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SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW CHANNEL OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION FOR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT?

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Abstract

This paper aims to fill the gap in the literature review of internal communication and employee engagement in the age of social media and then, proposes a conceptual model of using social media channel in internal communication for enhancing employee engagement. Qualitative methodology is adopted by reviewing and analysing research papers related to the following terms: “social media”, “internal communication”, and “employee engagement”. The result of this study is the conceptual model based on three hypotheses, including social media usage on employee engagement directly and indirectly through mediating variable “perceived organizational support”. This positive result intends to encourage managers and employers to allowing using social media among employees as an internal communication tool. However, regarding the reliability, it is essential to collect data and do empirical research based on this model.

Keywords: Employee engagement, internal communication, social media, conceptual framework

1 INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is always the concern of managers and employers due to its potential consequences, such as enhancing employee loyalty, employee productivity and performance (Sievert & Scholz, 2017). Therefore, boosting employee engagement is still a hot topic both in theory and practice. According to previous studies, internal communication is one of the main factors in employee engagement improvement in an organizational context (Karanges et al., 2015; Sievert & Scholz, 2017). Through internal communication, employees develop their relationship with supervisors and, co-workers and become more involved in the organizational culture. Moreover, with good internal communication, employees will know their roles and their responsibilities, which will help them to better reach the objectives of organization and improve their performance.

However, in the era of digitalization where internal communication is influenced by technology, choosing a communication strategy for improving employee engagement is not an easy question for communicators, managers and academics. The world has witnessed how quickly social media has grown in the last two decades since its first introduction to users in 1997 (Ellison, 2008). Along with this exponential growth, companies realized and applied social media in internal communication (Burgess, 2014). Large companies built enterprise software for internal social media and encourage employees to use social media externally as well. Although they generally recognize the benefits of social media, especially for employee engagement, studies in recent years have identified an unpleasant result that many companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, fail in using social media internally (Sievert & Scholz, 2017).

Replying to the call for more studies in facilitating social media internally (Bridger, 2015; Kluemper, Mitra & Wang, 2016), this study investigates the role of social media in internal communication to improve employee engagement. Additionally, despite the important influences of social media, the author found that there is still a limited number of studies focusing on social media in internal communication and employee engagement. Therefore, this paper will fill the gap with the proposed conceptual framework of social media communication

for employee engagement improvement and explain how social media, as a new channel of internal communication, can influence employee engagement.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employee engagement

Employee engagement has been identified in many different ways, including "the needs-satisfying approach, the burnout-antithesis approach, the satisfaction-engagement approach and the multidimensional approach" (Truss et al, 2014).

When employee engagement was firstly introduced, Katz and Kahn (1978) described it as the act of engaging "in occasional innovative and cooperative behaviour beyond the requirements of the role but in the service of organizational objectives". Later, Kahn (1990) further specified the three psychological conditions of an engaged employee: meaningfulness, safety and availability. Based on Kahn's work, many engagement scholars further developed the construct of "employee engagement". For example, a team of academics in Britain (Truss et al., 2006) characterised employee engagement as having three dimensions: emotional, cognitive and physical, which later became fundamental for communication scholars building the relationship between employee engagement and internal communication (Welch, 2011).

Another common definition of employee engagement is by organizational psychologists, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004). For them, employee engagement is "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Rather than a momentary and specific state, engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour". In another way, this concept is about long-term intrinsic motivation, not created by external factors. In particular, vigour, the first state of mind, is specified to be persistent even when suffering work-related difficulties and always to be energetic while working. Next, dedication is described as a state of mind in which an employee is strongly involved in their work and expresses "a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge". Last but not least, absorption is identified as being focusing completely and happily into work, regardless of obstacles (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli & Baker, 2004). Due to these good characteristics, engaged employees are highly sought after.

Along with these academic views, in practice, employee engagement by Gallup firm is defined as "the right people in the right roles with the right managers drive employee engagement" in their business book (Buckingham & Coffman, 2005). The Gallup organization also created a 12 question workplace questionnaire for measuring employee engagement in organizations. Buckingham and Coffman (2005) evaluated the person who says yes to all these 12 questions as an engaged employee.

In each view, employee engagement is characterised and measured differently but it has a common point that engaged employee is considered to willingly work harder for performance improvement, think positively about jobs and organizations, and actively discuss with co-workers and supervisors about work-related issues (Bridger, 2015). Those positive attitudes are the causes to performance improvement, employee loyalty and productivity (Moqbel, Nevo and Kock, 2013; Parry and Solidora, 2014; Sievert and Scholz, 2017)

2.2 Social media and internal communication

In organizational context, internal communication is described as "approaches by a company to communicate their employees" (Cornelissen, 2017). Given this definition, an effective internal

communication strategy is extremely necessary and it is because employees are motivated and delivered essential information on time, which leads to better performance (Holla & Pikhart, 2014). Furthermore, knowledge sharing, motivations and teamwork in the organization is also fostered with the good internal communication implementation. However, internal communication is a never-ending challenge due to geographical obstacles and misunderstanding, which needs the action of expert communicators and organizations. In the past, common channels of internal communication were face-to-face, writing and web 1.0 platform. With face-to-face and writing channels, misunderstanding and slow information transfer were the hug troubles in large companies which had many branches in different locations. Then, Web 1.0, including text message and e-mail, pushed internal communication forward and improved the speed of information transfer. However, this is only linear way so that mail goes back and forth only. They also are not supported in the large and interactive networks (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Those encourage employers searching more technology to deliver message smoothly and reduce the noise of communication.

Going with the growth of technology, internal communication now moves further with the help of social media as an electronic channel. One of the commonly accepted definitions by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is that social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” Thus, using social media platforms, users can have two-way dialogues and share digital content with other users faster than Web 1.0 platform. Comparing with Web 1.0, social media also allows people share knowledge effectively and foster the collaboration within groups (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015) because many users can interact with one post at the same time and they even can edit the content of this post. McFarland and Ployhart (2015) summed up some characteristics which differ social media from other channels of internal communication: physicality (barriers of geography and weather are reduced), accessibility (more open access for users), latency (faster sharing speed), interdependence (information is shared in a wider range), synchronicity (either synchronous or asynchronous), permanence (content is permanent on social media), verifiability (easy to verify) and anonymity (users are anonymous). Those are promising features for an effective internal communication channel and as a result, many companies invested in their own software as enterprise social networking or facilitate public social networking sites, such as: Facebook at work and LinkedIn. Some companies which are successful in implementing social media at work are listed as following: IBM, McDonald, Texas Instrument Industry and some other large companies (Arjomandy, 2016).

To sum up, social media is believed strongly to improve the quality of internal communication much more than other channels. Even, it is essential for companies to implement soon because the Generation Y, who were born between 1982 and 2000 and have grown up with internet (King, 2008), is now in the labour force. On other hand, social media has itself so many risks, especially in data control. Additionally, many companies felt in using social media for internal communication (from now, it is referred with “social media communication”) effectively and others are looking forward to implementing but do not know where to start. Hence, it is important to conduct more researches on the strategy of facilitating social media in companies.

2.3 Perceived organizational support

Perceived organization support is defined as the beliefs of employees that their organization appropriates their contributions and cares about their health and safety (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). This definition is originated from the Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), which explains that employee perceives organization as humanlike characteristics and thus, they will consider treatments from

organization as indicator for favours or non-favours to them. Employees will perceive the supports from organization through treatments from supervisors, organizational polices, norms and culture (Levinson, 1965). From then, they will feel a sense of connection to organizations. From previous studies, perceived organizational support has been found to be the antecedence of organizational commitment, performance and employee engagement (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002; Saks, 2006). The relationship between perceived organizational support and those concepts is explained with the Social Exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), which said that employees receive the support from organization, they will return back their good attitudes and better performance, in particular: employee engagement, performance, loyalty and commitment.

2.4 Organizational culture and leadership style

There is the disagreement in defining and measuring the concept organization culture. However, all researchers seem to agree that organizational culture is one of the main factor to commitment and performance (Ogbonna and Harris, 2011). In this study, organizational culture is defined simply as the expectations, norms and values which are shared within organization (Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 19830). Usually, in organization, they would seek potential applicants who share the similar values and norms with them. All of those create the organizational culture with specific characteristics.

Leadership style plays the important roles in management field because its consequences are the performance and employee engagement (Ogbonna and Harris, 2011). Leadership has a long history with different important phases and components. In this study, leadership style is considered simply as the adopted behaviour and style of leaders, based on the approach by Hemphill and Coons (1957).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative research in which technique for data collection and data analysis is secondary data. Secondary data method is recommended for studies of framework because it is highly reliable, inexpensive and useful for exploration (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Those features of this method meet the purposes of this study which are to explore the role of social media and to propose the conceptual framework.

Secondary data for this study are articles and papers related social media, employee engagement and internal communication from Scopus and Web of Science. The reason for those sources are their reliability and the huge range of covered topics (Falagas et al., 2008). Those selected articles in this study have to meet those following requirements:

- ▶ Qualitative or quantitative research paper based on primary data or secondary data.
- ▶ Consisting of those keywords: social media, employee engagement and internal communication.
- ▶ These mentions about social media should be published within lately 5 years (2013 – 2018) so that it can update the new trends in the field. Moreover, the period of time is controlled because this paper focuses only on the latest trend – social media in internal communication.

After all, 20 articles from two main databases: Scopus and Web of Science were reviewed and analysed for exploring the role of social media and building framework. (Table 1)

Table 1 the overview of analysed articles for conceptual framework. Source: own research

No.	Author	Research design	Kinds of social media
1	Moqbel, Nevo and Kock (2013)	Quantitative	Public social media
2	Badea (2014)	Quantitative	Public social media
3	Charoensukmongkol (2014)	Quantitative	Public social media
4	Leftheriotis and Giannakos (2014)	Quantitative	Public social media
5	Parry and Solidoro (2014)	Qualitative	Both types
6	Sedej and Justinek (2014)	Qualitative	Both types
7	Ainin and et.al. (2015)	Quantitative	Public social media
8	Ali-Hassan, Nevo & Wade (2015)	Quantitative	Public social media
9	Gibbs, MacDonald and MacKay (2015)	Quantitative	Both types
10	Korzynski (2015)	Quantitative	Both types
11	Men & Hung-Baesecke (2015)	Quantitative	Both types
12	Ngai, Tao and Moon (2015)	Quantitative	Both types
13	Alqahtani and Abunadi (2016)	Qualitative	Enterprise social media
14	Charoensukmongkol (2016)	Quantitative	Public social media
15	Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen and Fonner (2016)	Quantitative	Public social media
16	King and Lee (2016)	Qualitative	Both types
17	Naim and Lenka (2017)	Quantitative	Enterprise social media
18	Madsen (2017)	Qualitative	Enterprise social media
19	van Zoonen, Verhoeven and Vliegenthart (2017)	Quantitative	Public social media
20	Sievert and Scholz (2017)	Quantitative	Enterprise social media

4 FINDINGS

After reviewing and analysing articles related to social media, employee engagement and internal communication, some significant findings should be pointed out and discussed further. The positive relationship between employee engagement and social media exists. However, there are some factors influencing this relationship, which companies should pay more attention. At the end of this discussion, a conceptual framework will be proposed for using social media to enhance employee engagement.

Social media communication positively influences employee engagement

As a typical tool of internal communication, social media connect employees and employers in the organizations together and communication among those now will become more interactive (Arjomandy, 2016). With horizontal communication, employers can use social media to spread vision and objectives as from top to down. On the contrast way, employees can raise their voice to employers with the characteristics of anonymity (Parry & Solidoro, 2014; Arjomandy, 2016). With the vertical communication, employees now do not only contact with co-workers in the same location, they even can get in touch and update information from the huge range of colleagues in other corners of the world (Sedej & Justinek, 2014). On the other hand, previous studies proved that determinants of employee engagement are employee voice and dialogue (Parry & Solidoro, 2014; Bridger, 2015). Thus, with social media channel, internal communication is expected to be more effective and turns into two-way communication, which helps employee easily raise their voice and their concerns to employers. On the other hand, the employers can response to employees more quickly and conduct effective dialogue within organizations. From then, social media communication in internal communication is suggested to have the positive impacts on employee engagement, thanks to advantages of two-way dialogue and anonymity.

Hypothesis 1: Social media communication positively associates with employee engagement.

Besides that, social media allows users to join forum or online group and then they can contact and receive supports without the impacts of geographical barriers. Therefore, when implementing in organization, social media communication enhances the organizational support from supervisors and co-workers to employees. Consequently, those perceived organizational support as job resources in the job demand-resources model increases employee engagement (Truss et al., 2014). Another kind of perceived organizational support from social media communication is the knowledge sharing through Web 2.0 platform (Paroustis & Saleh, 2009; Ali-Hassan, Nevo & Wade, 2015). It is easier to share knowledge on blog, forum and websites so that any employees in the same company can access the knowledge source.

Hypothesis 2a: Social media communication positively associates with perceived organizational support.

Hypothesis 2b: Perceived organizational support positively associates with employee engagement.

Factors influencing the relationship between employee engagement and social media communication

Despite the positive association between social media and employee engagement, there are two main factors, including organizational culture and leadership, which should be considered before using social media (Parry & Solidoro, 2014; Sedej and Justinek, 2014). Social media is more democratic than other internal communication channels because of its anonymity. As asked about social media usage, employees expressed the fear of speaking up things on social media because of its “unsafety” (Parry & Solidoro, 2014). An opened leadership style and organizational culture is demanded to reduce this fear, which will encourage more employees to speak, engage and improve performance. In another way, leadership and organizational culture are moderating variables in the relationship between employee engagement and social media communication.

Hypothesis 3a: As the safety of organizational culture and openness of leadership style increase, social media communication associates with employee engagement more positively.

Hypothesis 3b: As the safety of organizational culture and openness of leadership style increase, social media communication associates with perceived organizational support more positively.

Hypothesis 3c: As the safety of organizational culture and openness of leadership style increase, perceived organizational support associates with employee engagement more positively.

Conceptual model

Discussion about employee engagement and social media results in the following conceptual framework (figure 1), which presents the idea how social media can have positive impacts on employee engagement under the consideration of some variables. Also, this view is interpreted in the employee level.

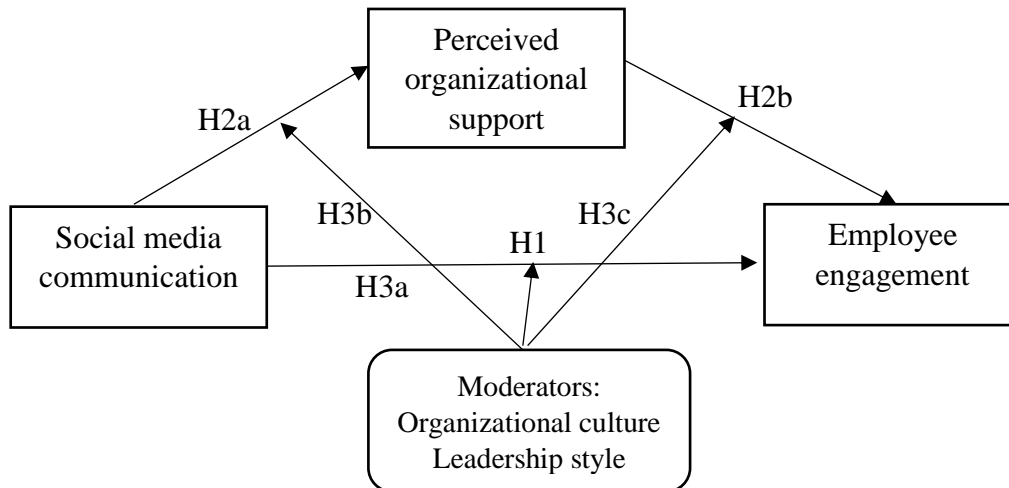


Figure 1 – The conceptual framework between social media communication and employee engagement.

Source: Own research

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, the results presented the conceptual model of using social media internally to improve employee engagement. The results are supported by the results from previous studies. Social media should be examined in different aspects, such as: benefits of internal social media usage, individual usage and the frequency of usage. When organizations use social media internally for communication, employees are believed to feel connected to organizations and then improve their engagement. Also, they can use social media freely, they can balance their work-life and as consequences, increase engagement too. Employee engagement should be examined in the whole three aspects: vigour, dedication, and absorption. So, the researchers can have clear results of the impacts by social media communication. Perceived organizational support in this conceptual model should be considered from supervisor supports and co-worker supports in the further researches. The moderating variables: organizational culture and leadership style are considered only as dimensional concept to find the effects on other main relationships in this study.

The findings of this study supported the relationship between social media communication and employee engagement. The relationship is built based on the theory of internal communication and employee engagement. Social media communication positively has impacts on employee engagement in the direct way and through perceived organizational support. This result contributes to the internal communication literature review in the new era of technology but also encourage managers and practitioners to facilitate social media at work. Social media is not only technology if we can facilitate effectively and have a good communication strategy. Nevertheless, managers should have an opened leadership style and organizational culture first before promoting social media usage internally. Also, it is important for employers to be aware

that employees may only waste time of social media (Khosla, 2016) while defining the social media communication strategy for employee engagement.

On the other hand, two main limitations of this study are that the results are not from empirical data analysis and it may overlook some details in this relationship. These limitations come from the chosen method, secondary data (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Hence, it is necessary to conduct further researches with empirical data to generalize the results. Moreover, it is important to consider more variables in this conceptual model, such as: employee satisfaction, employee communication needs, employee performance and so employee-related variables.

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