

Where and Why Coworkers Connect on Social Media: Examining Employees' Motivations for Connecting with Coworkers on Social Media

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This study explored the motivations employees have for connecting with coworkers via personal social media and which platforms they choose to connect on. Open and close-ended responses collected on Amazon's Mechanical Turk from 307 individuals reveal insight into four research questions. First, participants were mainly connected to coworkers using Facebook (89.7%), LinkedIn (77.6%), and Instagram (69.5%). Second, no difference was found in employees' motivation to connect via social media whether they are working in-person, remotely, or in a hybrid format. Third, participants had two main motivations for using personal social media accounts to connect with coworkers: a) sharing and obtaining

personal information, and b) communicating about work and nonwork issues. Fourth, gratifications obtained by coworkers who connect with colleagues on social media include: a) professional networking, and b) an alternate means of easily communicating. The results of this study contribute to a fuller understanding of coworker communication via social media, especially in terms of the motivations and benefits employees have for connecting via social media in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: coworker communication, social media, uses and gratifications

Social media has expanded its reach into nearly every aspect of daily life, including the workplace. Research indicates that coworkers are often connected to one another via social media (Chen et al., 2022; Frampton & Child, 2013; Huang & Liu, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2016). While some organizations have internal social networking sites through which employees are connected (Cardon & Marshall, 2015; Leonardi et al., 2013; Madsen, 2016), individuals often choose to connect with their coworkers through their personal social media accounts (Frampton & Child, 2013; Huang & Liu, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2016). Individuals may have a variety of reasons for connecting with their coworkers on social media, including for work-related and social-related purposes (Chen et al., 2022;

Huang & Liu, 2017). As social media continues to grow across platforms and employees are increasingly working remotely, understanding individuals' motives for connecting with their coworkers via their personal social media accounts has important implications for understanding coworker relationships and social media behaviors. Thus, the present study seeks to understand employees' motivations for connecting with coworkers via social media and which social media platforms employees use to connect with coworkers post-COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coworker Communication

Coworker communication refers to communication between employees in the same organization. Communication within the workplace often results in a variety of relationship types including supervisor-subordinate relationships, peer coworker relationships, friendships, and even romantic relationships. Through building relationships in the workplace individuals can share information, collaborate, and build trust (Sias, 2009). Further, workplace relationships have a variety of outcomes on both individuals and the organization including job satisfaction, turnover, and productivity (Sias, 2009; Tjosvold, 1986). As such, the relationships individuals share with those in their workplace have important functions both organizationally and socially.

Extant literature has examined how workplace relationships, and especially workplace friendships, develop (Sias, 2005; Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias et al., 2020). Specifically, the initiation of workplace friendships are often influenced by two work-related factors: physical proximity and shared projects (Sias, 2005; Sias & Cahill, 1998). That is, when coworkers work in close physical proximity to one another on shared work projects, they are more likely to find that their coworker relationship will evolve into a friendship. The nature of work and where work is completed is rapidly evolving post-COVID-19. Increasingly employees work fully remotely or in a hybrid format whereby they work remotely some percentage of the time (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022). Thus, the workplace factor of physical proximity influencing the formation of workplace friendships may no longer be present for all workers. However, as individuals' work increasingly moves online, individuals' ability to connect with their coworkers is similarly moving online (Leonardi et al., 2013; Sias et al., 2012, 2020).

Coworker Communication via Social Media. Although much of the literature on workplace relationships focuses on talk situated within organizational confines (e.g., face-to-face interactions, email, meeting communication; Sias, 2009; Sias et al., 2012), employees often communicate with each other through a variety of channels, including social media (Frampton & Child, 2013; Huang & Liu, 2017; Leonardi et al., 2013; Madsen, 2016; Robertson & Kee, 2017; Sias et al., 2012, 2020). Organizations have noted the utility of social media use for organizational operations and many have adopted internal social networking sites for organizational use (Cardon & Marshall, 2015; Leonardi et al., 2013; Madsen, 2016; Men et al., 2020; Sias et al., 2012). Internal social networking sites, or enterprise social media, refer to social media platforms used solely for internal communication processes in organizations (Leonardi et al., 2013). Research indicates that employees use internal social media platforms to collaborate and share information (Vuori & Okkonen, 2012) and craft their organizational identity (Madsen, 2016). Thus, many employees are familiar with the use of social media platforms for connecting with coworkers due to the need to use these platforms on the job.

While organizational scholars have focused on the implications of the use of internal social networking platforms on organizational processes and employee experiences, limited scholarship has examined employees' motivations for using their private social media accounts to connect with coworkers online. However, research has shown that when employees connect with one another via personal social media accounts, such as Facebook, that it can influence their level of identification with the organization (Bartels et al., 2019), their job performance (Chen et al., 2022), and their job satisfaction (Huang & Liu, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017). Huang and Liu (2017), for example, found that the percentage of coworker connections on one's Facebook account was associated with higher job satisfaction and improved job performance. Likewise, Robertson and Kee (2017) found that employee's job satisfaction was positively associated with the amount of time they communicated with coworkers on Facebook. More recently, scholars have noted that as the number of coworker contacts on one's Facebook increases, so does organizational identification (Bartels et al., 2019). Thus, connecting to coworkers via personal social media can have important implications on coworker relationships and one's identification with their organization.

Prior research indicates that individuals use their privacy orientations (e.g., level of openness with sharing personal information with coworkers) to make decisions around accepting coworkers' (Frampton & Child, 2013) and supervisors' (Cistulli & Snyder, 2019) friend requests on social media. Further, individuals are often careful regarding whether they are connected to coworkers via personal social media accounts, such as Facebook, and with the amount and types of personal information that would be visible to coworkers via social media (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017; Frampton & Child, 2013). Research also indicates that while using social media to connect with coworkers is associated with friendship closeness, it is also negatively associated with the level of trust between coworkers (Sias et al., 2020). As such, it is clear that for many individuals the decision to connect with coworkers via social media is not as simple as sending or accepting a friend request.

According to Statista (2022), there were 4.59 billion global social media users in 2022 and the number of social media users is expected to grow to over 5.5 billion by 2026. As social media usage continues to grow, social media users will likely face more decisions regarding whether to connect with their coworkers online. While some scholarly research has examined individuals' use of social media platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook to connect with coworkers online (Child & Petronio, 2011; Frampton & Child, 2013), few studies have updated the discussion to account for the wider range of social media platforms being used today, especially post-COVID-19. As such, this study seeks to understand what social media platforms employees use to connect with their coworkers.

RQ1: What social media platforms do individuals use to connect with their coworkers?

RQ2: Is there a difference in whether employees are connected to their colleagues via social media based on their work arrangement (e.g., working remotely, in-person)?

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G; Katz et al., 1973) has traditionally been applied to understanding media viewing selection processes. Katz & Blumer (1974) explained that media audiences are discerning, active, and motivated by specific needs. As such, U&G Theory is used to understand why audiences use media. More recently U&G

has been applied to social media use and specifically the motivations for using social media and the needs that using a given social networking site fulfills (Okazaki, 2006; Rathnayake & Winter, 2018; Shen & Khalifa, 2008). Unlike traditional television media, social media allows users to experience different benefits particularly due to the two-way nature of social network sites and the ability to not only consume content, but to create it (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018). That is, social media is used for consumption of content (e.g., information, entertainment), participation (e.g., social interaction, virtual community), and content creation (e.g., self-expression; Shao, 2009). Further, the gratifications from using social media may focus on the motivations of the user or may focus on the affordances from a given platform (e.g. a specific affordance of TikTok) (Rathnayake & Winter, 2018).

In terms of affordances, motivations, and gratifications for connecting and interacting with coworkers on social media, research has explored internal enterprise social networking platforms, such as Yammer and Jive (Cardon & Marshall, 2015), along with public social media (e.g. WeChat, LinkedIn, Facebook) for connecting employees for work and nonwork communication (Bi & Zhang, 2021). Scholars have found that the use of social networking sites for internal organizational use, like WeChat, (Bi & Zhan, 2021) and external social networking sites, like Facebook, for personal use (Bartels et al., 2019) can facilitate organizational identification and sense of belonging within organizations. That is, social media users may be motivated to use social networking sites to satisfy personal needs, like a sense of achievement and belonging (Vogt & Knapman, 2007). While prior research has identified a clear relationship between organizational identification and connecting with coworkers via social media (Bartels et al., 2019; Bi & Zhan, 2021), organizational communication scholars have not fully explored users' motivations for connecting with coworkers via their personal social media accounts. Guided by a U&G framework, the present study seeks to further understand employees' motivations for connecting with their coworkers via their personal social media accounts.

RQ3: What are employees' motivations for using personal social media accounts to connect with coworkers online?

RQ4: What needs does connecting to coworkers via personal social media accounts fulfill for employees who choose to connect with coworkers via social media?

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 307 individuals who worked full-time ($n = 266$), part-time ($n = 39$), or were on temporary leave (e.g., FMLA; $n = 2$) and used social media. Participants ages ranged from 19 to 71 years old ($M = 35.10$; $SD = 9.66$). Out of the 307 individuals who completed the survey, 64.2% identified as male ($n = 197$) and 35.8% identified as female ($n = 110$). Most participants were working exclusively from home (39.1%; $n = 120$) at the time they completed the survey. Participants' ethnicities included white (55%; $n = 169$), Asian (30.3%; $n = 93$), Black (6.2%; $n = 19$), Hispanic (5.9%; $n = 18$), American Indian/Alaskan Native (2%; $n = 6$), and other (.7%; $n = 2$). Participants represented diverse industries, including legal services (23.5%; $n = 72$), software development (11.1%; $n = 34$), construction (10.1%; $n = 31$), and technical services (9.4%; $n = 29$).

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, an online survey was administered through Qualtrics in May 2021. Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were compensated (\$3.00 USD) for completing the online survey. MTurk was used for the present study in an effort to recruit a general sample of U.S.-based employees who currently use social media. All participants were required to complete the survey and submit a unique identifier to the MTurk platform that the authors then used to verify their completion of the survey. A total of 386 surveys were submitted through Qualtrics, but after removing incomplete and/or incoherent responses ($n = 79$), a total of 307 responses were retained for data analysis.

Participants responded to open-ended and close-ended questions about their social media use and their demographic information. Specifically, participants were asked to report which social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) they used, which social media platforms they used to connect with workplace coworkers, their reasons for connecting or not connecting with coworkers via social media, and their demographic information. All quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 27.

Qualitative data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. After open-ended data was imported into Excel, both researchers familiarized themselves with the data and began the coding process. The researchers employed a two-step coding process in which initial, line-by-line codes were assigned to

participant responses. Line-by-line codes were used to describe participant responses (Charmaz, 2006). Upon reviewing initial codes, the researchers engaged in focused coding (Charmaz, 2006), whereby they identified initial codes that were dominant and frequent. Once codes that appeared most frequently were identified, they were constantly compared to one another and organized into categories based on similarities and patterns. The categories identified were examined and used to answer the qualitative research questions.

RESULTS

The first research question examined the social media platforms individuals use to connect with their coworkers, exploring what social networking sites were the most popular for connecting with coworkers online. The social media usage across the sample is reported in Table 1. The results show that some social media platforms are used by a larger percentage of participants to connect with coworkers than others. Specifically, 89.7% of participants who used Facebook were connected to coworkers on the platform, 77.5% of participants who used LinkedIn were connected to coworkers on the platform, and 69.5% of participants who used Instagram were connected to coworkers on the platform.

Table 1. *Social Media Platforms Usage*

Social Media Platform	Number of participants who used platform	Number of participants who were connected to coworkers on platform	Percentage of participants connected to coworkers on platform
Facebook	283	254	89.7%
Instagram	249	173	69.5%
Twitter	235	137	58.3%
LinkedIn	129	100	77.5%
Snapchat	114	57	50%
Pinterest	98	29	29.6%
TikTok	68	18	26.5%

The second research question examined whether there was a difference in participants' decision to connect with their colleagues via social media based on their work arrangement. Chi-square tests were used to determine whether individuals' connections to

coworkers via social media differed based on their work arrangement (see Table 2). While none of the chi-square tests on individual platforms showed a statistically significant difference between choice of connecting with coworker via the social media platform and work arrangement, the chi-square test for the Facebook platform was approaching significance, $\chi^2(4, 283) = 9.182, p = .057$. Thus, it does not appear that, in general, one’s work arrangement impacts the decision to connect with coworkers using one’s personal social media account.

Table 2 *Chi-Square Test Results*

Group	100% Remote Work	Primarily Remote Work	Hybrid (Remote/ On-Site)	Primarily On-Site	100% On-Site
Facebook					
Connected to Coworkers	99	46	61	25	23
Not Connect to Coworkers	12	10	3	0	4
$\chi^2(4, 283) = 9.182, p = .057$					
Twitter					
Connected to Coworkers	51	31	29	18	8
Not Connect to Coworkers	44	18	19	8	9
$\chi^2(4, 235) = 3.579, p = .466$					
Instagram					
Connected to Coworkers	66	34	43	20	10
Not Connect to Coworkers	29	17	16	8	6
$\chi^2(4, 249) = .930, p = .920$					
Snapchat					
Connected to Coworkers	23	10	12	6	6
Not Connect to Coworkers	22	13	13	4	5
$\chi^2(4, 114) = .944, p = .918$					
Pinterest					
Connected to Coworkers	16	5	3	2	3
Not Connect to Coworkers	21	12	20	8	8
$\chi^2(4, 98) = 6.803, p = .147$					
LinkedIn					
Connected to Coworkers	40	21	22	8	9
Not Connect to Coworkers	11	10	6	0	2
$\chi^2(4, 129) = 4.179, p = .392$					
TikTok					
Connected to Coworkers	5	5	3	3	2
Not Connect to Coworkers	13	14	17	4	2
$\chi^2(4, 68) = 3.472, p = .482$					

Notes: “100% Remote Work” refers to participants who worked remotely 100% of the time; “Primarily Remote Work” refers to participants who work from home the majority of the time, but do work on-site some portion of the time (<50%); “Hybrid” refers to participants who work remotely approximately 50% of the time and on-site approximately 50% of the time; “Primarily On-Site” refers to employees who mostly work on site, but do work remotely some portion of the time (<50%); “100% On-Site” refers to employees who work on-site 100% of the time.

Qualitative Results

Motivations for Using Personal Social Media to Connect with Coworkers. The third research question explored employees' motivations for using personal social media to connect with coworkers online. The data revealed two themes: (a) sharing and obtaining personal information; and (b) communicating about work and nonwork issues. Descriptions of the themes and associated participant quotes are presented in the following sections.

Sharing and Obtaining Personal Information. Respondents reported that they are motivated to connect with coworkers on social media to share personal information, such as photographs and updates about their personal life, with their coworkers and to get to know their coworkers better through the information that their coworkers share on social media. For example, Participant 4 stated they use social media with coworkers "to be able to connect and share with them and being able to have them included in my life." Other respondents echoed that sentiment by saying "It allows us to connect outside of work. We get a glimpse of our lives outside of work" (Participant 128) and "we can see how each other are in our real lives outside of work" (Participant 260). Employees specifically noted they connect on social media not only to share their personal information with coworkers, but to *obtain* personal information about their coworkers. For example, Participant 146 said, "I use social media to get to know them more as a person. I can gain insight into their daily life when they are not working." Participant 184 also used social media "to be more close to the personal lives of my work colleagues." Others gave similar responses by stating, "it [social media] allows me to get to know them better and have a better understanding of them on a personal level" (Participant 205) and "I enjoy knowing what goes on in their private lives" (Participant 203).

Several participants expanded upon what exactly they hope to see on social media in terms of coworkers' private life and explained that they were interested in learning about their coworkers' families. Participant 167 said, "I like learning about them and their families" while Participant 279 said, "It's a great way to keep up with them for things outside of work. See their families, what they have going on in a different environment." For some participants, the ability to learn about their colleagues' family on social media allowed them to build a stronger relationship with their coworkers. Participant 151 said,

“I use social media to connect with coworkers because it helps me to learn more about their lives outside of work, including family/personal life. As a result, it helps me feel a closer connection to the people in my team.” In the same manner, Participant 206 wrote, “It [social media] keeps me up to date on what is going on in their life which helps us relate.” Finally, Participant 286 noted, “I want to be ‘in the know’ about what is going on with their lives so that I feel like we have a connection beyond just work.”

Respondents noted that by connecting to their coworkers on social media, they were able to foster closer relationships with coworkers, including friendships. For example, Participant 3 saw social media as an avenue for relationship building and said, “[Connecting to coworkers on social media] is a good way to make friends outside the office and learn a little about their lives.” Participant 236 noted one reason they share and connect on social media is to “improve the friendship between us [coworkers].” Participant 163 shared content on social media because “several of my coworkers are my good friends and since we don’t like to talk personal things at work on work time we use social media. Plus it’s easy to share pictures.” Thus, some participants described sharing personal information, such as photos, on social media as acts that could foster friendships, while others were motivated to share on social media because they are already friends with their coworkers.

Communicating about Work and Nonwork Issues. Respondents’ second motivation for using personal social media to connect with coworkers was to communicate about work and nonwork issues. Participant 83 said they use social media “sometimes to talk about work, other times to arrange something together and hang out.” Similar remarks came from Participant 270 when they said, “We use it mostly to communicate for work. However, sometimes we have personal conversations and discuss topics of interest, such as current news and entertainment videos.” Participant 61 also described the various uses of social media with coworkers and said, “Sometimes it is to discuss workplace issues in a private capacity, completely disconnected from the workplace; sometimes, it is to engage in small talk; other times, it is a convenient alternative for when official means of communication (our company email, as an example) is out of commission.”

Some participants described using social media for either work or nonwork communication, while others said they use it for both. For participants who used social

media to talk about *work-related topics*, they said they use it for “talking or small meetings” (Participant 55), “to discuss work-related issues” (Participant 67), to “exchange work-related ideas” (Participant 252), “to have fun related to office stuff” (Participant 72), “to communicate about work-related issues and see which shifts and who can work on certain days” (Participant 248), “for getting meeting details or any kind of changes in process” (Participant 224), and “to communicate during weekends or public holidays when there’s an important issue” (Participant 289). Participant 79 spoke more specifically about this when saying, “In our network of professionals, we often all share information about trade-related publications and professional conferences.” One reason workers may turn to social media for work-related communication is because of the familiarity and ease of use. Participant 34 used social media with coworkers “To keep up on schedules and tasks. It’s an easy way for us to ask questions or give solutions” (Participant 34). Participant 274 made similar observations when sharing social media is “an easy and fast way to connect to do work-related things” (Participant 274).

Other respondents used social media to discuss *nonwork issues*. Workers shared they use social media with colleagues to “have a place to talk after work” (Participant 208), “to show funny gifs and craft ideas” (Participant 237), and “to send funny memes” (Participant 249). Participants also described using social media to discuss nonwork topics, but only with certain coworkers. Participant 201 said, “I consider some of my coworkers as friends and like to be connected through social media with them to keep in touch regarding our daily lives.” Others provided similar information about their willingness to communicate. Participant 231 stated, “I am very selective about which of my coworkers I use social media with, but for the few that I do use it with, we generally connect about upcoming events or places to meet up outside of work.” Likewise, Participant 287 was careful about which coworkers they were connected with via social media and said, “I [am only connected to a] few [coworkers] where we use messenger if we don’t want to use the email from work if we have something not work related to discuss.” Finally, participants noted the benefit of relationship-building in terms of connecting with coworkers on social media to discuss issues other than work. Participant 189 said, “I like to build personal relationships with them in order to have conversations that don’t always revolve around work.” Participant 306 said they connect with some coworkers, “so we can

talk about other stuff beside work-related. Also, it helps to understand your coworker better by talking to them about other things in life.” Another respondent framed this relationship-building communication in connection with the pandemic and remote work:

Since the pandemic started, our organization shifted to work from home rather than on-site work. Due to this, I felt disconnected with my colleagues and I wanted to connect with them where we can talk freely and support each other in these trying times. That’s why I connected with my colleagues over social media. (Participant 255)

Thus, for some participants social media can be a way to keep in touch with coworkers when they are not able to be with their coworkers in-person.

Reasons for Not Connecting to Coworkers via Social Media. Although the vast majority of participants said they connect with their coworkers via social media and find benefits of doing so, some participants ($N=30$) said they are not motivated to connect with coworkers over social media for two main reasons: (a) they want to separate their personal and work life, and (b) they do not have a relationship with coworkers. Respondents shared, “I don’t want to mix work and personal life” (Participant 11), “I want to separate my work job and my home life” (Participant 168), “I’d prefer to keep our relationships strictly work-related and professional” (Participant 31), “I don’t want my home life being brought up and talked about at work” (Participant 39), and “I don’t want my coworkers to learn about my personal life” (Participant 100). As such, some participants held firm boundaries between their work life and personal life and saw connecting with their coworkers on social media as something that could potentially muddy those boundaries.

While some participants did not choose to connect over social media for personal reasons, others said they simply had no relationship with their coworkers. Participant 30 said, “I don’t really have relationships with any of them, so connecting with them on social media would seem inappropriate.” Others said, “I’m not friends with my coworkers” (Participant 28) and “I don’t have friendships at work” (Participant 290). Participants 4 and 29 respectively said they do not connect with coworkers via social media because “I don’t like them very much,” and “I don’t like any of them.” Thus, connecting with coworkers via social media may not be used by employees who do not have close relationships or friendships with their coworkers.

Benefits of Connecting with Coworkers via Social Media. Although a subset of participants shared why they did not connect with coworkers over social media, the majority of participants who did connect with coworkers via personal social media noted the array of benefits it brings. The fourth research question explored how connecting to coworkers via personal social media can fulfill certain needs for employees. The data revealed two themes: (a) professional networking, and (b) alternate means of easily communicating.

Professional Networking. The first benefit for connecting with coworkers via social media is professional networking. In general, participants note social media is beneficial to “share ideas and information about industry and company-related news” (Participant 267) and to find “job alerts and current affairs of the IT companies” (Participant 262). Many participants referred to LinkedIn specifically as being beneficial to use with coworkers to develop their network. Participant 175 said they connect with coworkers “for professional networking reasons on LinkedIn.” Participant 185 said, “I use LinkedIn. It is a social media for professional networking. So I connect with my coworkers.” In a similar manner, Participant 226 stated, “I used LinkedIn for professional connection so that they can endorse me. I follow coworkers that I consider friends on Facebook & Instagram.”

Alternate Means of Easily Communicating. A second benefit of social media is that it provides an alternate route for easy communication when coworkers want to connect. Respondents referred to social media as easy, comfortable, convenient, and fast, especially compared with other channels of communication. Respondents said social media is an “easy and comfortable way to communicate” (Participant 47), an “easy way to ask questions or give solutions” (Participant 34), and an “easy way to contact them [coworkers]; communication is very comfortable” (Participant 120). Participant 75 said, “It’s very easy and can be easily accessed to communicate to each other in different places.” Participant 187 also noted the convenience by saying social media is “faster, and much better to communicate, when you’re away, and it helps a lot in this pandemic.” Additionally, part of the convenience factor of social media is that seemingly most people use it. Participant 154 noted, “Since most of them are on it, it is a convenient place to stay connected with them there.” “It’s always easy and efficient let alone the fact that majority of them are always online,” said Participant 198.

Not only is it easy and convenient to use, but it is preferred to other methods of communication. Participant 50 said social media is “easier than phone calls.” Likewise, Participant 294 said, “It is the easiest way to stay in contact with coworkers rather than text or call.” Others mentioned the privacy concerns that are not as prevalent when connecting with social media versus cell phone. Participant 264 said, “It’s a great way of keeping in touch without invading the privacy.” Participant 59 stated social media is an “easier way of doing it plus I don’t want everyone at work to have my personal cell number.”

DISCUSSION

The current study investigated employees’ motivations for connecting with coworkers via personal social media accounts. First, this study indicates that, by and large, individuals are using their personal social media accounts to connect with coworkers and Facebook is the most popular social networking platform for these types of connections. These findings align with prior research that also indicates that most social media users accept friend requests on Facebook from coworkers (Frampton & Child, 2013) and that employees are frequently connected to coworkers via their personal social media accounts (Chen et al., 2022; Huang & Liu, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017). Second, the present study findings indicate that there is no significant difference in the choice to connect with coworkers via personal social media based on one’s work arrangement. That is, it does not appear that working remotely or in a hybrid format impacts the decision to connect with one’s coworkers via personal social media accounts. This finding is particularly notable, as employees are increasingly working remotely or in hybrid formats following the COVID-19 pandemic (Wigert & Agrawal, 2022), but these work arrangements do not appear to impact the decision to connect via social media with coworkers.

The qualitative findings from this study contribute to U&G research on social media and coworker communication by suggesting that social media is used by employees to share and obtain information about coworkers and interact with coworkers about both work and nonwork issues. Further, the study’s qualitative findings indicate that connecting with coworkers via personal social media also provides opportunities for

professional networking and for some individuals social media, as a medium, is a more desirable channel for communication due to its ease of use. Prior research notes the utility of qualitative methods for uncovering the specific U&G for using media and social media (Perks & Turner, 2019). That is, quantitative research examining individuals' U&G may not uncover the "nuance" present in individuals' motivations and gratifications from media use (Perks & Turner, 2019, p. 112). The present study reflects this notion in that the findings highlight the fact that personal social media use is a convenient and effective way to build relationships with colleagues, communicate (about work and nonwork issues), and engage in professional networking. While prior research has documented the associations between connecting with coworkers via personal social media and job satisfaction and organizational identification (e.g., Bartels et al., 2019; Huang & Liu, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017), the present study findings indicate that individuals are actively motivated to use social media as a medium for communicating with coworkers, as a source of information about coworkers' lives, as a method for sharing their own personal information (i.e., content creation through sharing photos and posts), and as a tool for building closer relationships and friendships with coworkers.

The present study findings also contribute to a growing body of research examining the role of social media in coworker relationships and organizational experiences (Bartels et al., 2019; Batenburg & Bartels, 2017; Cistulli & Snyder, 2019; Frampton & Child, 2013; Huang & Liu, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2016; Sias et al., 2020). Using social media to connect with coworkers appears to have many positive implications regarding both coworker friendships and organizational experiences. Although the present study findings and other research notes the challenges surrounding maintaining clear boundaries between one's work and personal life (Vitak et al., 2012), most individuals appear to believe that the benefits of connecting with coworkers via social media outweigh the risks.

Practical Implications

Post-COVID-19 social media has become a critical lifeline for connecting individuals. Even social media platforms, like LinkedIn, that were once considered reserved for professional networking, have become a hub for interactions among individuals looking to build closer relationships with colleagues and other professionals

(Kelly, 2022). As such, organizations would be remiss to discount the potential impact that social media can have on employee relationships, organizational productivity, and employee job satisfaction. The current study shows that employees see social media as a way to more effortlessly connect with colleagues and build stronger relationships. More specifically, these findings indicate that physical proximity may no longer be one of the primary factors contributing to building close relationships and friendships among employees and that, in fact, connecting to coworkers via personal social media accounts may be an essential way for employees to now feel connected to their coworkers and organization. As such, organizations considering adopting hybrid and/or remote work arrangements should consider how social media can function as a way for employees to connect, learn about one another, and maintain and build friendships that contribute to job satisfaction, commitment, and productivity.

Although internal social networking sites and productivity tools, like Slack and Microsoft Teams, feature some of the functions of mainstream social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, employees still are making the conscious decision to turn to their personal social media accounts to discuss work and nonwork issues with coworkers and to build relationships. Thus, organizations interested in how social media is being used a channel for communication among employees must consider their policies surrounding social media use in the workplace and their organization's presence on these platforms. That is, organizations that foster an environment where social media is used by employees to connect with coworkers may need to consider how these connections can be useful for effective employee communication (e.g., efficiency, availability, organizational identification) and, conversely, the potential harm that can result from using social media for work-related communication (e.g., blurred personal and work boundaries, cyberbullying).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The results of the present study should be considered in relation to the limitations of the study and need for future research. First, the study used a cross-sectional survey design that included participants from a variety of organizations and industries. Future research should consider including longitudinal surveys to examine how social use changes over time (e.g., platforms used, frequency of use). Additionally, future studies

should consider examining employee social media use in specific professions and/or organizations. That is, certain professions and organizations may have a more robust presence on social media and, as such, it is important to understand how social media use is related to professional identity and organizational affiliation.

A second limitation of the present study is that the qualitative approach did not allow for the measurement of specific motivations for social media use and its relationship to coworker communication (e.g., levels of friendship, trust, privacy concerns). Thus, future research should apply a quantitative U&G approach to the topic of coworker communication via personal social media accounts. Finally, the present study data was collected in May 2021 and was likely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on work arrangements. Future research should continue to examine how communication among coworkers is changing post-COVID-19 as organizations adopt increasingly hybrid and remote work arrangements that reduce physical proximity between employees and increase the reliance on technology for the formation and maintenance of coworker relationships.

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