals exchange provisional understandings and try to agree on consensual interpretations and a course of action (Weick et al., 2005). Scholars generally agree that individual and group-level sensemaking processes are connected, and individual interpretive efforts construct collective interpretations (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). The temporal orientation of sensemaking differs, however. Originally it was considered to be retrospective, but prospective and future-oriented approaches to sensemaking have subsequently emerged (Maitlis & Christianson 2014).

When does sensemaking occur, and what can trigger it when employees act in social media? “Sensemaking is triggered by cues, such as issues, events, or situations, for which the meaning is ambiguous and/or outcomes uncertain” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 70). According to sensemaking scholars, identity threat is a significant trigger for sensemaking, seen at the individual, organizational, industrial, and institutional levels (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 75). Previous research has shown that when identity is threatened, or experienced as ambiguous, people engage in sensemaking. Following this line of thinking, sensemaking processes are not only triggered when unusual situations occur but also when employees



experience uncertainty in their working environment (Madsen, 2016). When communicating in social media, employees face constant tension between revealing and concealing. This can be seen to relate to the goals set for personal and organizational identities. The need that employees have to make sense of organizational identity is rooted in a basic need to belong to and identify with the community, in this case one's organization (Cheney, Christensen & Dailey, 2014; Madsen, 2016), and employees' social media engagement regarding the organization can be seen as an external manifestation of their connection to their respective employers (Smith et al., 2017). So whenever employees use the rhetoric of defining what "we are as an organization" to the wider public, they simultaneously construct the corporate identity (Madsen, 2016).

The sensemaking literature has mainly focused on how meanings are created inside an organization and among organizational members. This study includes interactions between organizational members and external stakeholders in the sensemaking process. The focus is on how employees, when communicating on behalf of their organization, create meanings through sensemaking and how these meanings construct corporate identity. External stakeholders guide this sensemaking process when they communicate their expectations or views, which are assumed to reflect the reputation that they consider the organization to have. Thus, in this paper, sensemaking is seen as a social process that guides employees to communicate with external stakeholders on social media platforms and in dynamic and interactive issue arenas. With the aim of benefiting the organization, employees also simultaneously consider their own protection and promotion to be important (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016). Employees duly use sensemaking to balance the goals of personal and organizational identities.

Cornelissen (2012) has studied how individuals make sense of their environment through their communication, while being accountable to others. He suggests that the discursive

strategies people use in sensemaking can be divided into three categories based on the expectation level: strategic shifting, framing and narration. In situations where employees perceive the social approval motive as strong, they use metaphors to align themselves with the expectations of others and to mark particular roles for themselves that meet those expectations (strategic shifting). In situations where employees know the views of others but are also strongly motivated to think through a circumstance as part of their professional role or previous commitments, they engage in the extended use of a single metaphor to compress a situation into a frame that mediates between individual convictions and the expectations of others (“framing”). Thirdly, when employees are in a position to define a circumstance, are unconstrained by past experiences, and do not directly know the views of relevant others, they systematically use a combination of metaphors blended and elaborated into a plausible narrative that attributes responsibility and prescribes a course of action (“narration”) (Cornelissen, 2012 p. 132). Employees advocating their organization are accountable for their organization and can be assumed to use similar tactics.

The interplay between action and the environment during sensemaking is known as enactment, and through enactment, an organization’s members create the environments which then constrain them (Weick, 1995); thus, sensemaking plays a central role in institutional change. Issue arenas function as spaces for enactment (Weick, 2012, Luoma-aho and Vos 2010), and employees that are increasingly present in issue arenas duly have an important boundary spanning role. Leifer and Delbecq (1978) define boundary spanners as employees who “operate at the periphery or boundary of an organization, performing organizationally relevant tasks, relating the organization with elements outside of it” (pp. 40–41). Kim and Rhee (2011) have introduced the concept of microboundary spanning to describe the voluntary two-way

communication behavior by any employee between the organization and its strategic publics. Maitlis and Christianson (2014 p. 105) note that while sensemaking appears influential, it is often not purposive: “actors do not act with the intention of changing an institution”.

Sensegiving, instead, refers to the purposeful process of influencing the sensemaking and cognitions of others towards a preferred definition of an organizational identity (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving is often considered a privilege of corporate management and the communications function, and studied in the context of how organizational leaders or managers strategically shape the sensemaking of organizational members (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Instead of seeing the sensegiving process as a management-centric activity, this paper follows the views of Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) that actors at any level of an organization, or outside its boundaries, may engage in sensegiving with others. This paper argues that due to social media, and particularly its ability to grant communicative power to employees (Men, 2014), employees’ role as sensegivers increases.

When employees act as sensegivers, the process is not linear and the many complexities of human communication need to be considered. For example, people are likely to accept only those ideas that allow them to maintain a consistent, positive understanding of themselves, namely those ideas that fit their identity needs (Weick, 1995, p. 20). Thus it can be assumed that employees participate in issue arenas and prefer advocating those themes and topics that are consistent with their intended personal image. Additionally, individuals may be influenced by their peers and they may model their behavior through interactions in social media (Wang et al., 2012). This can be explained by the spiral of silence, a theory by Noelle-Neumann (1974), which states that individuals may not voice their opinions if they know or assume that their audience

will not share their beliefs. An effect of this is that employees in an organization may be hesitant to express views that differ from those expressed in the issue arena by other participants.

### **Different social media user types engaging in different meaning-making processes**

User types in social media have been examined extensively in the literature, and they provide an alternative perspective for analyzing employees' communication behavior. Although the typologies differ among scholars, researchers seem to agree that there are different levels of involvement among social media users (Li, 2016). Most of the previous research has been conducted from the external stakeholders' point of view (Huotari et al., 2015), but as the boundaries between private and professional communication are blurring (Dreher, 2014), this paper argues that similar profiles can be identified in organizational members' social media use. Li and Bernoff (2011) classify users into seven groups based on their participation in social media: creators, conversationalists, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators and inactives. Creators are active in adding content and generating conversations in the online arenas. Conversationalists participate in dialogue in the online environment. Critics react to the content available, for example by posting ratings or reviews. Collectors organize content created by critics and creators. Joiners maintain their profiles on social networking sites and follow those sites. Spectators are the consumers of social media, while inactives are not active on social media at all. Based on Li and Bernoff's (2011) classification, we can assume that the different social media users apply sensemaking and sensegiving processes differently. Some roles, such as creators and critics, can be assumed to engage more actively in the sensegiving process, while others, such as conversationalists and collectors, create meanings through both sensegiving and sensemaking processes depending on the issue, whereas spectators engage in sensemaking when

acting in social media. Applying the idea of issue arenas, where organizations participate in multiple issue arenas and may be active in one and passive in another, and combining this with Li and Bernoff's thinking on social media user types, we can increase understanding of employee communication behavior in different issue arenas. Based on this theorizing, this paper argues that employees, when participating in issue arenas, apply different roles based on the issue and its relations to their identity goals. In other words, employees act differently in different arenas and the "issue" in each specific arena influences their communication behavior.

Theoretically (as in this paper), concepts of sensegiving and sensemaking can be distinguished at any particular time. In practice, however, it is most often the case that people engage in sensegiving based on their sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995). Employees' communication behavior, particularly their advocacy behavior in issue arenas such as social media, is based on a similar constant cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving activity, and employees engage in these processes based on their preferred social media user role in each specific issue arena.

### **Internal communication facilitating organizational sensemaking and sensegiving**

Given that sensemaking can be seen as organizing through communication (Weick et al., 2005), organizations' internal communication is a central process in facilitating organizational sensemaking and sensegiving, as employees share information, create relationships, make sense, and construct organizational culture and values (Berger, 2008). Berger argues that internal communication is one of the most crucial activities in organizations because it "helps individuals and groups coordinate activities to achieve goals, and [is] vital in socialization, decision-making, problem-solving, and change-management processes" (p. 2). Internal communication has been

argued to play a crucial role in constituting organizational culture as “internal communication influences corporate culture since it represents the culture” (Welch and Jackson, 2007, p. 192). Conceptually, organizational culture can be seen as “the set(s) of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members” (Keyton, 2014, p. 28). Culture is manifested through communication as artifacts, values and assumptions (Keyton, 2014). Employees manifest corporate values and assumptions through their behavior. In other words, they do not talk about values or assumptions directly, but rather reveal them in their conversations with others (Keyton, 2014, p. 550). Thus, corporate identity work is founded on a thorough understanding of an organization’s core values in its mission, vision and culture (Cornelissen, 2017), and internal communication lays the foundation for this work.

Internal communication (Kim & Rhee, 2011) and leadership communication (Men, 2014) have been identified as having an impact on employees’ communication behavior. Kim and Rhee (2011) found that symmetrical internal communication efforts in particular can contribute to engaging employees to communicate positively about their organizations and thus to act as employee advocates. Madsen (2016) found that when communicating in internal social media, employees also become well equipped to discuss current issues with their network outside the workplace. As Weick (2012, p. 27) has put it, “The organizational context provided by norms, culture, and organizational logic shapes the substance of what is said, seen, and thought.”

The recent research completed by Huang et al. (2015) suggests that the management of both user-generated content and organizationally produced content requires the establishment of distinctive, and thus complementary governance structures and a supportive organizational culture. From the sensegiving point of view, this paper proposes that internal communication has a particularly important role in creating a culture that supports sharing and polyphony, and

values that mirror corporate identity. Interaction in virtual issue arenas in social media mimics face-to-face interaction in its communication pace, and guides people toward disclosing information spontaneously (Richey, Ravishankar, & Coupland, 2016). This fast pace of interaction requires that employees take ownership of their communication and decisions. Allowing employees to take ownership not only encourages them to take initiative but also supports a new way of thinking and behavior (Huang et al., 2015). For employees to be able to interact in virtual issue arenas at the required pace, they need to have autonomy and support to voice their opinions. Scholars suggest that in order to enable employees to network and negotiate in such a complex and diverse external environment, organizations need to nurture polyphony and diversity in their internal environment to begin with (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011, p. 402).

### **Discussion and conclusions**

This conceptual paper aims to increase understanding of how sensemaking and sensegiving processes are linked to employees' communication behavior, and employee advocacy in particular. According to Weick et al. (2005), individuals make sense with the aim of introducing order, which is transient and needs to be re-accomplished repeatedly. From the corporate communication and public relations point of view, this means that corporate identity, image and reputation are in constant flux and employees have an increasingly important role in continuous corporate identity construction as they demonstrate corporate values through their daily actions and communication with external stakeholders. This paper also argues that employees should be regarded as important sensegivers since social media has changed the corporate voice dynamics, shifting communicative power from communication teams to

individual employees who curate discussions in social media (Kietzman et al., 2011). Applying the sensemaking view, it is argued that employees' communication role is not static. Instead, it is constantly produced and reproduced based on the demands of the communicative environment and organizational and individual goals. Employees also apply different roles based on the issue and its relation to their identity goals. Employees' sensemaking and sensegiving processes are intertwined, and employees often engage in sensegiving based on their sensemaking process (Weick, 1995).

Employees' communication behavior and collective sensemaking can be orchestrated through internal communication. Internal communication has a particularly important role in creating a culture that supports sharing and polyphony, and that promotes values that mirror corporate identity. This will increase employees' autonomy and ability to take ownership and initiative in a dynamic social sphere. The process of making sense and developing plans at an individual and an organizational level becomes crucial for corporate communication and public relations outcomes as "effectiveness in uncertain times lies as much in the capability for sensemaking as it does in the capability for decision making" (Weick, 2012, p. 8).

This paper contributes to corporate communications and public relations theory by integrating sensemaking into the corporate identity and reputation construction in social media. It also advances understanding of employees' critical role in contributing to the corporate voice and duly highlights the changes within the corporate voice architecture in the contemporary communication landscape.



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### III

## **MANAGING THE COMMUNICATIVE ORGANIZATION: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE COMPANIES**

by

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## Managing the Communicative Organization: A Qualitative Analysis of Knowledge-intensive Companies

The increase in employees' communicative role in organizations has been acknowledged in the literature in recent years (Andersson, 2019; Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019; Mazzei, 2010; Pekkala and Luoma-aho, 2017; van Zoonen et al., 2018). The emergence of digital media, particularly social media, has enabled employees to communicate across organizational boundaries about their work, profession and organization (Men, 2014).

Employees' communication behavior (ECB) in digital media has been linked to organizational reputation (Kim and Rhee, 2011; Helm, 2011), the promotion of corporate products and services (Dreher, 2014), social selling (Warren, 2016), employer branding (Mangold and Miles, 2007), organizational resilience (Vos, 2017), strategizing (Whittington et al., 2011) and the generation of new knowledge (Mazzei, 2014). Yet despite the increased interest in ECB, its antecedents and contributions to organizational performance, there is very little understanding with respect to the ways in which companies manage employees' work-related communication in social media. However, there has been a long-standing consensus among management scholars, particularly in the area of behavioral management, that employees' performance in the organizational context is very much dependent on conditions created by managerial work, which either increases or decreases employees' motivation (e.g. Herzberg, 1966 and McGregor, 1960).

The integration of behavioral management theories and communication management literature has been lacking due to the prevailing paradigmatic thinking in which corporate communication and its management has been the exclusive task of the members of the



dominant coalition, meaning organizational leaders and communication practitioners (Grunig, 1992). A recent literature review by Zerfass and Volk (2018) revealed that previous communication management research has paid comparatively little attention to the communication function as a unit of analysis. “Instead, a greater focus has been laid on the professional roles of communication practitioners and their individual strategic contribution to the corporation” (Zerfass and Volk, 2018, p. 399). As a consequence, many key patterns in communication management systems and structures remain unexplored (Moss et al., 2017). Additionally, the extant literature on communication management, particularly in the area of corporate communication and strategic communication, has largely been built on an approach in which organizations are univocal and consistency is the key guiding principle of communication management to external publics (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), while employees’ communicative role has been relevant mainly in the internal organizational context. This paradigm is changing, however, as employees are increasingly taking on the role of active communicators (Agresta and Bonin, 2011; Huang et al., 2013; Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019). One of the novel avenues that builds on the assumption that organizations are increasingly multivocal is the research area of the “communicative organization,” which perceives each employee as a potential communicator in today’s mediatised and polyphonic environment (Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn, 2011).

The present study builds on this limited knowledge about the management of employees’ work-related communication and argues that by integrating behavioral management as a subarea of the communication management discussion, we are able to theorize communication management in an era where organizations operate through multiple voices of employees as active communicators. The term management is broadly defined here as including leadership (Mintzberg, 2009) and is understood as the process of working with and through individuals, groups and other resources (such as technology) to accomplish

organizational goals. Ultimately, management is perceived here as enacting authority to create conditions for individual behavior in an organizational context and hence, it is seen as a design function (Kuhn, 2008). Communication management is an integral part of any organization, as organizations can only achieve their goals and objectives through the coordinated efforts of their members (Adler, 1999).

The objective of this paper is to explore how employees' work-related communication is managed in knowledge-intensive organizations and the paper is organized as follows: First, the literature related to communication management and ECB is reviewed and key theoretical approaches and concepts are introduced. Second, in the empirical part of the paper, the methods and the sample used in the exploratory study are described, before presenting and discussing the findings.

### **Literature review**

The literature review addresses the core constructs of the study, including ECB, the multivocal organizational communication system (MOCS) and management of the communicative organization (MCO).

Following the "communicative organization" approach (Kuhn, 2008; Schoeneborn, 2011), the paper focuses on finding answers to how organizations through their communication management create organizational conditions that enable and motivate employees to communicate professionally in social media. To this end, the paper draws on corporate communication, public relations, organizational communication and the management literature. Before providing a more detailed review of the management literature, the paper focuses on the literature related to ECB in organizations and the communication context since organizational behavior is always situational in nature (Meyer et al., 2010).

### **Employees' communication behavior (ECB)**

The emergence of post-bureaucratic and knowledge-intensive organizations (Alvesson, 2004) and the increased use of social media among employees has shifted communication power (Men, 2014) and the responsibility (Andersson, 2019; Gulbrandsen and Just, 2016) for corporate communication outcomes to individual employees communicating on behalf of their employers. This has recently prompted scholars to study ECB, including individual and organizational antecedents that enable positive communication behavior [e.g. self-enhancement (Lee, 2020); the employee–organization relationship (Kang and Sung, 2017); symmetrical internal communication (Men, 2014)]; the key processes in ECB (e.g. megaphoning and scouting, Kim and Rhee, 2011); the consequences of social media use in organizational contexts and identifying important organizational (e.g. reputation, Helm, 2011; Dreher, 2014) and individual outcomes (e.g. job performance, Cao et al., 2016).

Kim and Rhee (2011) conceptualized ECB into two categories, which they termed megaphoning and scouting. They defined megaphoning as “employees’ positive or negative external communication behaviors about their organization” (p. 246) and scouting as “employees’ voluntary communication efforts to bring relevant information to the organization” (p. 247). Positive megaphoning has also been conceptualized as employee advocacy (Men, 2014) and defined as “the voluntary promotion or defense of a company, its products or brands by an employee externally” (Men, 2014, p. 262). An employee advocate may have a variety of ways to communicate on behalf of their employers. Vos (2017), for example, stated that individuals can contribute to their organizations in social media by drawing attention to a topic, influencing the direction of the debate, showing accountability to maintain legitimacy or gain acceptance, educating publics and engaging social media users to provide input and participate in joint problem-solving (Vos, 2017, pp. 18–19). Through these activities, employees enact important communicative roles through which they embody,

promote and defend their organizations, scout for information and insights about the operating environment and build and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019).

### **The Multivocal Organizational Communication System (MOCS)**

The emergence of employees' work-related communication through the use of digital media with an increasing number of organizational communicators is changing organizational power structures (Riemer et al., 2015). Communication in the organizational context is argued to be changing from being exclusively univocal in nature toward being multivocal (Huang et al., 2013). As employees from different parts of the organization are increasingly communicating both inside and outside organizational boundaries, and hence the source of the voice is no longer centrally located and legitimized by the management or communications function, it is increasingly stemming from individual employees' communication with stakeholders across those boundaries (Agresta and Bonin, 2011; Huang et al., 2013).

Huang et al. (2015) defined univocality as an institutional, formal, centralized and mostly top-down mode of communication, while, conversely, multivocality refers to a more user-centric, distributed, informal and inherently participative mode of communication that creates polyphony. In this paper, the term univocal corporate communication is used to describe communication from a single source, initiated by the organization's central communications team or leadership, which has traditionally been seen as formal corporate communication. Huang et al. (2015) defined the content of univocal communication as organization-published content (OPC), referring to content generated by small teams "under the guidance of senior management" (p. 51). A multivocal mode of communication is, instead, based on user-generated content (UGC) and refers to organization members using

their personal voice and character and engaging in dialog with stakeholders internally or externally on topics that relate to the organization's brand, products and organizational culture, which has traditionally been seen as informal corporate communication. Multivocal communication is thus based on UGC (Huang et al., 2015), namely, content "created outside of professional routines and practices" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This paper provides the more specific definition of employee-generated content, which refers to content generated by employees concerning their work, career, profession or employer.

Recent research suggests that in digital media environments organizational reputation becomes coproduced, requiring organizations "to embrace the same creative style of expression favored by their audiences" (Etter et al., 2019, p. 47) as "social media users are a multitude of actors, whose motivations, sources of information and constraints are comparatively more diverse" (ibid., p. 34). Moreover, Christensen and Cornelissen (2011, p. 395) suggested that corporate communication is no longer an exclusively managerial project but the "ideal that is shared and kept alive by many different actors inside and outside the organization." This mode of communication, where many different actors communicate on behalf of the organization simultaneously, is termed as the MOCS in this paper, consisting of both organization- and employee-generated contents.

### **Management of the Communicative Organization (MCO)**

Despite the increased importance of employees' communicative role and its potentially strong effects on an organization's reputation (Miles and Mangold, 2014; Helm, 2011; Mazzei, 2014), surprisingly little research has addressed the management practice of ECB in social media. A vast majority of the existing literature and research focus on social media policies as instruments for management (Banghart et al., 2018; O'Connor et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019) and very few empirical studies (e.g. Felix et al., 2017 and Walden, 2018) have

taken a broader “social media governance” approach to manage employees’ communication (e.g. Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). However, this type of framework views individual employees and their identities quite narrowly – as members of an organization – either creating or diminishing organizational value, protecting or hurting the organization (Stohl et al., 2017) and does not take into account that employees’ advocacy behavior is voluntary in nature and requires organizational identification and job satisfaction (Van Dick et al., 2008) and thus, a positive employee–organization relationship (Kang and Sung, 2017). The governance model describes management practices conducted in many of today’s organizations but does not reveal why some organizations are more successful than others.

Overall, the communication management literature has drawn for the most part on two management literature streams: strategic management and the excellence approach. According to both of these theoretical frameworks, employees have been seen as important assets for organizations but their motivation has not been the locus of the literature among these frameworks. Grunig’s (1992) excellence theory of public relations, inspired by the excellence management approach originated by Peters and Waterman (1982), “specifies how public relations makes organizations more effective” (Grunig, 1992, p. 27). The aim of the excellence approach is to strive for improvement and toward best practices. In addition to the excellence approach, in recent years, corporate communication and public relations have been increasingly practiced and theorized within the framework of strategic management (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). Strategic management is defined by Greene et al. (1985) as “a continuous process of thinking through the current mission of the organisation, thinking through the current environmental conditions, and then combining these elements by setting forth a guide for tomorrow’s decisions and results” (p. 536).

Strategic management has resulted in dividing management activities between strategic and operational management (Zerfass and Volk, 2018). A recent attempt to create a strategic

framework for social media use in organizations has been made by Felix et al. (2017), who conceptualized the dimensions of social media marketing into four blocks: scope, culture, structure and governance. At the operational level, Walden (2018) found that communication practitioners engage in three operational activities to guide employees' social media use: serving as a reactive–technical resource, supporting employee communities and responding to incidental monitoring of social media posts.

In this paper, it is argued that introducing the behavioral management approach to the communication management discussion can advance understanding of how organizations can manage ECB. The behavioral management approach focuses on human motivation and how organizations can best motivate their employees to work willingly and effectively. One of the classic theories of motivation was created by Herzberg 1966 and his dual-factor theory posits that employees have two different kinds of needs, which either prevent job dissatisfaction or increase motivation, resulting in superior performance. The motivation theories in the work domain have evolved and broadened over the years and the understanding that individuals are motivated differently duly points to differences in people's orientations toward the initiation and regulation of their behavior (Mitchell, 1982; Gagne and Deci, 2005). Self-determination theory (SDT) differentiates between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separate outcome (Deci and Ryan, 1985) and, further, between autonomous motivation (acting with a sense of volition) and controlled motivation (acting with a sense of pressure) (Gagne and Deci, 2005). SDT has also contributed to the literature by positing that there are three universal psychological needs, namely, for competence, autonomy and relatedness, which are prerequisites for high-quality performance. SDT has been used to study the relationship between motivation and technology acceptance (Lee et al., 2015) and self-determination has been found to moderate the relationship between

employees' perceived external reputation and organizational citizenship behavior (Schaarschmidt et al., 2015).

In summary, there is as yet very little understanding of how organizations manage their employees' communication at different levels, as the communication literature has been built on ideals of univocality and consistency in communication management (Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011), while the management framework has leaned on the strategic management and excellence approaches and has not been theorized from the behavior management point of view. This study aims to contribute to this identified research deficit through an exploratory empirical study and in-depth analysis, leading to the development of a theoretical model – Management of Communicative Organization (MCO).

### **The research method**

In order to explore in depth how organizations manage employees' communication, the study takes an exploratory, qualitative approach (Bryman, 2016). The data were collected from six different professional organizations operating in the service sector (one organization in management consulting, two organizations in legal services and three organizations operating in financial services) in Finland. The six companies participating in the study employed a total of 22,996 employees (on average in 2019). The rationale for focusing on this particular sector is that an employee's role as an organizational communicator and advocate has become important specifically in knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs), such as law firms, and management consultancies as their success depends on their employees' ability to gain and demonstrate expertise (Alvesson, 2004; Treem, 2016). In total, the researcher conducted 23 interviews among organizational leaders responsible for employee engagement in social media in their respective organizations. In each company, the head of communication/ external communication (6) and the head of human resources (HR)/human resources



development (HRD) (6) were interviewed. Additionally, four organizations had wider teams involved in coordinating communication and advocacy programs in their respective organizations. Those respondents occupied the following roles: head of social media (3), head of editorial and strategic communication (1), manager, external communication (1), head of internal communication (2), manager HRD (2), manager employer branding (1), senior vice-president, private customers (1). The anonymity of the interviewees and their companies was assured, and the interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview guideline, which included the following topics presented in this article:

- (1) Company background: operating environment, organizational culture and structure
- (2) ECB: leaders' perception of employees' communication behavior and its outcomes
- (3) Management processes: existing management objectives and processes regarding engaging, empowering, controlling and developing employees' communication.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were conducted face to face. They were held in Finnish and direct quotes were translated into English for the presentation of the results within this article. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo). The interview transcripts amounted to 602 pages of text (Times New Roman, 12pt, double-spaced) in all.

The interviews were supplemented with further data such as internal documents on social media policies and publicly available information on company websites and in social media. The use of data from multiple sources contributed to data triangulation (Flick, 2007).

To ensure qualitative rigor, the data were analyzed using the three-step process recommended by Gioia et al. (2013). In each step, the constant comparative method was applied, in which different parts of the data are constantly compared with all other parts of the data to explore variations, similarities and differences. First, open coding was conducted before determining first-order concepts. Second, these concepts were grouped into second-

order themes, taking into account the results of the literature review. Here, it became evident that the processes that formed the first-order concepts varied based on the contextual factors identified. Thus, three distinctively aggregated patterns, in this case communication management approaches, were identified altogether and named according to their underlying orientation: “individual-,” “corporate-” and “business-oriented approaches.”

### **Findings**

This section begins by introducing the organizational differentiating factors that were identified during the data analysis and outlines three different management approaches adopted by companies coping with different internal and external environments. The section concludes with an examination of the key processes identified in managing employees’ communication in knowledge-intensive organizations.

#### **Managing employee communicators**

The interviews confirmed that employees’ work-related communication in social media is regarded as an increasingly important area among the knowledge-intensive companies and that it has required companies to establish new managerial processes. According to the analysis, all of the companies were undergoing change caused by external factors, namely, the emergence of new communication technologies, business transformation caused by digitalization, changing transparency expectations and increased competition for talent.

Above all, the increasing use of digital communication in professional communication and the opportunities and the threats it has created were identified as the main drivers for establishing management processes that both enable and motivate employees in their work-related communication in social media. All of the interviewed organizations pointed out the importance of ECB for their reputation and had created processes that allowed them to

manage multivocal communication and employee-generated content. As one of the interviewees pointed out:

“It is not only about saying that communication is everyone’s responsibility, and “Start doing it!”. Instead, we offer tools, opportunities and support, coaching and help for employees to be able to take on that new task.” (Interviewee 16)

The most common communication management processes mentioned by the respondents were increasing awareness and creating common understanding, creating community, communicating expectations, allocating time for communication, providing tools and content, training, coaching and supporting, providing feedback and rewarding.

Although all of the organizations participating in the study were operating in the service sector, faced similar external trends in their operating environment, employed knowledge workers and had some common processes and practices in place, the interviews revealed that there were some contextual differences that affected the way in which employees’ communication was managed, namely: culture and norms, strategic orientation toward communication, leadership commitment and support, roles and responsibilities and competence. The data structure of the organizational differentiating factors is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The data structure of the organizational differentiating factors

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working culture</li> <li>• Organizational communication culture</li> <li>• Weighing opportunities and risks in management decisions</li> <li>• Attitudes toward rules and policies</li> <li>• Attitudes toward new technologies</li> <li>• Tolerance of individual differences</li> <li>• Respecting the boundaries between professional and private life</li> </ul>	Culture and norms affecting communication management	Organizational differentiating factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceiving communications as a way of doing business</li> <li>• Perceiving communication as a central driver e.g. the motor for an organizational change</li> <li>• Perceiving communication as a strategic goal</li> </ul>	Strategic orientation toward communication	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribution of communication responsibility</li> <li>• Perception of the role of communication professionals in organizations</li> </ul>	Communication roles and responsibilities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of contemporary communication</li> <li>• Experience in employee communication management</li> <li>• Ability to develop new management practices for new processes</li> </ul>	Organizational communication competence	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate from the CEO and top management to move from univocal to multivocal communication</li> <li>• Top management being active in social media and acting as role models</li> <li>• Planning and follow-up of employee communication in management meetings</li> </ul>	Leadership commitment and support	

For instance, employees’ communication with external stakeholders was viewed as an opportunity or a threat depending on the organizational culture and the norms that were manifested in the relationship between organizational leaders and employees. When the communication culture was open, employees’ communication was seen as an opportunity and the management focused on enabling employee communication. As one communication professional stated:

“I think it is not only about communication but about something more general related to trust and how people are managed. If the organization needs to micromanage the time employees use in social media, I think it is a sign of distrust. Then the company is measuring the wrong things. It is not relevant how the employee uses his or her time, but what results he or she is able to achieve. The focus should be on results.” (Interviewee 4)

Conversely, when the culture and norms enhanced control, the focus was on guiding and creating mechanisms to control employees' work-related communication. In these types of organizations, the management emphasizes consistency. As another communication professional put it:

“I would say that these recent tech developments and all the tools we have in use allow almost anyone to do whatever they want. And it actually looks fine. The only problem is if the colors, graphics or tone of voice are not according to the guidelines. The way in which we want to be seen and perceived. Then it's a problem.” (Interviewee 15)

Moreover, the strategic orientation toward communication differed between companies. In some companies, communication was seen as a strategic goal in itself, while in one organization it was seen as a tool for achieving results in other areas and in another it was not on the priority list at all when considering areas of development in that specific organization.

Organizations also differed in how they had structured their communication and related roles and responsibilities. In some organizations, the communication responsibility was distributed among all members of the organization and seen as a part of employees' work role. In other organizations, the ownership of corporate communication resided in the communications department, which considered itself as ultimately responsible for driving the communication activities and the employees' role was considered to be more instrumental.

Moreover, leadership commitment and support varied across different organizations. The influence of organizational leaders on the communication culture and its development work was highlighted by all interviewees but the actual supporting activities differed between the organizations. As one interviewee stated:

“If employees themselves had initiated this internally, it would have met with resistance from the top management and communications department. But the top management were so committed to supporting this. This is not to say that commitment alone

would make the change happen, but it is almost a prerequisite for doing this successfully.”

(Interview 4)

Finally, the novelty of the phenomenon also affected the level of maturity in managing employee communication in social media. In some organizations the strategic decision to engage all employees in organizational communication had already been made several years prior, while in others the work had just started. Hence, the organizational competence in functioning as a multivocal system differed. Additionally, in some organizations, the development work had been systematic and in others more ad hoc. So the level of experience and intensity of the development work differed between organizations.

**Different managerial approaches**

With regard to the organizational differentiating factors mentioned above, three patterns of managerial processes were identified, which were named “individual-,” “corporate- and “business-oriented approaches.” The data structure of these three different managerial approaches is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The data structure of three different managerial approaches

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trusting and respecting professionalism of individual employees</li> <li>• Viewing individual differences as a richness</li> </ul>	Guiding beliefs among communication leadership	Individual-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aiming for efficiency and quality in communication</li> <li>• Focus on consistency of communication</li> <li>• Communication team having ownership of organizational communication</li> </ul>		Corporate-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewing organizational communication as a part of business and everyone’s work</li> </ul>		Business-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to make expertise visible</li> <li>• Willingness to attract new talent</li> <li>• Willingness to acquire new knowledge</li> </ul>		Individual-oriented

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to improve organizational visibility and discoverability</li> <li>• Willingness to enhance employer brand</li> <li>• Being aware that communication department resources are insufficient to operate in contemporary media landscape</li> <li>• Being worried that other organizations are more advanced</li> <li>• Being worried about employees harming the reputation</li> </ul>	Drivers for development of employees' communication	Corporate-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Willingness to create new business</li> <li>• Strategic decision to be on the cutting edge in organizational communication</li> <li>• Understanding that many voices have a greater effect than one single voice</li> </ul>		Business-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing awareness</li> <li>• Creating community</li> <li>• Communicating expectations</li> <li>• Allocating time</li> <li>• Providing tools and content</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Coaching and supporting</li> <li>• Providing feedback and rewarding</li> </ul>	Employees' communication management processes	Individual-oriented
		Corporate-oriented
		Business-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependence on active and skillful individuals</li> </ul>	Perceived challenges in managing employees' work-related communication	Individual-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to engage individuals</li> </ul>		Corporate-oriented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires plenty of work and time to make this approach function well</li> </ul>		Business-oriented

**Individual-oriented approach**

This approach relied on the individuality and self-responsibility of employees and the managerial focus was on enabling individual employees to empower and educate themselves. In organizations applying this type of management approach, the hierarchical structure was fairly flat and employees trusted each other's abilities to conduct the work-related tasks.

The drivers for engaging employees to communicate about their work and act as organizational advocates were the willingness to be perceived as an insightful organization and to make their employees' expertise visible. Such companies were eager to acquire the best talent from the job market, to which end employees' work-related communication was considered important in attracting new talent to join the company. For existing employees,

social media also offered a place to gain new knowledge and to stay up-to-date on industry news and events.

Communication management was focused on enhancing individual employees, both in terms of their expertise and their personality. All communication about the organization was based on promoting individual employees and their expertise, with corporate webpages featuring employees prominently.

“Our Internet pages are structured in such a way that every piece of content our employees create is linked to the individual who produced it, and this is the way we aim to generate traffic between different platforms and tools.” (Interviewee 2)

According to the interviewees, employees had a great deal of autonomy regarding how they performed their work. There was strong resistance toward manuals and guidelines so the management approach respected the organizational culture in this matter, and instead of creating policies and procedures, the emphasis was on inspiring and encouraging employees and enhancing the uniqueness of the organization and each individual’s important role in it. This was summed up as follows:

“We have strong resistance to all manuals. We communicate a lot about our communication objectives and we always explain what we are doing in our department in our communications and on our marketing sites. And we try to inspire people by showing our passion and by communicating our achievements and results.” (Interviewee 2)

Overall, such organizations valued their employees as important assets. They were also highly dependent on their experts and if an active and insightful communicator left the organization, it was difficult to find a replacement. The management approach was also affected by certain constraints because the culture and norms dominated behaviors. Hence, it took time and effort and required patience and persistence from the communication professionals to achieve the intended results.



**Corporate-oriented approach**

In the corporate-oriented management approach, the communications department played a central role in driving organizational communication initiatives and processes. Many of the management processes were applied in a paternalistic manner. However, the managerial work differed between companies depending on the extent to which organizational leaders were committed to supporting employees as active communicators and signaled the importance of this through their own communication and example. Companies where leaders were more committed showed higher levels of trust toward employees' ability to communicate at work. When employees were seen as trusted advocates, they were trained, supported and guided to communicate actively. On the other hand, when leaders were less committed, the focus of managerial work was on preparing for risks and creating guidelines for employees to follow and systematic processes that would encourage employees to communicate about their work did not exist.

As one interviewee from a company where leaders were highly committed to employee communication stated:

“We (the communications department) help our people to write those blogs, we create templates and background materials for them. We help in editing and fine-tuning their content so we kind of support them in content production. When the content is ready, we advise them on how to send it out with ready-made post alternatives so it is easy for them to share content. We also use a tool called Smarp, which allows people to see what is going on and to share content easily in their social media networks. For both social media and Smarp, we have regular training sessions in which everyone can participate, and then we are available afterwards so whenever anyone needs support we help with writing, and guide them on how to produce different types of content such as blogs. We offer consultation ourselves,

or then we offer support by providing external writers who create the content on their behalf. So we really offer whatever they want in terms of support, and we never abandon them.”

(Interviewee 8)

The communications department had a central role in providing support, as well as in driving the communication initiatives and making sure that things happened. All work-related content such as blog posts and articles were published through the employee advocacy platform by members of the communications department. This allowed the communications professionals to check and verify that the content was in accordance with the required guidelines. On the other hand, the communications department was able to support employees in their communications efforts by providing draft content and posts that employees could then modify and share among their networks.

When the leadership commitment was low, there was an apparent lack of trust among organizational leaders toward employees' ability to communicate on behalf of their organizations and the focus of the managerial work was on content. Employees were asked to follow detailed guidelines and policies, as one interviewee stated:

“We have so many existing policies that staff may not always be familiar with all of them. Employees are required to undergo code of conduct training every year, part of which is a reminder about the basic policy concerning how you talk about your company and that you need to be objective when doing so. And that when acting as a representative of your company, you should not put your own views forward. And that those things should always be kept in mind and separate from each other.” (Interviewee 15)

Overall, in these types of companies, the working culture was hectic and customer work and other areas of organizational development were often prioritized above communication among the leadership and employees in general. The interviewees argued that they felt that communication was often regarded as an add-on to employees' daily work.

They reported that it was difficult to engage employees in communicating actively, although they were supported and guided. One of the explanations for this inactivity could be that the employees perceived work-related communication as an extra duty. The managerial strategy and practices supported the view that the ultimate responsibility for and ownership of the communication was still in the hands of the communication professionals.

### **Business-oriented approach**

Within organizations that adopted a business-oriented management approach, social media communication was perceived as an integral part of doing business. Such organizations had a strong vision for the future as far as organizational communication was concerned and employees were perceived as integrated assets in making this vision a reality. The communication management was therefore based on future insight, an understanding of technological affordances, being connected to employees' daily work and the organizational culture. This means that communication leads were well aware of recent developments and opportunities in the communication environment, as one interviewee stated:

“I think that our Head of Communications at that time identified some silent signals about where the world is going. Actually not only about where the world is going, but in which direction we should develop it.” (Interviewee 4)

The driver for the systematic development of employees' work-related communication and supportive management practices was the objective to become a thought leader and, ultimately, to gain new business through being perceived as a premier partner in the respective industry. These expectations were communicated internally to all employees. As one member of staff put it:

“I would say that we are now in a very desirable situation. We have been working hard during the past two and a half years to change our culture in such a way that communication

is everyone's responsibility and belongs to everyone. We used to have a strong mindset about communication being handled exclusively in the communications department, but now we are shifting toward the mindset that communication is everyone's responsibility."

(Interviewee 16)

One of the early decisions made by the communication management was the decision to communicate about shared responsibility and the discussion was always linked to business objectives. Although everyone was perceived as a communicator, individuals were encouraged to find their own style, channels and interest areas and to be their authentic selves. One interviewee expressed it this way:

"From the very beginning, we launched the idea that communication is on everyone's desk and part of that was the so-called distributed content management model, which means that the communications department does not update all channels and webpages exclusively. . . We saw that employees had the knowledge and that they are on top of that substance and should take more responsibility for sharing it. For example, if product managers are responsible for making sure that their product is competitive, we think that part of that responsibility involves communicating about that product and its benefits. That created some resistance in the beginning and it has been a rocky road to becoming what we are today."

(Interviewee 3)

The business-oriented management approach emphasized the systematic training and coaching of employees. The training sessions were often organized by the communications department and there was a dedicated person or team to coach employees. Interviewees also stated that more experienced peers were encouraged to act as mentors for less experienced employees. So the ownership of the development work was also shared between employees and the communications department.

In addition to training and coaching, employees were supported in the event of problematic situations, for example. The change whereby employees became organizational advocates posed new risks and challenges, which required the communication management to create new supporting practices. For example, an employee's personal messages in social media could be construed as representing the organizational view, even though that was not the intention. In some cases, social media users could tag official company accounts and company leadership and try to cast employees in a negative light. These kinds of situations could be very stressful for employees and organizational support might duly be needed. As one interviewee explained:

“These situations are very challenging from the staff's point of view if, for example, someone has a different opinion than our employee and then our employee's tweet is retweeted, and there are comments to the effect that people should look at what the employee is doing by himself. It is quite a difficult situation for that employee, as he might be thinking that he has messed up and feel scared that will he lose his job and there will be consequences. I have always tried to call the employee in these circumstances and say that you have not done anything wrong, and that you should not be worried about that.” (Interviewee 4)

If mistakes were made, they were seen as opportunities for improvement, and informing employees about their mistakes was handled with sensitivity to ensure that they would not feel apprehensive about communicating in the future. As one interviewee pointed out:

“I always aim for caution because if the situation is handled in the wrong way, and the emphasis is on the mistake and what the employee has done wrong, they might become paralyzed and unwilling to communicate anymore. What we absolutely do not want is for anyone to become afraid of communicating.” (Interviewee 4)

Overall, the business-oriented approach of managing employee communication called for a visionary mindset and plenty of work by the communications department to get started. According to the interviewees, the hard work paid off when employees bought into the idea and started to see communication as a part of their work, which in turn motivated other employees and changed the organizational culture and norms in the long-term.

### **Management processes in different managerial approaches**

The data showed that communication management processes, including increasing awareness and creating a common understanding, creating community, communicating expectations, allocating time for communication, providing tools and content, training, coaching and supporting, providing feedback and rewarding were used differently depending on the managerial approach adopted in each organization. The different processes and their application (derived from open coding) are presented in Figure 3. The processes are divided into two categories: enablers (processes that enable employees' intended communication behavior) and motivators (processes that can increase employees' motivation to communicate) as they affect behavior in different ways, following Herzberg's (1966) dual-factor theory. According to this theory, the maintenance factors as such – called enablers in this model – do not increase performance but, if absent, can decrease employee output. On the other hand, motivators can have a positive effect on behavior and serve to motivate employees to enhance their performance.

Figure 3. The different management processes and their application

Processes	Individual-oriented	Corporate-oriented	Business-oriented	Effect on behavior
Increasing awareness and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlighting individual employees in all corporate communication</li> <li>• Inspiring with success stories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating in organizational forums to present communication governance model and support provided</li> <li>• Engaging organizational leaders e.g. CEO to set an example</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating the strategic decision that everyone is a communicator in the organization</li> <li>• Integrating all communication around business objectives</li> <li>• Introducing multilevel framework for engaging employees in organizational communication</li> </ul>	Motivator
Creating community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizing the uniqueness of the organization and each individual's role in it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building brand that each employee can be proud of</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizing everyone's role in strategy realization</li> <li>• Creating fun and a somewhat competitive climate that encourages people to put themselves out there</li> </ul>	Motivator
Communicating Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating about responsibility to provide insights</li> <li>• Communicating about responsibility to be easily discovered and accessed in online channels</li> <li>• Communicating good work through role models</li> <li>• Respecting individuals' decisions on how they are willing to communicate</li> <li>• Communicating that the organization does not need social media policies as there is trust in individual assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating governance model for employees' communication behavior</li> <li>• Engaging organizational leaders e.g. CEO to set example</li> <li>• Selecting strategic themes and dedicating individual professionals to create content on those selected themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicating about shared responsibility</li> <li>• Including communication objectives in goal-setting discussion among key spokespeople</li> <li>• Creating fun and a somewhat competitive climate that encourages people to put themselves out there</li> <li>• Encouraging employees to be their authentic selves in social media</li> <li>• Promoting role models</li> </ul>	Motivator
Allocating time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging employees to allocate time for communicating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing key spokespeople to allocate time for communication in timesheets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing employees to allocate time for communication as a standard procedure</li> </ul>	Enabler
Providing tools and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing training sessions</li> <li>• Providing technologies and tools for employees' use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing rules and policies to guide employees' communication</li> <li>• Acquiring and maintaining employee advocacy platforms, which function as internal content hubs for employees (e.g. Smarp)</li> <li>• Training employees to communicate in social media and preparing for crisis situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing training for each advocacy level</li> <li>• Using peer-mentoring as part of training</li> <li>• Encouraging employees to learn by doing</li> </ul>	Enabler
Providing content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating some ready-made content for employees to share</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating plenty of ready-made content for employees to share</li> <li>• Using content-sharing tools such as Smarp</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having an inspiring strategy and creating internal stories that inspire for employees' content creation</li> <li>• Creating news about organization successes</li> </ul>	Enabler
Coaching and supporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching employees to make a start and improve</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting employees content generation (e.g. editing support)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hands-on support when needed</li> </ul>	Enabler

	<p>in their professional communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hands-on support when needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing hands-on support when needed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting employees when facing problematic situations in social media</li> <li>• Having professional communicators to follow communication and support employees in the most relevant discussion forums</li> </ul>	
<p>Providing feedback and rewarding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building individuals' self-confidence in communicating professionally with constructive feedback</li> <li>• Recognizing the active communicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following up and giving analyzed data and feedback to active employees</li> <li>• Recognizing active and successful communicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing active and successful communicators (internal messages, awards, small gifts)</li> <li>• Following up and giving analyzed data and feedback to key advocates</li> <li>• Rewarding employees for their communication activity</li> </ul>	<p>Motivator</p>

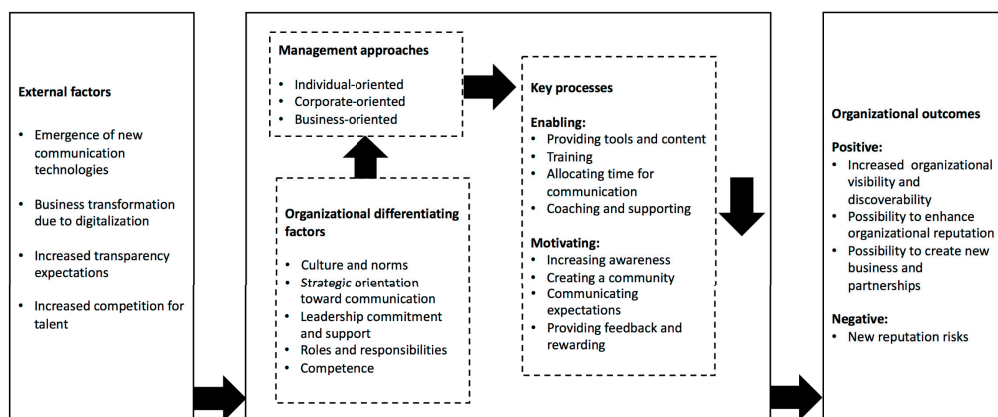
**Discussion**

This study advances the field of communication management and ECB by empirically proving that organizations manage their employees' work-related communication and that the management processes and practices identified derive from the behavioral management tradition. Perhaps the most significant finding of the study is that in addition to managing content, communication management is transforming into the management of people who communicate. In addition, an important finding is that companies vary based on contextual factors in relation to how they manage their employees' communication. These differentiating factors, namely, culture and norms, strategic orientation toward communication, leadership commitment and support, roles and responsibilities and competence, are aligned with the existing literature on social media management (e.g. Felix et al., 2017). Based on these differentiating factors, the organizations under study applied different patterns of management processes, namely, "individual-," "corporate-" and "business-oriented." The suggested relationship between external factors, organizational



contextual factors, management approaches, key managerial processes and the organizational outcomes of employees’ work-related communication is displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Framework of Management of the Communicative Organization (MCO)



*Key management processes*

Management processes are at the heart of the behavioral management model, and the task of communication management is to design the most appropriate combination of processes for each organization. The processes identified in this study were divided into two main categories – enablers and motivators – in line with Herzberg’s (1966) dual-factor theory.

*Enabling processes*

The first enabling process relates to ensuring that employees can access social media from their workplaces and devices and have appropriate platforms at their disposal such as a blog site to publish their professional content. Organizations can also enable ECB by providing

tools that function as internal content hubs where employees can discover and share content. These types of employee advocacy platforms (e.g. Smarp) were found to be beneficial, particularly in the beginning when employees were learning to use social media for work-related communication. However, some of the organizations pointed out that overreliance on centralized tools might encourage employees to share similar “default” content, rather than tailoring it for their own network and developing their own style and tone in work-related communication. By training employees to use social media and communicate effectively, organizations enable ECB by improving employees’ competence to take on this new communication role. Additionally, these processes can increase employees’ confidence in their own competence and hence their motivation (Gagne and Deci, 2005). By allocating sufficient time for communication (particularly relevant in organizations where employees were required to report their actual working hours, a typical procedure in industries where the customer is invoiced for the working hours, such as the consulting industry), organizations effectively enable ECB in the form of work-related communication activities. Moreover, by offering support in problematic situations, organizations create a feeling of psychological safety in that there is someone with the relevant expertise to hand in the event of challenging situations. Without this type of support, employees might feel insecure and be unwilling to engage in communication activities.

#### *Motivating processes*

The first motivating process relates to increasing awareness of social media communication. All of the companies considered this an important phase in the overall process, not least because it included communication about opportunities, benefits and risks for the individual, the organization and society in general. By increasing the understanding of opportunities and benefits, management can nurture employees’ intrinsic motivation – their interest in the activity itself and hence their feeling of autonomy. By creating a community, organizations

aim to increase employees' identification with and relatedness to the organization, which has been found to affect motivation and communication behavior positively (Van Dick et al., 2008). Communicating expectations, and having leaders exemplify these expectations, increases employees' extrinsic motivation, which is the prototype of controlled motivation, whereby people act with the intention of obtaining a desired consequence or avoiding an undesirable one (Gagne and Deci, 2005). Communication expectations may also enhance the feeling of relatedness, particularly if the person has internalized the expectations. All of the organizations also considered it important to give feedback and acknowledge and reward good work. None of the organizations had any financial rewards in place, but small gifts such as chocolate and movie tickets were given to employees who had excelled. All of the companies used social rewarding and some had organized galas to award prizes to the best employee communicators. Through this type of rewarding, organizations can enhance employees' self-efficacy, as well as both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Gagne and Deci, 2005).

When applied in practice, these processes not only benefitted the employees as active communicators but also the organizations inasmuch as they cultivated more active communicators among their human resources. The processes also created new knowledge; for example, allocating specific time for communication made both the communication and the time allocated to it visible to employer and employee alike.

At the same time, the processes applied transformed the work of communication professionals in organizations as managing communications was extended to managing communicators – the most important change being that communication professionals are increasingly applying behavioral management in their daily operations. Additionally, similar to a recent paper by Leonardi and Vaast (2017), the present study found that the decisions to take social media and related tools into use were made primarily in the communications

department. This indicates that communication teams are required to have the latest knowledge and understanding about the communication technologies available to be able to support employees in their communicative role.

### **Theoretical implications**

Based on the findings, this article proposes a new field for the communication management literature, namely, MCO, which builds on behavior management knowledge and focuses on managing employee communicators in MOCSs that are dependent on employee-generated content. The article suggests that, in addition to managing content, communication management should manage the people who communicate.

Figure 5 demonstrates the different management frameworks and their locus and compares the management paradigms applied in the corporate communication and public relations literature. In the table, MCO is conceptualized as a management framework to design organizational conditions that enable and motivate organizational members to communicate about their work, profession and organization. It introduces a novel area for academic discussion on how communication management affects ECB and attitudes, such as motivation. As Miles and Mangold (2014, p. 406) have posited, “managing employees’ voice in the social media era begins with ensuring that an appropriate organizational context is provided.”

This paper provides empirical evidence that communication management includes the ECB aspect and promotes what Eisenberg (1984) calls “unified diversity” (p. 230) – the ability for differences to coexist within the unity of the organization. With this conceptualization, the paper addresses the criticism expressed by Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) that contemporary management ignores the organizational and behavioral complexities of human communication.

Figure 5. The different management frameworks, paradigms and their locus

Discipline	Communication management framework	Applied management paradigms	Locus of management	Definitions
Public Relations	Public Relations	Excellence approach	Relationships between organization and its publics	“Public relations is a mechanism by which organizations and publics interact in a pluralistic system <i>to manage their interdependence and conflict</i> ” (Grunig, 1992, p. 9)
		Strategic management	Organizational decisions and communication programs	“It is important to view public relations as a strategic management function rather than as a purely interpretative function by explaining its role in strategic management and organizational governance.” (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, Grunig, 2013, p. 202)
		Behavioral management	Publics	“To understand the formation and evolution of reputation, it is necessary to understand the causes, processes, and consequences of communicative behaviors of active publics or highly involved behavioral relationship holders.” (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, Grunig, 2013, p. 207)
	Communicative Organization	Behavioral management	Communicators (Individual members of organizations)	Management framework to design organizational conditions that enable and motivate organizational members to communicate about their work, profession and organization.
Corporate Communication	Corporate Communication	Strategic management	Corporate communication (communication and symbols)	Corporate communication being an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are “harmonized” as effectively and efficiently as possible, so as to create a favourable basis for relationships with groups upon which the company is dependent (van Riel, 1995, p. 26). The vision of contemporary corporate communication, in other words, is <i>to manage all communications under one banner</i> (Christensen and Cornelissen 2011, p. 386).

**Limitations and future research directions**

As with every research project, this study has its limitations. First, the study was conducted among knowledge-intensive companies that are dependent on their employees' expertise. The decision to focus on such companies can be justified by arguing that as prior research focusing on managing employee communication is rare, the most informative sample could be obtained by selecting a field in which employees' expertise and corresponding communication would be a critical success factor and in which informants would be expected to have experience in managing employees' communication. Luckily this was the case, and the managerial approaches uncovered were even more varied than expected. Second, the study was conducted in Finland only and all of the interviewees were responsible for national communication programs, although some of the organizations were part of international companies. It would therefore be interesting to know how the proposed framework could be applied to other cultural contexts.

**Practical implications and conclusions**

This study provides insights into communication management and employees' work-related communication in knowledge-intensive companies. First of all, the article identifies the organizational differentiating factors that affect the way management is conducted in each organization. To this end, the article pinpoints three different management approaches, namely, individual-oriented approach, which is used in organizations with flat hierarchies, autonomy and shared leadership; corporate-oriented approach, which is used in organizations that have a hierarchical structure and which are willing to exert some level of control over employees' communication and business-oriented approach, which is used in companies that have made a strategic decision to engage employees in using social media at work to realize

the full potential of the digital communication technologies available. In addition, the article describes management processes designed to enable and motivate employees' work-related communication and thus provides a good starting point for companies willing to develop their managerial work in this area.

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## IV

# **IS IT MY JOB OR NOT? EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR COMMUNICATIVE ROLE, ITS ANTECEDENTS AND RELATIONSHIP TO WORK-RELATED COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

by

Kaisa Pekkala & Ward van Zoonen

Submitted manuscript

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V

**WORK-RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA USE: THE MEDIATING  
ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION  
SELF-EFFICACY**

by

Kaisa Pekkala & Ward van Zoonen

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# Work-related social media use: The mediating role of social media communication self-efficacy

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## ABSTRACT

Social media use has become an indispensable part of knowledge work. Employees posting work-related content on social media are considered credible sources of information and have significant importance for how stakeholders, such as potential customers and future employees, perceive the organization. Therefore, employees' ability to communicate about their work on social media has become a competitive advantage both for individual employees and for their organizations, especially in the professional service sector. Hence, understanding the role of employees' ability to use these social media professionally is crucial for understanding the communicative behaviors of contemporary knowledge workers. In this study, we draw on social cognitive theory and focus on the antecedents and consequences of self-efficacy in individuals' work-related communication on social media. The results show that perceived organizational commitment, clarity of communicative role, social media training, and prior experience with social media serve as antecedents of communication self-efficacy and subsequent work-related communication on social media. Thus, organizations and particularly management, have several aspects directly within the scope of their control that may aid employees in engaging in the professional use of social media. The paper contributes to the literature on employees' communication behavior and provides important and actionable insights for management and the development of human resources.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly adopting social media as a formal communication channel, which is changing the ways companies operate and relate to customers and providers (Paniagua, Korzynski, & Mas-Tur, 2017). In the EU area, for example, 75% of the companies that employ more than 250 people were using social media as a part of their operations in 2019, primarily to support image building and product marketing, to build and maintain customer relationships, and to recruit new employees (Eurostat, 2020). In addition, recent literature highlights the importance of social media communication by suggesting that customers are increasingly taking into account social media content, including content published by organizational members, when forming relationships and making buying decisions (Ancillai, Terho, Cardinali, & Pascucci, 2019).

Social media, characterized by user-generated content (UGC)

(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), enables employees "to create, circulate, share, and exchange information in a variety of formats and with multiple communities" (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017, p. 150). In this paper, we focus in particular on how social media is used for professional purposes, and refer to employees' work-related communication on social media as communicative acts in which employees share information about their work, organizations, professions, and/or industries through publicly-available platforms (i.e. Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook), typically through individually-owned accounts (van Deursen, Verlage, & van Laar, 2019; van Zoonen et al., 2016; van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018). These forms of social media communication have been found to have important individual implications, for instance for employee engagement and exhaustion (van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018; van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegthart, 2017), as well as organizational implications, for instance for organizational reputation (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019), sales performance (Ancillai et al., 2019) and talent attraction (Korzynski, Mazurek, & Haenlein, 2020).

The emergence of employees' work-related communication through the use of social media is transforming work and workplaces as it is shifting the communication responsibility from

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headquarters to individual members of the organization (Kietzman, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). As a consequence, employees' capability to communicate on social media has become an increasingly important competitive advantage for both individual employees and their organizations (Cao, Guo, Vogel, & Zhang, 2016; Korzynski et al., 2020; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Pekkala, 2020).

For competent and confident communicators and their employers, social media provides a platform for conveying desired impressions (Erhardt & Gibbs, 2014), sharing knowledge, networking, building social capital, and reaching broad audiences including potential customers, employers and other stakeholders, duly contributing to work performance (Ancillai et al., 2019; Cao et al., 2016). Earlier studies suggest that employees' social media abilities shape organizational reputation, for better or worse (Walsh, Schaarschmidt, & Von Kortzfleisch, 2016). The potential is largely attributed to the notion that employees are considered a trustworthy and authentic source of information because they know the company from the inside (Fleck, Michel, & Zeitoun, 2014; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

Although social media has become ubiquitous and advantageous, its use by employees is not without risk for organizations. As Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann, and McCarthy (2018) rightfully point out, "for organizations, the cost of 'social media gone bad' is difficult to quantify, but the consequences can nevertheless be dire" (p. 437). In this vein, recent research has examined the antecedents and consequences of social media communication in the context of brand management (Wagner, Baccarella, & Ingo-Voigt, 2017), while others have focused on the implications of work-related social media use by employees at an individual (van Zoonen et al., 2016), and organizational level (Baccarella et al., 2018; Korzynski et al., 2020). More recently, Baccarella, Wagner, Kietzmann, and McCarthy (2020) proposed two strategies – namely sensitizing and regulating – to deal with the often-neglected dark side of social media, such as technostress and social media addiction.

The growing pervasiveness of social media communication in working life requires new skills and knowledge (van Laar, van Deursen, van Dijk, & de Haan, 2019). To survive and thrive in this new media environment, characterized by user-generated content, employees need to be able to gather and analyze information, develop informed opinions, and share these perspectives with others in an appropriate manner (van Zoonen et al., 2016). At the same time, employees should be aware of the potential risks of social media use (Baccarella et al., 2020). However, previous work indicates that the levels of these communication abilities, and digital literacy, vary substantially among the working population (Marsh, 2018; van Laar et al., 2019) and that the increased availability of digital communication technologies has not led to more organizational support related to actual use of these resources (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017). This is paradoxical because when individuals fail to communicate appropriately through social media, negative organizational consequences are not uncommon (Baccarella et al., 2018; Stohl, Etter, Banghart, & Dajung, 2017). At worst, inappropriate social media use can lead to substantial reputational damage for the individual employee and their organization (Baccarella et al., 2018; Helm, 2011), and in some cases even termination of employment (Schmidt & O'Connor, 2015).

Due to the increased importance of social media use in the work context, management scholars have shown increased interest toward employees' communication behavior (ECB). Earlier research has investigated the technological affordances, i.e. the opportunities of an action provided by a technology, that allow these behaviors (e.g. Treem & Leonardi, 2013), the organizational antecedents (van Zoonen, Bartels, van Prooijen, & Schouten, 2018), the management practices enabling and motivating employees'

work-related social media use (Pekkala, 2020), and the potential benefits of employees' social media use for organizations (Helm, 2011; Korzynski et al., 2020). However, limited research has focused on individual employees' confidence in their abilities to act – that is, self-efficacy – in this novel social media environment. Yet this is important, as it may not only make employees more effective communicators, but also better equipped to deal with, or avoid, some of the negative aspects of social media use (e.g. Baccarella et al., 2020).

Hence, this study aims to extend our knowledge of social media use in organizational contexts. Specifically, we focus on the role of social media communication (SMC) self-efficacy as a mediator between individual and organizational factors and employees' work-related communication behavior. Drawing on the social cognitive theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), we examine how social media experience, training, organizational commitment toward employees' communication on social media and clarity of communicative roles predict work-related social media use through employees' SMC self-efficacy.

## 2. Theoretical foundations and hypothesis development

### 2.1. Self-efficacy as a predictor of work-related social media use

Self-efficacy is a widely used construct for the self-assessment of different skills and knowledge. The construct is embedded in social cognitive theory, which emphasizes that human behavior is shaped and controlled by personal cognition in a social environment (Bandura, 1997). The theory posits a multifaceted causal structure that addresses both the development of competencies and the regulation of action (Bandura, 1986). It is founded on an agentic perspective highlighting the role of an individual's influence over their functioning (Bandura, 1986). In his seminal book *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* (1986), Bandura explains that "People are not only knowers and performers. They are self-reactors with a capacity for self-direction" (p. xi). Perceived self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). The self-efficacy component of social cognitive theory addresses the origin of self-efficacy beliefs, their functional properties, their diverse effects, and the processes through which they work (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as a person's own belief in their ability to perform a specified task successfully. In other words, self-efficacy is about perceived capability (Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2006), and concerns a person's estimate of their capacity to accomplish a task with their own skill set (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1997) posits that self-efficacy impacts our selection of activity; individuals who perceive themselves as highly efficacious in a given area of activity will be more likely to conduct a task related to that area. Conversely, individuals are not willing to engage in activities if they believe such efforts will end in failure. Therefore, self-efficacy has a direct influence on behavior (Bandura, 1997). For example, individuals who perceive themselves as lacking abilities to successfully communicate on social media may refrain from using these media. As Stajkovic (2006) noted, "Having high confidence makes it more likely that people will initiate action, pursue it, and sustain persistence because they feel certain that they can handle what they desire to do or what needs to be done" (p. 1209). This is proven to be particularly salient in settings in which new skills and knowledge are needed, such as the adoption of new technology (Blachnio, Przepiorka, & Rudnicka, 2013).

The conceptual difference between self-efficacy and competence is that self-efficacy is a subjective evaluation of confidence that affects motivation (Bandura, 1986), whereas competence is often understood as an evaluative judgement of a behavior,

meaning that a person is not a competent communicator unless they have been judged to be so by an observer (Roloff & Kellermann, 1984). In this study, we focus on social media communication (SMC) self-efficacy, referring to employees' beliefs about their communication abilities on social media, as a predictor of employees' work-related social media communication behavior.

With the rise of social media, employees have multiple new ways to communicate across organizational boundaries and to reach large audiences, including potential customers and future employees. Individuals who perceive themselves as not having the abilities to control their social media-related behaviors (e.g., being unable to create relevant content for social media, being misinterpreted in social media conversations, or being unable to create a desirable impression online or act as a valuable advocate for one's organization) might be less willing to use social media for their work-related communication, especially for complex tasks such as using social media strategically for professional purposes (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2015; van Deursen et al., 2019). This idea may be particularly salient in the context of social media in which individuals are likely to be judged based on their communication content and the way they use these technologies (Treem, 2015). Furthermore, self-efficacy beliefs in the context of work-related communication may be particularly important as these behaviors can be highly consequential for both individuals and organizations (Rokka, Karlsson, & Tienari, 2014; Horn et al., 2015). For example, social media use for professional purposes has been linked to job performance and job satisfaction (Cao et al., 2016), intentions for career advancement (van Zoonen & Treem, 2019), employability (Khedher, 2019), and organizational reputation (Etter et al., 2019; Helm, 2011; Walsh et al., 2016).

Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory on self-efficacy has been widely used to predict behavior in different settings (e.g., Bandura & Locke, 2003; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008). Recently, the theory has been applied to understand the role of self-efficacy in relation to digital technology use, such as computer self-efficacy (Mew & Money, 2010), internet self-efficacy (Kim & Glassman, 2013; Sun & Wu, 2011) and social media self-efficacy (e.g. Hocevar, Flanagan, & Metzger, 2014; Xu, Yang, Macleod, & Zhu, 2019).

The previous empirical research on social media or internet self-efficacy has focused on studying social media use among the general public (e.g. Helsper & Eynon, 2013; Hocevar et al., 2014) or among students in higher education (e.g., Xu et al., 2019). However, research that would provide insights into employees' social media use in the workplace context has been lacking. In addition, a majority of studies have predominantly focused on users' technical abilities instead of communication and content creation skills. The distinction between technical and content-related skills has been shown to be theoretically and empirically distinct and to have different determinants (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). In this study, we focus in particular on efficacy beliefs that are related to content creation and the strategic use of social media to achieve professional and organizational goals, such as the acquisition of strategic contacts and effective job completion (van Deursen et al., 2019). We are also interested in increasing understanding of the antecedents of SMC self-efficacy as earlier literature posits that self-efficacy is dynamic in nature and may change as a result of learning and feedback (Gist & Mitchell, 1992) (see Fig. 1).

## 2.2. Antecedents of social media communication (SMC) self-efficacy

### 2.2.1. Experience

According to social cognitive theory, individuals rely on prior experience, social cues and their physiological and emotional state when making self-efficacy judgments (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Bandura (1997) posited that two types of experience enhance efficacy beliefs – task-related experience (enactive mastery experience) and social modeling (vicarious experience). Prior experience with a task that builds skill and is perceived as successful by the individual results in a heightened sense of self-efficacy. Moreover, observing others' successful or unsuccessful performance in order to make a referential comparison and model successful behavior serves as an important source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Social media provides unique affordances for the development of self-efficacy through both enactive mastery and vicarious experience because it allows people to follow each other and garner social support from a crowd (Argyris & Xu, 2016). Taken together, according to social cognitive theory, prior experience in using and following social media can be assumed to contribute to increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Prior empirical work conducted outside of the work context has found that individuals' social media experience is a significant predictor of the intention to use it (Lee & Ma, 2012). However, no empirical studies have been conducted in the context of work although the earlier literature suggests that the link between earlier experience and social media use may depend on the context of social media use (e.g. social media use for personal or professional purposes) (Treem, Dailey, Pierce, & Leonardi, 2015). Hence, the relationship between social media experience and work-related communication on social media requires further empirical research to understand whether different levels of experience may cause inequality among the workforce.

To test these relationships, we base our hypothesis on social cognitive theory, and its assumption that experience is one of the sources of self-efficacy, which in turn predicts related behaviors (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, we rely on earlier studies citing social cognitive theory, which suggest that social media experience increases content-sharing intentions (Lee & Ma, 2012). Hence, we expect to see both a direct association between experience and work-related social media communication, and an indirect association between social media experience and work-related social media use through SMC self-efficacy, pointing to the following hypotheses:

**H1a.** Prior experience in using social media is positively related to work-related social media communication.

**H1b.** Prior experience in using social media is positively related to work-related social media communication through SMC self-efficacy

### 2.2.2. Role clarity

Role clarity, namely the explicit articulation of the purposes, goals, and performance contingencies of individuals' work roles, plays an important part in self-efficacy assessments (Bandura, 1997) and provides a context in which employees have sufficient information to enact the desired behaviors effectively (Dierdorff, Rubin, & Bachrach, 2012). "If one does not know what demands must be fulfilled in a given endeavor, one cannot accurately judge whether one has the requisite abilities to perform the task" (Bandura, 1997, p. 64).

Role clarity has also been found to improve the likelihood of an individual engaging in an activity (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). Employees with a clear understanding of responsibilities are more likely to begin, persist in, and finish a task, and ultimately perform well because they "know what to do, how to do it, and how they are evaluated" (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007, p. 333). To this end, the literature suggests that when role clarity is high, employees know what is expected of them and how to fulfill these expectations, and that this is associated with their job performance (ibid.).

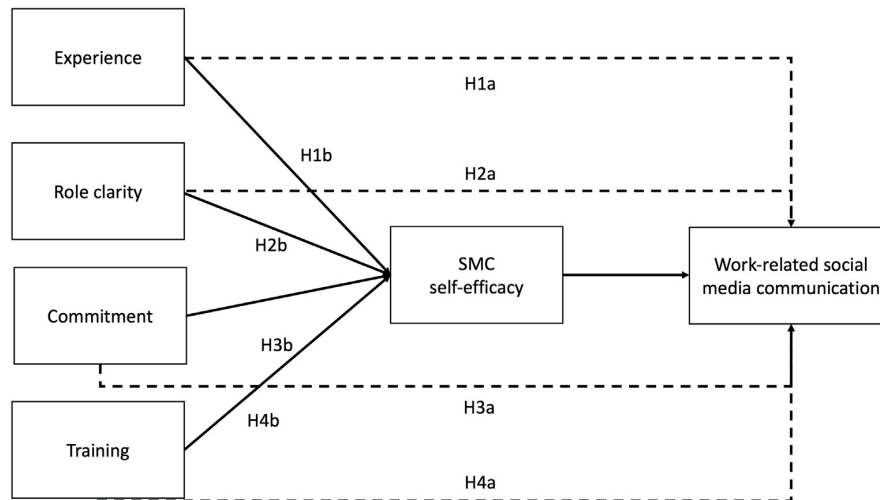


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the study.

Consistent with Bandura's reasoning about role clarity enhancing efficacy beliefs and hence related behavior, and role clarity literature and earlier studies suggesting that role clarity is positively related to an individual's enactment of those behaviors (e.g. Bray & Brawley, 2002; Gilboa et al., 2008), we duly hypothesize that communicative role clarity, referring to employees' perceptions of receiving adequate information describing task expectation, would be positively related to work-related social media communication directly, and indirectly through increased SMC self-efficacy.

**H2a.** Role clarity related to communicative responsibilities is positively related to employees' work-related social media communication.

**H2b.** Role clarity related to communicative responsibilities is positively related to employees' work-related social media communication through SMC self-efficacy.

### 2.2.3. Organizational commitment

Self-efficacy beliefs are formed through social and informational cues (Bandura, 1997). According to social cognitive theory, these cues may lead to individuals formulating beliefs that they possess capabilities that will enable them to perform the given tasks (Bandura, 1986). Organizational commitment and support also provide informational cues that influence employees' efficacy beliefs by signaling that there are "situational resources" available for employees to complete a task successfully (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Hence, organizational commitment and support are assumed to strengthen self-efficacy (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Kurtessis, Eisenberger, Ford, Buffardi, Stewart, & Adis, 2017; Albrecht & Marty, 2020). Cues that demonstrate organizational commitment and support have been associated with employees' attitudes toward new technologies and perceived benefits for one's work (Lewis, Agarwal, & Sambamurthy, 2003.)

Moreover, it is suggested that perceived organizational commitment and support elicit the norm of reciprocity, leading to a felt obligation to help the organization, as well as the expectation that increased performance on behalf of the organization will be noticed and rewarded (Blau, 1964; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Therefore, employees who construe that their organizations are committed to social media use for work-related communication can be assumed

to increase their communication activity. On the basis of the above, we predict that organizational commitment affects employees' social media use and subsequently enhances their related efficacy beliefs, leading to more frequent use. Thus, the following direct and indirect hypotheses are proposed:

**H3a.** Organizational commitment to social media use is positively related to employees' work-related social media communication.

**H3b.** Organizational commitment to social media use is positively related to employees' social media communication through SMC self-efficacy.

### 2.2.4. Social media training

Recent findings indicate that knowledge-intensive organizations are increasingly training their employees to successfully engage in social media communication (Pekkala, 2020). Participation in task-specific training, aimed at improving employees' knowledge and skills, has been associated with perceived efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Kim & Glassman, 2013). Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals form knowledge structures through observational learning, exploratory activities, verbal instruction and cognitive syntheses of acquired knowledge. These knowledge structures act as cognitive guides, providing strategies for effective action (Bandura, 1997 p. 34). Bandura suggests that this cognitive guidance is particularly influential in the early and intermediate phases of skill development (Bandura, 1997). Given that social media use for professional purposes is a relatively novel phenomenon (Treem et al., 2015), it can be assumed that training, providing opportunities to develop one's knowledge and skills and hence contribute to the formulation of knowledge structures, may affect one's self-efficacy beliefs.

Indeed, earlier studies on communication skills have shown that interpersonal communication training (offline) enhances communication self-efficacy (e.g., Gulbrandsen, Jensen, Finset, & Blanch-Hartigan, 2013). However, this relationship has not been tested in an online communication context. Furthermore, receiving task-specific training can be appraised as favorable treatment, which may result in feeling a sense of obligation to reciprocate in enacting those trained behaviors (Blau, 1964). Consequently, we propose that social media communication training organized by one's employer may have a positive impact on employees' work-related

social media communication. Following the suggestion of social cognitive theory, particularly the efficacy component, we also assume that there will be an indirect relationship through employees' SMC self-efficacy perceptions.

**H4a.** Social media communication training organized by one's employer is positively related to employees' work-related social media communication.

**H4b.** Social media communication training organized by one's employer is positively related to employees' work-related social media communication through SMC self-efficacy.

### 3. Research method

#### 3.1. Sample and procedure

The data for the study were collected from knowledge workers in three professional service organizations in Finland. Two of these organizations were operating nationally, and one globally, although we only surveyed employees working in the Finnish branch of the company. The organizations provided management consultancy and financial and insurance services, offering professional services to individuals and businesses. Most work in these companies can be characterized as knowledge work, which is distinguished by its focus on "non-routine" problem-solving, requiring convergent, divergent, and creative thinking (Reinhardt, Schmidt, Sloep, & Drachler, 2011). The rationale for focusing on knowledge workers in the professional service sector is that the communicative roles of employees are particularly salient, and the success of these types of organizations largely depends on their employees' ability to gain and demonstrate expertise (Alvesson, 2004; Treem, 2016), increasingly online (Reinhardt et al., 2011).

The invitations to participate in the online survey were sent to all employees in the respective organizations ( $n = 9786$ ) through email and internal communication channels. Responses were received from a total of 1179 employees. The majority of the respondents were female (61%) and over half (52%) were between 30 and 49 years old. In all, 51% of the respondents occupied a specialist role, 28% worked in customer service positions, and 12% had a managerial role. In our sample, 38% had been working for their current organizations for one to five years, 16% for between six and ten years, and 32% for over ten years. 91% of the employees responding to the survey had a permanent contract with their employers.

#### 3.2. Measurement

##### 3.2.1. Independent variables

*Social media experience* refers to a person's previous experience in using social media measured in years. Experience was measured with one item asking respondents to indicate their experience ranging from no social media experience at all, less than one year, 1–5 years, 6–10 years, or more than 10 years of experience.

*Communicative role clarity* refers to the extent to which individuals clearly understand the duties, tasks, objectives, and expectations of their work roles (Katz & Kahn, 1978) – in this case, their communicative roles. Absence of role clarity (i.e. role ambiguity) occurs when individuals are uncertain with regard to what is expected of them. Role clarity was measured with four items adapted from Babin and Boles (1996). This scale has been used in earlier research focusing on communication behavior (Walsh et al., 2016). The construct included items such as "There are clear, planned goals and objectives regarding my social media use". Response options ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

*Perceived organizational commitment* refers to the extent to which employees perceive their organization as being committed to their communicative behavior and support employees in their engagement with it. Five items measuring perceived organizational commitment were derived from Lewis et al. (2003). This construct included items such as "My organization supports the use of social media at work". Response options ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

*Social media training* was measured using a single item where respondents were asked whether they had participated in social media training organized by their employer, with response options ranging from 'never' to 'during the last six months'. For the purpose of this study, the training variable was dummy coded including two different options as to whether the person had participated in the training or not.

##### 3.2.2. Mediator

*Social media communication (SMC) self-efficacy* was assessed using the five items from the scale developed by van Deursen et al. (2019), which were adapted to this study. The scale measures beliefs in individuals' strategic communication capacity, meaning the ability to use social media strategically to achieve professional and organizational goals. This measurement scale included items such as: "I am able to improve relations with important stakeholders through the use of social media". As suggested by Bandura (2006), respondents were asked to rate the strength of their belief in their ability to carry out the requisite activities. In this study, respondents recorded the strength of their efficacy beliefs on a 7-point scale, ranging from (1) very uncertain, to complete assurance (7) very certain. Notably, only 16.37% of respondents felt some level of confidence in their ability to use social media strategically to achieve professional and organizational goals. Most respondents were neutral (44.78%) or did not feel confident in their ability to use social media for professional or organizational purposes (38.85%).

##### 3.2.3. Dependent variable

*Work-related social media communication.* This measure evaluated the frequency of social media use for work-related communication, that is, the utilization of public social media accounts owned by individual employees to produce or consume work-related information. The scale used was derived from van Zoonen et al. (2016). Respondents were prompted to respond to five items, such as "I publish work-related content on social media" and "I participate in discussions related to my work on social media" by asking how often they engaged in these behaviors using their own personal social media accounts, from never (1) to multiple times a day (7). Specifically, we were interested in tapping into the general frequency of work-related communication through individually owned social media accounts (e.g. on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook). Our measure, therefore, was in line with earlier studies measuring the frequency with which employees use these social media for work-related communication (van Zoonen et al., 2017). Overall, employees differed in their social media communication, with 8.23% using social media for work-related communication a few times a week or more, 28.33% a few times a month or less, and 63.44% a few times a year or less.

#### 3.3. Confirmatory factor analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for all latent variables in the model to evaluate the validity and reliability of our measures. The four-factor measurement model demonstrated a good model fit:  $\chi^2(146) = 899.6$ ; CFI = 0.948; RSMEA = 0.066; C195% [0.062; 0.070]. Reliability coefficients  $\alpha$  ranged between 0.80 and 0.95, indicating satisfactory reliability. Factor loadings ranged

between 0.58 and 0.95. The average variance extracted was above 0.50 for all constructs, and exceeded the maximum shared variance between the constructs. Overall, these results indicated satisfactory convergent and discriminant validity. The correlations among the study variables and other descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

#### 4. Results

The hypothesized model was tested using path modeling in STATA (see Table 2). We controlled for age, gender and work category, and found that these factors did not influence the hypothesized relationships. Hence, for reasons of parsimony these variables were excluded from the final model. As our model includes mediation, we first examined the direct relationships estimating a path model without the self-efficacy. The results demonstrated that training ( $B = .674$ ,  $BC95\% [0.544; 0.805]$   $p < .001$ ), experience ( $B = .270$ ,  $BC95\% [0.216; 0.323]$   $p < .001$ ), commitment ( $B = .556$ ,  $BC95\% [0.472; 0.640]$   $p < .001$ ) and role clarity ( $B = .130$ ,  $BC95\% [0.051; 0.209]$   $p = .001$ ) demonstrated a significant relationship with social media communication behavior.

Subsequently, we estimated a model including self-efficacy as a mediator. The results demonstrated that prior experience is still significantly and positively related with work-related social media communication ( $B = .16$ ,  $BC95\% [0.109; 0.208]$   $p < .001$ ). These findings support hypothesis 1a. In addition, the results demonstrated a significant positive indirect relationship between social media experience and work-related social media communication, through self-efficacy perceptions ( $B = .11$ ,  $BC95\% [0.084; 0.137]$   $p < .001$ ). These findings imply partial mediation and support the reasoning reflected in hypothesis 1b.

Hypotheses 2a and 2b address the relationship between role clarity and social media communication. It is noteworthy that the significant direct effect of role clarity on social media communication from the initial model without self-efficacy completely disappeared when self-efficacy was added ( $B = -.06$ ,  $BC95\% [-0.130; 0.019]$   $p = .146$ ). Hence, hypothesis 2a is not supported. The results demonstrate a significant positive indirect relationship between role clarity and social media communication through self-efficacy ( $B = .186$ ,  $BC95\% [0.145; 0.226]$   $p < .001$ ). Hence, the results indicate full mediation between role clarity and communication behavior through self-efficacy.

Hypothesis 3a posits that organizational commitment is positively related to work-related social media communication. The results support this assumption as evidenced by the significant positive relationship between organizational commitment and employees' work-related social media communication ( $B = .46$ ,  $BC95\% [0.386; 0.538]$   $p < .001$ ). In addition, we again hypothesized an indirect relationship through self-efficacy. Hypothesis 3b was also supported as the predicted indirect relationship was significant ( $B = .09$ ,  $BC95\% [0.056; 0.132]$   $p < .001$ ), suggesting that part of

the relationship between organizational commitment and work-related communication is explained by self-efficacy.

Finally, hypothesis 4a assumes that social media training organized by an employer is positively related to work-related social media communication. The results from the model with self-efficacy also demonstrate a significant positive association between training and work-related social media communication ( $B = .58$ ,  $BC95\% [0.467; 0.702]$   $p < .001$ ), supporting hypothesis 4a. In addition, hypothesis 4b suggests that training and work-related social media communication are partly related because training increases an employee's self-efficacy. The results indeed demonstrated a significant positive indirect relationship ( $B = .090$ ,  $BC95\% [0.033; 0.147]$   $p < .001$ ). Hence, the results support hypothesis 4b.

#### 5. Discussion

The findings highlight the importance of SMC self-efficacy in understanding employees' work-related communication on social media, although their prior social media experience, perceived organizational commitment, and social media training organized by their employer were also directly related to work-related social media communication. The findings indicate that these relationships were partially mediated by self-efficacy. This indicates that experience, organizational commitment and training are in part related to work-related communication on social media to the extent that these factors increase employees' self-efficacy. Finally, the findings indicate that the relationship between role clarity and work-related social media communication is fully mediated by self-efficacy. This indicates that role clarity is only related to work-related social media communication through self-efficacy. Taken collectively, our results suggest that employees' self-efficacy beliefs play an important role in their behavior, particularly in novel tasks such as social media use for work and in a non-routine task context such as knowledge work. Our study also demonstrates that organizations operating in the knowledge sector have an important role in creating conditions that support their employees' SMC self-efficacy and work-related communication behavior. These findings have several theoretical and practical implications.

##### 5.1. Theoretical implications

The study empirically tests the role of SMC self-efficacy in the context of work, and hence provides a novel understanding for researchers interested in employees' communication behavior and human resources management. According to social cognitive theory, employees enact agency through cognitive control and regulate their behavior through their judgement of their capability to succeed in that specific task. Bandura (1997) suggests that this type of cognitive guidance is particularly influential in adapting to new ways of working. In line with this observation, our results confirm that self-efficacy beliefs represent an important underlying

**Table 1**  
Correlation matrix with descriptive statistics.

Variable	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social media communication self-efficacy	3.50 (1.46)	<b>.95</b>								
2. Communicative role clarity	2.59 (0.89)	.41*	<b>.80</b>							
3. Work-related social media communication	2.86 (1.35)	.57*	.32*	<b>.86</b>						
4. Perceived organizational commitment	3.24 (0.84)	.32*	.45*	.46*	<b>.85</b>					
5. Social media experience	4.02 (0.34)	.30*	.11*	.30*	.07*	-				
6. Social media training	n/a	.22*	.22*	.38*	.25*	.13*	-			
7. Gender	n/a	.06*	.04	.01	.01	.09*	.01	-		
8. Age	n/a	-.07*	.03	-.04	.01	.28*	.06*	.05	-	
9. Work category	n/a	-.11*	.09*	.25*	.10*	.02	.18*	.14*	.20*	-

Note.  $N = 1179$ . <sup>s</sup> Values on the diagonal represent reliabilities Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ). Significance levels are flagged at \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 2**  
Hypotheses testing: Indirect Pathways using Bootstrapping.

	Result	Bootstrapping		BC 95% CI		P
		Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	
<b>Direct relationships x → y</b>						
H1a Experience → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.159	.025	.109	.208	.000
H2a Role clarity → Work-related social media communication	Not supported	-.055	.038	-.130	.019	.146
H3a Organizational commitment → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.462	.039	.386	.538	.000
H4a Training → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.584	.060	.467	.702	.000
<b>Indirect relationships x → m → y</b>						
H1b Experience → Self-efficacy → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.111	.014	.084	.137	.000
H2b Role clarity → Self-efficacy → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.186	.021	.145	.226	.000
H3b Organizational commitment → Self-efficacy → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.094	.019	.056	.132	.000
H4b Training → Self-efficacy → Work-related social media communication	Supported	.090	.029	.033	.147	.002

Note: BC = bias corrected; CI = confidence interval. Entries represent unstandardized coefficients. N = 1179.

mechanism for understanding employees' adoption of social media for work-related communication.

Our model and results demonstrate the mediating role of self-efficacy and thus complement earlier studies that have focused on employees' communication behavior (e.g. [Baccarella et al., 2018](#); [van Zoonen et al., 2017](#)) and their social media skills (e.g. [van Laar et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, the results complement the research on social media self-efficacy (e.g. [Hocevar et al., 2014](#)) by studying social media communication self-efficacy as the ability to use social media strategically to achieve professional and organizational goals ([van Deursen et al., 2019](#)). The ability to use social media strategically not only increases work-related social media use, but arguably also contributes to more effective and informed uses. This is particularly important as we have seen increased attention being paid to the adverse effects of online communication in general and social media in particular – namely social media's dark side (e.g. [Baccarella et al., 2020, 2018](#); [van Zoonen et al., 2017](#)). Specifically, our findings help to identify mechanisms that may inform sensitizing strategies aimed at creating greater awareness of the potential consequences of online behaviors ([Baccarella et al., 2020](#)), as employees who become more efficacious can more accurately assess the implications of their behaviors and make more informed decisions about how, when, and with whom to communicate.

In addition, the findings emphasize that organizations and particularly management have an important role in creating the conditions for employees' work-related social media use, such that employees have the confidence to participate equally in increasingly digital professional spheres, and enjoy the advantages of contributing to their organizations' visibility and reputation. This finding addresses the research deficit identified by [Helsper and van Deursen \(2017\)](#), who found that the increased availability of digital resources has not led to more organizational support related to the actual use of these resources, and suggested that sources of support should receive more attention from management scholars. Our findings also indicate that, overall, most employees do not feel confident in their abilities to engage in work-related social media communication. This is important as research has found that employees increasingly engage in company or work-related communication on social media, and their role as spokespersons and influencers is increasingly creeping into (in)formal job requirements ([Korzynski et al., 2020](#); [Pekkala, 2020](#)). Given that the public have unprecedentedly high expectations of companies' openness, visibility, transparency, and authenticity ([Men, 2014](#)), and that reputational damage continues to be one of the most worrisome strategic risks among business executives globally ([Deloitte, 2019](#)), our results support the argument by [Dreher \(2014\)](#) that "Managing the risks and leveraging the benefits of employees' social-media use requires a thorough, strategic management approach" (p. 353).

Moreover, similarly to other studies (e.g. [Bray & Brawley, 2002](#)), and in line with social cognitive theory ([Bandura, 1997](#)), we examined the relationship between role clarity and efficacy beliefs. Our findings suggest that the relationship between role clarity and work-related communication is fully mediated by self-efficacy. In other words, role clarity is related to work-related communication not because the clarity of one's role increases communication, but because clarity increases SMC self-efficacy perceptions, which in turn increase work-related communication. This result is in line with [Bandura \(1986\)](#), who proposed that "people often do not behave optimally even when they know full well what to do. This is because self-referent thought mediates the relationship between knowledge and action" (p. 390). According to social cognitive theory, self-referent thought such as self-efficacy mediates the relationship between knowledge and action. Hence, our results demonstrate that Bandura's above-mentioned idea holds true also in today's mediatized workplaces, suggesting that role clarity – possessing an understanding of the communicative duties, tasks, objectives, and expectations at work – plays an important part in SMC self-efficacy, and subsequently enhances employees' work-related communication behavior.

The findings further indicate that perceived organizational commitment toward communication tasks is positively related to employees' perception of their individual communicative ability and communication behaviors. This finding is in line with self-efficacy theory, which posits that awareness of resources and support influences an individual's efficacy assessments ([Gist & Mitchell, 1992](#)). Earlier studies have also shown that organizational commitment and support toward specific activities within organizations demonstrate to individuals how technology might be useful in their work processes and tasks ([Lewis et al., 2003](#)), bolstering their confidence in using these technologies. Moreover, the findings are aligned with organizational support theory ([Eisenberger et al., 1986](#)), suggesting that perceived organizational support strengthens self-efficacy and increases employees' positive orientation and behavior toward the organization through social exchange ([Kurtessis et al., 2017](#)). Our results confirm that these relationships are also applicable in the area of communication behavior in the work domain, and suggest that perceived organizational commitment, particularly toward employees' communicative role, increases effort in communication activities.

The findings also inform the literature on human resource development by demonstrating the role of training and social media experience in employees' perceptions of communicative ability and communication behaviors. This is an area that management science is just beginning to grasp and we hope that these findings increase the understanding that organizations have the ability to enhance their communicative capacity by training their employees in social media communication. Hence, as our results

show, organizations and management have an important role in enabling their employees' communicative behavior by creating conditions that provide equal opportunities for participation and by preventing the development of differences in people's ability to use social media, referred to as the second-level digital divide (Hargittai, 2002).

Finally, the results also provide new avenues for studying social media outcomes for individuals. Prior studies have found that social media use for professional purposes has been linked to positive outcomes such as job performance and job satisfaction (e.g., Cao et al., 2016; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Moqbel, Nevo, & Kock, 2013). At the same time, studies have revealed that social media beliefs into future studies focusing on social media outcomes for individuals. The reason for this stems from the fact that according to social cognitive theory, perceived efficacy affects behavior not only directly, but also through its impact on other determinants such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, and perceptions of opportunities in the social environment (Bandura, 1997, 2006).

### 5.2. Practical implications

The findings likewise have important implications for managers in developing the communication potential of their individual employees. The positive relationships between organizational commitment, role clarity and social media training speak directly to issues within the organization's control. First of all, an important task for managers in the era of social media is to commit to building and educating an organization-wide competence base, given that social media use in organizations is a relatively new phenomenon (Treem et al., 2015). More explicitly, our findings suggest that organizations should enhance employees' confidence in their communication abilities through training, and help them to gain experience by providing internal platforms and facilitating and supporting their communication using those platforms. Furthermore, our findings indicate that organizations would benefit from explaining the purposes and goals of communication work to their employees, as clarity on communicative expectations would increase employees' self-efficacy, which in turn increases work-related social media engagement. In addition, employers should foster employees' self-efficacy by demonstrating commitment. Such commitment may facilitate an environment where employees feel supported and empowered to engage in work-related communication in online contexts.

Moreover, the results, highlighting the role of experience, suggest that employees would benefit from taking the time to learn from and monitor their peers' social media use, which has been seen as a source of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Recent studies show that some organizations have started to allocate time for employees' social media communication (Pekkala, 2020), which ensures that those employees who have limited time or access to social media also have equal opportunities for participation. Therefore, creating a context that fosters employees' SMC self-efficacy through continuous training, support and clarity on communicative responsibilities would allow organizations to realize the communication potential of their members.

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

Inevitably, this study has its limitations. First, although the

respondents came from three different knowledge-intensive organizations operating in the professional service sector, and our findings were robust across these organizations, statements on generalizability should await the results of research in additional organizational and cultural settings. Second, the cross-sectional research design precludes any causal inferences. For instance, it may be the case that more frequent social media use also increases the level of social-media self-efficacy. Hence, future research could examine these relationships over time or utilize experimental methods to demonstrate the causal linkages in our model. Third, this study assessed the influence of employees' social media communication self-efficacy on communication behavior. However, we do not have information on the extent to which employees are actually performing competently online (as judged by their managers or peers). Multi-sourced data including performance ratings by peers or mixed-method designs, for instance through investigating actual social media content combined with survey data (e.g., van Zoonen & Treem, 2019), may further enhance our understanding of social media use for work, as well as expand our methodological repertoire (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). In addition, this study does not allow for investigation into how the feedback related to employees' performance affects their behavior. Self-efficacy is dynamic in nature and changes as a result of learning, experience, and feedback (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Therefore, future studies could investigate the effect of performance feedback on actual communication behavior. Finally, although this study investigated the effects of managerial work, for example by providing role clarity on employees' perceptions of the respective areas, it is possible that a manager's perception of expected behavior is different from that of their employees, which may affect the manager's judgements of expected behavior. Hence, investigating these conflicting role expectations would broaden understanding of other role stressors, such as the effect of role conflict on communication self-efficacy.

Collectively, this study is the first to demonstrate empirically and with extensive data that self-efficacy is an important transmitting variable in predicting online communicative behaviors, and hence the result itself provides many new directions for future research. For instance, further research could test the extent to which self-efficacy may mitigate the negative consequences of social media usage found earlier (e.g. van Zoonen et al., 2016; van Zoonen & Rice, 2017).

## 6. Conclusions

Our research highlights the role of individuals' SMC self-efficacy in understanding their social media use for work-related communication. In addition, the findings demonstrate that many factors underlying employees' SMC self-efficacy are directly within the respective organization's locus of control. As such, organizations can play an important role in educating and guiding their workforce to effectively utilize social media in a professional context. Based on our results, these organizational actions may include providing an environment where employees would feel supported, ensuring that they understand their communicative responsibilities, providing training, and allocating time for learning. Indeed, employees' SMC self-efficacy increases the use of social media for work-related purposes, which may benefit individual employees and allow the organization to more effectively tap into the enormous communication potential of its members.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.03.004>.



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