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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Employee voice on social media — An affordance lens

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## Abstract

Voice mechanisms in organizations provide an opportunity for employees to have a say about their work. As new digital mechanisms, such as social media (SM), are being increasingly adopted by organizations for knowledge sharing, employee engagement and general communication, it is important to consider the extent to which SM may facilitate employee voice. The limited attempts to examine SM and employee voice have mostly focused on identifying the contextual factors that could promote constructive voice on SM. The extant literature does not explore how SM features may (or may not) facilitate all types of voice, such as those which promote employee interests. Adopting an affordance lens, this paper answers the call of voice scholars to explore the potential of SM as a voice mechanism by discussing the perceived value of different SM features for different types of employee voice content. The paper brings together SM and voice literature and explores how different SM affordances may potentially facilitate certain voice content more so over others. In doing so, future directions for research of voice on SM are also discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Employee voice is employees' expression of ideas and opinions regarding their own or organizational interests through formal or informal mechanisms (Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson, Barry et al., 2020). Employee voice enhances individual and organizational outcomes and research continues to grow in this area (Bashshur & Oc, 2015; Mathisen et al., 2022; Weiss & Morrison, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2015). With growing interest in technology and social media (SM) (Kemp, 2020; Martín-Rojas et al., 2021; Treem et al., 2020), the exploration of employee voice on SM has gained some momentum (Holland et al., 2016; Jebesen et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2019). This topic is even more salient as the increase of work-from-home (WFH) during the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of all types of SM (Kelly,

2020; Lister & Kamouri, 2020), including internal and formal enterprise social media (ESM), such as workplace and Microsoft (MS) Teams, and/or external and informal applications or platforms, such as WhatsApp/Facebook.

Voice scholars do not yet have firm evidence on the state of voice on SM and they urge further exploration (Holland et al., 2019; Thornthwaite et al., 2020). It has been considered in a few recent reviews of voice (Ghani & Malik, 2022; Kougiannou & Holland, 2022; Thornthwaite et al., 2020), as it is considered an important new trajectory of literature (Wilkinson et al., 2021). The usage of SM as a means to voice is becoming prevalent and there are high-profile cases where employees have used internal or external SM to express themselves. These include employees tweeting about layoffs at HMV (Sherwin, 2013) and Indiabulls Housing Finance (IANS, 2020), and Google employees using SM to organize themselves to protest about unjust company

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policies (Bhuiyan, 2019). However, SM also pose risks to employees, as was the case for multiple Australian public servants losing their jobs over criticizing their departments on external SM (Barnes et al., 2018; Byrne, 2019). So, while SM may now be considered a common communication mechanism in practice, voice scholars have not grasped the full potential of SM for voice (Holland et al., 2019; Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2021). This paper seeks to bring together the current research on SM by voice scholars with that conducted in other disciplines, such as digital communication, to better understand voice on SM.

As the nature of SM may be different (Forsgren & Byström, 2018), especially when compared to other typical communication mechanisms used for voice, such as face-to-face/in-person conversations, suggestion boxes or emails (McCloskey & McDonnell, 2018; Stumpf & Süß, 2022), exploring the nature of voice on SM requires an understanding of the value of SM capabilities for different voice content. This can be analysed using the technological affordance lens, which explores the perceived utility of technological capabilities, that is, *affordances* (Gaver, 1991; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Norman, 1988; Rice et al., 2017; Treem et al., 2020). We explore SM affordances in relation to varying voice content because the affordance lens ‘helps to explain why people using the same technology may engage in similar or disparate communication and work practices’ (Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p. 146). This paper makes several important contributions to the literature. First, given the growth of interest in SM and voice, and a developing stream of literature (Jebsen et al., 2022), it is timely to integrate SM and voice literatures to better understand the value of SM for voice. We use the concept of affordances, drawn from the SM literature, to do so. Second, our discussion of the current state of literature signals the need for more explicit analysis and discussion of SM affordances for different types of voice content identified in the voice literature (Mowbray et al., 2019). Therefore, the paper discusses SM affordances in relation to voice to understand how SM affordances may facilitate or constrain different types of employee voice content. This lens also allows us to explore the extent to which SM may facilitate voice in contexts such as those of remote working in a post-COVID-19 employment context, where employees may be dependent on SM for individual and organizational communication. Third, our review and analysis enables us to identify directions for future research in relation to SM and voice. Given the evolving nature of SM and the changing context of work, these research avenues will be important to explore in order to optimize voice outcomes for organizations and their employees. Hence, the key research question explored in this paper is: *To what extent are different types of employee voice content facilitated by SM affordances?*

## METHOD

The paper uses a narrative review to explore the links between different literatures and propose possible new fields of inquiry (Hammersley, 2001; Hodgkinson & Ford, 2014). Narrative reviews are useful in generating new research questions and identifying new fields of knowledge (Hodgkinson & Ford, 2014). The purpose of this narrative literature review is to bring together employee voice and SM literatures to explore the extent to which SM facilitates employee voice, providing direction for future research. We use a technique by Greenhalgh et al. (2005) based on searching, mapping, appraising (and synthesizing) and recommending (see Figure 1) to discuss the research included in our review.

Owing to the recency of this field, different research items have been included using a combination of Web of Science and Google Scholar. To ensure quality and reliability, only research articles from well-reputed journals have been included. Only journals that either have a minimum rating of 2 on the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Academic Journal Guide and/or have a Web of Science (WoS) Impact Factor (Clarivate Analytics) of at least 1.000 were included. We combed through research articles from leading journals such as the *Academy of Management Annals*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Human Resource Management Review*, *British Journal of Management* and *New Technology, Work and Employment* during our search process. A combination of key terms such as ‘employee voice’, ‘employee voice mechanisms’, ‘social media’, ‘social media affordances’ and ‘e-voice’ were used to explore employee voice and SM affordance theories.

We included empirical and conceptual journal articles, notable books and book chapters, peer-reviewed conference papers, and select news articles and professional reports. The inclusion of peer-reviewed research such as journal articles, books and conference papers informed the construction of our framework, while news articles and professional reports provide examples of SM use in the modern employment context. A total of 114 journal articles, 26 book chapters, 3 peer-reviewed conference papers, 7 news media sources and 3 professional reports were included. The time period was restricted to items published between the year 2000 and 2022, which allowed us to understand current debates around SM and voice, given very little has been written about SM pre-2000. Research exploring the organizational and individual outcomes of SM adoption, some of which covers affordances (and informs our views on SM as a voice mechanism), is dated after the year 2000. A total of six research items (two books, three journal articles and one conference paper) published between 1970 and 1999 were also included because they are

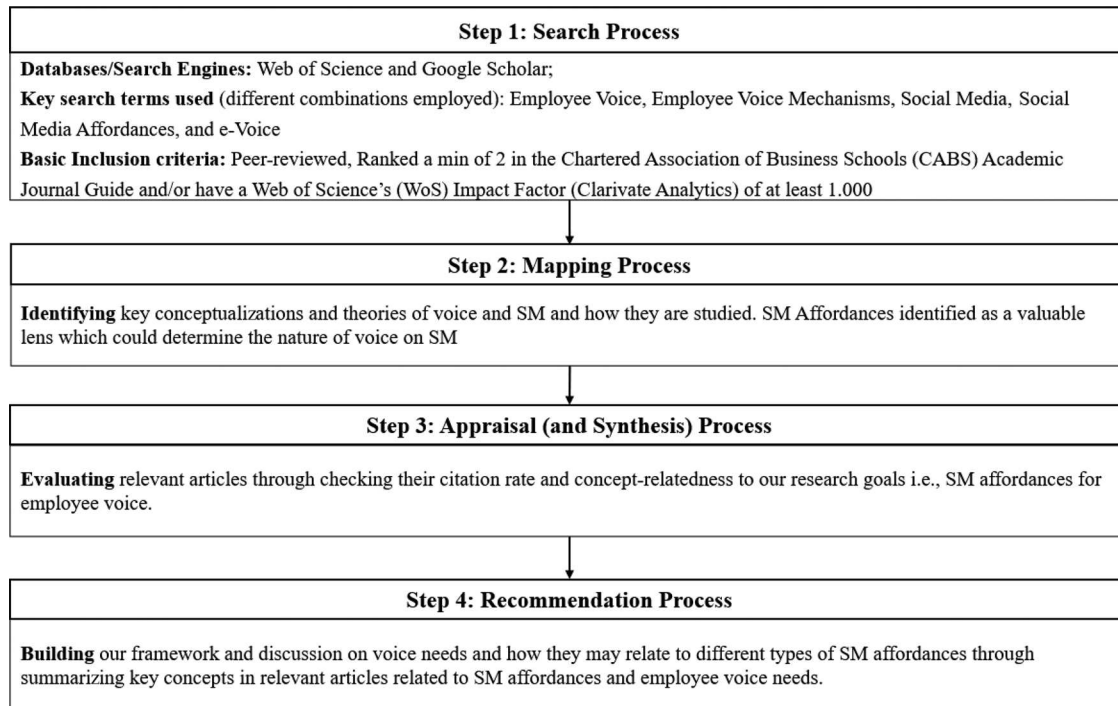


FIGURE 1 Narrative review process

very influential pieces of literature that anchor the work around SM and employee voice and provide a basis for exploring SM as a voice mechanism.

During the mapping process, we observed that while voice scholarship has started to explore voice on SM in general (Holland et al., 2019; Thornthwaite et al., 2020), scholars have not yet fully understood the role of technology affordances in shaping voice behaviour (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Estell et al., 2021; Gegenhuber et al., 2020). Furthermore, the conceptualizations of voice and SM affordances vary in their respective literatures (Y. Li et al., 2021; Wilkinson, Dundon et al., 2020). In light of exploring a modern communication mechanism like SM that allows multidirectional communication, we take an inclusive conceptualization of voice, that of Mowbray et al. (2015, 2019), which consolidates voice goals and content previously discussed across employment/industrial relations (IR), human resources (HR) and organizational behaviour (OB) voice literatures, that is, that voice can be both an in-role and an extra-role behaviour, which may be expressed via formal or informal voice mechanisms, for employee and/or organizational interests. Similarly, while there are different SM affordance frameworks by SM scholars, this review primarily uses the affordance framework of Treem and Leonardi (2012), which is most commonly used when exploring digital communication in the organization (Y. Li et al., 2021).

The appraisal (and synthesis) process involved evaluating articles for their relevance. We included articles

that were frequently cited and/or were relevant to our research goals. We carefully read and reflected on the articles, searched for additional literature and re-read key research to understand how SM affordances may relate to voice. This iterative review process (cf. Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021, p. 47) contributed towards the refinement of concepts and the development of our framework in the recommendations stage. This stage summarized relevant arguments related to voice needs and how they relate to SM affordances.

The following section provides an overview of employee voice and details the concept of SM affordances. Next, we discuss the literature regarding voice on SM and how adopting an affordance lens can be useful to explore voice on SM. The paper then explores in-depth how different types of voice identified in the literature (Mowbray et al., 2015) may be facilitated or constrained by different types of SM affordances (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

## EMPLOYEE VOICE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Originally conceptualized as an attempt to alleviate an 'objectionable state of affairs' (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30), employee voice has been conceptualized variously in different literatures: IR (Klaas, 1989; McCabe & Lewin, 1992; Wilkinson, Barry et al., 2020), HR (Dundon et al., 2004, p. 5) and OB (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne et al., 2003). There have been efforts to integrate these



conceptualizations of voice (Morrison, 2011, 2014; Nechan-ska et al., 2018; Wilkinson, Barry et al., 2020; Wilkinson, Dundon et al., 2020) as a multidimensional concept, to do with employees' expression of ideas and opinions using different mechanisms for either self or organizational interest (Mowbray et al., 2015; Wilkinson, Barry et al., 2020). One review identifies six main types of voice content, namely: 'contributions to decision-making, suggestions for change and improvement, concern about work issues harmful to the organisation, opinions and different points of view, grievances, complaints, and employees' individual interests' (Mowbray et al., 2019, p. 15). Discussing how different SM affordances facilitate or constrain each type of voice content will provide rich insight into the potential of SM for voice.

One of the earliest works to explore voice over technology-based platforms is by Bishop and Levine (1999), who used the term 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC) to describe the internal online bulletin board of a large technology company in America. They found that CMC increased consultative participation and two-way communication due to messages cutting through hierarchies and instantly reaching relevant stakeholders. This is because SM offers multidirectional communication and versatile functions such as storage of data and collaborative digital information management tools to improve work in real time (Y. Liu & Bakici, 2019; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This differentiates SM from other digital communication (such as intranets or emails). SM is defined as 'a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61) and can be categorized as external or internal SM. These different types of SM could vary in the degree to which they facilitate different voice content. To explore this, we need to first understand the different types of SM and their capabilities.

External SM includes (but is not limited to) social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, video-based platforms such as YouTube, blogs and microblogs like Twitter, wikis like Wikipedia, direct messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, video conferencing platforms such as Skype, and others (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2018; Sugimoto et al., 2017). These platforms are usually hosted outside a business enterprise and are used by anyone with access to internet, while internal SM are only accessible to internal stakeholders of an organization (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017). An example of an internal SM is ESM, which is designed for collaboration and workplace conversations such as IBM Connection, Workplace by Facebook or MS Teams (Y. Li et al., 2021). This review focuses on affordances of both internal and external SM, rather than a specific platform, to explore if

different types of voice may be facilitated by any SM capabilities.

Social media platforms have varying capabilities and are not all used the same way (Forsgren & Byström, 2018). Empirical research suggests that individuals adopt SM for work depending on their hedonic (pleasure-oriented) and/or utilitarian (productivity-oriented) needs (Chin et al., 2020; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014; Y. Liu & Bakici, 2019). The use of SM depends on how employees perceive its features, which could also explain employees' views on the utility of SM for voice (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020). For instance, Gegenhuber et al.'s (2020) study of five crowdsourcing platforms found that they allow crowdworkers to voice about everyday work, but the features limit any significant influence over decision-making. Another study by Abdulgalimov et al. (2020) interviewed university employees to explore perceived facilitators and inhibitors of employee voice on digital media to assist in the design and deployment of a prototype digital system for voice. Their study emphasized specific design goals, that is, anonymity, moderation of platform and limited access to platform, for SM features to ensure voice effectiveness. A recent review of the literature by Knoll et al. (2022) developed propositions around how technology-enabled flexible work arrangements would affect employee voice behaviour. They did not focus on any particular mechanism, rather, they present an overview of potential opportunities and challenges where digital technologies could provide voice. These studies underscore that employees may perceive SM capabilities differently. Therefore, the utility of these capabilities, that is, *affordances*, need to be explored in relation to different types of employee voice.

## Social media affordances

Technological affordances are the perceived utility of technology prior to its adoption (Gaver, 1991; Norman, 1988; Rice et al., 2017). Leonardi and Vaast (2017) explain technological affordance to be 'the intersection between people's goals and a technology's material features' (p. 7). SM is not always used or perceived similarly because of individual differences in psychological needs, cognition, media literacy or even availability of SM resources (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Karahanna et al., 2018). The affordance lens enables us to explore how employees perceive the utility of SM for different types of voice, given that voice needs vary. For example, some concerns may require confidentiality, which suggests that SM that does not provide privacy may not attract grievances unless all other voice mechanisms have failed (Miles & Mangold, 2014). Scholars discuss SM affordances from different perspectives and

within specific contexts owing to the dynamic nature of SM design/features. Some prominent affordance frameworks, each focusing on a particular context, are shown in Table A1 in the online [Appendix](#).

The most commonly cited affordance framework is that by Treem and Leonardi (2012), who dissected the features of different SM and identified four affordances for work communication, namely *visibility*, *association*, *persistence* and *editability*, as shown in Table A1. Through bibliometric mapping, a recent review by Y. Li et al. (2021) found Treem and Leonardi (2012) to be the most influential work on technological affordances. *Visibility* is the effort to locate or display, publish information, messages or posts such as status updates or messages posted/activities appearing on users' main pages (or 'walls'). *Association* allows users to connect with other individuals in the network, enabling them to form relationships. These can be through the features of 'Suggested Friends' or using metadata tags (e.g., hashtags) to link content to topics/people. *Persistence* is the retrievability and/or reviewability of content in its original form, over time. Most SM allows information to persist over time (Treem et al., 2020). For example, a video conference is retrievable in its original form if the SM allows it to be recorded, such as on MS Teams. *Editability* allows users to modify or revise their message/content before or after it has been posted online. A common example is modifying posts or correcting errors on content, which gives the communicator control over how the message is displayed (Fox & McEwan, 2019).

Other scholars depicted in Table A1 have offered overlapping conceptualizations and interpretations that are built on/linked to affordances by Treem and Leonardi (2012). For example, the degree of displaying one's own information/posts and searching ones by others has been conceptualized mostly as *visibility* but is also sometimes referred to as *searchability* (boyd, 2010; Rice et al., 2017) or *browsing others' content* (Karahanna et al., 2018). Treem and Leonardi (2012) also discuss *visibility* as the ability to manage one's image by controlling what is shared (p. 152), which is in line with the affordance of *self-presentation* by Rice et al. (2017) and Karahanna et al. (2018). Treem and Leonardi (2012) also conceptualize *visibility* in terms of users' ability to learn about others through the information people tend to post about themselves on their profiles (pictures/interests/tags/likes), which is categorized as *meta-voicing* by Majchrzak et al. (2013) and Karahanna et al. (2018). Similarly, using SM to build social/professional connections is called *association* by Treem and Leonardi (2012) but is also known as *network association* (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Majchrzak et al., 2013) or *forming relationships* (Karahanna et al., 2018). These scholars essentially adapt Treem and Leonardi's (2012) affordances for different contexts and they add additional interpretations of SM

affordances. A frequently cited affordance in information and communications technology (ICT)/SM literature that is not included in the Treem and Leonardi (2012) framework is *anonymity* (Abdulgalimov et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017; Fox & McEwan, 2017; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Mao & DeAndrea, 2019). *Anonymity* is the degree to which one's personal identity is concealed on SM (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Kietzmann et al., 2011). *Anonymity* is different from *visibility* because it is the degree of confidentiality of individual identity rather than the degree of accessing information (Mao & DeAndrea, 2019). We include *anonymity* because voice and SM literatures both suggest that it offers opportunities and challenges for voice.

Treem and Leonardi's framework considers a range of SM and other digital communication platforms and discusses their value in terms of organizational communication in various contexts, including knowledge sharing, socialization and power. This is important for our review as the employee voice literature also emphasizes the importance of context in shaping voice behaviour, especially in the three contexts discussed by Treem and Leonardi (2012). Recently, the affordances proposed by Treem and Leonardi (2012) and *anonymity* have also been used for voice in the qualitative study by Ellmer and Reichel (2020), who demonstrated how affordances shaped voice behaviour. They found that even though a particular SM was deployed to promote employee participation, its ability to do so depended on SM affordances, managerial reactions to voice on SM and the organizational climate. Our research builds on this through considering the varying types of voice content and exploring how different affordances and types of voice are linked. Additionally, our research extends current debates discussing the potential opportunities and challenges that digital media, including SM, offer for voice (Knoll et al., 2022).

## SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES FOR EMPLOYEE VOICE

This section uses the affordances identified by Treem and Leonardi (2012), that is, *visibility*, *association*, *persistence* and *editability*, along with *anonymity* (not directly addressed in Treem and Leonardi's framework) to explore how they may facilitate or constrain a range of different voice types identified by Mowbray et al. (2015, 2019). In doing so, it integrates the voice and SM literatures and explores the potential of SM as a voice mechanism. It appears that the same SM affordances may potentially facilitate and constrain different types of voice. These tensions are presented in Table 1, which is structured such that each row of affordances relates to different types of voice in each column. Each cell provides insight into how the

TABLE 1 Employee voice facilitated/constrained by SM affordances

Affordances	Voice content					
	Contributions to decision-making	Suggestions for change and improvement	Concern about work issues	Opinions and different points of view	Individual interests	Grievances and complaints
Visibility	Facilitated: Increased visibility of individual/collective opinions and suggestions to key stakeholders	Facilitated: Better identification of key issues/suggestions (meta-voicing); Increased opportunity for collective/lateral voice	Facilitated: Collective/team identification of issues and problem-solving enhanced; Increased opportunity for collective voice	Facilitated: Typical and atypical points of view shared/viewed more widely; Increased opportunity for collective/lateral voice	Facilitated: Individual interests expressed (pay/growth/working conditions, etc.) viewed more widely by others; Increased opportunity for collective/lateral voice	Facilitated: Collective grievances/complaints visible to a wider audience
	Constrained: Increased 'noise' resulting in possible overlooking of key contributions/issues	Constrained: Increased 'noise' resulting in possible overlooking of key contributions/issues	Constrained: Challenging authority figures or status quo	Constrained: Opinions challenging points of view held by the majority of others	Constrained: Personal interests	Constrained: Individual grievances
Association	Facilitated: Increase opportunity to be heard through accessing key stakeholders/decision-makers	Facilitated: Opportunity to increase support for suggestions/ideas from others; Refine suggestions through collective input	Facilitated: Access to key stakeholders who can resolve concerns; Opportunity to strengthen collective concerns	Facilitated: Share voice goals/opinions with others who are like-minded or debate with those with opposing views; Increased opportunity for collective/lateral voice and image management	Facilitated: Access to key stakeholders/relevant voice targets to express individual interests (pay/growth/working conditions, etc.); Increased opportunity for collective/lateral voice	Facilitated: Increased opportunity for collective grievances/complaints to be voiced, especially for typically silent employees
	Constrained: Possible circumventing of authority resulting in lower response to voice by managers/key stakeholders	Constrained: Voice target possibly unresponsive to voice on SM leading to delayed response to suggestions	Constrained: Voice target possibly unresponsive to voice on SM leading to delayed actioning or inaction of concerns	Constrained: Voice target possibly unresponsive to opinions expressed on SM	Constrained: Voice target possibly unresponsive to individual issues (salary/promotion/personal issues affecting work) on SM	Constrained: Voice target possibly unresponsive to voice on SM leading to delayed actioning or inaction of complaints and grievances
Persistence	Facilitated: Record of decisions/instructions on issues available shaping future voice contributions; Increased accountability for voice targets regarding decisions on voice content	Facilitated: Record of suggestions raised/brainstorming sessions to solve future problems or provide ideas	Facilitated: Invites further contributions to issues raised historically or have concerns recorded for shaping future issues raised	Facilitated: Record of individual/collective opinions expressed for others to consult/contribute	Facilitated: Record of individual interests (pay/growth/working conditions, etc.) expressed available for others to consult/contribute	Facilitated: Increased accountability for voice targets to respond to grievances/complaints recorded

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Affordances	Voice content					
	Contributions to decision-making	Suggestions for change and improvement	Concern about work issues	Opinions and different points of view	Individual interests	Grievances and complaints
	Constrained: Suggestions/ideas that require privacy	Constrained: Suggestions/ideas that require privacy or are not relevant to others	Constrained: Perceived notion of surveillance leading to selective voice	Constrained: Criticism of management/organization	Constrained: Selective voice due to perceived decrease in privacy	Constrained: Selective issues raised due to perceived decrease in privacy
Editability	Facilitated: Refined ideas having an increased opportunity to be implemented	Facilitated: Improved quality of suggestions through opportunity to revise/edit before and/or after sending them	Facilitated: Concerns regarding work presented after having an opportunity to research the issue	Facilitated: Opportunity to revise/refine opinions, especially challenging ones to better appeal to voice targets	Facilitated: Opportunity to present individual interests to voice targets more eloquently	Facilitated: Issues more articulately expressed, especially for those employees who normally do not voice at all or are less articulate when they do voice.
	Constrained: Selective voice due to possibility of others controlling the message or too much self-editing of message	Constrained: Selective voice due to possibility of others controlling the message or too much self-editing of message	Constrained: Selective voice due to possibility of others controlling the message or too much self-editing of message	Constrained: Selective voice due to possibility of others controlling the message or too much self-editing of message	Constrained: Selective voice due to possibility of others controlling the message or too much self-editing of message	Constrained: Selective voice due to possibility of others controlling the message or too much self-editing of message
Anonymity	Facilitated: Increased opportunity to provide honest feedback	Facilitated: Challenging/atypical suggestions expressed openly	Facilitated: Whistleblowing/concerns related to set practices/culture expressed openly	Facilitated: Opinions challenging status quo/individual ideas	Facilitated: Individual interests and concerns expressed openly	Facilitated: Whistleblowing/concerns related to authority figures/peers expressed more openly
	Constrained: Possibility of delays or lack of desired action/fear of being identified	Constrained: Possibility of delays or lack of desired action/fear of being identified	Constrained: Possibility of delays or lack of desired action/fear of being identified	Constrained: Lack of response/action from management to criticism	Constrained: Possibility of delays or lack of desired action/fear of being identified	Constrained: Possibility of delays or lack of desired action/fear of being identified



SM and voice literatures suggest each type of affordance facilitates or constrains different voice types.

For instance, where *visibility* provides increased ability to view and share typical and atypical points of view to build lateral voice (Shalini et al., 2021; Walker, 2021), it may cause some hesitation to voice amongst those who do not concur with the majority opinion as they fear social isolation (Chun & Lee, 2022; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). In this way, *visibility* can facilitate lateral voice, but constrain opinions that are not in line with majority opinion. Similarly, where *association* provides increased access to key decision-makers that is useful for suggestions and participation in decision-making (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020), such access may be more apparent than real as managers do not feel the need to respond to SM comments (Gibbs et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2012). Based on Table 1, we discuss three main themes that highlight the key ways in which each affordance facilitates or constrains varying types of employee voice. These themes include *perceived safety to voice versus low privacy*, *access to key decision-makers versus low target response to voice* and *opportunity to build and amplify collective voice versus muting of minority voice*.

### Perceived safety to voice versus low privacy

The voice literature identifies employees' perceived psychological safety as important when expressing voice (Gruman & Saks, 2020; Liang et al., 2012). Psychological safety may be provided either through an organizational climate where voice is encouraged and supported (Duan et al., 2022; X. Liu et al., 2022; Morrison, 2014) or through voice/communication mechanisms' features that may provide privacy/anonymity when voicing (Abdulgaliimov et al., 2020; Mao & DeAndrea, 2019). Contrary to what Knoll et al. (2022) posit regarding digital media lowering employees' perceived safety to express challenging voice, we argue that where *anonymity* is provided, SM could enhance employees' perceived safety to voice. *Anonymity* can potentially promote voice that employees may otherwise hesitate to express (e.g., individual issues/challenging concerns or ideas/opinions countering status quo) (Adhvaryu et al., 2022). While employees may not always want to remain anonymous, such as where rewards or recognition for work/suggestions are concerned (Robbins et al., 2020), research demonstrates that *anonymity* can increase employees' tendency to report fraudulent behaviour (Johansson & Carey, 2016), which promotes voice culture, especially in regard to challenging voice.

Whilst recent research by Cornish (2022) in the South African context showed that employees used external SM (such as Facebook and WhatsApp) to express dis-

sent despite disciplinary action (dismissals), we argue that *anonymity* could provide an additional safety measure for employees who refrain from voicing on SM due to fear of negative consequences. Since *anonymity* provides safety through concealing the identity of the voicer, it allows employees to express themselves without fear of being alienated or labelled a trouble-maker (Milliken et al., 2003). In their experimental study on college students in America, Mao and DeAndrea (2019) found that when employees can voice anonymously, they are more focused on voice itself instead of fearing negative consequences. Anonymous opinions and concerns promote voice through empowering employees, especially in unfavourable voice climates. These include contexts where leader-member relations are weak (Ward et al., 2016), where employees do not want to openly disagree with their supervisors (Brooks, 2018) and in collectivist cultures where expressing disagreement with the group is considered inappropriate (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019). In such cases, *anonymity* can promote voice by allowing employees to express their opinions/concerns on important policy matters without fear (Kim & Leach, 2020), especially where voice challenges the status quo. This perceived safety can also prompt typically silent or under-represented individuals to engage in work-related conversations (Barnes et al., 2019) that could benefit the organization or employees.

*Persistence* could also be useful in allowing employees to gauge whether the voice climate is favourable. As *persistence* preserves information on SM over time, discussions taking place in virtual town halls/meetings on platforms like MS Teams or Workplace can be retrieved if they are recorded, which enables employees to see issues discussed and how voice targets responded. As the voice literature suggests that employee voice is informed by others' voice outcomes and target responses (Burriss, 2012; Carnevale et al., 2020; X. Liu et al., 2022), the archived discussions/open thread created due to *persistence* could allow employees to gauge their safety to voice based on previous voice outcomes on collective/individual interests (salaries, working conditions), criticism or challenging voice. Due to *persistence*, posts where employees have participated in debates or brainstorming sessions can be archived by the organization in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQs), communities or repositories of information (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Treem et al., 2020), such as those by Best Buy or IBM (Balnave et al., 2014). These archived discussions can serve to refine future suggestions and concerns, and allow others to contribute ideas/solutions to issues raised (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), which facilitates constructive voice. *Persistence* of information can also create an element of accountability for voice targets. This is because the recordings of meetings and discussions on SM like MS Teams are accessible to others and when concerns

or grievances are voiced on such platforms, voice targets can be held accountable for their responses. This allows employees to gauge the effectiveness of SM for voice based on the type of target response usually attracted by that platform (Miles & Mangold, 2014).

Through gauging the level of safety to voice, employees can choose when, how and what suggestions, ideas, opinions or concerns they share. In this regard, *editability* can also be useful to refine voice before it is expressed. For example, when/if managers solicit ideas/solutions on SM like MS Teams or Workplace, employees can research issues and craft their suggestions and/or concerns in a way that they may not be able to do if the same feedback is taken in in-person/synchronous settings, because high *editability* allows more time to respond (Gode et al., 2019). While most other written communication allows more time to respond, it may often be in asynchronous settings (e.g., suggestion boxes) or may not always allow modification of message once expressed (email/submitted digital feedback on forms). However, SM often allows repetitive content iterations in both synchronous and asynchronous communication even after a message is posted, which can be used to articulate ideas/opinions aimed at the organization (e.g., proposing a unique solution) and/or self-benefit/interests more eloquently. Due to the additional time *editability* provides, employees who normally do not voice due to factors including personality, lack of power and/or fear of negative repercussions (Brinsfield, 2013; Pinder & Harlos, 2001) could find it easier to voice in synchronous communication such as during virtual meetings/town halls and so on.

While grievances may be expressed on more formalized/confidential voice mechanisms, *editability* seems particularly useful when expressing concerns or general complaints because it enables employees to express issues more coherently. This preserves employee image and/or potentially averts retaliatory behaviours by voice targets who may deem voice behaviour undesirable (Popelnukha et al., 2021). Therefore, if employees have increased control through being able to tailor message content to 'the actual context in which it is likely to be viewed' (Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p. 160), it would make SM more attractive to voice in different contexts. We see *anonymity*, *persistence* and *editability* as increasing employees' perceived psychological safety to express suggestions, concerns and opinions, especially when they are challenging in nature, as shown in Table 1.

However, these affordances can also constrain voice. Where *persistence* allows employees to refine and prioritize their suggestions, employees may also be reluctant to voice criticism, concerns and grievances online. For example, management may not appreciate criticism being voiced on SM, where it can be recorded and accessi-

ble to all types of stakeholders, resulting in policies that may directly/indirectly discourage voice (Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). Without privacy of identity, this reduces employees' perceived safety of voicing on SM. *Visibility* can also discourage employee opinions related to individual interests or challenging ideas/opinions, critique, concerns or complaints (Morrison, 2014), due to fear of negative consequences (Burris, 2012; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). It would be fair to assume that because employees usually do not air their individual grievances or sensitive matters in situations where perceived safety to voice is low (Felix et al., 2018; Klaas et al., 2012), increased *visibility* would discourage them from using that platform due to lack of control over how the message will be perceived. This issue is often debated in the SM literature and there are concerns regarding SM allowing users access to information that is not necessarily intended for them, especially if it leads to negative outcomes such as dismissal of employees over expressing their views about the organization (Barnes et al., 2018; Thornthwaite, 2018). Gode et al. (2019), in their study of employees' ideation on internal SM, also revealed that due to *visibility* and *persistence*, employees perceived there to be less safety to voice as they worried about self-image and negative consequences for their careers when suggesting ideas. This leads to selective voice (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016) because employees perceive that their views (preserved online over time) can be used against them (Fox & McEwan, 2017). This fear potentially limits what employees actually voice compared to what they want to voice. For example, when there is high *visibility*, the dilemma is that while information is easily available to users, which is useful for gathering support for collective interests, it poses threats to perceived safety for individual interests/grievances, and concerns and opinions that challenge the status quo or criticize management/policies.

*Persistence* has also been linked to employees perceiving their employers to be engaging in surveillance by monitoring their activity and opinions online (Hurrell et al., 2017), which further lowers the perceived safety to voice online (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Stoycheff, 2016). It is also important to consider that personal identity is not always protected online because information such as IP addresses can identify individuals (Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018), which means that employees may decide not to voice on SM even if it appears to provide *anonymity*, for fear they may be identified. In addition, team sizes may be small, which may make online anonymous feedback an ineffective exercise, as employees would fear being identified regardless of level of *anonymity* provided. Consequently, they would avoid SM as a voice mechanism because they do not trust its affordances, especially for voice that requires privacy—such as individual concerns or suggestions/options that need

confidentiality (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020). So, where different affordances provide opportunities for voice, such as suggestions and collective interests through increased psychological safety, they pose some challenges for individual grievances and interests as information/content may be linked to particular individuals thereby limiting privacy on SM.

### Access to key decision-makers versus low target response to voice

A review of the voice and SM literatures suggests that SM affordances can provide more direct access to key decision-makers in the organization (Conway et al., 2019; Klumper et al., 2016), thereby increasing opportunities for influence. Ellmer and Reichel (2020) found that *visibility* provides a greater chance of employee opinions and suggestions reaching a wider audience, including senior stakeholders. In doing so, it provided some influence over the decision-making process. While a response is not guaranteed when posting on high *visibility* mechanisms (such as on Workplace), it provides a wide audience for employees to voice their issues.

In addition, increased *association* can also provide further opportunities for employee voice. Leidner et al. (2018), in their study of an ESM deployed for the socialization of new hires in a financial services company, found that frequent users of the ESM could circumvent bureaucracy through accessing and interacting with other employees, including senior management. *Association* provides employees access to key decision-makers and the ability to voice their opinions regarding their work or employee-related policies, especially where they are reluctant to voice to the direct supervisor. As access to key decision-makers who have power may be valuable (Detert & Trevino, 2010), especially when they are not accessible through typical voice mechanisms, *association* can provide a greater opportunity to have suggestions, opinions and concerns be heard, which offers more influence (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Martin et al., 2015).

However, *association*, as shown in Table 1, may not necessarily be perceived positively by vertical voice targets. Gibbs et al.'s (2013) study cautions that being constantly accessible by others on SM (through *association*) causes work disruptions, especially for key stakeholders, and they become disengaged from SM. This reduces the propensity for a response to voice on SM. In addition, Koch et al. (2012) in their case study found that middle management did not perceive SM positively because junior employees could gain direct access to senior management, which reduced the managers' sense of authority. So, where *association* can potentially promote voice through allowing employees

influence, managers may not always perceive it positively, resulting in lack of response to voice on SM. While this may be considered a management-related agency issue rather than intrinsic to the mechanism or its affordances, it is unlikely that SM will be effective if management itself does not approve of or does not respond to voice on SM. So, employees' perception of which mechanisms managers prefer can shape their decision to use SM for voice. This potentially reduces the perceived utility of SM as a voice mechanism (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Miles & Mangold, 2014), especially in authoritative contexts where management generally has more control over the voice agenda (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019; Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

Voice on SM may also be difficult to action, resulting in potential delays to response. In their study of designing effective SM for voice, Abdulgalimov et al. (2020) found *anonymity* to be a double-edged sword; while it provides employees confidence to voice their concerns, anonymous voice can be difficult for management to action. Concerns regarding authenticity have been raised whereby information, suggestions, ideas or concerns expressed anonymously have built tensions between credibility of information and the need to express oneself openly (Scott et al., 2011). So, anonymous voice may not always lead to desired actionable outcomes unless there are resources in place for investigating issues reported anonymously (Abdulgalimov et al., 2020). While ideas expressed anonymously could be useful in some instances, such as reporting unethical behaviour or raising employee concerns (e.g., disparate pay or a lack of advancement opportunities for a particular gender) (Song et al., 2019), there may not always be an opportunity to further investigate issues (Abdulgalimov et al., 2020), especially ones that are not collective or immediately apparent. Due to this, voice may not always be actioned as desired by the employee.

*Anonymity* also has the tendency to increase venting or bad-mouthing online (Gossett & Kilker, 2006; Krishna & Kim, 2015; Richards, 2008; Thompson et al., 2020), which is not perceived positively by management because it damages their and the organization's reputation (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020; Walsh et al., 2016). A review of the anonymous online dissent literature by Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018) highlighted the tensions between dissenting employees, platform administrators, external audiences and targeted organizations. They emphasized that managers often distrust anonymous online voice because they view it to be unreliable or opportunistic at times, and thus choose to ignore it. Hence, in the absence of complementary conditions such as an environment of trust and follow-up support systems to substantiate concerns or issues raised (Abdulgalimov et al., 2020; Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018), *anonymity* may



not always facilitate voice. Table 1 provides a summary of this discussion whereby *association* may be beneficial for accessing key decision-makers; however, voice targets may be unresponsive.

### Opportunity to build and amplify collective voice versus muting of minority voice

*Visibility* allows employees to discuss their interests and to locate others with similar interests, which is an important part of organizational socialization and image management (S.K. Lee et al., 2019; Leidner et al., 2018). This is particularly significant in a global pandemic where *visibility* of information to co-workers addresses the challenges of increased social distancing and WFH. In such a context, having the ability to exchange ideas and build support for collective concerns and opportunities for mutual peer consultation can be valuable. *Visibility* provides increased opportunity for employees to identify key suggestions, ideas and opinions (meta-voicing) related to employees or work. This can facilitate the expression of concerns and the identification of typical and atypical points of view, builds awareness of key collective issues and can lead to employees jointly refining and presenting their concerns or interests to decision-makers (Subhakaran et al., 2020). The Google protest in 2018 illustrates this, whereby employees used SM to reach out to other geographically dispersed employees at Google to organize walkouts in protest at the organization's policies (Bhuiyan, 2019).

Features such as 'recommended contacts' on LinkedIn, Yammer or Facebook, and auto-loaded contact lists on MS Teams (forms of *association*), provide employees with access to peers whom they would not normally encounter in traditional, physical settings. This increases space for lateral discussion of work, interests, ideas or concerns, and provides opportunities for learning through debate with individuals with opposing views (Walker, 2021). We see *association* providing increased opportunities for lateral voice, which—despite being understudied in the voice literature (Kalfa & Budd, 2020)—is deemed essential for employee well-being and support, especially in high-stress contexts (Loudoun et al., 2020). Additionally, in collectivist cultures, lateral voice may be expected and/or encouraged in order to refine ideas, suggestions and concerns before it is voiced upwards to authority figures (Subhakaran et al., 2020). Therefore, a voice mechanism that allows easy access to peers could promote lateral voice.

The use of SM in unions has also been explored in the special issue of *New Technology, Work and Employment* journal (Geelan, 2021), where SM showed potential to revitalize unions. Unions are now utilizing *visibility* to disseminate information, gather support and/or express

issues and concerns (Barnes et al., 2019; Lazar et al., 2020). In addition, *association* is making it easier to access members/non-members and has enabled faster union mobilization (Barnes et al., 2019; Hennebert et al., 2021). Panagiotopoulos's (2021) analysis of 33 British unions' SM activity showed the use of Twitter (high *visibility* and *association*) to attract new audiences and engage existing ones through observing information available on SM. In addition, Hennebert et al.'s (2021) study of 13 Canadian unions also emphasized how *visibility* enabled unions to mobilize faster through having information available for viewing more widely.

We also see *visibility* as allowing employees to organize in the absence of unions by making their voice visible to a larger audience and potentially building collective support to attract management attention. This indicates the need to revisit the conceptualization of organized and/or collective voice in an increasingly digitized work context. Through *association*, employees can access geographically dispersed peers to gather support for their issues/concerns and build collective voice (Bhuiyan, 2019; Palmer, 2020). A recent ethnographic study by Walker (2021) on Uber drivers in Australia found that participation in forum discussions on ICT/SM allowed gig workers access to others with similar issues and complaints, which enabled them to establish a shared consciousness about concerns and generate action. Recently, Facebook Groups and WhatsApp have become important for lateral voice as they are outside management control and easy to use. Shalini et al. (2021) used netnography, semi-structured interviews and direct observations to explore how Indian platform-based (Ola/Uber) ride-share drivers developed solidarity using external SM. The drivers used Facebook Groups and WhatsApp to build collective action through sharing the platform's technical loopholes/workarounds and organizing protests to protect their rights. Another study by Bowes-Catton et al. (2020) showed employees using WhatsApp to build resistance against their university's new management, which contributed to the removal of a Vice Chancellor. This showcases how *association* makes it easier to reach out to others and express dissent, which is then expressed vertically to provide influence. Another recent study by Y.-T. Li (2022) also demonstrated how online platforms, including SM like Facebook Groups, allowed temporary migrant workers in Australia to access each other (*association*) and share information (control over *visibility*), to protect themselves from exploitation. These online interactions served as a form of resistance, whereby workers warned each other (and potential future workers) of exploitative employers/practices. Therefore, as shown in Table 1, we see *visibility* and *association* as facilitating vertical, lateral and collective voice through increased direct access to peers and senior management.

While affordances may enable employees to have their voice be more visible and accessible to others, it can also cause the overlooking or muting of key issues. For instance, where there is high *visibility* of message and low *anonymity*, such as on Workplace and Yammer, such SM could also discourage voice if the views do not appear to reflect the majority. So, minority voice can be thwarted due to fear of social sanctions when expressing opinions that counter those held by the majority (see Chun & Lee, 2022; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). In addition, high *visibility* also allows content to be available in a tight space (on timelines/homepages), which causes overcrowding of information (Leonardi et al., 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) and can result in overlooking of important issues or individual contributions that do not pertain to the majority. So, if employees deem an issue to be critical, they may avoid SM where information overcrowding is possible. Another concern is that *editability* could result in excessive control over what is expressed (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017), potentially stifling voice. For example, if employees express any type of dissent on internal SM platforms, such as company blogs (Balnave et al., 2014), their managers may force them to change the content or delete it because they may fear such voice on SM challenges their authority (Stumpf & Süß, 2022). Furthermore, SM research shows that employees often present overly cautious or edited opinions/ideas rather than engaging in any substantive discussion of issues (Gode et al., 2019; Madsen & Verhoeven, 2016). We see that increased *editability*, while perceived as useful for image management or voice refinement, could potentially limit the expression of ideas or concerns employees care about. So, where *editability* or *visibility* potentially facilitate different voice needs, their very nature and the absence of other supporting affordances (such as *anonymity*) also poses some challenges for voice, particularly voice that counters majority opinion as shown in Table 1.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to contextualize how employee voice is facilitated or constrained by SM affordances, it is worth briefly discussing additional considerations that could affect how SM affordances facilitate or constrain voice. This will guide future research when examining voice on SM.

### Interpretation of affordances may be nuanced

The SM literature frequently discusses how affordances are linked and offer different outcomes (Leonardi & Vaast,

2017; Rice et al., 2017; Treem et al., 2020). Studying a particular affordance in isolation does not fully explain how it facilitates or constrains any specific communication, including voice. In addition, an affordance may be interpreted differently by users, leading to variances in their communication behaviours. Vaast and Kaganer (2013), in their analysis of 74 SM policy documents, found that *persistence* and *visibility* were frequently addressed together (sometimes interpreted as one) in SM policy documents. They found that employees were often cautioned about what to post online because of permanence of information and the viewability for all intended and unintended audiences. Gibbs et al.'s (2013) qualitative study also discusses tensions between openly sharing information and protecting it on work SM. For example, Skype allows employees to work together across physical distances, but constant accessibility of experienced employees hindered their productivity because they were frequently bombarded with questions. As a result, they appeared *offline* to manage work. So, possible voice targets could limit their availability on SM if they perceive it to be inconvenient, resulting in reduced response to voice, if it occurs at all. In addition, Gibbs and colleagues emphasize that because SM allows *visibility* (and *persistence*) of information, individuals often limit what they post online or restrict their audience to maintain privacy. These tensions highlight how affordances, though linked with each other, offer different utility. This suggests that when there is high *visibility*, users may want additional features that allow some privacy or even *anonymity* in order for it to be useful for their voice.

Furthermore, there are differences between the formal capabilities of a SM platform versus how users perceive its utility. For example, there is a difference between *anonymity* as an affordance and the SM's technical capability to provide anonymity. Oftentimes, SM provides a *pseudonymity*, that is, an online profile that is not directly linked to the offline identity (Kane et al., 2014, p. 289), which causes users to perceive complete *anonymity*. However, personal identity can be tracked through IP addresses and other network information (Ravazzani & Mazzei, 2018), which means that it can be incorrectly interpreted as useful. Employees could share sensitive voice (grievances or concerns) under the false assumption of complete *anonymity*, leading to unfavourable consequences, especially in contexts where voice is already restricted. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the nuanced nature of SM affordances and that studying an affordance in isolation may not provide a complete picture of how it affects voice behaviour. Future studies would benefit from explaining their choice of affordances to better explain their interpretation of perceived SM utility for employee voice.



## Importance of context

SM affordances that facilitate or constrain employee voice may also be context dependent. We have focused on organizational climate/culture and the presence of other voice mechanisms in the voice system as they seem to frequently guide the interpretation of the state of voice on any mechanism (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Marchington, 2008; Martin et al., 2015; Morrison, 2014).

## Organizational and national culture

An organization's culture is frequently cited as an important determinant of how voice functions in the organization (Kwon & Farndale, 2020; Marchington, 2008; Sarabi, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). For example, organizations with centralized systems and hierarchical management style prefer communication mechanisms that provide control rather than power sharing (Huang et al., 2005; Kwon et al., 2016). Studies on voice on SM have found highly centralized organizations to affect employees' perception of freedom of speech (Kim & Leach, 2020) and existing voice norms, which shapes the use of SM (Martin et al., 2015) and managerial response to voice on SM (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020). Consequently, organizational culture could affect how employees perceive SM affordances. For example, if an organization has a participative culture, employees may not value *anonymity* as much as they value *visibility* and *association* for most voice. In participative cultures, due to increased psychological safety of voicing, one would focus more on expanding the viewership of the message rather than on potential negative repercussions of voice.

Broader influences from the national context can also shape organizational culture. Organizations situated in countries with high power distance and collectivist cultures tend to prefer formal, indirect voice mechanisms that facilitate group-level interests and concerns, while those within individualistic cultures often favour direct forms of voice due to low power distance (Emelifeonwu & Valk, 2019; Kwon & Farndale, 2020). So, in cultures with high power distance and high collectivist orientation, *association*, *editability* and *anonymity* could be valuable as they allow building and refining of collective issues to voice to key decision-makers without fear. For individualistic, low-power distance cultures, *association* could be perceived valuable as it allows users direct access to influential stakeholders/decision-makers.

There are very few studies that have so far compared voice on SM in comparative organizational/country contexts (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Martin et al., 2015; Parry et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2020). Comparative studies

provide rich insights into different contexts and enhance the generalizability of findings (McCloskey & McDonnell, 2018). Research that considers the role of organizational culture or uses a comparative context/country study to examine how SM affordances are perceived in varied contexts could enhance our understanding of employees' perceptions of utilizing SM for voice.

## Presence of other voice mechanisms

An organization's voice system includes several types of voice mechanisms whose attributes vary, affecting how they are used and perceived (Fox & McEwan, 2017; McCloskey & McDonnell, 2018). It is important that voice scholarship understands how the capabilities of SM fit in the organizational voice system in an increasingly digitized world (Kemp, 2021; Lister & Kamouri, 2020). The extant voice literature does not discuss SM in relation to other voice mechanisms, with the exception of the work by McCloskey and McDonnell (2018) and recently, Stumpf and Süß (2022). McCloskey and McDonnell (2018) reported that having too many voice mechanisms causes confusion and has a 'crowding out' effect (p. 188), whereby regular use of some voice mechanisms result in others being neglected. However, their study did not specifically compare SM to other mechanisms; rather, it explored how all mechanisms used within an organization compete for space. In addition, Stumpf and Süß (2022), in their experimental study, compared managers' reaction to voice expressed on a non-SM mechanism, that is, voicemail, versus on an internal SM (mimicking Yammer). They found that managers were more responsive to the voicemail over the SM mechanism due to various reasons, including managers perceiving voicemails to be more personal and private. Whilst only considering one particular non-SM mechanism and taking a managerial perspective, the findings of the study are valuable to gauge the types of responses to voice on SM as compared to a non-SM mechanism, and help us to understand how managers value SM for voice. Future studies could compare how employees value non-SM mechanisms (such as in-person meetings, emails, town halls, informal interactions in the office, and so on) in comparison to SM for different voice content, to understand its value in the organizational voice system.

Barnes et al. (2019) also found that if individuals are satisfied with existing voice mechanisms, the likelihood of using SM for voice could be limited. Neubaum and Krämer (2018) also emphasize how unpopular or controversial opinions may be more likely to be discussed in offline mechanisms because offline discussions, such as face-to-face mechanisms, allow an opportunity for clarification and a richer discussion compared to those online.

However, their study was not conducted in work settings, nor was voice a focus of investigation. Given the call to explore emerging voice mechanisms (Klaas et al., 2012; Thornthwaite et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2021), examining SM as a potential voice mechanism using an affordance lens can provide valuable insights about where SM sits in the organizational voice system.

## Other contextual factors

Additional contextual factors could also be considered for future research of voice on SM. Of these, the employment context, particularly the voice of atypical/gig/temporary workers on SM, is important since they rely on ICT/SM for relatedness and work communication (Fisher & Casady, 2019; Thornthwaite et al., 2020). Research has confirmed that atypical/temporary workers have a reduced propensity to voice due to the precarious nature of their employment contract. For them, digital platforms/SM are often the only opportunity to voice, and the platform's affordances play an important role in allowing them to voice safely. For example, while they do not directly discuss affordances, the studies by Gegenhuber et al. (2020) and Walker (2021) demonstrate the role of *association* and *visibility* in allowing gig workers to organize their ideas on SM. Research that explores SM affordances in relation to voice of gig/temporary workers would allow further insights into voice on SM in an atypical employment context (Thornthwaite et al., 2020).

Other contextual factors such as external labour market conditions (Kaufman, 2015; Martin et al., 2015), differences in management versus employee perceptions (Y. Wang et al., 2020) of SM affordances and organizational size/resources/technological skills of individuals/organizations (Fox & McEwan, 2017; Lupton & Michael, 2017; Parry et al., 2019) provide additional avenues for voice scholars to explore.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to explore the potential of SM as a possible voice mechanism in the modern employment landscape where SM is increasingly used, especially in a remote-work context (Kamal, 2020; B. Wang et al., 2020). We see value for practitioners in understanding SM affordances for voice because employees, and HR and digital media managers, need to understand the value of different internal or external SM being used for work conversations. Through affordances like *visibility* and *association* provided by SM like Workplace, Yammer or a

conference call on MS Teams, HR and line managers can disseminate information faster, especially when managing change/crisis, to control the narrative of the message and address concerns (Naeem, 2020). Equally, if management wants to involve employees in decision-making for the improvement of work or employee outcomes (satisfaction, engagement, and so on), they can use platforms with high *visibility* or *association* to reach out to a wider audience.

In addition, if management capitalizes on *association* affordance through participating in online discussions (such as those on ESM) and responding to communication requests by other employees, they are likely to build trust and have employees express voice more comfortably (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Miles & Mangold, 2014). As discussed earlier, trust is essential for employees to perceive a safe voice climate and management/HR can promote trust through responding to voice on SM. This improved employer–employee relationship also reduces the chances of employees bad-mouthing the organization on external/anonymous SM, which can be damaging for organizational reputation (Y. Lee & Kim, 2020). Given that SM is increasingly being used by employees to talk about work situations, the boundaries of an organization are no longer limited to the walls of the buildings. Instead, SM enables employees to voice about the organization they work for, which can potentially be accessed outside the organization, becoming public property in a way, subject to everyone's opinion. Hence, the voice of employees may not necessarily be confined to an internal audience, with possible impacts on employer branding or reputation, for example. The Treem and Leonardi (2012) framework is important in the voice and silence field as facilitating a wider evaluation of what SM means to voice within an organization. In an era of non-disclosure agreements and employee confidentiality, the type of SM used, and its *visibility* and target reach, are likely to be an important consideration for practitioners and managers in the design of SM as a voice mechanism.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges affordances provide for voice can lead to designing SM policies that are relevant and do not appear restrictive or invade employees' privacy. For example, for SM that has high *visibility*, *persistence* and *association*, like Twitter or Yammer, instead of fearing what employees may say on it and prohibiting employees from voicing on these (Gibbs et al., 2013; Opgenhaffen & Claeys, 2017), they can promote trust in the organization through having SM policies emphasize respect and open communication rather than limit what employees can and cannot say. This is because external SM, which is out of managerial control, still allows employees to express dissent regardless of policies and rules. This could further invite negative consequences for employees

(job loss, reprimanding) and organizations (reputation) rather than resolving anything. Therefore, it is important that SM policies emphasize constructive dialogue and focus on mutual benefit, early identification of trends, problems and solutions (Banghart et al., 2018).

We conclude that with the growth in technological innovation, it is important that voice scholarship examines voice on SM. This paper used the affordance lens to explore the value of SM for varying voice content identified in the voice literature, but we note that the role of context must be considered in future research because both the voice and SM literatures show that communication mechanisms are not necessarily used the same way in all settings (Ellmer & Reichel, 2020; Fox & McEwan, 2017; Marchington, 2008; McCloskey & McDonnell, 2018).


While SM has been used as a communication mechanism within organizations over the past 20 years and also used as a means to voice, its inclusion as a voice mechanism has been neglected by IR scholars, who emphasize collective voice, as well as OB scholars who focus on informal and in-person communication. Hence, our paper contributes to the voice literature by illustrating how SM can be used as a mechanism for voice and the instances where this may be more likely to occur or be most effective. We answer the call of voice scholars to further explore SM for voice (Holland et al., 2019; Klaas et al., 2012; Miles & Mangold, 2014; Parry et al., 2019; Thornthwaite et al., 2020) by bringing together the SM and voice literatures and exploring the SM affordances for different types of voice. Future research would allow us to understand how best to design our communications systems to include mechanisms that can facilitate employee voice in ever-changing business environments.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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