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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, & Vliegenthart, 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 (Rolloff & 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.).

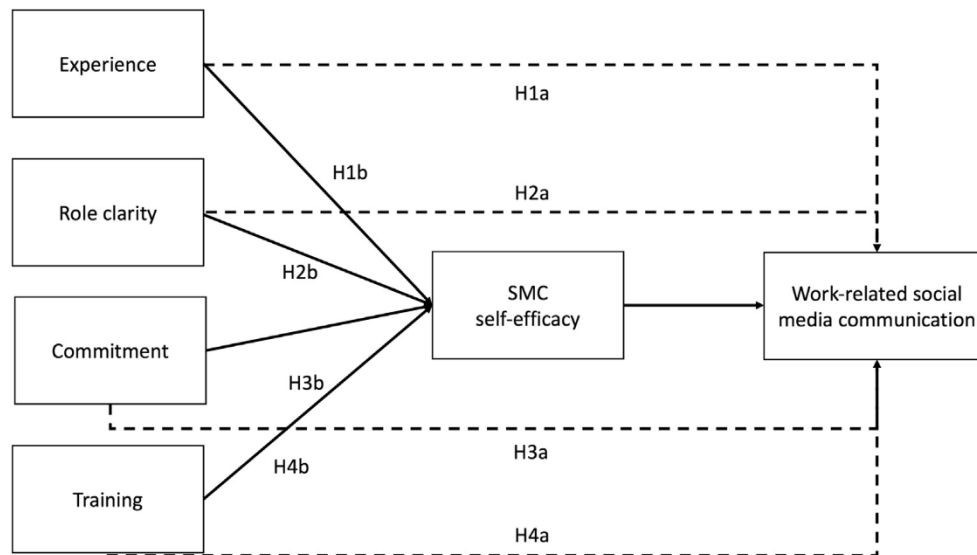


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the study.

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, & Drachsler, 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; CI95% [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>a</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 mediatised 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 use for work has negative consequences such as exhaustion caused by work-life conflict and interruptions (van Zoonen et al., 2017). There is a persuasive body of literature positing that self-efficacy influences attitudes in terms of respective behavior (Bandura, 1997, 2006). Thus, we suggest integrating self-efficacy 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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