

Social Media Friendships with Direct Supervisors: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Social media in modern companies can connect workers with their supervisors in myriad ways via multiple platforms. This study analyzes the perceived relationships between workers and their supervisors using the theoretical framework of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) and Psychological Contract Violation (PCV). The role of social media in the workplace in terms of privacy and trust between workers and their supervisors and workers' organizational commitment was analyzed. Demographic information, communication channels (platforms), and the source of the social media relationship request were also considered. An online survey of full and part-time employees yielded a diverse sample of 327 participants. This social media privacy research is consistent with previous literature on email privacy. Both Concern about Organizational Infringement (COI) and PCV influenced perceptions of (supervisor) trust. Additionally, PCV and trust influenced perceptions of affective organizational commitment. Implications of the results are discussed.

Introduction

Recent estimates suggest that there are over two billion users of social media worldwide (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017). According to the Pew Research Center, social media has "some" role to play in the daily lives of workers. Whether for a distraction or to connect for another professional reason, their research contends that the role is not always clear (Pew Research Center, 2016). Additionally, 17% of their respondents indicated that they use social media to improve their relationships at work. Yet, while 14% of those workers report a positive outcome for such connections, 16% have not.

Workers reported that having an employer with a social media policy results in less usage of social media. That said, those workers who do use social media have stated that they will use it to improve their professional relationships. Workers have also indicated that they may use social media to strengthen *personal* relationships.

Workers must, therefore, make some considerations about what parts of their social media world are private and what parts may be open to employer scrutiny. This implies that because some workers choose to use some social media channels to develop personal relationships with other professionals, including members of their own organizations, then workers may also have implicit rules about the privacy of those channels, the boundaries around their social media content, and what happens when professional and personal lives become blurred in the social media world.

Communication privacy has been explored in organizational literature. In recent years, that research has focused on workplace email surveillance, employee expectations of privacy and their impact on

workplace relationships and organizational outcomes (D'Urso, 2006; Walker, 2017). This study hopes to extend that research by exploring worker feelings of social media privacy and how those feelings influence key workplace variables.

Specifically, this study examines the role of social media in the workplace in terms of privacy and trust between workers and their supervisors and ultimately the workers' commitment to the organization. Like past workplace email privacy research (e.g., Snyder & Cistulli, 2011), this study uses communication privacy management and psychological contract violation literature as the lens through which it will explore workers' perceptions of social media privacy and how that relates to perceived psychological contract violation, supervisor trust, and affective organizational commitment.

Communication Privacy Management

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) explains people's management of the open-closed dialectic in relationships. In every relationship, people try to seek the appropriate balance between how open they are and how closed off they are from their relational partners. This balance is achieved by developing boundaries through privacy rules and seeking rebalance when boundary turbulence occurs (Petronio, 2001). The management of boundaries in relationships and the balance between private and public information shared are important because openness requires vulnerability and trust (Allen et. al, 2007). When relational partners violate privacy boundaries, they violate trust given to them. In the interaction between individuals, the amount of information that is disclosed or revealed help manage these boundaries (Petronio, 2007). This study explores employees' perception of boundary violations regarding social media privacy.

Psychological Contract Violation and Social Media Privacy

Psychological contracts (PCs) are the perceptions of employees regarding obligations between themselves and their company. These obligations are not legal contracts. Workers develop expectations outside of the contract that applies to their relationship with their employers (Rousseau, 1989; Rousseau 2001; Turnley & Feldman, 2000; van den Huevel, 2016). When employers fail to meet their obligations, that results in feelings of PC violation. Because PC violation is premised on exchange theory, workers will attempt to rebalance the relationship by doing things like reducing their levels of commitment (Snyder & Cistulli, 2011). Previous research from Snyder and Cornetto (2009), when examining email privacy, showed that violation of the psychological contract will have negative impact on the relationships an employee has with his/her company. That research has also shown that email privacy violation led to a poor relationship between superiors and subordinates and therefore decreased trust. Email is certainly a different channel than social media channels.

Work email is generally provided by and controlled by the employer. Social media accounts, by contrast, are typically created by individuals outside of work and used as a means of connecting with other in a social world. But use of both email and social media technologies has been influenced by the blurring of the personal/professional worlds. Professional emails are often used as social outlets, and as technology becomes more integrated, it is possible the same perceptions of boundary violation can occur. While email starts professionally and ends up in many cases being used for personal purposes, social media has leaked into the workplace. So, they can exist on opposite ends of the e-spectrum, but both share potential overlaps between work life and personal life.

Supervisor Trust

Trust is making oneself vulnerable; it is an openness to another (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Trust has also been defined as accepting this vulnerability in the hopes of gaining positive feedback from another (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Trust between a supervisor and an employee can be complicated because monitoring of social media can be done without the employee knowing. Downs and Adrian (2004) showed that trust is essential to the superior-subordinate relationship. Trust is an important influence on the quality of communication between a subordinate and superior (Klauss and Bass, 1982; Kramer, 2017). Management can be perceived as an agent of trust by an employee, so any breach in trust by a supervisor could be viewed as failure of the company to keep its commitment (Lester, Turnley, Blodgood, & Bolino, 2002).

In terms of e-mail monitoring, even if employees are accepting of current company policies, they still feel they have a right to privacy at work (Allen, Coopman, Hart, & Walker, 2007). This study explores whether perceptions of trust are impacted between a subordinate and his/her supervisor.

Organizational Commitment

Previous literature has shown that employees can commit to their organization in three dimensions: continuance, normative, and affective (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Continuance commitment refers to the cost of leaving an organization. Normative commitment refers to an employee's belief that they are "doing the right thing" by sticking with the organization. Affective commitment is the emotional connection to the company. Affective commitment is more closely related to positive job outcomes including job performance (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), turnover (Naumann, 1993) and burnout (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolonytsky, 2002) and so, for the purposes of this study, it is one of the measured variables.

Consistent with the research described above, the following hypotheses were considered:

- H1: Supervisor trust will increase as concern about organizational infringement increase.
- H2: Perceptions of psychological contract violation will increase as concern about organizational infringement increases.
- H3: Perceptions of psychological contract violation will partially mediate the relationship between concern about organizational infringement and supervisor trust.
- H4: Affective organizational commitment will decrease as perceptions psychological contract violation increase.
- H5: Supervisor trust will decrease as perceptions of psychological contract violation increase.
- H6: Supervisor trust will partially mediate the relationship between psychological contract violation and affective organizational commitment.

Methods

Procedure and Participants

Online data were gathered using Amazon's Mechanical (MTurk). MTurk is online system where individuals serve as participants. These participants (called "workers") review posted jobs and decide which ones to complete. The system is designed to encourage quality work because "requesters (the researchers who designed the study)" can limit access to tasks by refusing to pay for incomplete or low-quality participation. Participants for this study were compensated \$.50 for their completion of the

survey. This tool has been shown to provide consistent data collection and compares favorably to traditional sampling techniques (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosline, 2011).

Participants for this study had to be employed (either part-time or full-time, but not self-employed) and 18 years old or older. Eighty percent of the survey respondents reported working full time. Upon responding to the researchers' ad for "workers" on MTurk, the participants were invited to click on a link to participate in this study. The link directed the participants to the informed consent page for the study. Once participants gave their consent, they were directed to this study's survey. After completing the survey, the participants were provided with a unique code that they could report to MTurk in order to receive their compensation.

The sampling technique provided 327 participants. The distribution of male and female respondents was 44% and 56% respectively with an average age of 34 ($sd = 11$). Many racial and ethnic backgrounds including White (73%), Asian (11%), Black (7%), Hispanic (6%), and Native American (1%). Just over 1% identified as either bi/multiracial or "other."

The educational background also varied with participants, indicating that they had: only a high school diploma (10%), some college (18%), a completed undergraduate degree (40%), some graduate school (14%), a master's degree (16%) or a doctorate (2%).

Respondents were asked in which industry they worked. There was a broad number of industries represented including high tech (12%), manufacturing (11%), service (16%), retail (13.5%), public service (6%), banking (7.5%), energy/utilities (1%), education (13%), and insurance (3%). Sixteen percent of those surveyed indicated that they worked outside of these classifications.

The overall Household Income (HHI) of respondents was measured. The overall sample indicated that respondents earned less than \$10,000 (4%), between \$10,000 and \$25,000 (5%), between \$25,000 and \$50,000 (13%), between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (23%), between \$100,000 and \$150,000 (40%), between \$150,000 and \$200,000, and \$200,000 or more (4%).

Because this study was concerned with perceptions related to social media usage, the respondents were asked to identify the social media channels they use and the rates of that usage. The respondents reported that 88% used Facebook, 52% used Twitter, 27% used Snapchat, 55% used Instagram, 24% used LinkedIn, and 5% reported using some other channel. Those other channels included Pinterest, Tumblr, and Reddit. A full 75% of respondents reported having using more than one social media channel. The average respondent reported using social media for 3.8 hours per day.

The study measured respondents' personal, social connections with their work supervisors on social media. A total of 208 (61.7%) respondents reported having a social connection with a supervisor on a social media channel. Respondents were asked to indicate who made the connection request (respondent or supervisor), whether the request was made in person or online, and to identify on which social media channels these connections exist (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Other). In addition, in cases where respondents indicated that they had a social connection with a supervisor in social media, they were asked to think of the most recent supervisor they befriended and to identify age and gender of the supervisor. Of all respondents, 62% were connected with their supervisor, 52% made the request online (vs. in person), and 56% of them made the request to the supervisor (vs. the supervisor him/herself making the request). Finally, 60% of the supervisors identified by respondents were male.

Of those who connected with their supervisor, FB = 89% did so through Facebook, 28% through Twitter, 13% through Snapchat, 31% through Instagram, and 15% through LinkedIn. There was another category provided to identify other platforms through which to communicate, but no respondents reported connecting to their supervisor through those listed. Other platforms include, YouTube, Reddit, and Tumblr, among others. In total, 54% reported using one platform, 25% reported two, 14% reported three, 4% reported four, and 3% reported five.

Measurement

In addition to the demographic information reported above, this study gathered data on a number of variables of interest. All measurement items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale.

Social Media Privacy. The present study used a modified version of Snyder's (2010) measure of perceived email privacy called *Concern about Organizational Infringement*. The nine items (see Table 1) were modified to fit the social media context. The items on this reliable measure ($M = 2.52, SD = .61, \alpha = .75$) were scored such that higher scores were indicative of higher levels of concern (i.e., less privacy).

Table 1

Items Comprising Concern about Organizational Infringement on Social Media Privacy (COI)	
1	I feel comfortable with my company reviewing the content of my social media account(s).*
2	I am confident that I am in control of who sees the content of my social media account(s).*
3	I am satisfied with my ability to control the information my company can gather about me through my social media account(s).*
4	I am uncomfortable with my company's ability to monitor the content of my social media account(s).
5	My company has too much access to my social media account(s).
6	My company is not violating my privacy in any way when it reviews the content of my social media account(s).*
7	I am concerned that I do not have complete control over whether my company can review content of my social media account(s).
8	I am satisfied with the amount of access my company has to the content of my social media account(s).*
9	I am confident with my ability to regulate who has access to my social media account(s).*

Note. * = Reverse Coded Item

Psychological Contract Violation. This study employed Robinson and Morrison's (2000) measure of perceived contract breach. Items (e.g., "My employer has broken many of its promises to me even though I've upheld my side of the deal") were scored such that higher scores represented greater levels of perceived violation ($M = 2.49, SD = .81, \alpha = .73$).

Supervisor Trust. This study used the six-item trust in supervisor scale created by Ellis and Shockley-Zalabak (2001). The items (e.g., "I trust my supervisor") were scored such that higher scores were indicative of greater trust ($M = 3.86, SD = .76, \alpha = .89$).

Affective Organizational Commitment. Affective organizational commitment was assessed by means of Meyer and Allen's (1991) measure. The items (e.g., "This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me") were scored in such a way that higher scores reflected greater levels of commitment ($M = 3.21, SD = .79, \alpha = .73$).

Results

Table 2 contains the correlations among this study's variables of interest. This study's hypotheses were built on arguments related to CPM and PCV. The two mediational models hypothesized were tested through regression analysis, following the steps forwarded by Baron and Kenny (1986).

Table 2

Correlations for Variables of Interest

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Age	--	.12*	.03	.29**	.09	.12*	.03	-.09	-.04	.10
2 Gender		--	.003	.11	-.09	.17**	-.06	-.02	-.09	.06
3 PTFT			--	.10	.02	.01	-.05	-.04	-.02	.03
4 Tenure				--	.13*	.07	-.01	-.06	-.04	.13*
5 Education					--	.14*	.12*	-.11	.14*	-.11
6 HHI						--	.01	-.03	-.09	.04
7 COI							--	-.48**	-.49**	-.43**
8 Trust								--	-.50**	-.48**
9 PCV									--	-.58**
10 Commitment										--

Note. PTFT = Part-Time or Full-Time Employment and was dummy coded such that 0 = PT and 1 = FT; Education was coded such that higher scores represented higher levels of education; HHI = Household Income and was coded such that higher scores represented higher income; Trust = Trust in Supervisor; PCV = Psychological Contract Violation; COI = Concerns about Organizational Infringement (i.e., social media privacy).

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. (two-tailed).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the participants' perceived level of trust in their supervisors would be negatively related to COI. A regression including supervisor trust as criterion and social media privacy as predictor was run. The model was a good fit to the data ($F [1, 302] = 305.65, p < .001$) and accounted for 50% of the variance in supervisor trust ($R^2 = .50$). In support of H1, COI was positively related to supervisor trust ($\beta = .50, p < .01$). As employees' concerns about their organization's infringement on their social media privacy increased, they felt less trust in their supervisor.

Next, to examine the relationship between COI and PCV, a regression was run that included PCV as the criterion and COI as the predictor. Once again, the model was a good fit for the data ($F [1, 296] = 95.71, p < .001$) and accounted for 24% of the variance in PCV. The results yielded support for H2. COI was positively related to PCV ($\beta = .49, p < .01$). As employees' concerns about their organization's infringement on their social media privacy increased, they reported feeling a greater sense of psychological contract violation.

To test H3, a multiple regression was run in which trust in supervisor was the criterion and both COI and PCV were entered into the model as predictors. The model fit the data ($F [2, 283] = 67.60, p < .001$) and accounted for 32% of the variance in supervisor trust. The results of this multiple regression can be found in Table 3. The impact of COI on supervisor trust was much smaller in this model than the model testing H1. The relationship between COI and supervisor trust did not fall to zero. Therefore, the data yield support for the mediational model forwarded in H3. The impact of COI on supervisor trust is partially mediated through PCV.

Table 3

Regression of Trust in Supervisor on Concerns about Organizational Infringement and Psychological Contract Violation

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
COI	-.39	.07	-.31**
PCV	-.33	.05	-.35**

Note. COI = Concern about Organizational Infringement (i.e., social media privacy); PCV = Psychological Contract Violation. ** $p < .01$.

Hypothesis 4 predicted a negative relationship between PCV and affective organizational commitment. A regression including affective organizational commitment as criterion and PCV as predictor was run. The model was a good fit to the data ($F [1, 314] = 162.71, p < .001$) and accounted for 34% of the variance in affective organizational commitment ($R^2 = .34$). As PCV was negatively related to affective organizational commitment ($\beta = -.58, p < .01$), the data yielded support for H4.

To test H5, which anticipated a negative relationship between PCV and supervisor trust, a regression was run that included supervisor trust as criterion and PCV as predictor. The model fit the data ($F [1, 301] = 100.13, p < .001$) and accounted for 25% of the variance in supervisor trust. In support of H5, PCV was negatively related to supervisor trust ($\beta = -.50, p < .01$).

To test H6, a multiple regression was run in which affective organizational commitment was the criterion and both PCV and supervisor trust were entered into the model as predictors (see Table 4). The model fit the data ($F [2, 298] = 94.35, p < .001$) and accounted for 39% of the variance in supervisor trust. The results of this multiple regression can be found in Table 4. The impact of PCV on affective organizational commitment was smaller in this model than the model testing H4, but the relationship remained significant although the effect size was smaller. Thus, the data yield support for the mediational model forwarded in H6. The impact of PCV on organizational affective commitment is partially mediated through supervisor trust.

Table 4

Regression of Affective Organizational Commitment on Contract Violation and Trust in Supervisor

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
PCV	-.45	.05	-.46**
Trust	.26	.05	.25**

Note. PCV = Psychological Contract Violation; Trust = Trust in Supervisor. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion, Limitations, and Future Research

This research, using communication privacy management and psychological contract violation as the theoretical foundation, explored workers' perceptions related to social media privacy, psychological contract violation, supervisor trust, and affective organizational commitment. The nature of the relationships among the key variables in this study are consistent with previous research on email privacy (Snyder & Cistulli, 2011). The direction of the relationships is the same, but the magnitude differs. This illustrates that, as discussed above, despite the differences between social media channels and email, the CPM and PCV theoretical perspectives can be used to make predictions about how people respond to perceived breaches of privacy.

COI and PCV were both related to feelings of supervisor trust and affective organizational commitment. To the degree that employees feel an enhanced sense of infringement on social media privacy, they also tend to feel as though their psychological contract has been violated and their supervisor is less trustworthy. The impact of COI on trust is both direct and partially mediated through its influence on PCV. Moreover, the more that workers feel as though their psychological contract has been violated by their employers, their feelings of supervisor trust and affective organizational commitment go down.

Supervisor trust and affective organizational commitment are variables that get to the heart of a worker's relationship with his or her immediate supervisor and organization. Past research has thoroughly demonstrated the importance of quality relationships on important key organizational outcomes. Employers should work toward ensuring the strength of these key relationships. They are good for people and profits. The theoretical foundation of this research suggests that boundary turbulence caused by monitoring – or *perceived monitoring* – of workers' social media use may create an imbalance in the relationships between workers and both their supervisors and their organizations. Workers will seek to rebalance the relationships and that can be done through a withdrawal of positive associations with their supervisors and organizations.

Post hoc comparisons using t-tests of those respondents who reported befriending a supervisor vs. those who did not yielded some interesting results (see Table 5). The two groups of workers reported no difference on Concern about Organizational Infringement (COI). In other words, befriending a supervisor on social media does not appear to influence significantly one's feelings of social media privacy. However, given that COI is related to PCV, supervisor trust, and affective organizational commitment, future research should examine variables that influence perceptions of COI. There may be personality variables that influence perceptions of COI. Alternatively, there may be variables within an organization's control that may positively or negatively influence feelings of social media privacy. Future research should explore those avenues.

The results in Table 5 also demonstrate significant differences between groups for PCV and supervisor trust. The difference for affective organizational commitment is approaching significance in a two-tailed test ($p = .08$). Workers who reported having a supervisor relationship on social media also reported higher levels on both PCV and supervisor trust. These differences are worth further study as they may provide greater insight into motivations to develop social media relationships with one's supervisors.

Table 5

T-tests Comparing Respondents with and Without Supervisor Relationship on Social Media

Variable	No Supervisor Relationship <i>M (SD)</i>	Supervisor Relationship <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Concern about Organizational Infringement	2.54 (.64)	2.51 (.59)	.32
Psychological Contract Violation	2.30 (.85)	2.62 (.76)	-3.56**
Supervisor Trust	3.61 (.92)	4.02 (.59)	-4.83**
Affective Organizational Commitment	3.31 (.92)	3.15 (.70)	1.76

Note. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

In this study, we did not gather data about country of origin. Laws and regulations on workplace privacy vary from place to place. In future research, it would be beneficial to collect these and conduct cross cultural research.

There are potential limitations to this research. Specifically, there may be significant differences among company policies regarding social media and with the proliferation and diversification of social media platforms, companies must continue to address the widening of this e-spectrum. According to the Pew Research Center (2016), over half of part-time and full-time workers indicate that their workplace has some policy. Past research on email privacy showed that the content of the policy was not necessarily as important as the knowledge of the policy itself (D'Urso, 2006). This means that when people did not know what the policy was, their concerns increased. Therefore, companies need to be clear about their policies about social media use and monitoring. This is not likely a case where ambiguity will yield positive results.

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