Social media are a broad collection of digital platforms that have radically changed the way people interact and communicate. However, we argue that social media are not simply a technology but actually represent a context that differs in important ways from traditional (e.g., face-to-face) and other digital (e.g., email) ways of interacting and communicating. As a result, social media is a relatively unexamined type of context that may affect the cognition, affect, and behavior of individuals within organizations. We propose a contextual framework that identifies the discrete and ambient stimuli that distinguish social media contexts from digital communication media (e.g., email) and physical (e.g., face-to-face) contexts. We then use this contextual framework to demonstrate how it changes more person-centered theories of organizational behavior (e.g., social exchange, social contagion, and social network theories). These theoretical insights are also used to identify a number of practical implications for individuals and organizations. This study’s major contribution is creating a theoretical understanding of social media features so that future research may proceed in a theory-based, rather than platform-based, manner. Overall, we intend for this article to stimulate and broadly shape the direction of research on this ubiquitous, but poorly understood, phenomenon.

Keywords: social media, organizational context, social networking

Humans are social animals, and the propensity to seek and form relationships with others is deeply embedded into our DNA. Early in our history we formed into small packs of roving hunter-gatherers based upon common hunting techniques. The birth of agriculture allowed the development of geographically stable communities. Advancements such as alphabets, printing presses, telephones, airplanes, and email continued to fulfill humans’ appetite for social interaction and communication. In each major transition, the human need for building social relationships both created, and were further stimulated by, technological changes that facilitated interaction: hunting tools, agriculture, air travel, and the Internet. In turn, in each transition, the social context within which people interacted and communicated changed as well.

We are in the midst of yet another social revolution stimulated by the interaction between the human desire for connectivity and technology. Social media are digital platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people (Elefant, 2011). Social media include networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zichuhr, 2010). This technology has revolutionized the way people connect, communicate, and develop relationships (Beal & Strauss, 2008; Derks & Bakker, 2013). Social media also have the potential to revolutionize organizational behavior (e.g., leadership, engagement) and a variety of Human Resource (HR) functions, including recruitment, selection, and training and development. However, at this point the benefits of social media are merely potential, and there is more speculation than evidence. There are innumerable anecdotal claims discussing the merits (and risks) of social media in the broader business community, but little scientific research that validates such claims. Thus, at a time when most organizations are struggling with incorporating or adapting to social media, there is almost no scholarly guidance to provide principles, best practices, or separate fact from fiction.

Such neglect is problematic theoretically and practically. Theoretically, social media present a context for interaction that are potentially quite different from traditional interaction (e.g., face-to-face) and possibly other types of digital media (e.g., email). Some of the features unique to social media may challenge the ability of existing theories and frameworks to explain cognition, affect, and behavior, and may require new theories and frameworks to fully understand social media and organizational behavior. Practically, managers are trying to understand whether or how their firms should employ social media for organizational purposes. Further complicating such issues is the fact that social
media contexts are believed to be so different from conventional contexts, that new laws and legal guidelines are being established (Elefant, 2011). Social media are a global phenomenon, and neglecting to examine social media with scientific scrutiny contributes to the potential devaluation of applied psychological science (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). It also misses an opportunity for applied psychology to influence public policy and law, at least to the extent that scholarly journals become standards for professional practice.

The purpose of this article is to develop new theoretical insights that describe the nature and consequences of social media in organizational settings. We develop theoretical arguments demonstrating that social media are not simply a different type of technology, but rather represent contexts that can be distinguished from more traditional organizational contexts. That is, social media represent “ideal types” on one side of a continuum of social interaction contexts, with the other side containing physical (e.g., face-to-face) contexts, and older digital technologies (e.g., email) falling in between.

The framework developed in this article makes three contributions. First, the framework is based on a comprehensive integration of multiple literatures to identify the underlying discrete ambient stimuli that distinguish social media contexts from traditional and older digital contexts. These stimuli allow researchers to understand why social media, digital communication, and traditional interactions may have different effects on employee cognition, affect, and behavior. Second, this framework contributes to postulates and propositions whose implications may require significant revisions to existing theories of interpersonal interactions and communication. We take three theories with broad support (social exchange theory, social contagion theory, and social network theory) to illustrate how the nature of social media contexts challenge or transform these theories in new ways. Finally, the proposed framework is used to show how social media contexts interrelate with traditional organizational contexts to stimulate implications for practice (including potential benefits and potential risks). We show how many findings within a traditional organizational context are affected by consideration of social media contexts. We then use these practice issues to direct important theoretical questions for future research. These three contributions are, respectively, presented in the three subsequent sections of this article.

**Positioning Social Media Within a Contextual Framework**

**Social Media Defined**

Social media are digital Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people (see Elefant, 2011). Social media are digital in that they exist entirely on the Internet or portals that can access the Internet (e.g., cellular phones). Platforms are different mechanisms or technological vehicles for connecting people and information. They are created by different outside entities that may develop the platform for profit or noneconomic purposes (e.g., to share family pictures). Social media platforms include web-based and mobile-based Web 2.0 technologies that allow an interactive dialogue between organizations, communities, and individuals (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Content refers to the information posted to social media platforms that may include written text, pictures, videos, or most anything else that can be represented digitally.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn are among the most popular social networking platforms. Social networking sites are web-based services that allow individuals to (a) create a public (or semipublic) profile within a system, (b) develop a list of other users with which they share a connection, and (c) view and correspond with their list of connections (and even those made by others within the system; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Other examples of social media include media sharing like YouTube and Photobucket; wikis (i.e., collaborative knowledge development); creative works like blogs, social bookmarking such as CiteULike; and content compilation and organization such as RSS feeds (Greenhow, 2010). Social media also include forums designed to allow employees to vent and share information about employers and students to share information about teachers, such as Glassdoor.com and ratemyprofessor.com.

New types of social media are continually being created, but all share an underlying platform that is based on Web 2.0 technology. This means they are based on an Internet structure that allows large numbers of users to share in the creation, manipulation, and distribution of content. Users do not just obtain content from the Internet; they help create it. In this way our connections can become the connections of our colleagues, and these colleagues may in turn alter the nature of that content or add new content nearly instantly. This means social media networks can grow large and evolve very quickly in unexpected ways (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009b).

Social media can be distinguished from older Web 1.0 forms of digital communication media such as email and text messaging. Web 1.0 platforms tend to be more linear in the way content is distributed and do not easily support large and highly interactive networks (Dominick, 1999; Wei, 2012; Wei & Hindman, 2011). Unlike Web 2.0, Web 1.0 technologies do not allow multiple users to access and manipulate posted content (they can only respond to content, or manipulate and then repost it). Thus, what distinguishes social media from other forms of virtual communities and digital communication media is that social media are much more open, interactive, fluid, and dynamic. To illustrate, imagine a group of people talking over dinner. Web 1.0 platforms would be equivalent to members passing written notes back and forth, while Web 2.0 platforms would be more similar to members talking interactively.

An underlying premise in the manuscript is that knowledge and insight about social media in organizational settings will occur in a more informed and systematic fashion when that research proceeds according to a theory-directed framework. To date, the limited research on social media has focused on specific platforms (e.g., selection using Facebook; Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth, & Junco, in press). While valuable, we believe this progression will lead to a piecemeal and incomplete understanding of social media. For example, comparing knowledge transfer between traditional (physical) networks and LinkedIn networks may tell us something about LinkedIn, but it does not necessarily contribute to a broader scientific understanding of social media. In contrast, our approach shifts the locus of understanding from the technology to the contextual features that distinguish social media. Therefore, throughout this article, “social media” refers to the sharing of
information via the web or mobile devices based on Web 2.0 platforms. However, we will refer to specific social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn) as illustrations or when a point relates directly to a specific social media feature.

The Importance of Context

There are significant theoretical insights to be gained about human behavior by understanding the defining features of the broader context within which that behavior occurs (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Heath & Sitkin, 2001; Johns, 2006; Mischel, 1969; Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Porter, 1966; Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Schneider, Smith, & Sipe, 2000; Wright & Haggerty, 2005). A contextual framework is especially important for understanding the nature and consequences of social media in organizations. First, the phenomena of social media are so amorphous that, at present, they preclude any simple theoretical synthesis. Social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) take many forms and are quickly evolving. Each application differs in its characteristics and features, and hence creates different opportunities or constraints on behavior. Research that proceeds by trying to understand any one of these applications will produce a fragmented and unnecessarily complicated view of social media. Second, because social media are still evolving, describing the technologies will likely result in numerous “minitheories” that are only relevant to specific applications and only in limited settings. Third, trying to apply existing person-focused theories to social media will lead scholars to neglect many of the features that make social media contexts different in the first place. Thus, developing a theoretical framework to explain what social media are provides new insights into how social media influence the cognition, affect, and behavior of people within organizations and in conjunction with the organizational context.

Johns (2006) defines context as “…situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables.” (p. 386). Cappelli and Sherer (1991) define context as “…the surroundings associated with phenomena which help to illuminate that phenomena, typically factors associated with units of analysis above those expressly under investigation.” (p. 56). Rousseau and Fried (2001) describe the process of identifying contextual features as “contextualizing,” suggesting further that it “…entails linking observations to a set of relevant facts, events, or points of view that make possible research and theory that form part of a larger whole.” (p. 1). These definitions underlie a few critical points. First, an understanding of context contributes to an understanding of the entities embedded within that context. Second, context affects the cognition, affect, and behavior of individuals embedded within it. Third, context influences processes and interrelationships between constructs, as well as the meaning that people ascribe to events or themselves (Johns, 2006). As Lewin (1936) noted, behavior can only be understood as a function of the person and contextual situation.

Johns’ (2006) framework for understanding context suggests that contextual features exist in a hierarchy, such that the discrete context is embedded within the omnibus context. The omnibus context describes the most general features of context and provides a broad understanding of what the context is at a macro level (e.g., who, where, when, and why). The discrete context identifies the specific features of the context that are the most proximal influences on the cognition, affect, and behavior of people embedded within the context. The discrete context contains the specific characteristics of the environment that are proximal influences on human cognition, affect, and behavior. For example, prior research that has identified contextual stimuli such as work group interdependence, conjunctive versus disjunctive tasks, or the dynamism of the external environment, illustrates the nature of the discrete context (see Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Thompson, 1967). In this framework, the effects of the omnibus context on behavior are mediated (explained by) the discrete context. In turn, understanding the nature of behavior within a context requires understanding of both the discrete and omnibus context.

This conceptualization of context is clearly aligned with multilevel theorizing and principles (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). The omnibus context and discrete ambient stimuli exist at different levels, with the latter stimuli subsumed within the omnibus context. Understanding this nested view of context, and the manner in which top-down effects occur, benefits by recognizing the dynamics that underlie multilevel systems. Most important for present purposes is realization that stimuli most adjacent to a given level are likely to have stronger consequences than stimuli that are farther removed (a concept known as bond strength; Simon, 1973). Therefore, discrete ambient stimuli will more strongly affect individual cognition, affect, and behavior than will the omnibus context. Likewise, top-down contextual effects happen relatively faster than bottom-up effects, reflecting multilevel asymmetries (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). As we shall see, more than one context may exist at one time, such that social media contexts interrelate with the organizational context.

With context defined in this manner, it will be shown that social media represent an extreme form of context that is very different from the nondigital context (e.g., face to face or group interaction, printed media), and even other forms of digital communication media (e.g., email). In turn, this means that cognition, affect, and behavior within social media contexts will often differ—sometimes drastically—from what is manifested in more traditional organizational contexts. To make sense of these differences and why they occur, we build from the framework of Johns (2006) and others (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Mischel, 1969; Rousseau & Fried, 2001) to define and describe social media contexts. We first identify the broad omnibus features of a contextual continuum that ranges from physical to digital, and then discuss the specific discrete ambient features that operationalize social media contexts and distinguish them from other contexts. Figure 1 provides an overview of the contextual framework.

The Omnibus Context Continuum

Similar to research on virtual teams (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003), we propose that the context within which social interaction occurs falls on a continuum, with social media at one extreme and nondigital (i.e., physical) social interaction falling at the other extreme. Digital communication media (e.g., email) lies between these two extremes. The omnibus context is truly a continuum, but we use social media, face-to-face, and
digital communication media as idealized types to illustrate the key features of each omnibus environment.

The social media end of the context continuum is a human-constructed, immaterial, digital system for facilitating social interaction and communication. Social media are human constructions (Web 2.0) similar to the construction of skyscrapers or highway systems. However, skyscrapers or highways are material, tangible objects accessible to the senses. Social media, in contrast, are immaterial, intangible, virtual, and digital contexts that do not exist outside of the human-created environment that support them. Specifically, if there were a total loss of electricity or substitutable energy sources, then social media do not exist. Social media are digital in the sense that information is captured and presented in terms of bits or types of information that can be assembled into complex strings of information. For example, one may watch a “real time” video on the Internet, but regardless of its realism, this image is still a combination of bits of information.

The non-digital end of the context continuum is one that exists in the physical (material) world. Examples include face-to-face interactions with other people, small group interactions, and other forms of interaction or communication that occur in an environment that has physical substance. Between these two extremes are digital communication media. Examples include email, text messaging, Skype, and related platforms based on Web 1.0 technology. They are similar to social media in that they are human-constructed, digital, and virtual. However, digital communication media are more linear because they are based on Web 1.0 technology (e.g., do not enable members to manipulate content easily).

The omnibus difference between the digital (immaterial) and nondigital (material) contexts can be summarized in terms of time and space (distance). Between these two extremes are digital communication media and social media. Examples include email, text messaging, Skype, and related platforms based on Web 1.0 technology. They are similar to social media in that they are human-constructed, digital, and virtual. However, digital communication media are more linear because they are based on Web 1.0 technology (e.g., do not enable members to manipulate content easily).

The omnibus difference between the digital (immaterial) and nondigital (material) contexts can be summarized in terms of time and space (distance). Specifically, the barriers of time and space are minimized, possibly even eliminated, in social media contexts relative to nondigital contexts. With social media it is possible to communicate instantly, interactively, and asynchronously with others who are geographically distributed; such interactions can occur numerous times in a day with different and even large groups of people. In the nondigital context, such communication is considerably more constrained and challenging; if not impossible. Within the digital context, digital communication media and social media can be further distinguished in that social media offer a context that is generally more open, interactive, dynamic, and fluid.

Although we have described different idealized types along the contextual continuum, it should be remembered that organizational members are exposed to multiple contexts (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013). Employees will slide between digital and nondigital contexts throughout their day, perhaps checking email, collaborating on social media, and engaging in face-to-face meetings and interactions. Although members shift through these contexts to varying degrees and in varying amounts, each context will shape cognition, affect, and behavior depending on where the context is located on the contextual continuum. For example, we interact differently when talking within a small group setting than we do over email or virtually (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim, 2012). Figure 1 does not imply that organizational behavior is constrained within one context, but rather that multiple omnibus contexts exist and they will create predictable influences on cognition, affect, and behavior.

However, the most profound implication is that social media represents extreme types of psychosocial contexts within which people interact and communicate that is different from other contexts. Most of the current treatments of social media are viewed entirely from practical considerations: faster, cheaper, and better (see Jue, Marr, & Kassotakis, 2010, for a thorough review). Such practical considerations are important but do not explain for whom...
these benefits might occur, where, when, or why—that is, they lack a description of the omnibus context. Thus:

**Postulate 1:** An omnibus contextual continuum exists, with social media at one extreme and nondigital (physical) contexts at the other extreme.¹

We now turn to describing the specific discrete ambient stimuli that distinguish social media from other contexts in which social interaction takes place.

### The Discrete Context of Social Media

The discrete context represents the specific, lower level, ambient stimuli that are the most proximal influences on individual cognition, affect, and behavior (Johns, 2006). There is some adjacent research that has considered the nature of these ambient stimuli. For example, research on virtual teams highlights technological features such as accessibility, social presence, spatial distance, or communication medium to distinguish virtual teams from conventional teams (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). More specific to social media, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) categorize social media platforms in terms of media richness and self-disclosure. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) present seven building blocks of social media, including identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups.

We conducted an extensive review of scholarly research on social media from the organizational, educational, psychological, information technology, computer science, communications, marketing, and law literatures. We integrate and extend this prior research to posit eight discrete ambient stimuli that distinguish social media contexts from physical, nondigital context. These same stimuli also help make fine distinctions between digital communication media and social media. There are a large number of specific ambient stimuli that are likely to vary considerably across omnibus contexts, but not all of these are necessarily critical. Therefore, we focus only on the most important ambient stimuli for understanding social media in organizational contexts.

We should note that these stimuli are obviously interrelated, and they may interact with each other to exaggerate or minimize their direct effects. However, here we describe each independently to provide a greater appreciation of their features. Also note that we present these attributes in a **stylized manner**, meaning that one may find an exception to the various points but the arguments are expected to hold in general. The ambient stimuli most relevant to social media are summarized in Table 1.

#### Physicality

Physicality is the extent to which a given experience is tangible or accessible to the senses (Johns, 2006). Examples include geography, location, weather, temperature, and physical structures (e.g., cities). Physical stimuli create differences in cultural orientation, values, and attitudes because they present barriers that contribute to people forming collectives with those nearby. For example, geographic barriers such as mountains or oceans contributed to the emergence of regional differences in languages, cultural values, and political systems (Alderman, 2012). In the nondigital context, most social interaction occurs with people located in fairly close physical proximity. Classic social psychology research suggests that physical proximity affects the form of relationships in many ways, both positive (promoting liking and attraction) and negative (crowding creates conflict or aggression; e.g., Freedman, 1975; Kraut, Fussell, Brennan, & Siegel, 2002; Merry, 1987). In contrast, physical stimuli are almost completely irrelevant for shaping social media interactions. So long as there is Internet or cellular access, a user can connect with any other user from anywhere on the globe. Although there are regional differences in Internet access, and obvious language differences, once access is obtained, one has access to social media regardless of location. Further, physical stimuli such as weather, snowstorms, and the like, only affect social media to the extent such climatic events produce a loss of connectivity. Thus, the constraints put in place by physical stimuli in nondigital contexts are scarcely relevant in social media contexts, and for digital communication contexts as well (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003).

#### Accessibility

Accessibility is features of social systems or structures that influence the opportunity to join a network. The access may be perceived, such as when a person avoids a social relationship for fear of rejection, or real, such as when there is no opportunity to join a network (e.g., great physical distance). The extent to which network access is open in the nondigital world is severely constrained by barriers both physical (e.g., geography, distance, and weather) and social (e.g., political differences across countries). Usually, one must be in close physical proximity to gain opportunity to move from a member outside the network to a member inside the network (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), because joining a network requires time, interaction, and trust. In contrast, access to social media contexts is mainly limited by social barriers because physical access is open to all who have Internet or cellular connectivity. Clearly one will not have access to all of the social networks that exist within social media, but there is open access to enter social media contexts in the first place (e.g., there are no barriers to opening a Facebook account). Further, within social media it is possible to have multiple users connect to an individual or network and gain their cumulative knowledge. Subscribing to blogs posted by leading thinkers in a given area is one example. Most of us will never meet Richard Branson, but millions of people follow him on LinkedIn. Similarly, “following” a person who posts a great deal provides access to his or her content and expertise. Accessibility is also more open for social media than digital communication media like email. Until Web 2.0 platforms emerged, most Web 1.0 digital communications were linear and stemmed from a small group of users. Even though users could send mass emails to many members, one had to first find the email addresses (that is itself often difficult), send the mass email, and hope that various filters did not block the email. The person generating the email had to assume all the effort. In contrast, social media platforms based on Web 2.0 streamline this entire process but also enable others to join the network to receive and generate content. Thus, social media contexts can be more open and accessible than nondigital contexts and even digital communication media.

¹This article provides both postulates and propositions. Postulates are broad statements that provide the starting point for more specific theoretical arguments. Propositions are more precise operationalizations of the postulate that are used to demonstrate the truth of the postulate. Postulates and propositions are not testable themselves because of their breadth, but contribute to the development of hypotheses that can be empirically tested.
Latency. Temporal stimuli have strong influences on individual thought and action (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001; Mitchell & James, 2001; Roe, 2008). Temporal stimuli represent some of the most profound differences between social media and nondigital contexts, and the most important is latency. Latency refers to how long it takes to share content on a network. Latency is relatively slow in nondigital contexts (e.g., consider how long it took for information to spread over print media nearly a century ago). In contrast, content that is posted and shared using social media platforms is nearly instantly available. Indeed, it is for this reason that news platforms are increasingly relying on social media to break stories more quickly than can be done with reporters. For example, social media played a vital role in recognizing, and then responding to, the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, all in “real time” (Funabashi, 2012). The spread of content using digital communications media can be as fast as social media. However, the user-oriented nature of Web 2.0 platforms makes it slightly easier, and hence slightly faster, to spread content in social media. Further, the spread of additional content after an initial posting is faster in social media (Zhao, Jiang, Weng, He, Lim, Yan, & Li, 2011). Thus, content presented in social media contexts occurs with shorter latency than content presented in nondigital contexts.

Interdependence. Interdependence (i.e., the manner in which member interactions are interrelated with each other) has a profound influence on cognition, affect, and behavior (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Thompson, 1967). Member interdependence may range from completely autonomous and independent, to sequential (each person’s output is another person’s input), to reciprocal (like sequential, but a person’s output can be sent back to the prior individual for revision), to intensive (there is rich two-way interaction between any members at any time; Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Interdependence in the nondigital context is usually determined by a variety of physical, task, social, and temporal barriers. For example, there are physical limits on how many people can be part of a group, and groups will naturally break into subgroups if a group becomes too large (Dunbar, 2014). Many of these barriers become less important in social media contexts, and hence allow the opportunity for different types of interdependence to emerge. For example, tasks that require high interdependence can be greatly facilitated by using social media because time and space are no longer barriers to interaction. At the same time, basic characteristics of the platform, such as the manner in which people can (and cannot) interact, will influence coordination and communication (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). For example, social media enable an intensive type of interdependence because any member can access content and manipulate the nature of the content for the benefit of all members. In contrast, digital communication media like email are more sequential or reciprocal because content has to be manipulated by a member, and then emailed back to all other members, who may in turn manipulate the content and then email back to the broader collective. Thus, social media allow greater interdependence than digital communication media, which in turn are greater than nondigital interactions.

Synchronicity. Synchronicity captures the extent to which members engage in relationships or communication that require them to be temporally “in tune” (synchronous) versus at their own pace (asynchronous). Task demands will often dictate whether
communication needs to be synchronous or asynchronous (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Thompson, 1967). The creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in the nondigital world generally requires a greater degree of synchronized interaction. However, simultaneously, synchronized interaction with one network means it is not possible to be interacting with another network. There are physical and temporal limits on how active a person can be across multiple networks that may span home, work, and personal-life (Burt, 1992). Further, the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in the physical world requires a high degree of direct engagement and activity (Blau, 1964; Dunbar, 2014). However, both synchronous and asynchronous interaction can be effective in social media contexts. Asynchronous interaction and communication are possible because postings may occur at any time and from anywhere. For example, consider how many simultaneous social network “conversations” you are currently engaged in. Likewise, one may be a member of a social network yet post only infrequently. In this manner, it is possible for a person to be a member of many social networks, and gain the benefits of such membership, but actively participate (i.e., synchronized) in relatively few of them at any given time. In this regard digital communication media and social media are similar. However, digital communication media are less able to support synchronous communication than social media when the size of the network exceeds more than a few members, mainly because the Web 1.0 platforms are based on linear correspondence (post, respond). Thus, social media contexts more greatly enable, and support, either synchronous or asynchronous interaction.

**Permanence.** Permanence refers to how long the content that is posted on the social media system exists. Before the digital age, content was stored on microfiche or in print in libraries or archives, but the physical demands of storing it resulted in only limited content being preserved. Face-to-face interactions have even more limited permanence, as the content exists solely in human memory that is fallible and subject to many biases and inaccuracies (Morris, 1983; Smith, 1979). In response to these limitations, organizations may digitally record and share the summaries of key information over email or web postings. Social media contexts similarly offer the opportunity (or risk) for much greater permanence. In theory, anything that has been posted on the Internet exists forever even if it has been deleted, because the data is housed on backup servers or through downloads on various users’ hardware. Thus, what is posted in the digital context, whether by social media or older digital technologies, may live indefinitely. This is important because even though a person’s attitudes and opinions may change over time, prior expressions of these attitudes and opinions that are expressed over social media still exist.

**Verifiability.** Verifiability is the extent to which content or information can be checked or reviewed. It is related to permanence, but not the same because verifiability focuses on evaluating the content of what was posted. Information can be verified in nondigital contexts (e.g., printed media), but not for all content (e.g., word of mouth). In contrast, content presented in social media contexts can be verified quickly (think of background checks today vs. 50 years ago), and there is often no ambiguity about what was posted. Further, because content on social media platforms is (to varying degrees) accessible by others, it can be searched and verified more quickly and easily than content posted using digital communication media like email. For example, having a third-party verify the content of a person’s email must be done with either the person’s permission or by court decree (Sherman, 2007). In contrast, social media content is considered public, which is what enables employers to review social media content for recruiting purposes. Even more unique to social media contexts is the fact that verifiability can occur not only with what was posted, but also where and when it was posted. The location and time stamps present on many social media postings allow one to verify where a user was at a specific point in time (a point embarrassingly made by U.S. Representative Pete Hoekstra who tweeted his location [and put his delegation’s lives in danger] as they entered the Green Zone during the Iraq conflict). In this manner, most everything a person has ever posted in social media contexts is verifiable.

**Anonymity.** Anonymity is the extent to which a person can be identified (Marx, 2004). It is a well-established psychological principle that the degree to which a person is anonymous changes one’s cognition and behavior (see Hopkins, 1889 and LeBon, 1896, for some very early examples and Anonymous, 1998; Marx, 2004, and Smith, Terry, & Hogg, 2007, for more recent discussions). Being publicly associated with an idea often raises one’s commitment to the idea, but also results in greater personal critique of the idea before it is made public. We are less likely to make outrageous claims when the claim is tied to us (Diener, 1976). We also behave differently when we see people face-to-face than when we do not (e.g., Kugihara, 2001). It is difficult to be anonymous in the nondigital world, and arguably impossible because others can at least identify one’s appearance (Smith, Terry, & Hogg, 2007). In contrast, it is easy to be anonymous in social media contexts (Wynar, 1999). Users can create fake names, aliases, or even use the names of other people, and post content under these aliases. Digital media can allow anonymity for some platforms, such as when one creates a fake username using a free email domain (e.g., Google, Yahoo), but not others, such as text messaging (that is tied to a phone number). Social media creates the potential for users to be more anonymous than they would with most other communication platforms, and this opportunity for anonymity can lead to alarming behavior. Douglas and McGarty (2001) found that people who were anonymous on the Internet were much more likely to make hostile comments and convey threats (in chat rooms and via instant messaging). Further, Chiou (2006) found that individuals provided much more information about themselves online when they believed they were anonymous. The sender’s anonymity can also affect the target of the information (Smith et al., 2007). For example, information may be perceived as less credible coming from an anonymous source (Rains & Scott, 2007). Thus, anonymity has the potential to affect both the sender and the user of the information exchanged.

**Implications.** Upon a contextual continuum, social media represent an idealized form containing discrete ambient stimuli different from other contexts within which relationships and communication occur. Identifying the eight discrete ambient stimuli is an
important theoretical contribution because it enables researchers to make sharper and more specific distinctions between different points along the context continuum. For example, if designing an experiment, scholars could focus on manipulating the discrete ambient stimuli rather than simply adopting an existing platform, because platforms may disappear or change significantly over time (e.g., Napster) and hence research findings become platform-specific. These observations lead to the following postulate.

**Postulate 2**: There are eight discrete ambient stimuli that distinguish social media contexts from nondigital contexts and, to varying degrees, other digital media communication contexts: physicality, accessibility, latency, interdependence, synchronicity, permanence, verifiability, and anonymity.

Of course, readers must be reminded that we have developed the theory underlying these stimuli in a stylized manner. This means the distinctions are expected to hold in general, but exceptions can certainly occur. For example, social media can have a shorter latency than email, but this will not always be the case (e.g., emailing a spouse about dinner plans). Similarly, we have presented each of the stimuli independently, but they will clearly be interrelated and often interacting, sometimes in contradictory ways. Further, older digital media and social media may be indistinguishable on some dimensions, such as physicality or permanence. Future empirical research will be needed to identify these issues, as we discuss in a later section.

In the following section we turn to examining the implication of Postulates 1 and 2. From these postulates we develop three broadly important propositions that convey the implications of social media contexts for changing our understanding of employee cognition, affect, and behavior.

**Implications of Social Media Contexts for Theory**

Social media contexts are different from those studied in past research. Theories and empirical findings developed in nondigital contexts may need to be modified—possibly quite significantly—to reflect the uniqueness of the omnibus social media context. It may even be possible that entirely new theories will need to be developed. The unique context of social media has three broad implications. First, it may change the meaning people ascribe to phenomena, constructs, and processes within social media contexts. Second, there may be direct effects of the discrete ambient stimuli on the magnitude or direction of relationships. Third, there may be interactive effects among the discrete ambient stimuli on the magnitude or direction of relationships.

For each direct or interactive effect, we note how the effects may change, enhance, or constrain cognition, affect, and behavior. We illustrate these implications using three theories highly relevant to social media contexts: social exchange theory, social contagion theory, and social network theory. We chose these theories because they have proven broadly applicable across many nondigital contexts, seem reasonable starting places for understanding social media, and are beginning to be applied to social media research questions (e.g., Bond, Fariss, Jones, Kramer, Marlow, Settle, & Fowler, 2012; Borgatti, Mehran, Brass, & Labianca, 2009; Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Thus, using these theories as illustrations allows us to demonstrate how social media contexts often require more than simple generalizations of existing theories.²

**Proposition 1**: The discrete ambient stimuli resulting from social media contexts change the meaning or interpretation of existing theoretical concepts, constructs, or processes.

The discrete ambient stimuli that distinguish the social media side of the contextual continuum create an environment where the meaning attached to phenomena, constructs, or processes may differ radically from the meaning attached to these same characteristics on the nondigital side of the contextual continuum. We illustrate these changes in meaning using social exchange theory. Social exchange theory proposes that social behavior is the result of an exchange process whereby individuals weigh the potential risks and benefits associated with their social relationships (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962; Homans, 1958). In this context, risks are considered costs for developing or maintaining a relationship, such as the amount of resources (e.g., time or money) that are required to continue the relationship. Benefits are what the individual obtains or gains from the relationship (e.g., friendship, support, and fun). A relationship will continue over time as long as the benefits outweigh the costs. Costs and benefits may vary from person to person because they depend on the point of view of the individual (Blau, 1964).

Social media contexts have the potential to change the meaning of key concepts in social exchange theory from the way they are understood in the physical world. First, the very meaning and interpretation of social relationships may differ because of differences in physicality. Relationships in social media contexts are technologically mediated over platforms such as blogs, tweets, and status updates. There is evidence to suggest that the immaterial nature of these “digital” relationships differs from those in other social contexts (e.g., Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009a; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). For example, Boyd and Ellison (2007) found that the meaning of collegial connections was interpreted differently and much more broadly in social media contexts (likely because of greater accessibility and interdependence). Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) similarly found that there were different types of relationships perceived within social media contexts.

Second, the meaning of cost differs in social media contexts because of differences in latency and asynchronicity. Social media may influence the interpretation of “cost” because one can “friend” others and then interact asynchronously when personally convenient. For example, these platforms allow one to become colleagues via social media with other users, but in a manner that does not require the individual to invest significant resources (e.g., time or money) on the relationship, yet still potentially learn a great deal from those on their friend list. That is, relationships within social media contexts may be perceived as less costly.

Third, the meaning of benefits differs in social media contexts because of differences in accessibility, latency, and interdependence. For example, investment in social networks may benefit

² Also note that for parsimony, this section focuses primarily on the extremes of the contextual continuum shown in Figure 1, emphasizing differences between social media and nondigital (e.g., face-to-face) contexts rather than digital communication media contexts.
individuals through greater access to and use of information (e.g., advice, expertise), influence ("putting in a good word"), social credentials (networks "standing behind"), and reinforcement of identity and recognition (Lin, 1999). Interpersonal feedback and peer acceptance through social media connections contribute to personal identity construction (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Even simple asynchronous relationships can offer meaningful benefits in a social media context.

Finally, the evaluation of exchange relationships over time has a different interpretation in social media contexts because of differences in physicality, accessibility, latency, and asynchronicity. According to the "proximity principle," it is costly to maintain close interpersonal relationships in the nondigital world when the parties are separated by great distances (Newcomb, 1960). Physicality is largely irrelevant in social media contexts. For example, one of the often-advertised benefits of social media is an ability to stay connected with old colleagues who may live thousands of miles away. If the costs of relationships in social media contexts are perceived differently than in nondigital contexts, then it becomes possible to maintain more "beneficial" relationships for much longer periods of time (because of greater asynchronicity and shorter latency). The work of Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) suggests that networking through social media platforms may help to crystallize professional relationships that "might otherwise remain ephemeral" (p. 25), encouraging users to strengthen ties and maintain connections with former colleagues; thus, allowing people to stay connected even if they move from one location or job to another. In this manner, people’s interpretation of time, its duration and scope, are radically different.

Thus, the immaterial nature of social media contexts has the potential to transform one’s interpretations of relationships, costs, benefits, and time. Proposition 1 can be used to stimulate testable hypotheses examining how social media contexts change the meaning of concepts and phenomena. This research should be conducted in accordance with Rousseau and Fried’s (2001) Tier I (rich description) approach to contextualization. This requires not simply measuring constructs or processes already used in prior research, but taking a more fundamental examination of understanding the richness of the context and emphasizing the uniqueness of the setting. In fact, it is quite possible that existing measures are contaminated or deficient in social media contexts. This issue is similar to the challenges faced by those studying cross-cultural issues. Many of the concepts and phenomena identified in one cultural context may have different meanings and interpretations in different cultural contexts (e.g., Brett, Tinsley, Janssens, Barsness, & Lytle, 1997). Likewise, the study of relationships and communication in social media contexts will benefit from focusing first on the discrete ambient stimuli, to understand how people make sense of constructs and phenomena in this new environment, and then compare these interpretations to those in more traditional organizational settings. New operational definitions and measures may need to be developed, and new constructs may be identified that had not previously been considered. Qualitative research will be an important research methodology in understanding social media contexts.

**Proposition 2:** The discrete ambient stimuli resulting from social media contexts directly influence the magnitude and/or direction of relationships among cognition, affect, and behavior.

The discrete ambient stimuli that distinguish social media contexts from other contexts are likely to directly influence the nature of relationships among cognitive, affective, and behavioral constructs and processes. Examining the direct effects of these discrete contextual stimuli is similar to traditional multilevel research because "lower level" observations like individual attitudes or performance are nested within a "higher level" context. This is a manifestation of the classic cross-level model (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). That is, the discrete ambient stimuli in social media contexts are expected to be direct proximal influences on the manner in which individuals or collectives interact and communicate.

We illustrate these direct contextual effects using social contagion theory. Social contagion theory originated in sociology to explain the spread of within-network members’ attitudes, emotions, or ideas, such that individual behavior becomes collective behavior (Barsade & Gibson, 2002). The reasoning behind this theory is that networks are conduits for “infectious” attitudes, emotions, and behavior (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998). Communication networks expose people, groups, and organizations to information, attitudinal messages, and the behaviors of others (Burt, 1992; Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993). This exposure increases the likelihood that network members will develop beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes similar to those of their networks (e.g., Barsade & Gibson, 2002; Carley & Kaufer, 1993; Erickson, 1988).

Most applications of social contagion theory are focused in nondigital (face-to-face) contexts involving small groups. For instance, contagion may be activated by leaders and is especially likely in work group settings (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000; Kelly & Barsade, 2001; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005). However, the manner in which “infectious” attitudes, emotions, and behaviors spread may be both enhanced or suppressed in social media contexts. First, the potentially anonymous nature of interactions within social media contexts is likely to facilitate more inappropriate, infectious behavior than would be true in nondigital contexts. This fact, coupled with more open access to social networks and more interdependent networks, creates greater opportunities for the onset or prevalence of infectious expressions relative to email, for example. Second, removing constraints because of time (latency) and space (physicality) allow infectious expressions to be spread more quickly and broadly. Third, the greater intensive forms of interdependence create tighter extended networks, thereby generalizing the infectious expressions more broadly (i.e., they go “viral”). These features of social media contexts are vividly illustrated by observing that they contribute to large-scale change and crowd behavior. For example, some claim that the Occupy Wall Street movement spread so quickly because of the heavy use of the Internet and social media (Caren & Gaby, 2011). Thus, discrete ambient stimuli unique to social media contexts create the potential for social contagion to happen more often, more quickly, and more broadly.

Proposition 2 can be used to prompt specific testable hypotheses relating the discrete ambient stimuli to differences in cognition, affect, and behavior. These hypotheses should focus on how the discrete ambient stimuli enhance or suppress the relationships of interest. Studies designed to test these hypotheses can take two
On the one hand, varying the levels of these stimuli can occur purely within social media contexts (what Rousseau & Fried, 2001, refer to as “Tier 2” [direct observation and analysis of contextual effects]), e.g., one could examine different social media platforms [e.g., Facebook vs. LinkedIn] that vary on key stimuli such as anonymity and permanence. Alternatively, research in this area can be comparative across contexts (what Rousseau & Fried, 2001, refer to as “Tier 3”). This type of research would compare cognition, affect, and behavior across social media, digital communication media, and nondigital contexts. For example, one might compare the effects of physicality or accessibility between a social media context versus email within a more typical organizational context. These forms of research are also multilevel, and hence should draw heavily from multilevel theory, methods, and statistical models (see Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). For example, individuals may be nested within small groups, which are in turn nested within different social media contexts by using platforms that differ in synchronicity. In this type of design, social media contexts will shape the nature of group interactions, and group interactions will shape the nature of individual cognition, affect, or behavior.

Proposition 3: The discrete ambient stimuli resulting from social media contexts interactively influence the magnitude and/or direction of relationships among cognition, affect, and behavior.

In contrast to the direct effects suggested above, Proposition 3 suggests that the discrete ambient stimuli can interact with each other. In some instances these interactions will lead to the enhancement or facilitation of behavior, whereas in other instances these interactions will lead to the suppression of behavior (cf., Johns, 2006). Interactions among the discrete stimuli are likely to be very common.

We illustrate the nature of these interactions using social network theory. In social network theory, social relationships are conceptualized in terms of nodes and ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1982). Nodes represent the individuals within the networks and ties represent the relationships between those individuals. In its simplest form, a social network is a map of all of the relevant ties between the nodes being studied. The main features of networks are size (number of connections) and quality (information value of the set of connections). Although it may seem that a larger network is better because it brings more opportunities to obtain information, the larger networks also require more time and energy. Too many connections can result in difficulty managing information and a failure to maintain high quality relationships with others in their network (Burt, 1992). Therefore, network size is often inversely related to network or relationship quality.

The fact that social media are often referred to as social networking tools is not mere coincidence; the various social media platforms that allow social networking overlap in many ways with social network theory (Sacks & Graves, 2012). However, the features of social media contexts and the varieties of social media platforms allow scholars to significantly extend the boundaries of social network theory. For example, is the often-found inverse relationship between network size and quality found in social media contexts? One could hypothesize that different social networking platforms differ in their openness, synchronicity, and permanence. These ambient stimuli may interact, such that the highest quality information will occur when a person joins a network with open access, asynchronous posting, and permanent information. These are the precise conditions of many “discussion boards” or forums focused on specific interests or hobbies. In this example, the negative relationship between network size and quality may become positive. Social media connections do not have to be as time consuming as traditional relationships, and it is possible to get access to a much broader network (and potentially, a more knowledgeable network).

On the other hand, interactions among discrete ambient stimuli may strengthen the negative direction. For example, more open access to networks also means that the differences between experts and novices decreases because even novices may have the same wide access to audiences (Howe, 2009). One could hypothesize an interaction between access and latency, such that open access with instant postings will contribute to novices flooding the network with inaccurate information. For example, the more LinkedIn connections one has, the less he or she is able to know any given person very well, and hence it becomes difficult to assess expertise. There is a belief that postings on open boards are self-correcting (Esquivel, Meric-Bernstam, & Bernstam, 2006), but at this point there is little scientific evidence of this. These are questions that challenge social network theory, and there are likely to be many new insights, and perhaps even counterintuitive findings, generated by testing social network theory within social media contexts.

Proposition 3 can be used to prompt testable hypotheses relating interactions among the discrete ambient stimuli to differences in cognition, affect, and behavior. Similar to arguments raised in supporting Proposition 2, studies can be designed either within or across social media contexts (Rousseau and Fried’s (2001) Tiers 2 and 3, respectively). It is also possible that the social media stimuli will interact with the more traditional organizational (nondigital) stimuli. For example, the task environment in small group settings (e.g., sequential, intensive) may interact with discrete ambient stimuli from social media contexts (e.g., latency, verifiability) to influence cognition, affect, and behavior. A group formed to generate creative solutions (an intensive workflow structure) might perform better when the social media platform allows anonymous content posting; whereas this same group may perform worse if the platform has slower latency (e.g., email). This research may also be multilevel in the form of cross-level interactions. For example, an organizational climate for service might interact with social media accessibility to moderate the relationship between employee service orientation and performance behavior.

Implications

Most theories in applied psychology and the organizational sciences pay little explicit attention to context (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Heath & Sitkin, 2001; Johns, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Context can influence the meaning and interpretation of constructs and phenomena, change the nature of processes, and change the strength or direction of relationships specified in theories devoid of context (Johns, 2006). Theories are just starting to be developed specifically to explain the features of social media (e.g., Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). While encouraging, we argue that any such developments must
start by understanding the omnibus context (i.e., contextualizing them), which is similar to the way that research on virtual teams has proceeded (see Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Thus, the task for researchers is much more than applying existing theory to social media (in effect, a generalizability study). The task for researchers is to evolve and adapt the theories to incorporate the unique features and nuances of social media contexts, and in doing so, provide new tests of theory and develop the theories in important ways. A major contribution of this article is providing a roadmap for how such research should proceed.

However, perhaps the most novel and far-reaching contributions of Propositions 1-3 relate to understanding the relative importance of nondigital, digital, and social media organizational contexts. It will be important for research to understand when one type of context produces stronger effects on cognition, affect, and behavior, than a different context. For example, considering Proposition 1, for what types of content are nondigital contexts preferable to social media contexts? Socializing employees within face-to-face contexts might contribute to stronger effects on commitment and attachment than social media contexts. Considering Proposition 2, would email, social media, or multiple face-to-face interactions most strongly contribute to infectious behavior? Considering Proposition 3, how might the sharing of positive information within a physical network lessen the effects of negative information shared on a social media network? In all three examples, it is clear that much research needs to be conducted to understand how the traditional organizational context interrelates to social media contexts. We consider these possibilities next.

Implications of Social Media Contexts for Research and Practice

In this section we outline how social media contexts may interact or interrelate with the organizational context to influence findings within the applied psychology and management literatures. Indeed, were social media not a different context, then laws and regulations would not require revision—but evolving case law in many states clearly suggests they do (Elefant, 2011). These two contexts may thus interact to change the nature and presence of cognition, affect, or behavior, as well as the strength and direction of relationships between them. This section considers the implications of social media contexts on key organizational and HR functions, including (a) recruitment, (b) selection, (c) training, development, and knowledge management, (d) leadership, teamwork, and culture, and (e) socialization and engagement. These functions were chosen because they are most directly affected by social media applications. In each section, we first review what we know about social media use in the HR function (that is usually quite limited; McFarland, 2012). We then provide 1-2 key examples of how social media contexts are likely to change or transform key existing findings. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive but illustrative of the proposed framework’s implications on understanding practical questions. We then consider potential benefits and risks of using social media for each HR function.

Please note that the intent of this section is not to develop a “how to” guide for engaging social media in organizations. There are already articles that offer guidance for how to implement social media (see Elefant, 2011; Jue et al., 2010; Ployhart, 2012, for examples). Rather, the goal is to identify the main theoretical questions that will direct future research, and consider the main benefits and risks of social media implementation in organizations. Table 2 provides a broad overview that illustrates which specific discrete ambient stimuli are likely to be most impactful on the respective HR functions. Table 3 summarizes the major research questions, benefits, and risks, for each function. Note that these tables are only illustrations to highlight how the proposed framework prompts new research questions and offers insight into potential benefits and risks.4

Recruitment

Recruiter blogs have long espoused the benefits of social media platforms for recruitment purposes. For example, it is widely claimed that social media platforms increase speed of recruitment, effectiveness in recruiting passive candidates (i.e., those not currently looking for a new job), and conversion rates (Jobvite, 2012). In contrast, the scientific literature finds relatively little research that substantiates these claims (Braeugh, 2012; Brown & Vaughan, 2011; Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; McFarland, 2012).

The opportunities afforded by social media contexts may radically transform the nature of the traditional candidate-employer relationship. Candidates and employing organizations have historically had fairly tight control over the information and image presented to each other, resulting in information asymmetries (Bangerter, Roulin, & König, 2012; Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013). In contrast, social media contexts break down information barriers. For example, accessibility is greater in social media contexts because information internal to the firm is more open to outsiders. Websites such as Glassdoor consist of employees rating the quality of their employing organization—regardless of what organizational leaders may want their employees to be saying. Candidates can search Glassdoor postings and learn about the internal culture and climate of the firm (of course, the information on Glassdoor may not be balanced or representative). Similarly, prior recruiting research suggests that word-of-mouth is one of the most effective sourcing methods (Heneman & Judge, 2008). Social media enables the opportunity to advertise job postings through employee social media networks, and have employees spread the word about job openings. This is a digital version of word-of-mouth but on a scale that is faster (latency), includes a larger network (accessibility and interdependence), and is more geographically distributed (physicality). Finally, leveraging social media networks may enhance the recruitment of passive candidates because it is possible to search social media networks for qualified individuals more broadly than other channels. In these examples, the focus is not on the specific social media platform, but rather how the discrete ambient stimuli that exist in social media contexts enable the application of new approaches.

Recruiting is really a process of expanding and managing networks. Social media offers a natural bridge for connecting applicants and organizations. There are a number of practical benefits

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4 Note that we present directions for future research in the same table (i.e., Table 3) as practical benefits and risks. This is intentional to reinforce the idea that research needs and practice needs are closely aligned for social media. We hope this may in some modest way stimulate greater academic-practitioner collaboration around social media.
and risks that social media contexts generate. The main benefits include the potential to better source active and passive candidates in a manner that is more efficient, effective, faster, and offers greater ROI. The potential risks mainly involve Title VII Equal Employment Opportunity litigation caused by focusing on nonjob related factors or engaging in recruiting activities that may create disparate impact or disparate treatment.

**Selection**

Use of social media for selection is an area where there is a great discrepancy between research and practice (Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, 2013). A survey conducted in 2009 revealed that over 40% of the 2,600 managers who were surveyed indicated they used social media to help screen applicants (Haefner, 2009). HR personnel also frequently use social networking websites as reference checks for potential job candidates (Roberts & Roach, 2009). The prevalence of these practices is concerning because, to the extent that employers are being influenced by content that is not job-related, they are opening themselves to claims of disparate treatment and potentially disparate impact.

Despite growing use of social media in selection, there is little scholarly research that examines how to make hiring decisions in social media contexts (Roth et al., 2013). There have been three review articles discussing social media for selection (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Davison et al., 2011; Roth et al., 2013). Only three articles have published empirical findings on social media in selection contexts. Van Iddekinge, Lanivich, Roth, and Junco (in press) had recruiters view and rate Facebook pages. These ratings were unrelated to performance or turnover, and actually produced subgroup differences. Kluemper et al. (2012) found higher criterion-related validities for personality assessed via stranger ratings of candidate Facebook pages than are typically found using self-report personality measures. Finally, Kluemper and Rosen (2009) had raters view social networking profiles and found raters were consistent in their ratings of the profiles and could typically distinguish high from low performers. In addition, raters who were more intelligent and emotionally stable outperformed their counterparts.

Clearly, research must consider whether scores obtained using social media hiring methods produce reliability, validity, subgroup differences, applicant reactions, and ROI similar to alternative methods. However, if history is any guide, such research will tend to be practice- or technique-focused and not necessarily address the deeper underlying theoretical issues that explain why. For example, Van Iddekinge et al. (in press) focus only on Facebook, and the review of Roth et al. (2013) is selection-practice focused. In contrast, our social media framework prompts broad, theory-driven questions because it identifies which specific discrete ambient stimuli might affect hiring scores and decisions. For example, the permanence and verifiability dimensions of the social media framework suggest that candidate information on social media networks is easier to search and verify. Just as we know verifiability tends to reduce response distortion on noncognitive assessments (e.g., Schmitt & Kunce, 2002), so too might social media verifiability reduce response distortion in selection. Another important area to consider is whether social media contexts offer more accurate or valid inferences about KSAOs. Research has found that even laypeople can successfully interpret personality traits based solely on information included on an individual’s social networking website (Back et al., 2010; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009). To the extent that social media postings are more “honest” because of increased feelings of anonymity, it may be possible for recruiters to make valid inferences of applicant KSAOs.

There are clearly several issues that relate to the use of social media for making selection decisions, and these issues must be researched because of the substantial risk and cost of discrimination. The potential benefits of using social media for selection depend on a platforms’ ability to identify and measure job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities. If hiring managers and recruiters review social media sites and use information that is not job-related as a basis of hiring, or use information found on these sites that is false, then the organization will be exposed to considerable legal risk. Further, even if the organization does not intentionally use these sources to discriminate, perceptions of discrimination may be difficult to eliminate. Thus, the risks of using social media for selection are potentially great, even though organizations seem likely to use social media for hiring.

**Training, Development, and Knowledge Management**

The HR functions involving training, development, and knowledge management have in many ways been leading the application of social media to organizational settings (Jue et al., 2010). This is in part because the adjacent literature in education is currently at the forefront of social media research. However, the nature of educational research questions is sometimes of limited generalizability to organizational settings (e.g., education studies tend to be dominated with young people already using the technology). Further, there is still great variability because of a focus on specific platforms and little integrated guidance on what makes social media applications effective. To address this, Levy (2013) proposed that researchers use a common categorization of social media platforms for knowledge management activities. These categories are steps of social media involvement within knowledge management activities, with the first category including more basic social media functions (e.g., the use of bulletin boards) and the last step or category involving social media fully in knowledge management in terms of both the tools used and the participation (e.g., the use of wikis that can be amended by any organizational member). Although this approach is important, it fails to consider the broader contextual environment that social media creates for the employee.

Training research is often criticized as being faddish (Kraiger, McLinden, & Casper, 2004), but the social media framework helps direct future research in a programmatic manner. Each of the eight discrete ambient stimuli are expected to have direct and interactive relationships on training, development, and knowledge management. For example, social media platforms can be used as wikis or discussion boards to ask questions and share knowledge. These knowledge sharing platforms may be more effective than traditional practices because they are open (accessible) to more members (interdependent) from any location (physicality) in real time (latency and synchronicity), yet the posted content will be searchable (verifiable) in the future (permanence). Indeed, social media was instrumental in the response to the 2010 Haiti Earthquake. Yates and Paquette (2011) outline how three major U.S. agencies...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discrete ambient stimuli</th>
<th>Recruitment</th>
<th>Selection</th>
<th>Training, development, and knowledge management</th>
<th>Leadership, teamwork, and organizational culture</th>
<th>Socialization and engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physicality</td>
<td>Geographic location no longer constraining</td>
<td>Geographic location no longer constraining</td>
<td>Geographic location no longer constraining</td>
<td>Geographic location no longer constraining</td>
<td>Geographic location no longer constraining</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Greater access can enhance the breadth and speed of candidate sourcing</td>
<td>More open access to all employees; but potential for in-groups to form</td>
<td>More open access and exposure to leader, team members, and organizational culture</td>
<td>Connections with many internal and external members influences identification and engagement</td>
<td>Socialization may occur more quickly; disengagement may have faster negative effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latency</td>
<td>Spread of recruiting information is nearly instant</td>
<td>Faster review of applicant materials</td>
<td>Content can be posted or retrieved nearly instantly</td>
<td>Content can be posted or retrieved nearly instantly</td>
<td>Content can be posted or retrieved nearly instantly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interdependence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Synchronicity</td>
<td>Candidates can be sourced, or respond to recruiting messages, whenever convenient</td>
<td>Applicants may be assessed whenever convenient</td>
<td>Broad opportunities to share content; networks unfold however appropriate; broad network of experts</td>
<td>Opportunity to work synchronously or asynchronously as necessary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanence</td>
<td>Candidate-related content is searchable long after its posted</td>
<td>Candidate-related content is searchable long after its posted</td>
<td>Content is nearly permanent and exists long after members are gone</td>
<td>Content is nearly permanent and exists long after members are gone</td>
<td>Greater permanence may help or hurt socialization and engagement, depending on whether content is positive or negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verifiability</td>
<td>Candidate-related content can be verified</td>
<td>Candidate-related content can be verified</td>
<td>Content can be verified, corrected, updated as appropriate</td>
<td>Content can be verified, corrected, updated as appropriate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>Individuals may be more likely to spread negative information that hurts applicant attraction</td>
<td>Individuals may compromise test security by posting interview questions or test items</td>
<td>The source of information may be difficult to verify; a novice may be misperceived as an expert</td>
<td>Members may be more likely to share negative information that could have an effect on organizational culture</td>
<td>Opportunity for anonymity may lead to offensive or negative behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main benefits</td>
<td>Greater speed; more efficiency; higher conversion rates; sourcing of passive candidates; greater ROI</td>
<td>Greater speed; more efficiency; greater validity; enhance applicant reactions; greater ROI</td>
<td>Greater speed; more customization; greater efficiency; greater ROI</td>
<td>More consistent and widespread effects of leadership; stronger emergent group processes; greater shared sense of purpose and culture</td>
<td>Broader and more consistent exposure to the firm and its people facilitates socialization and engagement; connections to broader groups (e.g., customers) increases engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main risks</td>
<td>Disparate treatment; unequal access; chilling effects</td>
<td>Disparate treatment; disparate impact</td>
<td>Unequal access to training; less effective relative to traditional approaches</td>
<td>Creation of in-groups and out-groups; abusive or toxic leaders cause greater damage more quickly</td>
<td>Disengaged employees more capable of spreading negative information, more quickly and broadly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
Theoretical Questions and Practical Implications of Social Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key theoretical questions</th>
<th>Practical benefits</th>
<th>Practical risks</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Will research findings that demonstrate how specific features of traditional mediums (e.g., job postings, sourcing) affect applicant reactions to organizations (Heneman &amp; Judge, 2008) generalize to social media? Are social media faster, less expensive, and can they enhance candidate quality or offer greater ROI than traditional approaches?</td>
<td>• Source qualified candidates more effectively, efficiently, inexpensively, and with greater ROI.</td>
<td>• Potential violations of equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies, particularly with respect to Title VII legislation and subsequent additions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Are different social media platforms differentially useful for recruiting (e.g., does LinkedIn produce higher quality candidates than other platforms)? Are professional networking sites (e.g., LinkedIn) less likely to have personal and irrelevant information that may contaminate recruiting efforts?</td>
<td>• More effective sourcing of passive candidates not actively looking for new employment.</td>
<td>• Different demographic groups, or protected subgroups, may have differential access or usage of social media (Elefant, 2011; Slovensky &amp; Ross, 2011). To the extent that different classes protected by EEO legislation differentially use or have access to social media, an organization’s recruiting efforts may result in unequal access or sourcing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Which candidate subgroups use social media, or prefer to use social media? For example, even though minority individuals may be underrepresented on LinkedIn, it is possible that those minority individuals using LinkedIn are of higher quality.</td>
<td>• Provide more “high touch” recruiting experience.</td>
<td>• Customization in the recruiting message by the organization could create disparate treatment claims. For example, recruiters wishing to source candidates and tailor their recruiting message may treat some candidates more harshly or critically than others, for reasons that have little to do with job requirements. Similarly, information that is observed while sourcing using social media (e.g., potentially offensive personal content on Facebook) may violate laws separating personal and work life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What sources or social media platforms do candidates prefer? How much contact is ideal? Are candidates likely to be more or less trusting of recruiting messages presented over social media? Are candidates likely to be more or less honest when focusing their job search using social media?</td>
<td>• Greater customization of the recruiting message to a given candidate because one can view their preferences, content, postings, and related information.</td>
<td>• Recruiting using social media may generate more contacts, but not necessarily higher quality contacts. For example, generating more contacts who do not apply to the organization can cost additional time, money, and other resources. To the extent the recruiting process generates more applicants who are not qualified, ROI for recruiting will be diminished.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How should organizations communicate job openings within different social media contexts?</td>
<td>• Use of social media to leverage “friends of friends” or crowd-source candidates from friends or relationships. In effect, the organization can use social media as a means to generate employee or customer referrals (Brabham, 2010, 2008).</td>
<td>• How should candidates manage their social identities on social media (e.g., personal branding, Beal &amp; Strauss, 2008)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How should organizations communicate job openings within different social media contexts?</td>
<td>• Reinforcing and promoting the company’s brand may help differentiate itself from competitors. Such promotion may be easier to do with social media, particularly when content from marketing can be leveraged for recruiting purposes.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Key theoretical questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>• What is the validity, reliability, subgroup differences, and ROI, when scores are obtained from reviews of social media sites?</td>
<td>• It may be possible to collect job-related information without actively testing the candidate (Potosky, 2008). User-provided content on social media sites may allow recruiters or hiring managers to make inferences about underlying KSAOs. These inferences may have validity for predicting performance criteria, not unlike scores obtained from reference checks.</td>
<td>• Can hiring managers or recruiters that use social media avoid letting non-job-related information affect their decision-making? Even if an organization can be sure they ignore such information, are they still legally vulnerable?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Is content presented on social media sites more accurate than information provided via more traditional application methods?</td>
<td>• It may be possible to collect job-related information in a manner that captures more honest responses (Potosky, 2008). If candidates are more likely to present their “true” personalities and preferences on social media sites, then it is possible that information obtained by reviewing such sites could be more accurate than information obtained through the use of interviews or personality tests.</td>
<td>• Does the use of social media for selection expose the organization to multiple forms of legal risk? For example, not all protected subgroups will have equal access to social media, nor will all groups be equally engaged with social media. Similarly, the inconsistent nature of social media searches opens up firms to claims based on disparate treatment.</td>
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<td>• Is information collected via social media sites consistent with application materials, and what are the implications of discrepancies?</td>
<td>• Hiring managers and recruiters may find more value in searching social media sites. Those involved in hiring often react negatively to the required use of structured interviews, for example, but it is possible that using structured methods (e.g., rating scorecards) to review social media sites may be seen as more acceptable and informative.</td>
<td>• Scores based on reviews of social media content may not be reliable or valid for their intended purposes (see Kluemper, Rosen &amp; Mossholder, 2012; and Van Iddekinge et al., in press for initial findings regarding this question).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can valid inferences of traits or KSAOs be obtained from social media content? Which specific features of applicant social networking sites most influence impressions? See Back et al. (2010) and Kluemper &amp; Rosen (2009) for initial findings on these issues.</td>
<td>• How do applicants react to the use of social media in the hiring process? Are applicants more favorable when they are told beforehand that social media information will be used in the hiring process? Which procedural justice rules are violated or satisfied by specific social media procedures?</td>
<td>• There may be a variety of subgroup differences with respect to the psychometric characteristics underlying scores on social media. Preliminary research suggests that Facebook ratings may be biased in favor of Female and White applicants (Van Iddekinge et al., in press).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What specific content has the strongest effect on subsequent employer impressions? What types of work or non-work postings lead to negative/positive impressions?</td>
<td>• It may be possible to collect job-related information without actively testing the candidate (Potosky, 2008). User-provided content on social media sites may allow recruiters or hiring managers to make inferences about underlying KSAOs. These inferences may have validity for predicting performance criteria, not unlike scores obtained from reference checks.</td>
<td>• Twenty-nine states have adopted lifestyle statues that restrict employers from considering off-duty activities, such as drinking or smoking, in hiring or termination decisions as long as the off-duty activities have no employment related consequences (Elefant, 2011). Does the same hold true if an organization collects information from social media sources?</td>
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<td>• Can valid inferences of traits or KSAOs be obtained from social media content? Which specific features of applicant social networking sites most influence impressions? See Back et al. (2010) and Kluemper &amp; Rosen (2009) for initial findings on these issues.</td>
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<td>How do the social media discrete ambient stimuli affect the best practices for training,</td>
<td>Social media may allow for employee development and knowledge sharing in a manner</td>
<td>The quality of training, development, or knowledge management may not be as effective with social media</td>
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<td>development, and knowledge management? Are these practices more effective, result in</td>
<td>that is more effective, less expensive, faster, and more user-friendly than</td>
<td>than with alternative approaches.</td>
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<td>greater ROI, or more efficient than traditional approaches? Are there specific foci for</td>
<td>traditional approaches (Ong, Lai, &amp; Wang, 2004; Piccoli, Ahmad, &amp; Ives, 2001).</td>
<td>The success of social media for training and development is highly dependent on the quality of</td>
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<td>training, development, or knowledge sharing that are better suited for social media</td>
<td>Social media may provide greater access and faster access to information, development,</td>
<td>information provided, and whether users actually employ the various platforms for productive</td>
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<td>contexts?</td>
<td>and knowledge for employees located in different geographic regions, and in a</td>
<td>purposes.</td>
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<td>How might an organization ensure everyone is contributing and maximizing use of social</td>
<td>manner that’s more personally convenient.</td>
<td>Some employees do not learn well in digital environments</td>
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<tr>
<td>media for training, development, or learning (Bechmann &amp; Lomborg, 2013)? Is it possible</td>
<td>Employees usually rely on social networks for knowledge acquisition when problem</td>
<td>(Lee, Hsieh, &amp; Hsu, 2011). Older employees, or those less familiar with computers, may not know how</td>
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<td>to avoid the development of “in groups?” Are such groups harmful to knowledge sharing</td>
<td>solving (Allen, 1977; Cross, Parker, Prusak, &amp; Borgatti, 2001), so social media</td>
<td>to use social media effectively, or are unwilling to use it.</td>
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<td>over social media?</td>
<td>networks could effectively replace traditional methods. This may provide broader</td>
<td>Not all employees will have equal access to social media</td>
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<td>What types of pre-existing organizational or individual characteristics must exist for</td>
<td>access to more people and is searchable (i.e., lasts beyond any particular members</td>
<td>(Elefant, 2011). To the extent access is related to protected subgroups (e.g., as defined in EEO or</td>
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<tr>
<td>social media platforms to be effective for training, development, or knowledge sharing?</td>
<td>who may contribute to the information).</td>
<td>Title VII legislation), then use of social media could result in discrimination or legal</td>
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<td>What are the personal, social, or environmental factors that most influence employee</td>
<td>Discussion boards are a good way to share knowledge very quickly and among a large</td>
<td>challenges.</td>
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<td>motivation for using social media?</td>
<td>group of people. Someone may post a question or start a thread about a useful way of</td>
<td>Some social media tools can grow unwieldy, making it difficult to find the information needed</td>
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<td>To what extent does status within the organization influence knowledge sharing (or vice</td>
<td>doing something that they discovered. Discussion boards can be public or accessibility</td>
<td>(Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, &amp; Mishne, 2008; Yates &amp; Paquette, 2011).</td>
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<td>versa)?</td>
<td>can be limited (Hufaker, 2010).</td>
<td>There may be negative personal or organizational consequences for using social media for training,</td>
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<td>Does sharing knowledge via social media contribute to job satisfaction or organizational</td>
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<td>development, or knowledge sharing. For example, individuals who communicate via social</td>
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<td>commitment and identification?</td>
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<td>media are more likely to share similar attitudes (Rice &amp; Aydin, 1991). This can create in-groups</td>
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<td>How can an organization monitor discussion boards and what might an organization do when</td>
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<td>and out-groups, and contribute to feelings of exclusion. Similarly, different demographic</td>
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<td>someone unqualified is emerging as a leader? Should the organization appoint</td>
<td></td>
<td>groups have different access, which can contribute to EEO and Title VII litigation.</td>
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<td>administrators who are labeled as knowledge leaders to monitor activity and correct</td>
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<td>misinformation?</td>
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• Social media may allow for employee development and knowledge sharing in a manner that is more effective, less expensive, faster, and more user-friendly than traditional approaches (Ong, Lai, & Wang, 2004; Piccoli, Ahmad, & Ives, 2001).
• Social media may provide greater access and faster access to information, development, and knowledge for employees located in different geographic regions, and in a manner that’s more personally convenient.
• Employees usually rely on social networks for knowledge acquisition when problem solving (Allen, 1977; Cross, Parker, Prusak, & Borgatti, 2001), so social media networks could effectively replace traditional methods. This may provide broader access to more people and is searchable (i.e., lasts beyond any particular members who may contribute to the information).
• Discussion boards are a good way to share knowledge very quickly and among a large group of people. Someone may post a question or start a thread about a useful way of doing something that they discovered. Discussion boards can be public or accessibility can be limited (Hufaker, 2010).
• The quality of training, development, or knowledge management may not be as effective with social media than with alternative approaches.
• The success of social media for training and development is highly dependent on the quality of information provided, and whether users actually employ the various platforms for productive purposes.
• Some employees do not learn well in digital environments (Lee, Hsieh, & Hsu, 2011). Older employees, or those less familiar with computers, may not know how to use social media effectively, or are unwilling to use it.
• Not all employees will have equal access to social media (Elefant, 2011). To the extent access is related to protected subgroups (e.g., as defined in EEO or Title VII legislation), then use of social media could result in discrimination or legal challenges.
• Some social media tools can grow unwieldy, making it difficult to find the information needed (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008; Yates & Paquette, 2011).
• There may be negative personal or organizational consequences for using social media for training, development, or knowledge sharing. For example, individuals who communicate via social media are more likely to share similar attitudes (Rice & Aydin, 1991). This can create in-groups and out-groups, and contribute to feelings of exclusion. Similarly, different demographic groups have different access, which can contribute to EEO and Title VII litigation.
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<td><strong>Leadership, teamwork, and organizational culture</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• How do the social media discrete ambient stimuli influence leadership emergence or leadership effectiveness?</td>
<td>Leaders may be more effective under different social media contexts. For example, social media can give more followers access to information in a more consistent manner. Social media contexts could allow greater transparency between leaders and followers. At the very least, social media may make it easier for the leader to convey his or her vision.</td>
<td>Leaders who are narcissistic, incompetent, or otherwise ineffective, may use social media to spread destructive visions and direction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• What features of social media convey the impression of leadership? How is the use of social media for this purpose related to true leadership ability?</td>
<td>Social media may contribute to higher quality collaborations. Team emergent processes such as cohesion, trust, transactive memory, and so on, may emerge more quickly and more strongly in social media contexts.</td>
<td>Leader emotional contagion may spread more quickly in social media contexts. The effects of a toxic individual may be more impactful and harder to overcome in social media networks, because the negative information can be spread farther, faster, and with greater permanence.</td>
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<td>• How does social media influence, enhance, or diminish teamwork? Many of the principles that underlie group dynamics are based on groups of small size interacting primarily face-to-face. Will these same principles apply to social media contexts? Are there ways of structuring social media exchanges to facilitate teamwork and collaboration?</td>
<td>Group problem solving or innovation may happen more quickly in social media contexts. Crowdsourcing may leverage “the wisdom of crowds” and hence lead to higher quality solutions (Estellés &amp; González, 2012).</td>
<td>Social media may stifle teamwork or team effectiveness. Social media may result in groupthink (Janis, 1972) and produce poor decision-making (Esser, 1998; Turner &amp; Pratkanis, 1998). Similarly, if highly participative members on social networks become equated as being thought leaders (Wenger et al., 2002), then otherwise incompetent people have too much influence. Social media may also slow down decision making when too many ideas of questionable quality are pursued.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can social media create, change, or enhance organizational culture? Can an organization use social media to perpetuate its culture and create more positive support for programs more quickly? How can leaders use social media to create or change a culture?</td>
<td>Social media may contribute to reinforcing or enhancing the company culture. Because social media create a community of members who interact and share information, the values representing the company’s culture may become more widely known and shared.</td>
<td>Social media can damage the organization’s culture. Social media may be used to gripe and complain (Gossett &amp; Kilker, 2006). These complaints may be visible to others within the organization or the broader community, are searchable, and may exist for years on the Internet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can organizational culture be identified and managed by observing exchanges on social media? Leaders may espouse one type of culture or vision, but it does not mean employees necessarily buy into it. Could monitoring social media help managers identify the extent to which their visions are supported or endorsed? Can monitoring social media be used as a diagnostic tool for organizational change and development?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social media may contribute to the formation of subgroups of “in-group” members, hence leading to lower inclusion.</td>
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<td><strong>Socialization and engagement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• How can social media be used to effectively and efficiently socialize new employees? What are the best practices with social media that produce positive outcomes for individuals and organizations? How does socialization that is conducted in social media contexts compare to socialization conducted in traditional contexts?</td>
<td>Social media contexts may help socialization occur more quickly and consistently. Having new employees join social media networks can increase the speed of socialization because employees will have access to a much broader network. Further, the information is searchable and can be used for later cohorts of employees (e.g., an ongoing “frequently asked questions” page).</td>
<td>Social media contexts may not provide sufficient opportunities for socialization. It is possible that social media contexts only provide superficial information that, while valuable, lacks the depth needed to get employees assimilated and identified with the firm. Further, if inconsistent information is presented, then new employees may become confused and their socialization may take longer.</td>
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<td>• Is it possible to provide effective mentoring over social media? For which types of employees, mentors, or mentor-mentee relationships might this approach be best?</td>
<td>Use of social media for mentoring can expand the opportunities for learning and exposure to broader parts of the organization (DiRenzo, Linnehan, Shao, &amp; Rosenberg, 2010). A challenge with mentoring programs is ensuring that the mentor has the expertise and ability to be effective, and the time to be fully engaged. Moving some features of mentoring to social media contexts may allow an employee to have access to multiple mentors simultaneously, and in turn, each mentor being engaged without having to bear the entire responsibility of the employee’s development.</td>
<td>Social media contexts may not provide the kind of individualized attention needed for effective mentoring. If the mentor-mentee relationship occurs primarily over social media, then it is possible that the communication will be primarily one-sided and coming from the mentor. Further, the mentor may not learn as much about the mentee as with more traditional approaches, which could reduce opportunities for learning and exposure to the broader organization. For example, social media contexts may not provide opportunities to develop trust and commitment to each other.</td>
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<td>• How might social media contexts facilitate employee engagement? Does having more formal and/or informal social media connections increase job embeddedness?</td>
<td>Social media can enhance engagement by connecting users to others within the firm, as well as customers and end-users (Grant, 2007).</td>
<td>Social media contexts may contribute to disengagement. Allowing forums for employees to vent might backfire and result in unproductive communication that would involve nothing more than complaints and personal attacks. These may ultimately lead to negative emotional consequences and acts of retaliation. This might contribute to the erosion of organizational culture, leading to increased turnover and lower engagement.</td>
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<td>• Does socialization in social media contexts broaden opportunities for new employees to learn more about the organization, its leaders, or other coworkers? Does social media allow more equal access to the organization’s leadership?</td>
<td>Internal boards that allow employees to vent anonymously may allow managers to gain important information (Gossett &amp; Kilker, 2006; Simons, 2001; Wong, 2009) and these outlets may be good for employee well-being as they allow employees to let out negative emotions (Kulk, Pepper, Shapiro, &amp; Cogan, 2011).</td>
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<td>• How should organizations deal with unaffiliated forums that allow employees from their organization to vent publicly? What kind of damage control is most effective? Is it best for the organization to address the rumors directly or not to acknowledge them?</td>
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<td>• Are there benefits to employer sanctioned venting websites? How can they best be managed to ensure they lead to positive outcomes for the organization and the employees? Are any positive benefits of venting dependent on how it is used?</td>
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coordinated their efforts with the Haiti government and the United Nations by using wikis and collaborative technologies (such as SharePoint). It allowed the agencies to quickly share important information that may have ultimately saved lives. On the other hand, so many people were sharing information about the disaster it quickly became redundant, making it more difficult to search the database and find relevant information quickly. Further, research suggests that members of discussion boards tend to break off into smaller groups. These smaller groups are more likely to share their knowledge with each other than with the larger discussion group (Lin & Chiou, 2010). This can stifle knowledge sharing at the detriment of those not in the “in” group.

Similarly, research needs to identify the individual and organizational characteristics that relate to social media use for training, development, or knowledge sharing purposes. With respect to personal characteristics, preliminary research suggests that employee attitudes toward social media technology may relate to the extent to which employees engage in social media for knowledge sharing (Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Pelling & White, 2009). Individuals are more likely to contribute knowledge to social media sites when they feel their input is being recognized or used by others (Greenhow, 2010; Liang, Ho, Li, & Turban, 2011; Lin & Chiou, 2010). Further, individuals who feel supported by other users are more likely to contribute to online discussions (Liang et al., 2011). Thus, it seems different motivations are present when one seeks information than when one contributes information to such sites (Boh, Ren, Kiesler, & Bussjaeger, 2007; Wilkesmann, Wilesman, & Virgillito, 2009).

Organizational characteristics are also important to consider (Decarie, 2010). For example, Magnier-Watanabe, Yoshida, and Watanabe (2010) examined how the use of an intranet-based social networking platform affected business connections and cost-savings across several industries and occupations. It was found that companies that benefited the most from the use of such platforms initially had higher social capital and innovativeness. Further, Flanagan (2002) noted that technology used to manage and share knowledge should consider not only the types of knowledge they are designed to capture, but also the features of the technological platforms and the social dynamics among organizational members.

Overall, the benefits of social media rely primarily on enabling a broader network of relevant expertise and making it accessible to more people, and available whenever (asynchronous, latency) and wherever (physicality) they need it. Legal risk is certainly present with social media in training. For example, if employees consult social media for solutions that later prove to be catastrophic, it may result in serious liability on the part of the organization. However, most of the risk has to do with ensuring access is equal and consistent (e.g., accessibility).

Leadership, Teamwork, and Organizational Culture/Climate

This section combines leadership, teamwork, and culture/climate for two reasons. First, they are highly interrelated. Leadership is fundamentally about setting direction, managing meaning, and creating change (Avolio, Sosik, & Berson, 2013). Second, we could not find any theory or research that speaks directly to examining social media’s impact on leadership, teamwork, or culture. That said, there is a relevant literature on virtual teams that is closely related and can be used to help inform research on social media (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000).

Social media are relevant to leadership, teamwork, and culture because they are fundamentally about connecting people and information through relationships. The highly accessible, interdependent, and asynchronous nature of social media environments may facilitate the building of teamwork, culture, and a shared sense of purpose. For example, CEO blogs describing the company’s strategy, challenges, and financial information may raise support for the strategy and build rapport with the leader. However, a key question is whether the digital environment can by itself create such shared identity, or whether it can only supplement direct (face-to-face) interactions (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). Similarly, because social media contexts are more accessible, leadership and leader emergence may take on a different nature (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). For example, some literature in nonorganizational settings suggests that those who are most active and answer questions are more likely to be perceived as a leader (Lin & Chiou, 2010). Informal leadership may be more likely to evolve in social media contexts.

Relatively, the ambient stimuli of physicality, asynchronicity, and interdependence suggest that group dynamics may be quite different in social media contexts (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). For example, social media contexts offer greater potential for interdependence, access, and timeliness (latency and synchronicity), regardless of physical location. These contextual attributes should foster many emergent group processes even when group members are geographically distributed (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). And yet, the nature of social media contexts will shape the nature of group interactions and these emergent processes in ways different from those considered in past virtual teams research because different platforms enable or constrain different patterns of member interactions. Finally, social media contexts may shape culture or produce culture change. Formal organizational policies and practices may seek to create a particular culture, but informal interactions over social networks could distort this culture or even lead to the presence of multiple subcultures; particularly if postings are anonymous.

Overall, social media contexts offer many potential benefits for leadership emergence, effectiveness, facilitating teamwork, and building or changing culture. The ability to communicate and collaborate anywhere, anytime, with all relevant parties, and on one’s own schedule, offers tremendous potential for leadership and teambuilding. On the other hand, the widespread access to people and information may also create risks. For example, the negative effects of one toxic or abusive individual can be spread more quickly and more widely in social media contexts. Similarly, social media contexts may facilitate the fracturing of groups into subgroups and hence the creation of in- and out-groups. Organizational leaders may lose their ability to control or influence culture and norms, as informal social media networks may undermine organizationally sanctioned networks. The main benefits—as well as risks—have to do with inclusion.

Note that we discuss culture and climate together. Although they are different phenomena, there is so little social media research on either topic that we refer to them jointly as culture for convenience.
Socialization and Engagement

Socialization and engagement relate to how employees come to understand and become assimilated into the organization. Assimilation occurs in terms of aligning values and identifying with the company, its leadership, and its employees. Socialization includes those formal and informal interactions that contribute to new employees becoming assimilated into the organization. Engagement captures the range of employee attitudes, such that more strongly identified and assimilated employees should become more engaged and hence more productive.

The proposed social media contextual framework provides many new questions for understanding socialization and engagement. For example, the fact that social media contexts are unaffected by physical location means more employees may be socialized with more consistent messages and experiences. Socialization and interdependence might facilitate identity with the firm because employees can interact with more members, and at times when it is convenient (i.e., asynchronously). Engagement may increase because employees have more opportunities to share experiences and interact with others, including customers (e.g., Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). For example, research by Grant (2007) suggests that being able to communicate with the recipients of one’s work enhances engagement, and the ability of such communication is more possible within social media contexts. On the other hand, when users remain anonymous, more destructive types of behavior and content are manifested (Douglas & McGarty, 2001). Disengaged employees may spread such information quickly and widely, and hence increase disengagement more than if it was localized.

Thus, the potential benefits with using social media primarily involve more widespread and consistent exposure to organizational information, and the establishment of social networks within the firm that enhance engagement. The biggest danger is that negative information can spread quickly and on a massive scale. This can in turn erode new employees’ assimilation into the organization, perhaps contributing to earlier turnover and low morale. Some of the most interesting social media topics have to do with employees spreading negative information about their organization, coworkers, or supervisor. Using social media for spreading discontent blurs the line between personal and professional. This topic can have important organizational ramifications, but there is little scientific research addressing it in the literature.

Implications. Social media contexts clearly overlap, interrelate, and interact with organizational contexts. 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. The field of applied psychology has great scientific sophistication and appreciation of practical and legal considerations in nondigital contexts, and this knowledge should be integrated with social media contexts to better inform practice. Identifying the major opportunities, threats, and theoretical questions about social media use in organizations thus offers an important contribution in guiding future research.

A Critical Concluding Question

We end the discussion of social media by considering a broadly critical question, but one that speaks to the heart of issues around social media: To what extent do social media contexts require significant revision of organizational theories and practices? We answer this question by going back to the proposed framework and restating its major contributions, but this time starting with the practical and moving to the theoretical.

First, while EEO and Title VII legislation still apply to social media, as do psychometric and technical standards such as reliability and validity, it is clear that social media contexts require new interpretations of these standards, principles, and practices. Employers are using social media on a widespread scale (Society for Human Resource Management, 2011). Never in history has it been so easy for an employer to learn so much about an employee or potential employee. It is because of these profound differences that organizations such as the National Labor Review Board have taken aggressive initiatives to influence the evolving legislation around social media, and regulatory agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have released reports and press statements to assist employers (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2014). Thus, one important contribution of this article is to consider from a scientific perspective the opportunities and threats social media creates in a manner that can inform responsible professional practice.

Second, social media contexts may offer new insights, and possibly require significant revisions, of existing theories of organizational behavior. Critiques of research in organizational psychology and organizational behavior have routinely bemoaned the lack of context (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Heath & Sitkin, 2001; Johns, 2006; Mischel, 1969; Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). One common theme in these critiques is that a consideration of context will transform the nature of more person-focused theories. Manipulating or varying the eight ambient stimuli that distinguish social media from other contexts may offer many new and interesting tests of existing theories, and perhaps even the revision of commonly accepted findings. For example, those wanting to conduct a laboratory study can now identify which specific features they want to manipulate. Those wanting to conduct a field study can compare and contrast platforms based on their underlying attributes (perhaps even administering measures of the eight ambient stimuli in a manner similar to manipulation checks in experiments). An understanding of these contextual features thus allows scholars to make meaningful comparisons across contexts; an approach that has proven to be vital for understanding small group behavior (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Steiner, 1972).

Finally, developing the proposed social media contextual framework illuminates what is unique and what is shared across other contexts. The proposed contextual framework offers an organized, holistic, and programmatic way for social media research and practice to proceed. Lacking such a framework, research will likely be practice or technique-driven. Research findings are likely to be piecemeal and poorly integrated. For example, will a study on recruiting using LinkedIn generalize to a study on recruiting using Facebook, and will either study differ from research using traditional recruiting methods? Few new theoretical insights are likely to be gained by this approach because the underlying attributes that explain differences are not part of the design or theory. Furthermore, because the platforms are those that are human-constructions, changes in technology (such as moving to Web 3.0) may lead to platforms like Facebook or LinkedIn disappearing . . . along with the scientific research that was based on them. Thus, a
theory-based understanding of social media offers a scientific foundation that is useful regardless of what platforms are popular at the moment. It also will prove useful for understanding how new technologies may be similar or different to existing platforms, and predicting how those differences may influence cognition, affect, and behavior. A major contribution of the proposed framework is that it identifies those underlying contextual features—the eight discrete ambient stimuli—that explain why any such differences might exist.

Of course, the proposed framework is only a starting point. Future theoretical and empirical research will be needed to move from propositions to testable hypotheses. For example, it may well be that the eight discrete ambient stimuli need refinement. The stimuli may be deficient or contaminated, or they may be too few or too many. Based on the limited literature that currently exists, we purposely chose to err on the side of inclusion, but future research needs to consider this issue further. A particularly important issue that is beyond the scope of this article, is how content may interact with context. For example, does conveying or responding to negative information benefit from face-to-face contexts more than social media contexts? Finally, understanding how nondigital and social media contexts interrelate is a critical direction for future research. Most employees slide between these two extremes multiple times every day. Does bouncing between these contexts have consequences on cognition, affect, or behavior? Does bouncing between contexts make one more productive, more stressed, or more creative? Research should examine multiple contexts simultaneously.

We also only briefly considered the multilevel nature of social media contexts. We noted that the omnibus and discrete ambient stimuli are nested, that social media stimuli may influence the nature of emergence, and that the ambient stimuli may produce direct and cross-level interactions on lower level cognition, affect and behavior. However, research needs to develop richer theoretical models of how this occurs for different theories and phenomena. Indeed, social media contexts might often be nested within the nondigital (physical) context. For example, different nondigital contexts (e.g., organizational, home, or church) may influence or interact with the omnibus social media context and stimuli. Effect sizes and relationships for social media practices could change depending on the nature of the nondigital contexts. Such possibilities are beyond the scope of this article, but we think this is an interesting avenue for future research.

Similarly, we did not touch upon methodological and analytical issues. We suspect traditional methods will apply, but the contextual nature of social media will obviously require greater use of multilevel models such as hierarchical linear modeling and multilevel structural equation modeling. However, we suspect the networked nature of social media will also require adapting or extending social network analysis methodologies. For example, many firms are now analyzing social media interaction patterns under the rubric of “big data.” These analyses are based on millions of pieces of data obtained from within an evolving network of relationships. We speculate that fully understanding and analyzing social media networks will require a fusion of multilevel network analysis modeling; a fusion that will require the development of new methods.

Thus, there are many important questions that need to be addressed, and the proposed framework offers an introduction into such research. A lack of research-based best practices limits the ability to capitalize on the benefits and avoid the risks, for both individuals and organizations. This is an area that is complex, intersects many disciplines, and is quickly evolving. Researchers will need to blend a variety of theoretical, methodological, and analytical approaches. These challenges are not to be avoided but embraced. Social media has the potential to offer benefits for organizations that develop appropriate policies and practices. It is vital that scholarly research begin to identify these best policies and practices to help organizations do so. We believe a broad, theoretical understanding of social media as a distinct context has the potential to strongly direct future research and practice for many years, and provide the impetus for more systematic scholarly attention on this important global phenomenon.

References


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