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# What's in it for me and you? Exploring managerial perceptions of employees' work-related social media use

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study focuses on managers' perceptions of employees' communicative role in social media, and explores the changes in the contractual nature of employment relations in mediatized workplaces in which the boundaries of professional and private life are becoming more fluid.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative approach was employed to explore this relatively new phenomenon. The data, comprising 24 interviews with managers responsible for corporate communication and human resources in knowledge-intensive organizations, was thematically analysed.

**Findings** – The analysis shows that employees' work-related social media use creates new types of exchanges and dependencies between an organization and individual employees, which relate to employees' representation, knowledge and networks.

**Originality/value** – The study is among the first to examine the exchanges and dependencies in an employment relationship that emerge from increased use of social media for professional purposes.

**Keywords** Social media, Psychological contract, Knowledge work, Employment relationship, Employees' communication behaviour

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Few technologies have resulted in such widespread, rapid social and economic changes as Internet-based communication technology (Internet Society, 2017). In particular, the emergence of social media has created a new type of context for communication and interaction (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015), which has reshaped society at all levels, including interactions and identity construction, work and the economy (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), and – as we argue in this article – employment relationships. Social media has become ubiquitous in many workplaces (El Ouiridi *et al.*, 2015; Opgenhaffen and Claeys, 2017), where communication power – referring to the ability to influence – has shifted from the few to the many (Castells, 2009), duly enhancing the communicative role of individual employees (Opgenhaffen and Claeys, 2017; Pekkala, 2020) and creating new types of exchanges and dependencies between employers and employees.

Taking on new communicative roles, employees now have the ability to both share and exert greater control over knowledge and connections (Gibbs *et al.*, 2013) and shape organizational identities and reputations (Baym and Boyd, 2012). This has become



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particularly noticeable for knowledge-intensive organizations in which the knowledge possessed by members and how they make their knowledge visible through communication is the primary strategic resource (Alvesson, 2004; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Hence, organizations, particularly those employing knowledge workers, are increasingly perceived as “communicative” and each employee as a potential communicator in today’s mediatized environment (Kuhn, 2008).

Yet despite the increased importance of employees’ communicative role on external social media platforms (such as Twitter, LinkedIn or Facebook), to our knowledge, relatively few studies to date have pursued the important topic of how this development may transform the employment relationship (see e.g. Andersson, 2019a, b; Hurrell *et al.*, 2017; McDonald and Thompson, 2016). As one of these few exceptions, Andersson (2019a, b) has studied “communication responsibility” and “organizational ambassadorship”, but whereas he addresses these issues from the perspective of employees, we address them from the perspective of the employer – represented by informants responsible for managing employees’ work-related social media communication in their respective organizations. Work-related social media communication refers here to communicative acts in which employees produce, share, and follow work-related content through publicly available social media platforms (van Zoonen *et al.*, 2016).

By adopting the employer perspective, this study focuses on managers’ perceptions of employees’ communicative roles in social media and aims to identify whether and how these novel role perceptions affect the employment relationship. More specifically, the objective of this study is to determine how managers perceive the exchange relationship in which organizations aim to benefit from employees’ social media use – conducted through their personal social media accounts – and what kind of outcomes they expect this relationship to produce for both parties involved. To understand the related dependencies, we apply a psychological contract (PC) approach to discover how exchange agreements are formed and how they take on a (psychologically) contractual quality (Conway and Pekcan, 2019). To this end, we draw on organizational behaviour, organizational communication, management and human resource management (HRM) literature.

## Literature review

### *Communicative knowledge work in the mediatized workplace*

By allowing anyone to create, share, and exchange information with multiple communities, social media has enabled new patterns of work-related communications and interactions that seem to be pertinent and advantageous among knowledge workers in particular (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Treem and Leonardi, 2012). When communicating on social media, employees embody, promote and defend the organization, scout for new information and insights, and build and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2019). Through these communicative processes, employees can enhance the organization’s overall reputation and differentiate their organization from their competitors.

The affordances provided by today’s social media platforms give workers the ability to make their behaviours, knowledge, preferences and communication network connections visible to others (Treem and Leonardi, 2012, p. 150) and to reach large audiences, including potential customers and other interest groups (Miles and Mangold, 2014). By using social media, employees’ social networks grow, as does their understanding of their colleagues and customers, along with their expertise, knowledge and networks. These ties, and the benefits they offer individuals and organizations, are referred to as social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Employers have become increasingly aware of their employees' communicative potential, and many organizations have been establishing processes and policies for managing their social media use, including practices that enable and motivate employees to adopt a communicative role (Oggenhaffen and Claeys, 2017; Pekkala, 2020). By implementing these practices, organizations aim to enhance their employees' work-related social media communications and empower them as online advocates. For example, employees may promote career opportunities offered by their employer or share information about professional recognitions they have received. Due to its vast effect on organizational life and the emergence of new roles and responsibilities (Andersson, 2019a), it has been suggested that social media is not only a different type of technology, but rather that it provides a novel context for organizational communication and interaction, which allows for new types of dependences and exchanges to emerge (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015).

#### *The reciprocal basis for employees' work-related social media use*

Throughout history, people have used media to create public identities and images for themselves, and collectives, but the current scale of social media utilization allows individuals unprecedented reach to audiences (Baym and Boyd, 2012). Consequently, social media logic – the principles of social-networking platforms (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) – has provided organizations with a new way to embed themselves in these media through employee-generated content (Pekkala, 2020). When employees communicate about their work through their personal profiles in public social media, they simultaneously construct both personal and organizational identities and reputations and shape the boundary between private and professional representation (Baym and Boyd, 2012). Hence, social media enables “an intensive type of interdependence”, because any employee can act as a public representative of their organization and create content for the benefit of all members (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015, p. 1,658).

Most social media platforms require an identifiable profile, and thus encourage employees to consciously construct their online presence. Employees' work-related communication through social media is perceived as an external manifestation of their connection with their employer, demonstrating the employee-organization relationship (Smith *et al.*, 2017). The content posted on social media may stay there even though a person changes workplaces over time (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015), and employees have become increasingly aware that employers monitor their past and present social media use (Hurrell *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, when employees communicate about their work through their personal profiles in social media, they continuously think about who they are representing (Madsen, 2016; Madsen and Verhoeven, 2016). “Whereas in the past people could have a separate identity in their free time and ‘be’ the organisation during work time, they now represent their organisation all the time” (Siegert and Löwstedt, 2019, p. 33). Previous literature (e.g. Hurrell *et al.*, 2017; McDonald and Thompson, 2016) has noted that this new type of disclosure, particularly employers' ability to monitor it and use the information collected online in evaluating employees, raises ethical questions such as where the line is drawn between private and work-related communication.

Researchers have noted that the reputation-related relationship between employees and their employers is dual-sided (e.g. Helm, 2013), and that “employees are influenced by how they and others perceive their employer, and in turn, they may contribute to their employer's good name by displaying reputable behavior” (Schaarschmidt and Walsh, 2020, p. 719). Empirical findings show that while employees desire to be seen as knowledgeable professionals who benefit the organization, they also simultaneously consider their self-promotion and self-protection (Madsen and Verhoeven, 2016). This is particularly pertinent as recent studies affirm that employees' work-related social media use is associated with employability and maintained employment (Khedler, 2019).

### *Employees' communicative role and the psychological contract*

The increased use of social media for professional purposes has created new kinds of expectations, exchanges and dependencies that affect employment relationships. Hence, we suggest that the psychological contract (PC) and the related literature may provide an important perspective to more explicitly define how public social media use for professional purposes is affecting the contemporary employment relationship.

The concept of PC is commonly traced back to the early work of [Argyris \(1960\)](#) and [Schein \(1965\)](#), and social exchange theory ([Blau, 1964](#)). The approach was reinvigorated by [Rousseau's \(1989\)](#) seminal article on the PC, providing a transition from the early work to what is often regarded as contemporary research ([Coyle-Saphiro et al., 2019](#); [Coyle-Shapiro and Parzefall, 2008](#)). According to [Rousseau \(1989\)](#), a PC refers to “an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between a focal person and another party” (p. 123). Building on the idea of reciprocity and the metaphor of a contract involving at least two parties, [Guest and Conway \(2002\)](#) have defined a PC as “the perception of both parties to the employment relationship, organization and individual, of the reciprocal promises and obligations implied in that relationship” (p. 22). According to social exchange theory, these reciprocal promises and obligations create a mutual dependence between the exchange actors ([Blau, 1964](#)). The PC concept has proved to be useful for understanding tacit elements of employment relationships: “since many of their important aspects are based on perceptions: most employment relations are implicit or at least not written, and thus parties may have different understandings about them” ([Kalleberg and Rogues, 2000](#), pp. 316–317).

Employees' personal social media use for work-related purposes is a novel area in which formal legal codifications are rare ([Lam, 2016](#); [McDonald and Thompson, 2016](#)). Organizations and their members must rely on prevailing social norms ([Stohl et al., 2017](#); [Andersson, 2019b](#)) and generic principles such as “employee duty of loyalty” when communicating on social media. Much of the work-related social media use may be characterized as unregulated and uncharted. Therefore, those involved have to rely on implicit social contracts in the form of PC. While this may be a matter of necessity, and the situation is not unique to employment relations ([Kalleberg and Rogues, 2000](#)), an understanding of the nature, content, and consequences of work-related social media use is needed. This is of particular importance given the magnitude of the phenomena in contemporary working life. By adopting the PC approach within this study, we aim to identify the mechanism that motivates employers to express these expectations and employees to fulfil them.

Furthermore, previous PC research has mainly focused on the individual employee perspective, largely neglecting the employer side of the contract ([Ali, 2020](#); [Baruch and Rousseau, 2019](#); [Guest and Conway, 2002](#)), which we argue is equally important. Moreover, the majority of PC studies are based on questionnaire surveys, while only 10% rely on qualitative interview data ([Conway and Briner, 2009](#)). Scholars have called for qualitative studies that “may hold new implications for theory and practice [as they may highlight] the idiosyncratic and complex ways in which people understand and manage relationships” ([Poppleton et al., 2008](#), pp. 483–484).

The present study addresses these calls and adopts a PC approach to explore this novel phenomenon of work-related social media use and its effects on employment relationships particularly from an employer perspective and through the analysis of in-depth qualitative data.

### **Data and methodology**

The data was collected from seven knowledge-intensive organizations (referred to here using the pseudonyms Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta and Eta), operating in the

professional service sector (management consultancy, legal, financial and IT services) in Finland (see Table 1). This sector forms an ideal setting for our empirical examination as organizations within the professional service sector have been found to encourage and support their employees in using social media at work (e.g. Pekkala, 2020). Focusing on a sector in which informants would be expected to have experience in employees' communication in social media was considered essential in order to achieve a broader perspective on the topic. A heterogeneous group of managers ( $N = 24$ ) was interviewed, including communications and human resource managers holding both directorial and middle-management positions. A common characteristic shared by the interviewees was their role in managing employees' social media communications in their respective organizations. During the interviews, the managers were asked about the expected outcomes of employees' work-related communication, as well as the perceived benefits for the organization and the employees themselves.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 min and were conducted face-to-face by the first author between April 2019 and June 2020. Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate approach because they involve a line of questioning around particular themes, while also allowing interviewees to discuss any additional issues. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo). The interview transcripts amounted to 614 pages in total (Times New Roman, 12pt, double-spaced).

**Table 1.**  
Industries of case  
organizations

Organization	Field of industry
Alpha	Legal services
Beta	Financial service
Gamma	Financial services
Delta	Management consultancy
Epsilon	Financial services
Zeta	Legal services
Eta	IT services

#### *Data analysis procedures*

The interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), referring to the analytical approach which involves identifying and interpreting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships and overarching patterns (Mills *et al.*, 2010). The analysis began by carefully reading the data to understand the context and content of each interview. Concurrently, open coding was used for the initial data work to identify essential concepts related to expected outcomes and valued behaviours (Mills *et al.*, 2010). In this phase, code labels such as “organizational image”, “personal brand” and “thought leadership” emerged from the open reading and reflection upon the raw data. This followed the typical process in examining PCs, in identifying the set of exchange-based promises, and gaining an understanding of how they are formed and related to employee outcomes such as attitudes and behaviours (Conway and Pekcan, 2019). The analysis process continued by searching for themes, namely the patterned responses and core meanings within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes that emerged during the analysis process were related to employees' representation, knowledge, and networks. The expected outcomes of employees' communication behaviours were discussed on two different levels – organizational and individual – and the same themes emerged in both.

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Second, the analysis continued by defining the identified themes. In this phase, we continually returned to the prior literature to gain more knowledge about the identified dimensions. Hence, the inductive process was informed by moving between theory and data, but was grounded in the data and emergent themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

In the final stage of the analysis, the findings were reported by compiling three distinct scripts of the most dominant themes. In this phase, special attention was given to demonstrating the link between the data and the researchers' interpretations of it, to "unravel the surface of 'reality'" sought after by thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

As the thematic analysis was conducted within a constructivist framework, it focused on "latent themes" in which the development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Mills *et al.*, 2010). The interpretation was based on prior literature and practical experience, and enabled creating links between expected organizational and individual-level outcomes of employee communication behaviours. To this end, the researchers constructed three thematic categories of contractual elements – namely representation, knowledge and networks – which will be presented in the following section.

## Findings

In the following section, the findings of the data analysis are discussed and each identified contractual element is introduced. First, we discuss how managers perceived employees' communicative role in representing their organization, and what type of obligations and benefits were related to it. Second, we explain how managers perceived employees' knowledge generation and sharing in social media and mutual dependencies related to it. Finally, the dependency related to professional networks is discussed. To conclude this section, we summarize the findings by providing definitions of each suggested contractual element.

### *Communicative work and representation*

All interviewed managers perceived communication as an integral part of knowledge work in today's mediatised environment. Hence, all of the organizations participating in the study encouraged employees to identify themselves as members of the organization on social media and to represent their organizations by using their personal online accounts for work-related communication:

As soon as a new person arrives, we tell them that we are this type of "communicative organization", and that they have a mandate to take time for this, and that it's part of their work. (Communications Manager, Epsilon)

Every employee, regardless of their position or the type or size of the organization, was considered to have a communicative role. As one informant put it:

If you put something on social media, telling where you work, what you do and what kind of company it is, then you end up creating an image of your employer. You may not do this intentionally, but you still have a key role in this image creation process. (Employer Branding Manager, Delta)

The managers perceived that any member of an organization can create content for the benefit of all members, exemplifying the new type of dependency enabled by social media and based on mutual agreement (McFarland and Ployhart, 2015).

Managers considered that employees who had personal social media accounts, and who had identified themselves publicly as being employed by the organization, had made a conscious decision to engage in social media as representatives of their organizations, and to



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use it for purposes that they perceived as being beneficial for themselves. This was regarded as tacit approval of using employees' online identities for the benefit of the organization:

It's based on the employee's own free will . . . so they [employees] must be willing to engage, and be aware of the implications. (Communications Director, Beta)

Although managers were aware that they could not force anyone to engage in social media, their responses indicated that they valued individuals who used their personal profiles for work-related communications. In other words, managers seemed to expect such behaviours, and fostered a normative environment that encouraged employees to take social media into use, particularly platforms that were considered critical in client communication:

If we consider that there's a minimum level [of social media involvement], it's that our people should have their LinkedIn profiles in good shape. That's the minimum requirement because our clients are searching for our people, and information about them must be available. (Communications Director, Delta)

Furthermore, managers had designed social media guidelines advising employees to indicate in their social media profile that they were working for this specific company if the person discussed any kind of work- or organization-related topics on social media:

If you discuss work-related issues through your social media account, it's recommended that you indicate your organizational affiliation so that it's not considered covert marketing. It would not be right to praise our organization without indicating that you're employed by us, so there must be this transparency. (Communications Manager, Beta)

In addition to profiling individuals as members of the organization, managers encouraged employees to be their authentic selves and to share information regarding their personalities, values and experiences. When doing this, employees were seen as presenting the organizational identity through their personal identities, granting the organization authenticity in the process:

We really do not want [employees' communication] to be clinical and cautious. Instead, we would like the employee's own personality, interests and stories to be present. We would like people to be seen as a whole. (Communications Manager, Beta)

Hence, the managerial rationale for encouraging employees to present their authentic selves and to talk about their lives beyond work was related to the organization's intention to humanize itself: to appear easily approachable, conversational, and to display character:

If we think of our industry, it has often been seen as conservative and cautious, and kind of distant. But as communication is changing, and getting closer to people, this calls for more interactive participation, and transforms how the organization is seen. So it's really about how we would like people to perceive us today. (Communications Manager, Beta)

The motivation to advocate one's organization in social media was considered to be intrinsic when employees had a feeling of belonging to their organization, or when they perceived the benefits of being online and actively communicating:

I feel that it relates to the idea that the values of the individual and the organization converge and you feel that you can communicate with your own name and face. (HR Director, Alpha)

Managers acknowledged that organizational identity and image are linked to employees' willingness to communicate about their organization through their personal social media profiles. This is a particularly interesting finding as it reveals the emergence of a new type of representational dependency between employers and employees. The currency of this



representation contract is composed of tacit agreements related to identities and images, and ultimately to the reputations of respective organizations and employees.

The risks associated with this mutual dependency were also acknowledged, however. One of the risks entailed in expecting employees to engage in social media as organizational representatives and advocates was their potential misconduct, for example in the form of inappropriate communication, which could damage the organizational image and reputation:

It brings with it new reputation management-related risks. But these are still less worrisome than employees not communicating at all. (Communications Manager, Beta)

On the other hand, managers considered that, when positive, organizational reputation supported employees' communication activities and protected them in their communicative role. As a consequence, a positive organizational reputation was construed as creating goodwill for employees in their respective organizations:

In a way, we are an organization with an extremely good reputation, which safeguards us against many things. (Communications Manager, Epsilon)

An example of this type of goodwill, which individual employees were able to benefit from, was the development of their personal brand. This was considered to bring multiple benefits to employees by being known in networks, particularly among recruiters. Recent research supports this aspect, showing that professional social media use is associated with employability (Khedler, 2019):

I think it's extremely important that they [employees] can improve their own profile and their own expertise through this, especially if the idea is that they'll do this type of work for the next 40 years. Because it's often the person that the client is interested in, as he or she is the one who actually does the work. (HR Director, Zeta)

Overall, managers indicated that each knowledge worker had a communicative role in representing their organization, a role that combined obligations and benefits for employers and employees, creating mutual dependencies. Managers valued employees who identified themselves as members of the organization in their personal online profiles, and who used these profiles to communicate about their work and organization. This was considered to contribute to the organization's aim of expressing personality and character, and ultimately their reputation capital (e.g. Jackson, 2016). For employees, communicating about one's work and identifying publicly as a member of the organization was associated with their personal brand. On the other hand, managers stressed that, while supporting individual employees in their representativeness, organizations were also obliged to safeguard their reputations. Likewise, employees were obliged to behave professionally on social media. Managers also highlighted that organizations provided support, training, and protection when employees decided to communicate on social media and act as organizational representatives. Thus, both parties were construed as being dependent upon employees' representation.

### *Communicative work and knowledge*

The second central theme that emerged from the data relates to the knowledge generated and shared by employees in social media and the dependency it created between an individual's and the organization's knowledge capital. All interviewees highlighted that employees' knowledge, and how they make this knowledge visible through their communicative actions, was critical in constituting an organization's expertise. Hence, sharing knowledge about one's work, organization, or other industry-related topics of interest and benefit to stakeholders was considered an integral part of knowledge work:

If you're not able to share your knowledge in an understandable form, you cannot be a credible professional. (HRD Manager, Beta)

By sharing their knowledge on social media, employees were expected to contribute to the organizational knowledge capital as a whole and to support the organization's intention to position itself as a thought leader, as explained by one informant:

We have people who are the leading experts in their fields, and whose ideas are really listened to, both within but especially outside the organization. So this type of thought leadership really is our lifeblood. If we did not possess this, no one would listen to us . . . and that is the reason why we want [to employ] top professionals whose insight is valued. And clients are willing to pay for this insight, of course. (HRD Manager, Delta)

Establishing a thought leadership position by sharing content on social media was perceived critically in light of the existing functioning and features of social media. Standing out from the competition prompted by the widespread diffusion of online information required visibility and recognition:

The Internet is crowded with information, and users think about where they should turn—be that a discussion forum, a professional blog, a news site or something else. We would really like our professionals' role in these forums to be stronger. So it's about visibility, professional image, and employer image, which all have an impact on the organization. (Communications Manager, Beta)

The intention to gain a thought leader position in their industry was particularly related to the ability to generate new business, as one informant pointed out:

We're able to profile ourselves through relevant themes and topics. In this way, our employees can raise their professional profile as experts in these matters, and it's easier to sell our services when they're recognized in the market. (Communications Director, Delta)

Managers considered that communicating and sharing knowledge on social media facilitates expertise recognition, and that employees who are able to position themselves as thought leaders are perceived as being more credible among different stakeholders. Additionally, presence in communication networks was considered as contributing to professional learning, which benefits individuals in their professional development, as well as their organizations:

Professionals are often people who want to keep on learning, and to share the knowledge they acquire . . . I think it makes work more meaningful if you feel that you can influence those things that you consider important. (Communications Director, Eta)

Moreover, managers felt that people who have realized how to create and extract value from information through their communicative actions stand out from others, which makes managers favour and support employees with more communicative knowledge:

Those people who have understood that the information they receive is not only for them, but is meant to be used and distributed further. Those people stand out. (Communications Manager, Gamma)

Many have understood this and are willing to demonstrate their expertise and act as trusted advisors in some specific topic, enhancing their employability at the same time. (Communications Director, Delta)

Taken collectively, employees' knowledge, and particularly how it was demonstrated on social media, was the currency in the knowledge element of the psychological contract. Employees were encouraged to share their knowledge by creating professional content and taking part in industry-related conversations on social media. Employees' knowledge-sharing on social media was considered as contributing to organizations' intentions to

increase their knowledge capital and brand themselves as thought leaders in their industry. Reciprocally, managers believed that employees' knowledge-sharing online supported their professional learning and intentions to brand themselves as knowledgeable experts in their field. Both parties, employees and their respective organizations, were construed as having an agreement that an employee's knowledge – and making it visible – has mutual dependences in the form of benefits, but also in the form of obligations as it requires both parties to commit to the development of that knowledge.

### *Communicative work and networks*

Personal social media networks that employees had created for professional purposes were identified as a third theme that formed a contractual bond between employees who used social media for their work and their organizations. The parties to this contractual bond were an employee who creates and maintains professional networks, and an organization that provides a context for creating this type of work-related network, and that gains a wider reach for its communication.

First, interviewees emphasized the importance of networks for reaching their stakeholders such as potential clients and employers. Specifically, the more people are networked and the more they take a communicator role, the wider the audience the organization can reach:

It's been clear from the beginning that communication is not a task for just five or ten people. If it were, then our voice would be the voice of five or ten . . . if we shout together with x and y, we'll be able to reach some decibels together, but if more than 15 join in, our voice will be much louder, and we'll be able to dominate the airspace. So it really matters whether we're doing this just through our own corporate accounts or communication titles, or whether everyone in the organization participates. (Communications Manager, Epsilon)

Hence, when an organization and its employees shared their networks online, they were able to reach many more people. This was considered to be particularly relevant in social selling, namely when an organization leverages social and digital channels for understanding, connecting with, and engaging customers (Ancillai *et al.*, 2019).

Of course, if you have a bigger network, you'll achieve results much more easily. (Communications Manager, Delta)

In this way, you'll have more opportunities to do your work better. From the sales point of view, for example, I think no one is in a position to say that they know too many people. (Communications Manager, Beta)

Managers believed that being a part of networks in social media benefitted not only their organizations but also their employees in multiple ways:

So, what's in it for me? The networks and whatever people find there, the career opportunities that emerge from people knowing you, with many actually getting jobs through LinkedIn or Twitter. (Communications Manager, Gamma)

We've encouraged our employees by telling them what being active in social media may bring—that they'll be able to tap into those networks and information and be able to enhance their personal brand. (Communications Director, Beta)

The organization's dependence on employees' networks was often noticed when a widely networked employee left a company:

He changed jobs, and now we have a terrible gap again. This is how thin on the ground we are in this respect. (Communications Director, Delta)

Overall, networks were highly valued and some managers indicated that well-networked candidates may be preferred in the recruitment process:

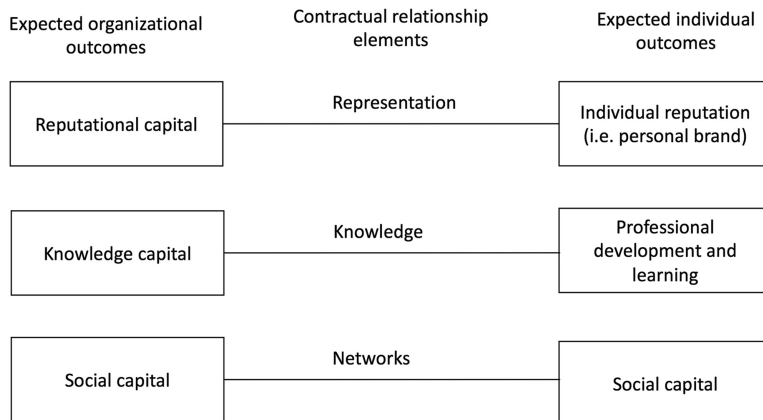
We could hire someone who's a really good professional, and of course people grow and learn, but I'd say that it would be more valuable if our people were more networked and more known in the market. (Communications Director, Alpha)

In summary, employees' professional networks in social media were the currency for these types of organizations and their creation, maintenance and utilization included mutual dependencies. These obliged employees to share their personal networks with their employers and, conversely, organizations were expected to enable and support their employees to grow and maintain their social media networks for work-related communication and interactions. This may benefit an organization in improving its business, through social selling for example. It may also help an individual employee to work more efficiently and achieve work-related results, as well as grow their network through this specific organizational role. Hence, employees' networks were seen as providing mutual benefits for both parties. The PC element regarding such networks included the notion that employees have full ownership of these networks, and that when leaving the organization, they would take these valuable networks with them.

*Summary of findings*

The three themes presented above revolve around the elements that link employees and organizations together when employees use social media for work-related purposes. These mutual dependences form psychological contractual relationships, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

The representation element of the contract refers to an agreement between an employer and employee to the effect that an employee's identity and personal reputation can be used for the benefit of the organization and, conversely, that an organization's identity and reputation may be used to benefit its employees. The representation element can be viewed as a dimension of the PC, based on the reputational interdependence (Frandsen and Johansen, 2018) of an employee and an employing organization. Applying this idea to the relationship between employees and their employers, reputation can be perceived as contagious capital, meaning that organizations benefit from their employees' reputation, and employees may



**Figure 1.**  
The elements forming psychological contractual relationships

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benefit from the good reputation of their employers. Earlier studies lend support to this conceptualization, as there is widespread recognition that employees' social media use can shape a company's reputation (Walsh *et al.*, 2016) and identity (Madsen, 2016).

*The knowledge element of the contract* refers to an agreement between employer and employee to the effect that, when occupying an expert role, an employee's knowledge is supposed to be made visible through their communication about their work, organization, or other industry-related topics, for the benefit of the organization. Employees demonstrating their expertise through sharing knowledge on social media were seen to support the organization's knowledge capital. Similarly, managers perceived that employees could expect that an organization's collective expertise and the opportunities that it provides for professional development and learning may be used to benefit individual members of the organization by providing them with expert statuses. This concurs with the findings of Treem (2016), who discovered that expertise can be viewed simultaneously as something that organizations have and as something that organizations do (p. 528). Managers perceived that employees' communication about their knowledge in social media was an integral part of knowledge work, and hence they adopted a practice-oriented approach towards individual expertise, with it being construed as something that is accomplished through communicative action and interaction (Kuhn and Jackson, 2008; Treem, 2016).

*The network element of the contract* refers to an agreement between employer and employee to the effect that, when occupying an expert role, employees are expected to create and maintain their professional networks. Conversely, organizations provide a context for creating this type of professional network in social media. With this agreement, both parties aim to gain social capital, referring to the goodwill that emerges from the structure and content of the actor's social relations (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p. 23).

## Discussion

The results of the study highlight that social media use in organizations is creating new kinds of exchanges and dependencies, which result in contractual bonds between employees and organizations that relate to representation, knowledge and networks. These, primarily psychological, contractual bonds are defining how organizations can utilize their employees' representation, knowledge and networks as a part of their operations and, conversely, how organizations reciprocate these exchanges so that employees are willing to engage. The PCs are formulated through diverse expectations, and "expectations such as these are not written into any formal agreement between employee and organization, yet they operate powerfully as determinants of behaviour", as pointed out by Schein (1965, p. 11). Hence, they are negotiated between organizations and each individual employee.

The key contribution of this study is to reveal the novel contractual bonds that result from mediatized working environments and particularly the increased use of social media for work-related purposes. Without an awareness of the nature, content, or consequences of these exchanges, the parties to these employment relationships may not be able to equally negotiate these unwritten terms. As stated by McFarland and Ployhart (2015, p. 1,672), "Employers want to leverage social media for competitive advantage, but doing so may increase risk until scholarly research has identified appropriate practices and guidelines for effective use". Since managers increasingly expect employees to use social media for work-related purposes, becoming aware of and understanding how these expectations may affect employment relationships is essential in developing the theory and responsible managerial practices.

*Theoretical implications*

The findings offer several important theoretical contributions. First, our work contributes to emerging research aiming to understand work-related social media use and its effects on employment. A recent study by [Andersson \(2019b\)](#) suggests that employees formulate their communicative role perceptions based on related role expectations. By adopting the PC approach in this study, we were able to identify the mechanism – mutual dependency – that motivates employers to express these expectations and employees to fulfil them.

Given that the immaterial nature of social media contexts “has the potential to transform one’s interpretations of relationships, costs, benefits, and time” ([McFarland and Ployhart, 2015](#), p. 1,661), we suggest that employment relationships may materialize in novel forms in mediated environments. We identified three forms of mutual dependences which relate to representation, networks and knowledge, and conceptualized these as elements of PC that emerge through managerial beliefs related to reciprocal promises and obligations ([Rousseau, 1989](#)). These three novel contractual bonds reveal how managers perceive the exchange relationship in which organizations aim to benefit from employees’ social media use, conducted through their personal social media accounts and, furthermore, what kind of outcomes managers expect this relationship to produce for both parties involved.

Second, the results contribute to the PC literature and further theorizing of PC by highlighting the role of context, in this case social media, and the meanings related to the content of PC within each unique context. For example, applying the contextual view of PCs may provide important insights in light of recent literature which suggests that mutual dependences between employers and employees include power asymmetries ([Ali, 2020](#)). Social media seems to augment these asymmetries by allowing employers to access detailed information related to current and potential employees ([McFarland and Ployhart, 2015](#)). Understanding the potential asymmetries is particularly important because recent empirical work indicates that employees may not be equally prepared to fulfil these new contractual bonds for their employers ([Pekkala and van Zoonen, 2022](#)).

Finally, our findings also contribute to the literature focusing on resource-based theories, which often discuss reputation, knowledge and social capital separately at individual and organizational levels, without defining the mechanism(s) which connects the different levels. The findings of this study contribute to the ongoing discussion by showing that, in the social media environment, the production of these capital elements is based on relational exchanges and dependencies, forming a contractual agreement, and should therefore be associated with the employment relationship discussion.

*Practical implications*

With the increased understanding of the contractual nature related to work-related social media use, we hope to help managers to make more informed choices in designing related policies and practices. First, our findings indicate that employers regard employees’ social media communications as a strategic asset that requires them to reciprocate in order to engage employees in acting as organizational advocates. In practice, this means that employers need to maintain their images to create a foundation for employees’ personal branding efforts, provide opportunities for their employees to enhance their expertise, and enable and support employees in creating and maintaining professional networks. Therefore, our findings build on the earlier studies by [Andersson \(2019a, b\)](#), which found that internal communication, the communicative role of managers, and the perceived importance of communication affect employees in taking communication responsibility. In addition, our results indicate that organizational identification plays an important role in all of these contracts, and employers should strive to create a shared value-base among the organizational members. If individual values are well aligned with corporate values,

employees feel engaged, trusted and proud (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008); in these circumstances, organizational identification leads to mutual benefits for both organizations and employees (Hongwei *et al.*, 2015). In other words, “Employees who trust, are satisfied with and committed to the organization, and agree on mutual influence tend to publicly advocate the company by engaging in positive word-of-mouth, defending the organization, and recommending the company to their personal networks” (Men, 2015, p. 465). The shared values may also decrease the reputational risks involved in respect of possible employee misconduct.

A drawback of enhancing employees’ communicative role may be a poaching effect. Essentially, managers need to be aware that when employees gain recognition on social media they also become interesting to other companies and competitors who may aim to poach them (Amankwah-Amoah, 2015). The risks and benefits of investing in employee development and making this visible to external stakeholders creates a new form of dynamics: the employability paradox (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2011). Acknowledging this underlines the importance of retaining these scarce human resources because, when an employee exits the organization, any form of contractual relation, including the PC, is terminated. The consequences of an exit can be significant, particularly for those organizations relying heavily on professional networks and the employees’ personal reputation and knowledge.

As social media is driving employer and employee actions that shape the boundaries between public and private spheres, it is argued to cause new tensions, resulting in distinctive forms of contestation in the employment relationship (McDonald and Thompson, 2016). Employers need to consider their institutional role and responsibility in this new environment and adjust their actions accordingly. Taking the responsibility and helping employees to navigate in this new environment, and respecting the boundaries that employees value personally, may in fact help employers to achieve positive outcomes from employees’ social media use. Recent empirical findings suggest that when employees perceive their relationship with their organizations as positive, they are more likely to share positive information regarding their employers on social media (Lee, 2020).

The results of this study, by identifying dependencies that motivate employers to drive employees’ social media use and employees to fulfil these expectations, have important implications for HR personnel, not only in terms of understanding the potential sources of tensions, but also in providing more information on how they can protect and support their employees in this new digital operating environment.

## Conclusions

To conclude, this study contributes towards expanding the body of literature dealing with the use of novel forms of digital technologies in workplaces by uncovering new forms of exchanges and dependencies related to employees’ increased use of social media. According to our findings, these roles involve new types of contractual bonds between an organization and an individual employee and call for due attention and consideration as organizations become ever-more communicative.

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