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Work-related social media use and the shaping of communicative role perceptions

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Abstract

This study focuses on employees' work-related social media use. The multivalent involvement of social media in corporate processes calls for attention to how employees' social media use is conceptualized and managed. Drawing on a sample of 1179 knowledge workers, the study explores how employees perceive their communicative roles, how contextual factors shape these perceptions, and how communicative role perceptions, in turn, are associated with work-related social media use. The findings demonstrate that leadership support and employees' perceptions of the anticipated impact of their communication are positively related to role perceptions, and the more employees define their communicative roles as an expected part of their work, the more likely they are to use social media for work-related purposes. This study is highly relevant to scholars and managers as it draws attention to expanding workplace roles that emerge in relation to advancements in, and the adoption of, new information and communication technology.

KEYWORDS

contextual behavior, identification, role perceptions, social media

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, one of the most significant changes in the workplace has been the evolution and increased use of communication technologies (Colbert et al., 2016; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). Social media have had a particularly profound impact on the nature of knowledge work by allowing anyone to create and share work-related information to broad audiences within and across organizational boundaries (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). The opportunities provided by social media have generated new expectations about employees' use of these technologies (Andersson, 2019b; Pekkala et al., 2022; Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2022; Walden, 2018), resulting in the emergence of new communicative roles for employees (Madsen & Verhoeven, 2019).

Employees' online behavior has become an integral part of the organization's outward representation, making individual employees "ambassadors for their organization and its cause" (Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019, p. 33). Most studies on employees' work-related social media

communication seek to explain this type of behavior as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and discretionary in nature, subject mostly to individual employees' needs or intentions (e.g., Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020; Fieseler et al., 2015; Helm et al., 2016; Men, 2014). However, recent studies indicate that not all employees voluntarily choose to display these behaviors; instead, they consider an ambassadorship role as a work-related responsibility (Andersson, 2019a, 2019b).

Employees' work-related social media use has become a critical success factor for organizations, especially in the knowledge sector, and it has been linked to assets such as brand equity (Boukis & Christodoulides, 2020) and social capital (Nikolopoulos & Dana, 2017). According to Pew Research (2016), most employees (77%) in the United States report using social media at work. Moreover, the time spent using social media has increased worldwide, averaging 151 min of social media use daily in 2022 (Statista, 2023). Given the global magnitude of the phenomenon, there is an urgent need for empirical research on the mechanisms that shape employees'

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communicative role perceptions and, consequently, their online communicative behavior. Role perception refers to a cognitive process whereby employees “define their work role, including what types and breadth of tasks, goals, and problems they see as within their set of responsibilities, and how they believe they should approach those tasks, goals, and problems to be effective” (Parker, 2007, p. 404).

This study focuses on the mediating role of employees’ communicative role perceptions and provides a novel perspective on how social media, as an emerging context for work-related communication and interaction, may shape work-related roles and behavior. We draw on role theory (Biddle, 1979; Morrison, 1994) and literature on work-related social media use (Dreher, 2014; Oksa et al., 2021; Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2022; Van Zoonen et al., 2016) to identify antecedents of employees’ communicative role perceptions and work-related social media use. We identify three factors (i.e., leadership support related to one’s use of social media for professional purposes, perceived impact of communication, and organizational identification indicating one’s willingness to represent the organization) that have been linked to work-related social media use and employees’ role perceptions.

Role theory suggests that employees’ behaviors and attitudes are shaped by the context in which they operate, including formal job duties and expectations and norms associated with the work role (Morrison, 1994). First, leadership support can provide resources and guidance that empower employees to take on additional roles and expand role perceptions (Andersson, 2019a; Pekkala & van Zoonen, 2022). Research has indicated that organizational leaders increasingly support employees’ work-related social media use (Dreher, 2014; Pekkala, 2020) as such communication may contribute to attaining organizational goals (Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2020; Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019). By implementing supporting practices and processes, managers gradually increase the expectations of related behaviors, enhancing employees’ communicative role (Andersson, 2019b). Second, employees have been found to be aware of the potential impact of their online communication (Helm, 2011). We refer to the perceived impact of communication to denote employees’ perceptual awareness of the anticipated impact of their online communication on their employer’s reputation (Helm, 2011). As employees’ social media use is partly informed by goal orientations and rational decisions about the efficiency of such use (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014), the perceived impact of communication can influence role perceptions by highlighting the value of effective online communication for employees (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020).

Third, organizational identification has been found to predict employees’ work-related social media use (Van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018; van Zoonen & Treem, 2019). Organizational identification refers to the degree to which employees define themselves as a member of an

organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Identification has also been found to contribute to employees defining their jobs in a broad manner (Morrison, 1994), suggesting that employees who identify with their organizations are typically willing to “do extra” to contribute to their organization’s goals. Engaging in social media use for work can be a way to contribute to such goals (van Zoonen & Treem, 2019).

We integrate these perspectives using role theory, suggesting that leadership support, the perceived impact of communication, and organizational identification influence employees’ role perceptions by creating an environment that is conducive to taking on new communicative roles. We argue that employees’ communicative role perceptions are central to understanding work-related communication behavior. Hence, we propose a novel approach to understanding how different contextual conditions may shape the communicative role perceptions that may underlie work-related social media use (see Figure 1 for a conceptual model). The findings of this study will duly contribute to a better understanding of the antecedents and consequences of employees’ changing role perceptions in the digital era.

THEORY

Role perceptions

Role theory suggests that everyday human activities, including activities in the workplace, are guided by socially defined roles (Merton, 1957). According to role theory, expectations define roles within a particular social structure (Biddle, 1979; Katz, 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978). To this end, roles are closely connected to expectations (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Katz & Kahn, 1978), awareness of those expectations in specific contexts (Biddle, 1979), and identity (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). Hence, roles are beliefs that are constituted in, and influenced by, context and social interaction (Parker, 2007; Stryker, 2002). Although the idea of role definitions for guiding behavior has “long been advocated and is theoretically plausible,” the relationship between employees’ role perceptions and their performance has received relatively little attention (Parker, 2007, pp. 408–409).

In the work domain, roles have typically been divided into two principal categories, in-role behaviors, and extra-role behaviors. In-role behaviors are related to task-specific roles and expected behaviors that directly contribute to the core offering of the organization and are typically embedded in formal job requirements (Van Scotter, 2000). Extra-role behaviors relate to “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).

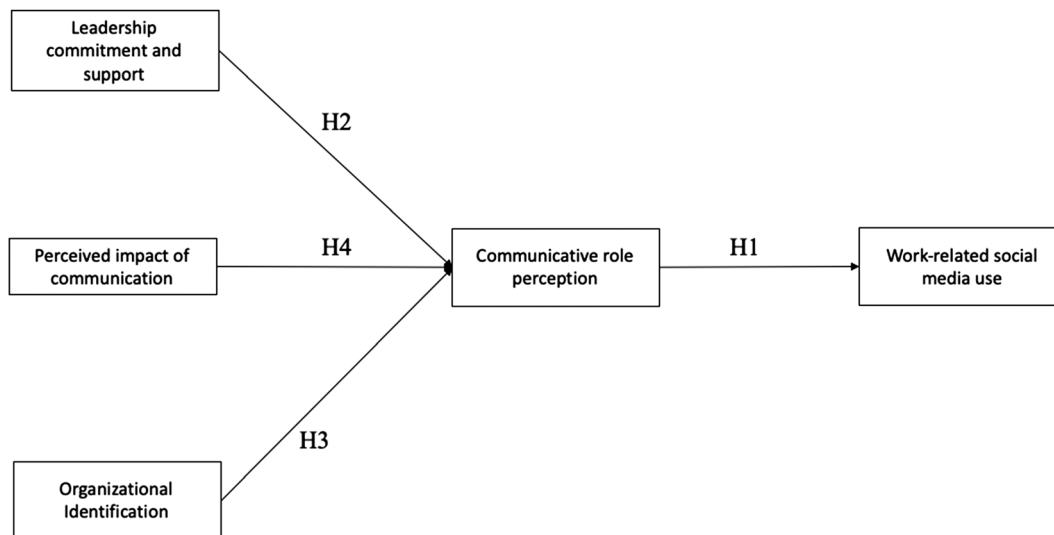


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model. *Note:* H2, H3, and H4 represent indirect effects of leadership commitment and support (H2), organizational identification (H3), and perceived impact of communication (H4) on work-related social media use through communicative role perceptions.

Employees' role perceptions refer to how an individual construes their work role and how broadly they perceive their role—"what types of tasks, goals, and problems they see as relevant to their role" (Parker, 2007, p. 406). Perceived job breadth is a dimension of role perception (Morrison, 1994; Parker, 2007), referring to the extent to which employees themselves perceive their behaviors as either an expected part of their work (in-role behavior), or as discretionary behaviors that exceed job requirements (extra-role behavior) (Morrison, 1994). Research has shown that employees are more likely to perform behaviors when they view them as an obligation, rather than as discretionary (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004; Morrison, 1994), as the former are more likely to be linked to extrinsic rewards and sanctions, both formal and informal (Katz, 1964; Organ, 1988). We argue that conceptualizing work-related communicative behaviors as OCB on digital platforms is problematic, or at least too narrowly focused. The entanglement of communication technologies in everyday work practices has expanded the communicative space of work and the rhetorical roles of workers (Huang et al., 2013). This has led to an expansion of role expectations, especially within the knowledge sector (Dekas et al., 2013; Nahapiet et al., 2005).

The role literature has long recognized that various factors shape role perceptions and role behaviors (Biddle, 1979). Specifically, task context and social context have been found to be important in shaping role perceptions (Johns, 2006). The task context encompasses the structural and informational opportunities and constraints under which work roles are performed. For example, research found that when employees perceive that communication is critical for organizational success, they tend to take more communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019a). The social context encompasses the relationships and social contingencies, such as social

support, that affect role performance (Johns, 2006). For example, according to the role literature, individuals who perceive that their supervisors value and support certain behaviors are more likely to define these behaviors as an expected part of their work (Biddle, 1979; Morrison, 1994). Additionally, when individuals identify with the organization more strongly, they are found to define their jobs more broadly (Morrison, 1994). Hence, drawing on the role literature, we suggest that task context (here: the perceived impact of communication) and social context (here: leadership support and organizational identification) are important in shaping an individual's communicative role perceptions, and, ultimately, their work-related social media use.

DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

Role perception and its effect on behavior

The changing nature of knowledge work, due in part to digital technologies (Dekas et al., 2013), is accompanied by novel expectations about how these technologies shape role requirements and facilitate role fulfillment. Following role theory, we assume that employees differ in how they define their communicative roles and responsibilities (Morrison, 1994; Parker, 2007). Differences in role perception occur because employees' interpretations of role breadth vary. Role breadth refers to whether one regards particular behaviors as an expected—and required—part of one's work or not (Morrison, 1994; Parker, 2007).

Employees' work-related social media communication has been described as (online) ambassadorship behaviors (Andersson, 2019a; van Zoonen et al., 2018), employee advocacy (Men, 2014), brand-building behaviors (Löhdorf &

Diamantopoulos, 2014), brand citizenship behavior (Chiang et al., 2012; Helm et al., 2016), and supportive behavior in social media (Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2020). These work-related communication behaviors range from producing, sharing, and following work- and organization-related content through publicly available platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Twitter, or Facebook) to the creation and maintenance of useful professional networks (Dreher, 2014; Oksa et al., 2021; Pekkala, 2020; Van Zoonen et al., 2016). Accordingly, social media are increasingly important in organizational communication, likely shifting perceptions about the nature of such behaviors in the context of job roles. This is important as the role perception literature suggests that when employees define behaviors as an expected part of their jobs, they are more likely to enact these behaviors than if they were defined as discretionary (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004; Morrison, 1994). Hence, we hypothesize that broader communicative role perceptions are positively associated with work-related social media use.

H1. The more broadly employees define their communicative role, the more likely they are to engage in work-related social media use.

Leadership support, role perceptions, and social media use

Role theory holds that social context predicts how employees perceive their roles (Johns, 2006) and that employee behavior is influenced by their interpretation of the role expectations they receive from influential others (e.g., direct supervisors) (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The role literature asserts that organizational leaders influence individuals' perceptions and cognitions with respect to their roles and responsibilities, thereby legitimizing and regulating specific behaviors (Biddle, 1979; Graen, 1976). It has also been found that leadership commitment signals the usefulness of technology at work and thus shapes role expectations regarding the use of technologies (Lewis et al., 2003).

Several studies provide theoretical and empirical corroboration for the assumption that leadership support may expand employees' role perceptions, including communicative roles. For instance, research demonstrated that employees are likely to reciprocate supervisory support by engaging in behaviors that promote individual and organizational functioning (Eisenberger et al., 2001). This is particularly true in the realm of communicative behaviors such as organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), promotive and prohibitive voice behaviors (Liang et al., 2012), and new voice behaviors—namely, social media use (Holland et al., 2016). Research showed that support received from one's supervisor is connected to employees' predisposition toward taking communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019a). Duan et al. (2017)

demonstrated that leaders' voice expectations were positively related to employees' voice role perceptions. We propose that leadership support positively relates to employees' felt role obligations (Eisenberger et al., 2001) and communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019a). In turn, following the principles of role theory, when communicative responsibilities are perceived as a more integral part of the role, employees will be more likely to utilize social media for work. For instance, Hansen and Levin (2016) proposed that employees' social media use on behalf of their organization is dependent upon their job roles. Hence, we suggest that leadership support is related to work-related social media use through employees' communicative role perceptions.

H2. Leadership support is positively related to work-related social media use through communicative role perceptions.

Organizational identification, role perceptions, and social media use

The role perception literature suggests that employees who are more attached to their organizations define their jobs more broadly (Morrison, 1994) because of their “desire to protect, support, and improve the organization that surfaces when organizational identities and self-identities converge” (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010, p. 85). Organizational identification can thus motivate members to act on behalf of the group's best interests and, as such, identification has been linked to a broader role definition (Riketta, 2005).

Moreover, organizational identification has been considered one of the key determinants of employees' advocacy behaviors on social media (e.g., van Zoonen et al., 2018; van Zoonen & Treem, 2019). Research has demonstrated that when individuals identify with their organization, they are more likely to appear online with their professional identity, and also that individuals who perceive a stronger bond with their organization feel more confident in using social media (Fieseler et al., 2015). In addition, it has been shown that when an employee feels their workplace is perceived positively by society, they are more likely to share organizational affiliation across social media (Piercy & Carr, 2023), indicating that online identities are created within a specific context (Fieseler et al., 2015). Along these lines, we predict that employees who identify more strongly with their organizations define their communicative roles more broadly and, subsequently, are more active social media communicators. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3. Organizational identification is positively related to work-related social media use through communicative role perceptions.

Perceived impact of communication, role perceptions, and social media use

According to role theory, the task context affects role perceptions and role behavior (Johns, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993). This requires that individuals are aware of the consequences of their respective behavior (Biddle & Thomas, 1966; Katz & Kahn, 1978) and the function of their roles within the social system (Biddle, 1979). Research has found that when employees perceive that communication is critical for organizational success, they tend to take communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019a). This suggests that when employees perceive that their communication can make an impact by contributing to organizational goals, they will be more likely to view such communicative behaviors as part of their job roles.

Research has demonstrated that employees who are aware of the potential impact of their communication tend to use social media to represent their organization (Helm, 2011; Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020; Siegert & Löwstedt, 2019). In addition, employees' social media use has been informed by goal orientations and rational decisions about efficiency (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014). Furthermore, research has previously linked employees' social media use to individual role perceptions (Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2020). Following role theory, if employees expect that communicating on social media will help them achieve important individual or organizational goals, they may view social media as a part of their job responsibilities (Biddle, 1979). As such, we hypothesize that the perceived impact of communication may lead workers to expand their role perceptions to include such behaviors and therefore drive the use of these technologies to achieve work-related goals. Hence, we hypothesize that

H4. The perceived impact of communication is positively related to work-related social media use through communicative role perceptions.

METHOD

Sample and procedure

We tested our hypotheses (see Figure 1) by conducting a survey among knowledge workers in three professional service organizations operating in Finland in the areas of management consultancy, banking, and insurance. The decision to focus on these areas was based on earlier literature suggesting that organizations operating in the knowledge sector are inherently dependent on their employees' communicative agency and ability to communicate with external stakeholders, such as customers and the general public (Alvesson, 2004; Treem, 2016).

As a leader in the EU's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), Finland provides an interesting context for

studying role perceptions related to social media communication. Finnish companies are active users of social media (51% against the EU average of 29%) (DESI, 2022) and, based on previous studies, Finnish employees use social media for knowledge sharing, information retrieval, and networking and collaboration (Lyly-Yrjänäinen, 2018).

All employees of the respective organizations were considered eligible to participate in the study, and an invitation to take part in the online survey was sent to them ($n = 9786$) through email and internal communication channels. All completed surveys were retained for further analysis. A total of 1179 employees completed the survey between November 20 and January 12, 2020. The employees were distributed as follows: 817 worked in the insurance field (company A), 211 in the field of management consultancy (company B), and 151 in the banking field (company C). The response rates in company A and company B were similar at 22% and 17%, respectively. Notably, the response rate in company C was relatively low at 3%; this may have been due to the timing of the survey just before and during the holiday season. The overall response rate across the three companies was 12%. Sixty-one percent of the respondents were female, and 52% were between 30 and 49 years old. Gender distribution did not differ across the companies ($\chi^2[4] = 5.75, p = 219$). In company B, the youngest age group was more strongly represented in the data compared with company A and company C—namely, company A 16%, company B 43.6%, and company C 17.2%— $\chi^2(8) = 104.35, p < .001$. In our sample, 38% had been working for their current organization for 1–5 years, 16% for between 6 and 10 years, and 32% for over 10 years. Comparing these percentages across the three case companies did not demonstrate significant differences ($\chi^2[2] = 3.12, p = 211$). Ninety-one percent of the respondents had a permanent employment contract, which did not differ across the three companies ($\chi^2[2] = 1.43, p = 488$).

Measures

Leadership support refers to the extent to which employees feel that their leaders are committed to employees' work-related social media communication and encourage and support their communication on social media. Five items measuring perceived leadership commitment and support were derived from Lewis et al. (2003) and assessed with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This construct included items such as "My manager encourages the use of social media at work."

Perceived impact of communication measures employees' perception of the anticipated impact of their online communication on their employer's reputation (Helm, 2011). The perceived impact was measured using a sub-dimension of

the empowerment measure validated and operationalized by Spreitzer (1995). The scale included three items such as “My communicative actions have a significant influence on how my organization is perceived as an employer” and was assessed with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Organizational identification refers to the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), an employed measure derived from Smidts et al. (2001) (e.g., used by Fieseler et al., 2015). Five statements including “I experience a strong sense of belonging to my organization” were used to measure organizational identification, and the responses were anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Communicative role perception refers to the extent to which an employee perceives that work-related communication in social media is an expected component of their job. Following the procedure described by Morrison (1994), respondents were asked to assess whether they felt that a particular activity described in the statements was an expected part of their job. Respondents were instructed as follows: We are not interested in whether you perform these activities. Rather, we are interested in whether you yourself see them as part of your job. The activities were specified based on the typology of work-related social media use (Van Zoonen et al., 2016). Contrary to Morrison (1994), responses were inferred on a continuous answer scale (rather than dichotomous). As social media is relatively novel territory in many organizations (Pekkala, 2020), employees’ perceptions about social media use as part of their job may be more nuanced. Hence, response options were anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), such that higher scores indicated greater expectations that work-related activities on social media were an expected part of one’s job.

Work-related social media use. This measure evaluated the frequency of employees’ social media use for work-related communication and was derived from Van Zoonen et al. (2016). Respondents were prompted to respond to six items, such as “I publish work-related content on social media” by asking how often they engaged in these behaviors, from never (1) to multiple times a day (7).

Controls. Additionally, gender, age, employment type, occupational role, and social media training were used as control variables. Gender was coded (1) female or (2) male, and employment type referred to whether employees had permanent (1) or fixed-term (2) contracts. Occupational roles represented in our sample were categorized as managerial roles (2) and other (1). Finally, social media training was measured for those who received training (2) and those who did not (1). Table A1 presents the description of scale items used in the analysis.

Analysis

Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized models, and several fit indices were used to gauge model fit. Specifically, two incremental fit indices were used—namely, the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) and the comparative fit index (CFI)—and two absolute fit indices—namely, a standardized version of the root mean square residual (SRMR) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Additionally, the χ^2 statistic was reported. In order to estimate model parameters and corresponding confidence intervals, 5000 bootstrap samples were extracted from the data.

RESULTS

Measurement model

The measurement model demonstrated good model fit: $\chi^2(312) = 1566.49$; CFI = 0.950; TLI = 0.944; SRMR = 0.04 and RMSEA = 0.058 (CI: 0.056, 0.061). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis indicated no validity concerns. Specifically, we examined reliability through composite reliability scores and by calculating Hancock’s coefficient H for maximum reliability (Hancock & Mueller, 2001). The coefficient H is a reliability measure where the squared correlation between a latent construct and the optimum linear composite is formed by its indicators. Distinct from other reliability measures (e.g., Cronbach’s alpha), H is never less than the best indicator’s reliability, suggesting that a factor inferred from multiple indicators should never be less reliable than the best single indicator alone (see Hancock & Mueller, 2001 for a methodological explanation). The findings demonstrated that the composite reliabilities ranged between .83 and .95, whereas the maximum reliability (H) ranged between .87 and .95, which is well above the recommended threshold of .70. Subsequently, we examined convergent and discriminant validity. The findings showed that the average variance extracted (AVE) for all concepts in our model was well above the recommended .50, ranging between .55 and .74. All factor loadings were significant and sizeable on the intended latent construct, ranging between .63 and .96. Discriminant validity was also demonstrated, as the square root of the AVE was greater than the inter-construct correlations. Further, the maximum shared variance (MSV) ranged between .15 and .34. Discriminant validity was established as the MSV did not exceed the AVE for all the constructs in the model (Hair et al., 2010). Overall, these findings indicated adequate measurement of the model and justified further inspection of the structural relationship between these constructs. Table 1 shows the validity and descriptive statistics.

TABLE 1 Validity and descriptive statistics.

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Leadership Support	2.75 (0.92)	.93	.74	.32	.95	.86									
2. Impact	3.77 (0.85)	.83	.63	.16	.87	.27	.79								
3. Identification	3.95 (0.74)	.90	.66	.15	.96	.29	.39	.81							
4. Communicative role perceptions	2.62 (0.96)	.95	.69	.34	.95	.56	.32	.19	.83						
5. Work-related social media use	2.89 (1.34)	.88	.55	.34	.89	.35	.40	.27	.58	.74					
6. Gender ^a	1.40 (0.51)	-	-	-	-	.04	.06	.04	-.00	.00	-				
7. Age	n/a	-	-	-	-	.10	.12	.10	.09	-.01	.05	-			
8. Employment type	1.09 (0.29)	-	-	-	-	.01	-.03	-.05	-.02	-.06	-.07	-.23	-		
9. Occupational role	1.12 (0.33)	-	-	-	-	.13	.17	.19	.21	.26	.13	.20	-.08	-	
10. Social media training	n/a	-	-	-	-	.19	.29	.13	.27	.38	-.01	.02	-.04	.13	-

Note: Square root of the AVE is reported on the diagonal. Correlations $\pm .06$ are significant at $p < .05$.

Abbreviations: CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted; MSV, maximum shared variance; ASV, average shared variance.

^aCoded 1 female 2 male. Employment type was coded 1 permanent contract 2 fixed term. Occupational role was coded 1 no managerial role, 2 managerial role.

Structural model

Before testing the hypothesized model, we examined the variation in communicative role perceptions among employees. The mean (2.62) and median (2.75) were slightly below the mid-point of the 5-point scale. The variance was 0.93, and the data were normally distributed. The results further showed that 9.1% of the respondents agreed that these communicative behaviors were an expected part of their jobs, whereas 28.9% disagreed that the activities were expected job responsibilities. Overall, employees conceptualized communicative behaviors differently, varying in the extent to which they perceived work-related communication as an expected part of their job, with most employees centering around the scale's mid-point (62% scored between 2.01 and 3.99).

In the analyses, we controlled for gender, age, employment type, occupational role, whether someone had participated in social media training provided by the company, and for the company itself. The hypothesized model with control variables demonstrated good model fit: $\chi^2(422) = 1988.49$; CFI = 0.940; TLI = 0.929; SRMR = 0.04 and RMSEA = 0.058 (CI: 0.056, 0.061). We found that older employees were less likely to engage in work-related social media use ($B = -.118$, BC95% [-.169; -.064] $p = .001$). Gender or employment type did not affect role perceptions or work-related social media use. Occupational role demonstrated strong relationships with both role perception ($B = .346$, BC95% [.225; .480] $p = .001$) and work-related social media use ($B = .589$, BC95% [.344; .854] $p = .001$). These findings indicated that those in managerial roles have broader role definitions and report higher levels of work-related social media use.

Moreover, social media training increased role perceptions ($B = .061$, BC95% [.023; .099] $p = .004$) and work-related social media use ($B = .256$, BC95% [.193; .329] $p = .001$). These findings suggest that role perceptions and social media use may vary depending on the occupational role of employees and on whether they have had social media training. Finally, the company was found to significantly affect role perceptions and social media use (see Table 2). Notably, a comparison of means across the companies using a one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni correction demonstrated that role perceptions were lowest in company C ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.92$) compared with company A ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.99$) and company B ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.86$); $\eta^2 = .022$ CI95% [.008, .040]. Social media use was highest in company B ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.17$) compared with company A ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.39$) and company C ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.26$). However, it should be noted that the results for the hypotheses did not change based on the inclusion or exclusion of these control variables (see Table 2). Hence, as we lack clear theoretical

TABLE 2 Regression results of structural models.

Relationships	Retained model				Model with controls					
	B	SE	Beta	BC CI95%	P	B	SE	Beta	BC CI95%	P
Direct effects ($X \rightarrow Y$)										
Leadership support \rightarrow social media use	-.022	.033	-.036	-.144; .077	.508	-.021	.032	-.020	-.140; .078	.715
Impact \rightarrow social media use	.205	.029	.463	.328; .609	.001	.181	.028	.450	.277; .542	.001
Identification \rightarrow social media use	.090	.030	.206	.065; .338	.002	.064	.027	.168	.009; .266	.010
Direct effects ($X \rightarrow M$)										
Leadership support \rightarrow role perceptions	.519	.027	.534	.475; .593	.001	.486	.028	.524	.440; .560	.001
Impact \rightarrow role perceptions	.199	.032	.277	.185; .362	.001	.167	.031	.258	.143; .317	.001
Identification \rightarrow role perceptions	-.037	.031	-.053	-.139; .032	.220	-.056	.031	-.073	-.164; .008	.096
Direct effect ($M \rightarrow Y$)										
Role perceptions \rightarrow social media use	.511	.034	.825	.700; .947	.001	.433	.035	.783	.581; .819	.001
Indirect effects ($X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$)										
Leadership \rightarrow role perceptions \rightarrow social media use	.428	.039	.441	.363; .520	.001	.341	.035	.351	.282; .422	.001
Identification \rightarrow role perceptions \rightarrow social media use	-.031	.026	-.043	-.116; .026	.213	-.039	.022	-.056	-.120; .004	.071
Impact \rightarrow role perceptions \rightarrow social media use	.164	.030	.229	.155; .316	.001	.117	.025	.164	.097; .235	.001
Control variables										
Gender \rightarrow role perceptions						-.031	.026	-.078	-.144; .024	.179
Age \rightarrow role perceptions						.024	.024	.018	-.021; .055	.351
Employment type \rightarrow role perceptions						-.004	.022	-.013	-.143; .123	.862
Occupational role \rightarrow role perceptions						.115	.023	.346	.225; .480	.001
Training \rightarrow role perceptions						.151	.026	.061	.023; .099	.004
Company A ^a \rightarrow role perceptions						.053	.035	.102	-.031; .233	.133
Company B ^b \rightarrow role perceptions						.180	.035	.415	.263; .572	.001
Gender \rightarrow social media use						-.020	.025	-.056	-.021; .055	.408
Age \rightarrow social media use						-.074	.030	-.118	-.169; -.064	.001
Employment type \rightarrow social media use						-.073	.024	-.360	-.600; .129	.006
Occupational role \rightarrow social media use						.133	.028	.589	.344; .854	.001
Training \rightarrow social media use						.236	.027	.256	.193; .329	.001
Company A ^a \rightarrow social media use						-.122	.036	-.378	-.588; -.152	.003
Company B ^b \rightarrow social media use						-.099	.037	-.368	-.648; -.105	.006

Note: All results in the table were obtained by extracting 5000 bootstrap resamples from the data using a maximum likelihood estimator. B represents standardized coefficients, and SE represents the standard error associated with the standardized coefficient. BC CI95% represents the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval associated with the unstandardized coefficient (Beta). The p -values are associated with the unstandardized coefficients.

^aDummy variable represents comparison of company A (1) versus company B and company C (0).

^bDummy variable represents comparison of company B (1) versus company A and company C (0).

grounds for their inclusion (Spector & Brannick, 2011) and for reasons of parsimony (Kline, 2015), we report the results from the final model without controls.

The model fit of the structural regression model and the confirmatory factor analysis are identical because the two models are equivalent (Kline, 2015). This implies that the structural part of our structural regression model is just-identified. It should be noted that this is not uncommon in structural regression models that test a partially mediated model. Hence, the model fit statistics for the retained structural model are χ^2 (312) = 1566.49; CFI = 0.950; TLI = 0.944; SRMR = 0.04 and RMSEA = 0.058 (CI: 0.056, 0.061). This suggests that, overall, the data support the theoretical notion that role perceptions play a central role in understanding work-related social media use. The model fit of this model demonstrated significantly better model fit compared with the model with controls $\Delta\chi^2$ (110) = 422.00, $p < .001$. The unstandardized regression weights are reported below, and the standardized and unstandardized solutions are provided in Table 2.

Hypotheses testing

The first hypothesis suggests that the extent to which employees define social media communication as an expected part of their job is positively related to work-related social media use. The results confirmed this assumption by demonstrating a positive and significant regression coefficient ($B = .825$, BC95% [.700; .947] $p = .001$). As reflected in Table 2, the standardized regression coefficient demonstrates the large effect of role perception on social media use. Hence, these findings support Hypothesis 1.

The second hypothesis posits that leadership support is positively related to work-related social media use through employees' communicative role perceptions. The results demonstrate that perceived leadership commitment and support are positively related to role perceptions ($B = .534$, BC95% [.475; .593] $p = .001$). Notably, we had already established a significant positive relationship between role perceptions and social media use. Hence, the results demonstrate a significant positive indirect relationship between leadership commitment and support and work-related social media use through role perceptions ($B = .441$, BC95% [.363; .520] $p = .001$). These findings support the reasoning reflected in H2. Importantly, the direct association between leadership support and work-related social media use is no longer significant ($B = -.036$, BC95% [-.144; .077] $p = .508$), suggesting the relationship is fully mediated by role perceptions.

Hypothesis 3 articulates that organizational identification is positively related to work-related social media use through role perceptions. The results indicated that the relationship between organizational identification

and role perceptions was nonsignificant ($B = -.053$, BC95% [-.139; .032] $p = .220$). As a result, the indirect relationship between organizational identification and work-related social media use through role perceptions also failed to reach significance ($B = -.043$, BC95% [-.116; .026] $p = .213$). Thus, the results do not support Hypothesis 3. Notably, albeit not hypothesized here, organizational identification demonstrated a direct and positive relationship with work-related social media use ($B = .206$, BC95% [.065; .338] $p = .006$).

Finally, Hypothesis 4 relates to the notion that the perceived impact of communication is positively related to work-related social media use through role perceptions. The results indicate that the perceived impact of communication is positively related to role perceptions ($B = .277$, BC95% [.185; .362] $p = .001$). As a result, the indirect relationship between the perceived impact of communication and work-related social media use through communicative role perceptions was positive and significant ($B = .229$, BC95% [.155; .316] $p = .001$). Hence, H4 is supported. Notably, the direct relationship between the perceived impact of communication and work-related social media use is also significant and a positive relationship ($B = .463$, BC95% [.328; .609] $p = .001$), albeit smaller than in the model without the mediator, suggesting role perceptions partially mediate this relationship. Table 2 presents the standardized regression results, as well as the results from the model with and without control variables.

DISCUSSION

This is one of the first empirical studies to focus on employees' perceptions of their communicative role and its relationship to their communication behavior on social media. Most existing studies of employees' work-related communication behavior on social media seek to explain this type of behavior as OCB and as discretionary, deriving from individual employees' needs or intentions (e.g., Fieseler et al., 2015; Helm et al., 2016; Men, 2014). Extending this research, we have presented empirical evidence that employees vary in the extent to which they perceive work-related communication behavior as an expected part of their job. Our findings demonstrate that rising expectations, set against the backdrop of the further entanglement of social media (and new technologies more broadly) and work practices in contemporary knowledge work, have led many workers to expand their role perceptions to include such behaviors.

Specifically, the results indicate that the more broadly employees defined their communicative role, the more likely they were to engage in work-related social media use. The findings also demonstrate that employees who perceived that their leaders were committed to and supportive of social media use at work were more likely to

define work-related social media communication as an expected part of their work and, as such, engage in work-related social media use more frequently. Earlier research has found that organizations differ in their approach to adopting social media in their processes and operations, which may explain the differences between the companies and the support provided for employees in the respective organizations (Pekkala, 2020). Furthermore, our findings show that employees who were aware of the potential impact of their communication perceived their communicative role more broadly and were also more likely to communicate about their work on social media. Lastly, organizational identification was not related to communicative role perception but—in line with earlier research focusing on employees' social media use—was found to directly predict work-related social media use. Next, we discuss the implications of these findings.

Theoretical implications

A key finding of our research relates to the nature of employees' work-related social media use. The underlying assumption in research on employees' online communication behavior has been that these efforts are discretionary behavior, or a particular form of OCB (e.g., Fieseler et al., 2015; Helm et al., 2016; Men, 2014). We challenged this assumption by demonstrating that employees may perceive work-related communication on social media as an expected part of their work, or at least not as behavior that they would construe as being discretionary or extra-role behavior. This suggests that the prevalent conceptualization of employees' social media use for work as a form of OCB is currently running out of pace with knowledge workers' perceptions of these behaviors. A more nuanced understanding of employees' communicative behaviors is critical to ensuring that organizational behavior and management literature continue to accurately reflect the current realities and practices in contemporary, technology-intense workplaces.

Role theory suggests that employee motivation may depend on individual role perceptions. In line with role theory, the findings demonstrate that work-related social media use may differ depending on employees' communicative role perceptions and the drivers underlying these perceptions. This means that some employees use social media to communicate about their work and to represent their organization because they consider it a component of their job, not necessarily because they aim to fulfill personal needs (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Hence, we suggest that the previous extra-role, or OCB, lens used to study and conceptualize work-related social media use should be extended.

For many knowledge workers, the current organizational realities are such that online communication and visibility have slowly but surely become an integral part

of the job. As such, employees' communicative role perceptions have shifted to adjust to these organizational realities, and it is time to align our conceptual and theoretical understanding of employees' social media use too (e.g., Dekas et al., 2013). Instead of defining employees' communicative role as OCB, or as a dichotomy between in-role and extra-role behavior, we propose that communication behaviors should be conceptualized as *contextual role behavior* (CRB). CRB has its roots in contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993), and it refers to those behaviors that emerge from changes in the work environment and are relevant for individuals in their respective work context, such as knowledge work in the social media era. Hence, we suggest that role perceptions are contextual and partly derived from changes in the work environment, leading to differing expectations regarding employees' communicative behaviors, especially in the context of social media use for work.

This study further examined several antecedents of communicative role perceptions, providing important insights for managing these new communicative forms of work and hence contributing to earlier research on management of employees' communicative behavior (Korzynski et al., 2020; Pekkala, 2020) and employees' communication responsibility (e.g., Andersson, 2019a). The findings demonstrate that leadership commitment and support, as well as the expected impact of communication, affect work-related social media use through employees' role perceptions. Communicative tasks are interpreted as an expected part of work when employees experience greater commitment and support from their leaders. Such support may imply that these behaviors are required, needed for task performance, or at the very least desired in line with role-making theory (Graen, 1976). Employees may reciprocate the support received from supervisors by expanding their felt role obligations. In addition, increased attention to and support for developing practices, processes, and policies for employees' social media communication (Korzynski et al., 2020; Pekkala, 2020) may result in employees increasingly perceiving these behaviors as an expected part of their work.

Moreover, the perceived impact of communication was also found to increase the communicative role breadth. This suggests that knowledge workers define their communicative role in the extent to which they feel that their online communications impact the outward representations of the organization. Arguably, employees who are more aware of the potential impact of their online communication adopt these behaviors as a felt responsibility and are consequently more active in their social media use. In addition, the perceived impact of communication may instill efficacy beliefs about the communicative aspects of their role in relation to individual and organizational goals (Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014). This finding contributes to the previous literature on employees' communication responsibility (Andersson, 2019a) by demonstrating that

when employees feel that the social media context provides opportunities to contribute to organizational performance, they are more likely to define social media communication as an expected part of their work and, consequently, are more active communicators on social media.

Finally, we could not confirm that organizational identification is related to work-related social media use role perceptions. However, we did find that organizational identification is directly related to work-related social media use (e.g., Fieseler et al., 2015; Van Zoonen et al., 2018). Hence, our findings suggest that organizational identification only affects work-related social media use in a direct way. The absence of an indirect relationship suggests that regardless of role perceptions, identification predicts work-related social media use. This finding is in line with earlier studies that suggested that organizational identification may directly increase employees' use of social media to support organizational goals (van Zoonen & Treem, 2019). Our results suggest that employees who identify more strongly with their organization may communicatively construct such identities on social media, regardless of whether they view such communication as expected components of their job roles.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the emergent workplace roles, how they influence workplace behaviors, and how these roles evolve in contemporary organizational environments. Given that knowledge work will continue to evolve, both individuals and organizations will need to reinvent themselves to respond to these ongoing contextual changes (Drucker, 1994). This requires recognizing the interplay between the nature of knowledge work (Alvesson, 2004) and the emergence of workplace expectations and roles in relation to technological advancements (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Griffin et al., 2007; Nurmi & Hinds, 2020). By integrating these diverse viewpoints into this study, we hope to inspire and advance the theorizing of in situ understandings of job roles (Morgeson et al., 2010), especially in the context of communicative work and its management. In doing so, we hope to prompt readers to consider the contextual nature of management by reflecting on how work has evolved and continues to evolve. This, we hope, will aid in fostering the “contextual understanding” of management research that has recently been called for (Gümüşay & Amis, 2021).

Managerial implications

Our findings also provide important insights for managers in knowledge-intensive organizations. First and foremost, they highlight that employees may perceive their communicative role differently because of individual and contextual factors. Being aware of this difference enhances understanding of how and why employees with

different role perceptions might react to managerial interventions such as reward schemes, training, or promotion (Becton et al., 2008). These results also highlight the importance of facilitating digital inclusion in the workplace (Pekkala, 2022). Acknowledging the varying contextual settings and differing role perceptions allows for more nuanced and sensitive ways of engaging employees in organizational communication and managing their communicative behaviors. On the other hand, taking contextual settings into account requires organizations to consider the threshold for when these behaviors should be included in formal job descriptions and employment contracts, especially because recent studies have shown that organizations have started to allocate time for some of their employees to enact these behaviors (Pekkala, 2020).

Second, the findings suggest that employees' communicative role perceptions are predictive of their social media use for work-related communication. Therefore, efforts to shape employees' communicative role perceptions—through leadership support and commitment, and by highlighting the potential impact of communication for one's work—may enhance the overall extent to which employees engage in work-related social media use and contribute to organizational representation. Additionally, our results suggest that training affects their role perceptions, which contributes to the recent literature highlighting the importance of communication training in organizations (Bergman, 2020).

Furthermore, our results highlight the importance of considering the “eye of the beholder” perspective (Morrison, 1994) with regard to workplace roles. The literature cautions that if managers have broader role definitions than their employees, they may take behaviors for granted although their employees regard them as extra-role and voluntary in character. This might lead to the emergence of role stress, for example, through role overload if employees feel that work requirements exceed the limits of their time and/or ability (Kopelman et al., 1983), or to role ambiguity if employees feel uncertain about the expected behavior (Rizzo et al., 1970).

Limitations and future research

As with any research project, there are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, given the cross-sectional design of this study, we cannot make conclusive statements regarding causality. Hence, statements about causality must await the results of studies in additional research designs. In addition, a more in-depth analysis of the relationships between the antecedents of role perceptions identified in this study could benefit from longitudinal research designs. For instance, it is possible that leadership support plays a role in shaping the perceived impact of one's social media communication or

organizational identification. Although beyond the scope of the current paper, future studies could examine causal dynamics among antecedents in more depth, and other variables in the proposed framework.

Second, the research was conducted in the professional service sector, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Hence, further research is needed to study role perceptions in different organizational settings and industries. Finally, as social media use by organizational members is a relatively novel and an inherently complex type of organizational behavior, a nuanced understanding is critical to ensuring that related literature continues to accurately reflect the current realities in contemporary workplaces. By and large, we hope that this study inspires further research and theorizing on employees' communicative role perceptions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kaisa Peckala: Conceptualization; data collection; data analysis; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. **Ward van Zoonen:** Data analysis; writing—review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors elect to not share data.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Description of scale items used in analysis.

Measurement	Items	Scales
Perceived leadership support (adapted from Lewis et al., 2003)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My manager is committed to a vision of using social media at work. 2. My manager is committed to supporting my efforts in work-related social media communication. 3. My manager encourages the use of social media at work. 4. My manager recognizes my efforts in using social media for work. 5. Employees' use of social media for work-related communication is important to my manager. 	Answers range from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree"
Perceived impact of communication (adapted from Spreitzer, 1995)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. My communicative actions have an impact on my company's business performance. 2. The way I communicate affects how our customers perceive us as a company. 3. My communicative actions have a significant influence on how my organization is perceived as an employer. 	Answers range from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree"
Organizational identification (adapted from Smidts et al., 2001, used, e.g., by Fieseler et al., 2015)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel strong ties with my organization. 2. I experience a strong sense of belonging to my organization. 3. I feel proud to work with my organization. 4. I am sufficiently acknowledged in my organization. 5. I am proud to work for my organization. 	Answers range from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree"
Communicative role perception (based on Morrison, 1994 and Van Zoonen et al., 2016)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am expected to use social media in my work to network with new people relevant for my work. 2. I am expected to use social media in my work to tell others about my work. 3. I am expected to use social media in my work to maintain professional relationships. 4. I am expected in my work to create and publish professional content on social media. 5. I am expected to follow social media in my work to stay up to date with stakeholders' activities and industry news and events. 6. I am expected in my work to share my organization's news and accomplishments on personal social media. 7. I am expected in my work to participate in work-related discussions on social media. 8. I am expected in my work to mention my employer's name in my social media. 	Answers range from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree"
Work-related social media communication (derived from Van Zoonen et al., 2016)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I publish work-related content on social media. 2. I share work-related content created by others on social media. 3. I participate in discussions related to my work on social media. 4. I read other people's posts on social media to obtain work-related information and knowledge. 5. I invite people to join my social media network because I think they might be valuable professional contacts. 6. I maintain and strengthen relationships with colleagues, customers, and business partners by sending messages to people in my network. 	Answers range from 1 "never" to 7 "multiple times a day"