







LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL MEDIA: KEY FINDINGS AND A WAY FORWARD

Ana Radulović^{1*}, 
Allan Lee², 
Venkat Ram Raj Thumiki³, 
Raihan Taqui Syed⁴ 

¹ Singidunum University,
Belgrade, Serbia

² University of Exeter,
Exeter, England

³ Modern College of Business and
Science, Sultanate of Oman,
Muska, Oman

⁴ United Arab Emirates University,
UAE, Abu Dhabi

Abstract:

As an important tool in the digital environment, social media platforms enable leaders to connect with their employees, customers, investors and other stakeholder. The nature of social networks allows leaders to create relationships and inspire positive responses from their followers that benefit the organization. More than 80% of CEOs view social media as a tool for activities and connections that will positively affect their organizations. Interactive and interpersonal features of social media platforms enable CEOs to make themselves more approachable and easier to interact with. This paper provides an overview of nine studies that examined leadership in the context of social media and gives suggestions for further research.

Keywords:

leadership, social media, Twitter, Instagram.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media represents a phenomenon which endlessly grows, expands and includes members from different spheres of both public and private life. Leaders are not immune to the allures of social networks which enable them to connect with their subordinates, customers, investors and other stakeholders. E-leadership is classified as a process of social impact enabled by technology with which leaders may modify the behavior, attitudes, emotions, or performance of individuals, groups and organizations (Avolio et al., 2000). Social media networks assist leaders in exerting their social impact on others regardless of whether they are formal or informal leaders (Tur et al., 2022). Nowadays, likes and shares are used to allocate a leadership status to an individual with an account on social media platforms. Numerous activists, bloggers and influencers engage with their followers on social media and communicate their views on various matters. In this loosely regulated arena, understanding how effective leadership is achieved is valuable for individuals, organizations and communities. Organizations can achieve their goals and ensure success by implementing appropriate public engagement strategies and by collaborating both online and offline. More than 80% of CEOs consider social media to be an important springboard for activities and connections that will be favorably reflected on the organization (Tsai & Men, 2017). Indeed, the interactive, private and interpersonal characteristics of social media platforms enable CEOs to lessen the power disbalance between themselves and their followers. Therefore, CEOs may portray themselves authentically and communicate with the audiences in a spontaneous and personal fashion.

Correspondence:
Ana Radulović

e-mail:
aradulovic@singidunum.ac.rs



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2. OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

Men and Tsai (2016) examined how the general audience interacts with CEOs on social media platforms. The authors proposed a model suggesting that CEOs' engagement on their social media platforms influences the perception of their authenticity and approachability, which, in turn, affects the organizational-public relational outcomes. Authenticity in the online environment entails providing an open display of all significant information and aspirations and thus represents the basis of efficient online interaction (Dahlberg, 2001). Therefore, interactions from a CEO's social media networks need to be viewed as authentic so that relevant bonds between an organization and the public can be created. Another notion significant for effective online interaction is approachability. Approachable individuals are perceived to be welcoming, thoughtful and friendly (Porter et al., 2007) and have been perceived as effective leaders. When interacting on their social media platforms, approachability enables CEOs to be viewed by the audience as close and reliable acquaintances instead of an obscure public personality. The organization-public relationship is rooted in the positive interactional exchanges that unfold on social media between an organization and its stakeholders (Broom et al., 2000). Results of an online survey involving 332 social media users demonstrated that two major factors in motivating an audience's interaction with a CEO on social media are thought leadership, or their perception that the CEO is a leader in one particular sector, and task attraction, or their perception that the CEO is the best at what they do. CEO's engagement with the audience on social media networks positively affected their perceived authenticity and approachability, which subsequently positively affected public satisfaction and trust. Based on the findings, the authors offer directions to CEOs and their organizations to devise efficient social communication strategies (Men & Tsai, 2016).

In their study, Tur et al. (2022) explored the impact of leaders' charisma on social media networks, such as Twitter and TED talks. Initially perceived as a gift that only chosen individuals have, charisma later became integrated into leadership theory. In particular, transformational leadership theory conceptualizes the factor of "idealized influence" as a leader's capacity to communicate a powerful mission to their followers and gain their trust (Bass, 1998). Charismatic leaders tend to engage in charismatic signaling (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999) which is displayed by both verbal and nonverbal conduct.

For example, using metaphors in one's speech to create clear images in the minds of the audience as well as selecting the unique structure or dynamics of the delivery enables the leader to be viewed as charismatic by their followers. At the same time, charismatic signaling can be quantitatively measured which enables these behavioral patterns to be assessed in the digital environment. Informal leaders actively communicate their positions and preferences to others even though they do not occupy a supervisory position in the organization. In order to investigate the impact of informal leaders' charisma, Tur et al. (2022) collected data from two sources of social media, namely, TED talks and Twitter, which enabled the authors to have a significant level of control over the data. The results showed that the display of more verbal charismatic indicators resulted in a greater number of TED talk views, better assessment of the talks' tendency to inspire viewers and greater numbers of retweets. These findings highlight the notion that leadership is primarily a process with a social impact in which followers willingly obey the leader and that this process is also unfolding in the social media context (Tur et al., 2022).

Lee et al. (2017) examined the difference between the founder CEOs in large S&P 1500 companies (e.g., Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Jeff Bezos of Amazon) and non-founder/professional CEOs when it comes to the tone of their discourse on Twitter. The results showed that the founder CEOs are more overconfident compared to the nonfounder CEOs. Overconfidence refers to a person's inclination to perceive themselves to be superior to others concerning their competencies, discernments or potential and to undermine the dangers in the environment (Dushnitsky, 2010). In order to make these comparisons, the authors tracked and analyzed daily tweets of CEOs. Generally speaking, an unbiased text entails a baseline number of negative words. Pessimistic authors tend to use more negative discourse whereas optimistic and overconfident authors tend to avoid negative discourse. The authors utilized the directory of negative words developed for business social studies by Loughran and McDonald (2011). The results of the analysis showed that the absence of negative words in tweets suggests that the CEO is confident (Lee et al., 2017). These findings deepen our understanding of why founder CEOs tend to manage their organizations differently compared to professional CEOs. These valuable insights enable stakeholders to have a better understanding of the founder CEO's actions.

Considering the notion that investors tend to visit social media platforms to gain financial information, CEOs and organizations are subsequently making their financial data available on those platforms. Indeed, posting statuses on platforms such as Twitter regarding the focal points of their press releases or excerpts from their conference calls is widespread.



Since revealing financial data on social media has become common, Grant et al. (2018) used experimental design to study whether investors' reactions to the communication approach of a CEO were affected by the nature of the channel ranging from more conventional such as conference calls to more contemporary like Twitter. The authors investigated the impact of three communication approaches by which a CEO described organizational performance, namely bragging, modesty and humblebragging (Grant et al., 2018). Bragging entails basing one's achievement on internal capacity and is delivered with intensifying expressions (Wosinska et al., 1996). Modesty involves basing success on outward elements such as prosperity or support without the use of intensifying expressions (Tice et al., 1995). Humblebragging is supposed to sound modest but since it highlights one's remarkable success, it is viewed as being deceitful (Sezer et al., 2018). The findings reveal that when the communication channel is a conference call, investors are more likely to respond favorably and invest when CEO messages entail bragging about the organizational results compared to messages with a modest stance. Contrastingly, when the communication channel is Twitter, investors favored modest discourse regarding performance. Additionally, the extent to which a CEO was perceived to be trustworthy influenced the investors' evaluation of a CEO's communication channel and the tone of the message. Moreover, irrespective of the communication channel, the CEO's messages with a humble bragging tone about the organizational performance were perceived least favorably. This study has significant practical implications for organizations that are interested in devising communication approaches for platforms such as Twitter.

Since social media networks are a medium through which organizations can expand their relationships with clients, members of staff and shareholders, Tsai and Men (2017) conducted a study in which they examined the effect that a CEO's discourse on social media may have on the wider audience. The study provides insights into CEO amiability and its underlying effects on the public's perception of their relationship with the company as well as on their public advocacy. Public advocacy is defined as the behavior of the general audience with which they willingly spread affirmative facts about a company, its products or services, or confront the company's opponents (Walz & Celuch, 2010). The nature of social media interactions enables the members to perceive the impact that their praise and criticisms may have on their connections. This notion motivated Tsai and Men (2017) to collect survey responses from 332 participants on social networks who were following CEOs. The results showed that CEOs' compassionate and confident interactions on social media portray them as friendly and admirable personas, which subsequently enhances followers' confidence in and advocacy

for the organization. Therefore, the CEO's presence and interaction with the audiences on social media seems to be a vital ingredient in evolving the relationship with their online followership, which eventually tends to have positive effects on the organization (Tsai & Men, 2017).

Using the data from CEO Twitter accounts, Gruda et al. (2021) studied the link between the narcissistic traits of leaders and corporate fundraising as a facet of a company's accomplishment. Narcissism as a trait entails an augmented perception of one's reputation and is linked to one's eagerness to succeed, contend, dominate and make brave projections (Wales et al., 2013). Despite its dark aspects, the bright side of narcissism entails self-assurance, and the capacity to motivate others which are highly admired qualities of corporate leaders. Namely, persons with narcissistic tendencies may be chosen for leadership positions in organizations, yet their behavior remains to be directed at their own interests and not at the concerns of their subordinates. In this study, the authors focused on grandiose narcissism which entails one's demonstration of supremacy, poise and privilege. Grandiose narcissism is composed of two components, namely admiration and rivalry (Back et al., 2013). Admiration refers to a narcissist's magnetism, uniqueness, and grandiose imagery whereas rivalry displays antagonism, violence and degrading others. Corporate fundraising represents an interesting polygon for investigating narcissistic traits because accomplishments in these activities support leaders' tendencies to portray themselves as a key factor in securing future organizational expansion. The data included 237 corporate leaders who actively published announcements on Twitter, who were followed by at least 100 Twitter users and were in at least 10 groups. Machine-learning algorithms were utilized to forecast leaders' character traits based on their Twitter accounts. The results showed that admiration was positively associated with - and rivalry was negatively associated with corporate fundraising achievements (Gruda et al., 2021).

Kim et al. (2016) investigated how the Chinese major online shopping platform Alibaba responded to a paracrisis on social media. Paracrisis is a situation that resembles a crisis to which the organization needs to react, yet it does not require the formation of a crisis committee or working in a crisis mode (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Indeed, since paracrisis is not that stringent, reacting to it in a formal, structured manner may only further harm the organizational status. The authors showed that in the initial phase of the paracrisis, Alibaba effectively prevented its status crisis on social media by assuming the reaction strategy of humorous self-ridicule. The authors also highlight the impact that a CEO's character and parasocial connections may have when it comes to responding to the crisis, including the choice of a messaging approach that corresponds well with social media.



Importantly, the authors highlight that a fruitful communication approach to the social media crisis may not only alleviate the crisis but ultimately transform a possible status crisis into an occasion for public relations (Kim et al., 2016).

While social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer a playground for a variety of activities such as public debates, and creating groups and pages, the main purpose of Instagram is displaying images. The fact that Instagram allows and accentuates graphic displays directs its users to focus on presenting and promoting themselves instead of creating relationships with others (Dumas, et al., 2017). Therefore, O'Connell (2018) investigated ways in which leaders in the political arena used Instagram and how it is related to both to their demographics and leadership positions. The author employed a content analysis of every Instagram announcement displayed by all members of the US Congress and nonvoting delegates seated in the first half of 2017. In total, the data included 17,811 Instagram posts made by 534 participants. The results showed that females tend to have an Instagram account more often compared to males. Furthermore, Senators and female members tend to make announcements on their accounts more often. A person's traits including their chamber, political affiliation and seniority substantially influence the type of content presented on Instagram. The results of an exploratory analysis yielded three conclusions: there is no difference in how members of Congress use Instagram and other social media channels, the use of Instagram will be vastly affected by the power of their political affiliation, and the future transformation of representation in Congress is evident due to more casual profiles of younger members (O'Connell, 2018).

Social media has been used by entrepreneurs as an influential medium for connection, branding and creating one's identity. Heizmann and Liu (2022) investigated how female entrepreneurs in Australia use social media to display their identity considering different aspects of their demographics. The study employed a qualitative methodology to collect and analyze data from the Instagram accounts of eight female entrepreneurs in Australia. Three prevailing aspects of members' identity performance include their presentation of themselves as being attractive, adored and influential. Even though entrepreneurial activities might have been perceived as masculine, this research demonstrates that female entrepreneurs tend to develop and portray more feminine identities on their social media accounts (Heizmann & Liu, 2022).

3. CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of nine recently published studies that investigate how leaders use social media and how it affects the perception of their traits, skills and organizational outcomes in general. In these studies, the most widely used social media network is Twitter, followed by Instagram. When it comes to personality, social media provides leaders with abundant opportunities to demonstrate various facets of their traits and thus enables followers to evaluate the leader's authenticity, approachability, charisma, overconfidence, and narcissism. These are significant attributes that have been shown to have a significant place in the leadership literature. For instance, charisma is a component of Transformational Leadership Theory and social media is an arena in which it can be explored further. Regarding the leader's skills, these studies highlight how social media enables leaders to effectively respond to a status paracrisis by employing the strategy of humorous self-ridicule and thus creating avenues for public relations. Furthermore, leaders use online platforms to display identities that align with their organizational goals and they may use a variety of communication styles (i.e., bragging, modesty). Last but not least, it was shown that the leader's interaction on social media networks may positively affect various organizational-public relational outcomes such as trust and satisfaction and may inspire public advocacy on behalf of their followers. Future studies should examine how various facets of the leader's personality presented on social media affect skills relevant to leader effectiveness such as encouragement, persuasion, communication, etc. Moreover, future studies should decipher how the leader's engagement on social media may impact relational outcomes such as the audience's supportive behavior, as well as product and service demand, achievement of corporate goals and organizational bottom line in general. Studies tend to employ quantitative methodology. Forthcoming studies should thus use a mixed-method approach to provide a content analysis of the leader's social media discourse, as well as the case study approach and qualitative interviews. In addition to Twitter (now X) and Instagram, future studies should use other social media platforms for collecting data. Social media remains a fruitful field for exploring leadership theory in the digital era and future studies will yield greater theoretical understanding, as well as practical implications for CEOs and organizations.



4. LITERATURE

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