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Michelle Richey M.N. Ravishankar Christine Coupland

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# Exploring situationally inappropriate social media posts

Social media posts

## An impression management perspective

Michelle Richey, M.N. Ravishankar and Christine Coupland

*School of Business and Economics,  
Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – Social media technologies are used by many organizations to project a positive image of their strategies and operations. At the same time, however, there are an increasing number of reports of slip-ups linked to poor situational awareness and flawed self-presentations on social media platforms. The purpose of this paper is to explore the triggers of inappropriate social media posts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Data were collected during a qualitative study of social media use in 31 organizations in the UK and interpreted using concepts from Erving Goffman's theory of impression management.

**Findings** – The findings point to a series of demanding triggers, which increase the likelihood of insensitive and contextually inappropriate posts and also damage fostered impressions.

**Originality/value** – The authors identify four triggers linked to inappropriate social media posts, namely: speed and spontaneity; informality; blurred boundaries; and the missing audience. The authors also discuss how extending the notion of what Goffman refers to as "situation-like" encounters provides useful insights into impression management on social media.

**Keywords** Organizational change, Behaviour, Interpretivist research, Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

Recent industry reports suggest that organizations are increasingly sophisticated in their use of social media technologies (Kane *et al.*, 2014). Organizations adopting social media anticipate a number of strategic benefits (Kane *et al.*, 2014; Leonardi *et al.*, 2013) and it has become common practice to use social media to communicate a favourable impression of a firm's operations to external audiences (Kane *et al.*, 2014; KPMG International, 2011). In order to create the right impression increasing efforts and resources are being devoted to ensure that messages, commonly referred to as posts, are carefully constructed and communicated. Many organizations now assign social media-specific roles to individuals. For example, Goldman Sachs (*New York Times*, 2012) and Apple (Mann, 2014) recently recruited "experienced" digital marketing directors to manage their social media activities. However, those overseeing social media are not always able to manage the image of their organizations in this setting. Indeed, there are potential risks to impression management on social media related to inappropriate posts and comments, which can seriously discredit and damage the reputation and good image of an organization (Barak, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2011).

There have been several illustrative examples in recent times. For instance, Singapore Airlines was heavily criticized after a team member made an insensitive tweet shortly after the Malaysian jetliner MH17 was shot down. The tweet read: "Customers may wish to note that Singapore Airlines flights are not using Ukraine airspace" (Associated Press, 2014). The individual responsible for the post claimed that



she had received a large number of enquiries about flight routes from customers and wanted to respond quickly and efficiently by using Twitter. In another instance, an employee of the American brand KitchenAid posted a joke about the death of President Obama's grandmother to the company's official Twitter account (*USA Today*, 2012). The social media manager issuing an apology for the post explained "a member of our Twitter team mistakenly posted an offensive tweet from the KitchenAid handle instead of a personal handle" (*USA Today*, 2012). The impacts of inappropriate posts can include loss of business, damaged relationships, public humiliation and embarrassment (Barak, 2014; Warren, 2011).

Following Goffman (1959) we conceptualize the group of individuals representing their organizations on social media as a "team of performers". Here, each individual member of the team can be seen as contributing to the overall impression of the organization. In this paper, we aim to broadly address the question: why do individuals in organizational contexts make situationally inappropriate posts to social media platforms? Specifically, we explore the fundamental individual-level triggers of contextually inappropriate posts made to social media platforms in organizational settings. The paper is based on a qualitative study of teams who extensively used the most popular, free social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) to promote favourable impressions of their organizations. The rest of the paper is organized as follows; the literature review focuses on impression management and how impression management on social media can be particularly complex. The methods section gives an account of our approach to studying inappropriate social media posts. The findings section presents four situational triggers, which contributed to the inappropriate posts described by our participants. In the discussion section we consider the implications of our findings for future social media studies.

### **Impression management**

The notion of impression management refers to the efforts made by individuals to control information in order to influence the impressions formed about them in the minds of others (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker and Wowra, 2003; Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1990). The sociological and organizational literature has paid much attention to impression management during face-to-face interactions, where individuals collude to maintain a version of social reality amongst their work peers and the general public (Westphal *et al.*, 2012; Hunter-McDonnell and King, 2013; Raghuram, 2013). Erving Goffman's (1959) seminal text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, describes these commonplace organizational interactions using a dramaturgical metaphor. In this analogy individuals are compared to actors who arrange themselves into troupes to present a particular, pre-agreed version of reality, while concealing any evidence that might contradict the official construction (Raghuram, 2013; Hunter-McDonnell and King, 2013).

With its emphasis on presentations and public performances, impression management has appealed to scholars studying organizational social media accounts, which have become an increasingly popular way for organizations to present themselves to the general public (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). People do not interact in each other's presence on social media; instead the vehicles for impression management in this setting are the posts made to organizational accounts. Such posts can consist of a variety of multimedia content, but primarily involve textual messages broadcast to groups of followers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). By carefully constructing posts, managers are able to promote favourable impressions of their organizations, which can help them achieve numerous strategic objectives (Schneiderjans *et al.*, 2013).

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In order for their strategic presentations to be successful, managers and other team members are reliant upon each other to maintain an appropriate performance on social media.

### *Team performances*

Goffman suggests that the perpetuation of a particular impression relies upon the cooperation of all of the individuals performing as part of a team (Goffman, 1959). Although individuals occupy different roles with different associated levels of status and responsibility, each contributes to the overall impression being conveyed. If a member of the team breaks with the acceptable conventions of the situation, fostered impressions can be damaged (Hunter-McDonnell and King, 2013; Westphal *et al.*, 2012). In such scenarios, team members can initiate some kind of damage control in an effort to restore the normal order of things (Hunter-McDonnell and King, 2013; Westphal *et al.*, 2012). On social media platforms team members are similarly capable of compromising the strategic presentations of their organizations. The use of bad language, emotional outbursts and the posting of offensive material are among the mistakes made by those posting to organizational social media accounts (Wang *et al.*, 2011). In general, when information is posted that is clearly not suitable for a broadly defined audience loss of face can occur, impressions can be discredited and the overall damage to reputation can be severe (Hunter-McDonnell and King, 2013; Peng and Tjosvold, 2011). In light of the high potential costs of inappropriate posts, it is in the interests of the organization to conceal inappropriate behaviour and material from those observing them (Vaast and Kaganer, 2013). In normal impression management settings this is achieved by separating the spaces in which public and private interactions occur.

### *Front and back-stage*

In Goffman's (1959) original metaphor teams controlled what was on view to the public by strictly separating their environment into "front-stage" and "back-stage" spaces. The appearance of the front-stage area and the look and behaviour of the team are all premeditated and contribute to the overall impression being conveyed (Giacalone and Rosenfeld, 1990). The team might even go as far as rehearsing a variety of anticipated scenarios, in order that all members know the appropriate script to use for different audiences (Goffman, 1959; Raghuram, 2013). Whilst in each other's presence, the team and the audience are able to pick up on various cues that alert them as to the type of performance to give and whether any adjustments are necessary. Body language, gesture, tone of voice and many other social cues combine to help the team assess what is necessary, as the performance occurs in real time. Any evidence that might contradict a public performance is removed from view in a "back-stage" area (Vieira de Cuhna, 2013; Raghuram, 2013). In such an area formal performances are relaxed because team members are no longer in view of their audience. Here, team members' performances are less contrived and more spontaneous, reflecting the overall back-stage status of the region.

### *Impression management on social media*

Impression management is made easier by some of the material features of social media (Walther, 2007; Leonardi and Treem, 2012). For example, many social media users communicate asynchronously, enabling them to think about and edit their responses before posting them and to conceal their involuntary gestures and expressions

(Walther, 2007; Leonardi and Treem, 2012). This means that they are able to carefully consider the potential audience for their posts and target content accordingly (Leonardi and Treem, 2012). They are also able to revisit and revise content over an extended period of time, incrementally improving the quality of information, a practice particularly prevalent among wiki users (Yates *et al.*, 2010). In addition, social media enables users to manage the visibility of their posts by using privacy settings or by creating multiple social media accounts (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Marwick, 2010). In this sense social media appear to offer both a front and back-stage to performers, enabling them to both reveal information and to conceal it from their audiences (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014). Indeed, social media allows users to make visible information that would be difficult to articulate in other ways, such as their social connections (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Kane *et al.*, 2014) and their association with particular types of content such as wikis and blog posts (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Articulating these associations provides users with a form of social capital (Treem and Leonardi, 2012) that can enhance their image on social media.

However, social media also complicate each element of impression management described above. Social media create what has been described as a “collapsed context” (Farnham and Churchill, 2011; Marwick, 2010) in which the audience of followers are far more heterogeneous than an audience in a traditional encounter might be. In contrast to face-to-face interactions where audiences place a single coherent demand on the team, on social media teams may be required to simultaneously address the expectations of a considerably varied group, and thus experience increased cognitive demands whilst performing (French and Read, 2013; Hogan, 2010). In order to manage this difficulty users tend to adjust the detail and depth of information shared in their posts to make them more acceptable to a broadly defined audience (French and Read, 2013). Furthermore, because performers and audience are not physically co-present during a performance, performers may experience a greater sense of disinhibition (Suler, 2004) making them feel less fettered by the traditional social norms governing face-to-face encounters. Some studies explore the feeling of invisibility and anonymity that lead individuals to unusually negative social behaviour (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012; Shelton and Skalski, 2014). In Goffman’s (1959) terms, these individuals do not have access to the rich array of social cues available during face-to-face encounters and this absence might constrain the overall performance. The sense of anonymity can also impact behaviour in an organizational setting. Scott and Orlikowski (2014) compare how anonymity is used by an offline scheme evaluating hoteliers and an online scheme populated with social media reviews. Their study showed that the type of anonymity afforded by social media produced markedly different results for the hotels under review and created impressions that were problematic for managers to control.

Interactions that are enabled by any form of technology have been called “mediated” (Rettie, 2009; Subramaniam *et al.*, 2013) in the material sense, and “situation-like” (Goffman, 1959; Rettie, 2009) in the sociological sense. When applied to social media, the two terms help distinguish the fundamental nature of interactions taking place in these non-physical settings. The term “mediated” attends to the material involvement of technology during communication. The term “situation-like” takes account of the fact that technology-enabled interactions do not constitute a perfect situation where performers can access a full range of social cues. In other words, these interactions lack some important social cues found in face-to-face encounters, but resemble typical face-to-face situations in many other ways (hence the term “situation like”). Studies observing individuals representing their organizations in other mediated contexts have shown that the lack of

available social cues in these circumstances can place additional cognitive demands on performers (e.g. see Raghuram's (2013) study of Indian call centre workers). Scholars have highlighted the entanglement of the material and the sociological dimensions that constitute social media interactions (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014; Leonardi and Barley, 2010). This entanglement occurs in practice as users "react to technology's materiality [...] when translating it from the realm of the artifactual in to the realm of the social" (Leonardi, 2013, p. 162). Entanglements can potentially create misinterpretations of technological (or material) demands as social (or normative) demands and vice-versa, thus contributing to impression management failures on social media.

While studies suggest that mediated contexts in general and social media settings in particular pose crucial challenges for teams of performers, the fundamental triggers for inappropriate posts are less well understood. In other words, while the extant literature suggests a broad range of possible causes for inappropriate behaviour on social media platforms, the specific social-psychological triggers, which may lead individuals to post inappropriate context have not been explored in any great detail. Social media users do not simply "type [themselves] into being" (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211) and in fact, a range of social and psychological processes underpin their behaviour on social media. An exploration of the origins of situationally inappropriate posts can provide a deeper understanding of the fundamental processes that shape individuals' and organizations' troubles with using social media for strategic purposes. From a practical viewpoint, such an exploration can also help managers better manage their social media strategies.

## Methods

In light of our aim to explore the triggers of contextually inappropriate posts to social media platforms, our research strategy was built on gathering accounts of the lived experiences of informants who could elucidate the situations in which their own inappropriate posts were made. Our approach was guided by an interpretivist philosophy (Walsham, 1993) assuming a subjective world-view in which social reality is constructed through human action and interaction (Ravishankar, 2013). Given the emergent state of research on social media in organizational contexts we employed a qualitative methodology to gather empirical insights informed by social media practice.

The data presented in this paper were collected during interviews conducted in 2012 with individuals who had been given or had assumed responsibility for the social media activities of their organizations. We conducted a total of 44 interviews in 31 organizations. We were particularly interested in the impact that individual users had on their organizations, and therefore sought to engage the social media representatives of each organization with a view to establishing an individual level of analysis. We contacted potential participants via two government supported small business advice networks in the UK that had offered social media training seminars as part of their business support programme. We assumed that small firms trying to learn about and adopt social media would be more prone to making mistakes and would therefore represent a purposive sample. We sent out e-mails to the networks of the two support agencies asking for participants who were using at least one social media platform to promote their organizations. In our e-mail we made reference to the four most widely adopted social media platforms at that time (KPMG International, 2011), Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Youtube. All of our informants used at least one of these platforms, which meant that the technological features they encountered were similar. Each organization had between 1,000 and 15,000 followers, although this number was not fixed. In order to understand why inappropriate posts occurred we focused on the

experiences of those making the posts. In exchange for their time and participation we offered some consultancy services to assist them with their social media challenges, which motivated a good response.

Our informants operated in a variety of different industries and all were classed as micro-enterprises (EU definition[1]) meaning they employed ten people or less. This had the practical advantage of allowing us to more easily access everyone involved in the social media activities of each organization. Table I gives some basic information about the organizations that were involved in the study.

The broader purpose of the interviews was an exploration of social media use by individuals in these organizations. We used semi-structured interviews comprising of questions based on the generic issues involved in social media participation, informed by a sensitizing scan of the literature prior to data collection. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewees, with the acknowledgement that they and their organization would be treated anonymously. We did not count the exact number of inappropriate posts that were made. Informants in all the organizations confirmed that slip-ups had occurred on numerous occasions since they started using social media. Some informants were

Organizational identifier	Industry sector	Number of employees	Number of interviewees
Org 1	Charity	10	1
Org 2	Charity	10	1
Org 3	Fashion	3	2
Org 4	Fashion	2	1
Org 5	Food and drink	10	1
Org 6	Food and drink	3	1
Org 7	Commodity e-retailer	3	1
Org 8	Design consultancy	3	2
Org 9	Internet security	10	1
Org 10	Media production	9	1
Org 11	Public relations	2	1
Org 12	Arts and crafts	5	2
Org 13	Corporate finance	3	1
Org 14	Charity	6	3
Org 15	Chemical engineering	3	1
Org 16	Domestic installations	3	1
Org 17	Electrical engineering	4	2
Org 18	Engineering	2	2
Org 19	Engineering	3	1
Org 20	Engineering	8	1
Org 21	Film production	5	2
Org 22	Food and drink	9	1
Org 23	Food and drink	5	2
Org 24	Health and beauty	10	1
Org 25	Health and fitness	7	1
Org 26	Accountancy	9	2
Org 27	Performing arts	2	2
Org 28	Property management	7	1
Org 29	Research and development	3	1
Org 30	Telecomms	10	1
Org 31	Telecomms	8	2

**Table I.**  
Participating  
organizations

reticent to discuss their negative experiences and impression damaging behaviour. The detailed accounts that were collected came about during conversations about their social media use more generally, when they felt comfortable enough to drop their guard and confess mistakes that had been made. Our data analysis focused on their descriptions of the circumstances leading up to an inappropriate post.

We analysed the data (around 500 pages of interview transcripts) in multiple rounds of coding, summarized in Table II. We did not impose an a priori theory on the data, but instead began by reading and summarizing the interviews to identify key themes.

To ensure a high level of inter-coder reliability we collectively produced a coding guide that stipulated the length of each coding unit as a complete sentence or a series of complete sentences that constituted a single semantic unit. Two of us analysed roughly 75 per cent of the data during joint coding sessions, in which we allocated a code to a block of text and then evaluated any differences in our interpretations. In 80 per cent of cases we agreed upon our code assignment, which was deemed acceptable. Each informant made reference to inappropriate posts that had been made (mistakes) and they also described steps taken to control the potential negative outcomes of their slip-ups (damage control). Where it was possible to identify the damage caused by their posts in real terms they did so, although in some cases the anonymity afforded by social media meant that they had to speculate about the potential damage caused (impacts). They also contemplated upon their experiences and what they had learned as a result (reflection). The first round of coding produced a set of themes that elaborated on the complete experience of making an inappropriate social media post, including the attempts of informants to rectify their mistakes. These themes were significant as they showed that the posts described were not harmless, and that they did have an impact on the informants and their organizations.

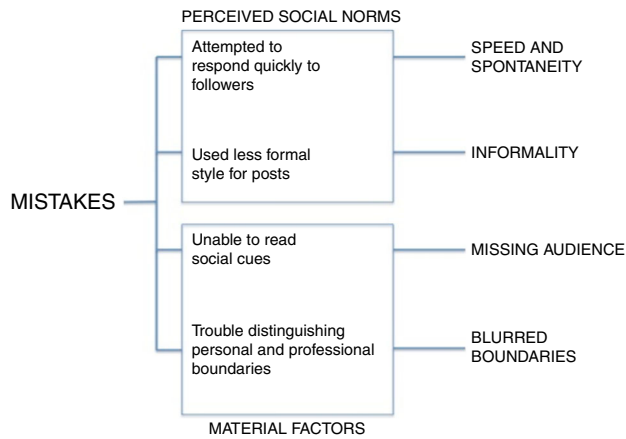
As our explicit purpose was to better understand the triggers of inappropriate posts the next stage of analysis focused squarely on the mistakes. At this stage we re-coded the data to establish second-order interpretive concepts (Van Maanen, 1979) relating to the mistakes described by the informants. Figure 1 shows how the second round of recoding enabled us to build on the mistakes dimension identified in Table II above, and arrive at the four triggers described in the analysis section.

Thematic codes	Interpretive concepts	Abstract theoretical categories
Mistakes (due to)	Perceived social norms (Speed and spontaneity; informality)	Flawed performances
	Material factors (Missing audience and blurred boundaries)	Front-stage/back-stage
Damage control (to protect)	Reputation Relationships	Repair work
Impacts (of mistakes)	Loss of business	Audience disapproval
	Loss of followers	Damaged impressions
	Embarrassment	
Reflection (included)	Emotional responses	Learning attempts
	Performance Analysis	

**Table II.**  
Codes used during rounds of analysis



**Figure 1.**  
The four triggers



The data showed how the inappropriate posts were related to a number of social and material factors, which were experienced in different combinations by the informants. The perceived social norms related to the social norms that the participants expected to be in operation whilst using social media platforms.

The informants felt that they were expected to respond quickly to their followers on social media (speed and spontaneity). They also reported that they perceived that their followers preferred social media posts that had a less formal tone (informality). The material factors described by the group were related to the way that social media platforms altered their normal face-to-face social encounters. Informants described that because they were not in the physical presence of their followers they would sometimes forget their preferences when making a post (missing audience). They also experienced difficulty in managing to keep personal posts strictly separated from their professional social media communications (blurred boundaries). We then organized the data relating to these interpretive concepts into a narrative analysis (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003) addressing the experiences and behaviours exhibited on social media which were damaging the impressions the informants sought to convey.

At this stage we returned to the literature to compare the emergent concepts to established theory and to identify a suitable theoretical lens for explaining the informants' slip-ups on social media. Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management and in particular his dramaturgical metaphor provided useful insights into the experiences of the informants. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) vocabulary we used concepts from the dramaturgical metaphor to create high order abstract categories (see Table II). We noted that the behavioural factors involved elements of performance, as informants attempted to respond to the perceived expectations of their followers. However, their performances did not have the desired effect and were ultimately deemed to be inappropriate, leading to us classifying them as flawed performances. The situational factors contributing the inappropriate posts were linked to the material features of the technology, particularly its role in revealing and concealing different communicational elements. We designated the label frontstage/backstage to these factors. The rest of the theoretical categories are outlined in Table II. These theoretical categories enabled us to connect the narrative accounts of the informants' experiences back to theory.

## Analysis

Despite their best efforts our informants reported that they were not always successful at fostering favourable impressions on social media. Permeating our data were many accounts of inappropriate postings and subsequent embarrassments. While some of these incidents involved key individuals saying the wrong thing on the company's business account others revolved around the reputational damage caused to the business by employees' indiscretions on their personal accounts. Our analysis highlighted four key triggers of inappropriate social media posts. Our data will now be presented in relation to each of the situational triggers.

### *Trigger one: the demands of speed and spontaneity*

Although social media gave the informants an opportunity to present themselves asynchronously, there were also other social dynamics at play that seemed to override their preference for carefully analysing each post they made. In particular they felt that their followers expected them to respond to social media comments quickly and spontaneously. In light of this they checked their accounts frequently and tried to respond promptly because they worried about the implications of leaving their followers waiting. One informant described how they treated social media differently to other forms of asynchronous communication:

If an email comes in we might think 'I'll do that in 10 minutes' or 'I'll go and get my coffee first' but the second something comes up on your Facebook or your Twitter, somebody complaining particularly, you think – "oh no, let's get this sorted straight away" (Org 3).

The general consensus among the informants was that if somebody demanded attention on social media, they could not be ignored. They worried that if neglected situations could snowball out of their control and cause major problems. They anticipated that followers who demanded prompt acknowledgement could respond negatively if they did not get it. Their quick responses were not always well considered, and their experiences showed that the requirement for speed was a key trigger for inappropriate content. A manager explained how he responded quickly to criticism posted to his account:

Someone wrote something negative about my work and everyone could see it so I tried to quickly defend myself. I got in to this argument with him and it just escalated. I learnt from that day forward; when comments are made, embrace them, or at least sit and think about your response! (Org 5).

The informant explained that he felt the pressure to respond quickly because he sensed that others were able to see the criticisms of his work. The negative comments had been made to a public forum, which seemed to intensify his feeling that he should quickly defend himself. He described the regret he felt at responding with haste, which from his perspective had fuelled the argument that followed. In retrospect he felt that a more thoughtful and considered response would have been more appropriate.

Another manager found that the pressure to respond promptly had the potential to lead to embarrassment. She described how her good intentions for managing quick responses to her customers went wrong:

Social media is so instant; you've got to watch it. People are very passionate – they expect things to be done. Because of the speed of communication on social media they expect things a lot quicker. We don't have automated responses in place but we want to respond quickly so our staff watch social media twenty-four/seven. In the early days this created a lot of confusion about who should respond to posts made by our followers. Sometimes several people would respond to the

same post, or we'd get cross posting. It was difficult to coordinate because a number of people would respond to the same post using their phones. Sometimes staff would respond using informal abbreviations, which I didn't think represented the organization very well. We're a national charity and it became embarrassing because it looked really unprofessional (Org 1).

The instant nature of communication on social media coupled with a particularly involved group of followers intensified the need for speedy responses. The manager explained that she attempted to meet these demands by spreading the responsibility to monitor and respond to social media across a number of her staff. However, this strategy ultimately undermined the professional impression she hoped to maintain. Whilst acting spontaneously individuals used incorrect or inappropriate grammar and were unable to coordinate their responses. Although individuals working within teams may conceivably struggle with similar issues in face-to-face settings, social media seemed to exacerbate the problems they were having. For example, it is less likely that a competent team would "talk over" and interrupt each other to answer questions in a normal meeting or that they would use inappropriate language in a normal business conversation. However, in an effort to respond quickly to their followers, informants explained that these issues occurred frequently in their social media posts.

*Trigger two: the demands of informality*

The informants identified another normative expectation on social media was for a more informal style of communication. They felt that the formal tone of many traditional corporate communications was not well suited to social media, where they perceived that their audience were used to communicating in a more relaxed and informal style. They felt that rigid, official sounding posts would deter their customers from following them. They described their attempts to construct posts in an informal style, which was not always easy for them to do. Many of the informants struggled to balance representing themselves in a professional way with the perceived social norm of communicating in a more relaxed style on social media. As one manager describes, she had been advised by a social media expert that rapport could be established with her followers if she would share some personal content in her posts:

I read a lot of things, a lot of opinions on how to conduct yourself on social media. One social media blogger I follow says there should be a percentage of personal and a percentage of business, but make sure that you show your real persona. And I don't necessarily follow that literally, but she's talking about being yourself whilst representing your business and building a connection with people (Org 6).

In an effort to present a more human, personal impression of their organizations, the tone of their posts became too conversational. In some instances this caused them to momentarily forget the type of language that was appropriate for their audience. One informant described the angry reaction of her customers to a post in which she used language in a more informal way:

On Facebook your language tends to be more informal. I was looking for models for our next photo-shoot and said something like – we've got someone with cerebral palsy and someone with autism and we're looking for a downs child. And I got slated by some clients for saying "downs child" and not saying "a child with downs syndrome". Some parents retorted angrily "My child is not a downs!" Because I was saying it on Facebook I was saying it as though I was talking to somebody. I was posting as if I was speaking rather than writing in a more formalized way – because normally (when writing) I'd really be conscious of not getting the language wrong (Org 4).

She felt that “because [she] was saying it on Facebook” she had adopted a more conversational tone than was usually appropriate. She was keenly aware of her customers’ hyper-sensitivity to the use of appropriate terminology to describe the medical conditions of their children. Yet, contrary to her usual behaviour, she temporarily lapsed in to language that was too casual and therefore inappropriate, which caused a string of angry comments that quickly escalated.

*Trigger three: blurred boundaries*

The third trigger for inappropriate posts related to a blurring of the boundaries the informants were traditionally able to draw between their professional and personal lives. They expressed concern about their personal lives being visible to their professional contacts and customers. Furthermore, on many occasions they found themselves relaxing their manners and adopting a less formal “back-stage” style of communication in what was ostensibly a “front-stage” setting. Put differently, in their minds the informants experienced a serious blurring of the boundary between front-stage and back-stage.

This blurring caused problems for the informants at two levels. It was a problem at a managerial level, because they found that even when using their personal accounts, followers tended to associate them with their organizations. For this reason, many of them had created separate social media accounts to try and maintain control over what could be seen by their professional networks. For example, one informant recognized that his weekend posts were contradicting the impression of professionalism he was trying to project:

I’d started to notice that the only thing my customers were seeing over the weekend were pictures of me drinking beer, which is not a particularly good image to be promoting. Twitter’s got to the point now where I’ve personally got two profiles. One which is my consultancy; polite, relevant, and one which is my beery, political, hippy, ranting stuff (Org 7).

The informants found that even when they made concerted efforts to control their own social media posts, the problem had the potential to surface at the staff level. The managers found slip-ups at this level more difficult to detect and control unless problems had already occurred and been reported to them. In one example, an extra-marital affair between a staff member and a client became a contentious topic of conversation on social media, causing reputational damage which the manager had to repair:

One of my female staff was going out with this mature chap, and it all got a bit messy. One of my team had posted derogative comments about him on Facebook and then the word got round. I got a phone call from this guy, saying “can you please ask your team not to make rude comments”. I get the phone call from somebody asking me to control my team. And this particular guy is a bit of an unscrupulous character (Org 24).

Although the comments made by members of staff were on personal social media accounts, their complaints about their behaviour came back to their manager. From his perspective the behaviour of his employees contradicted the impression he tried to maintain of a family-oriented business. He described feeling out of control of the image of his organization as more followers became aware of the negative posts. From the point of view of the employees blurred boundaries caused them to feel unclear about when they were representing their employer and when they could consider themselves off-duty and drop their guard. They appeared to be unaware that they were being

scrutinized according to front-stage standards, and therefore made inappropriate individual posts that had negative organizational consequences.

In a similar incident, another member of staff made personal social media posts which became the subject of scrutiny. The individual maintained a professional performance when at work but used crude language and inappropriate images on her personal social media account. This was noticed by other staff and customers who could see her personal account. They complained to her manager about her behaviour, even though it occurred in a non-work setting, as her manager described:

I've had to have a word with a girl who uses social media here, she's quite professional about how she acts, but on her social media she uses awful language and sick images [...] I had to have a quiet word with her to say "If you're on Facebook please respect the fact that people who are coming in to the business will read your Facebook page and I have to control that" (Org 22).

The informant showed a particular sensitivity to the potential for inappropriate behaviour to harm the reputation of his organization in the minds of his clients. Again, it is important to recognize that the behaviour of staff in offline settings could also cause reputational damage to an organization, but in this case social media seemed to have an amplifying effect by making the behaviour more visible to a wider audience, which included the manager.

Some managers tried to minimize the potential for these types of issues by observing the online behaviour of their staff. Another informant observed a particularly opinionated staff member and was careful to subsequently instruct her about what was appropriate whilst she was associated with their organization:

[One of the staff] uses Twitter a lot, and one of the things that I said to her, when she said she wanted to get in to social media is [...] your tone will completely have to change. If you want to do the odd tweet here and there, it's got to be relevant to us, and it's got to be neutral, it's got to not be opinionated and all those kinds of things. Because she's very much like that on her own Twitter (Org 14).

In all of these cases the boundaries between professional and personal life were significantly blurred. It was difficult for the managers to identify when they could stop monitoring their employees' online behaviour. It was similarly problematic for the employees to know when they could consider themselves "off duty". The difficulty in drawing these boundaries meant that on some occasions informants behaved in a back-stage fashion, unaware that their performances were being scrutinized by front-stage standards.

#### *Trigger four: the missing audience*

The fourth trigger of inappropriate posts was linked to individuals not being physically in the presence of those with whom they were communicating. As the accounts of their slip-ups unfolded many of the informants made a connection between their erroneous posts and the physical absence of the audience. They reported that at times this made them less able to sense who their followers were. On some occasions they seemed to forget that they could be seen by a front-stage audience. In other instances they would make casual comments aimed at one group and later realize that the comments could be seen by an unintended audience. An illustration of the challenges one informant faced in this regard occurred when he posted to his Twitter account after a Rugby match. His Twitter stream is displayed on the homepage of his

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website, meaning that when he came to work on Monday, his conversation about drinking and hangovers was displayed for his professional network to see:

Social media posts

A lot of things my pals might say to me on Twitter could cause an inherent reputational risk. Like on Saturday – a friend posted “Oh you had a great game today” – you know Rugby – and I replied “Cheers mate, heads hurting now from last night ‘cause I had ten pints of Guinness”. And I go on the website on Monday and it’s on the stream and I think shit, that doesn’t look good (Org 13).

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During the context of the conversation with his Rugby friend the manager seemed to have forgotten the other audiences that could see his Twitter posts. He explained his anxiety that his mistake would damage his reputation and cost him business, because his clients needed to have a high level of trust in his integrity and may not look favourably on a tweet about social drinking. In the moment he made the post there were no cues available to remind him that he was still visible to a work audience, and therefore his behaviour was more relaxed and the language more reflective of a back-stage style.

There were other types of social cues that were no longer available because of the physical absence of the audience. For example, difficulties arose when the informants tried to make posts addressing the interests of one specific group whilst forgetting the particular preferences of another group. One young manager was trying to illicit a response from a group of followers he considered his peers. He tried to use some attention grabbing tactics that proved unpopular with his other followers:

I was aiming at my younger followers, it was through my business account [...] Oh God, I just got a picture of a really nice bum, just to grab the attention of every guy and girl that went on there. Everyone’s going to look at it, aren’t they? It’s something you’re going to be drawn to. I did it just to see how much interaction I’d get with it. Actually in the end we lost followers, which was not good. There were probably other people on there that didn’t appreciate the humor (Org 23).

During our interview, he talked about the nature of his followers at some length and appeared to have a good grasp of their lifestyles and preferences. However, he described forgetting a significant proportion of his audience in the moment he made the inappropriate post. None of the usual social cues were available to remind him that some of his followers would find the content of his post offensive.

There were other instances in which even content aimed at a professional audience was not received well by followers. One informant received a negative response from a potential supplier after she made a post about being rejected for a bank loan:

I remember saying, “I went to the bank to try and get a loan and they said no.” Later I was talking to a possible supplier and he said “I read this and you shouldn’t be writing things like this because it doesn’t look very good for you”. At the time I didn’t consider it a bad thing. But I wouldn’t do it now; I think I understand where he was coming from. You can post things and you don’t know whose watching. Just make sure that you’re aware of the perceptions being formed about you (Org 6).

She clarified that her original intention for making the post was to share her experiences openly in order to be a role model for aspiring entrepreneurs. She did not recognize at the time that a wider social network was also “watching”. Only retrospectively in a moment of reflection did she realize that the information she had shared was inappropriate. She had not considered the wider audience for her social media account and as a result the post had damaged the impression that her business was successful.

**Discussion**

Our findings show how four triggers associated with social media use can lead to contextually inappropriate posts. Social media complicate normal encounters in impression management by being “situation-like” (Goffman, 1979; Rettie, 2009). Goffman (1979) refers to technologically enabled encounters in this way because they do not provide all the information and cues available in typical, face-to-face situations and encounters. Where a rich set of cues are available it is possible to sense the type of performance to give (i.e. whether a front or back-stage style is appropriate). During social media encounters (at least on the platforms currently available in the market) it is not possible to observe physical cues (such as facial expression, tone of voice or temporal setting) that might enable users to select a more appropriate style of performance when making posts. In the absence of a rich array of social cues, individuals seem less able to select an appropriate script to follow for their social media performances. Some platform providers attempt to supplement the user experience by introducing alternative tools, such as emoticons, which enable individuals to make the emotions they are experiencing more explicit in their posts (Tchokni *et al.*, 2014). However, these do not give users the same subtlety of expression and audiences still may not understand how to interpret the posts they read (e.g. it may not be clear whether a smiley face has been used ironically). Platform providers have made attempts to address some of the other challenging aspects of social media use, such as the difficulties of communicating with one’s social network simultaneously (by providing features allowing users to segment their contact lists) or the interruption caused by the expectation that posts will be responded to quickly (by providing the ability to automate posts). Despite these efforts, continuing reports of slip-ups suggest that the fundamental problems faced by those incorporating social media in to their organizations may not have been fully resolved.

Interestingly, the four triggers of inappropriate behaviour introduced in this study are also associated with the anticipated benefits of social media use, highlighting the duality of these platforms (see Turel and Serenko, 2012; Turel *et al.*, 2011). For example, it may be advantageous in many circumstances to be able to communicate at speed, but in other instances such as the ones illustrated in this paper speed makes users less thorough and is thus, a less virtuous quality. It may also be preferable to conceal one’s work environment by communicating over social media, but without the physical presence of the audience vital social cues are missing. Some studies have shown that there can be positive emotional benefits to blurring the boundaries between personal and professional life (Koch *et al.*, 2012) but blurring can also cause individuals to momentarily forget what constitutes an appropriate performance. Likewise, by adopting a familiar style and disclosing certain personal details, organizations may nurture the impression that they are trustworthy and have nothing to hide, yet they also risk disclosing contextually inappropriate details that could damage their reputations. In light of these contradictions many managers remain uncertain about allowing staff to access social media as part of their work (Koch *et al.*, 2012). Although it has become common for organizations to adopt some sort of social media presence, high profile cases involving the disciplining of staff for the misuse of social media (Pilkington, 2013), and the potential for social media posts to cause great embarrassment and damage (Associated Press, 2014) cast doubt over how the potential pitfalls of social media use might be successfully navigated. Scholarly research is only beginning to explore these apparently contradictory facets of social media use and our study adds to that stream of enquiry.

Our study draws particular attention to the role of individual team members in causing reputational damage to organizations through their inappropriate posts. Whereas there is a tendency to discuss organizational use of social media as though the organization itself were making posts and having online conversations, in reality key individuals are given responsibility for the social media activities of their organizations and therefore it is more meaningful to understand the slip-ups from an individual perspective, although the impacts of damaging posts may be felt at multiple levels of an organization. Some studies suggest that the impact of a technology accumulates as the number of individuals adopting a technology increases (Burton-Jones and Gallivan, 2007). Our study does not contradict this assertion but also shows that in the wake of social media technologies, individual employees have a far greater potential to cause damage to the reputations of their organizations due to the visibility of their errors and the subsequent amplification of the mistakes across online social networks. Indeed, it is this amplification effect that makes social media particularly impactful for organizations and employees alike. While the failures in impression management discussed above may also be observed in other settings (e.g. e-mail messages) impression management on social media has become a contemporary concern for organizations because indiscretions and mistakes are seen by a potentially unlimited audience, making the impact of impression management failures more acute.

#### *Sociomateriality and social media use*

A small but growing number of studies have employed Goffman's (1979) dramaturgical metaphor as a tool for teasing out sociological complexities of social media. Although Goffman (1979) himself only touches lightly on the idea, he implicitly suggests that "situation-like" interactions include some recognizable social elements of traditional encounters while excluding others due to the materiality of the situation (e.g. on some social media platforms it is possible to have a synchronous exchange with another person using an instant messenger function, although the individuals do not see each other physically). The aspects of face-to-face encounters that are unavailable during social media communication leave perceptual gaps for the performer who endeavours to give a good performance. The four triggers identified in our study highlight the perceptual gaps intrinsic to social media performances. In some instances performers are able to use heuristic devices to fill in missing information, enabling them to make informed choices about the type of performance to give. For example, those using internal social media systems communicate with a known audience, enabling them to make reasonable judgements about what the tone of a social media post should be (Huang *et al.*, 2013; Leonardi *et al.*, 2013). However, teams making social media posts in organizational contexts communicate with a largely unknown audience and therefore have fewer heuristic aides available to enable them to fill in missing information.

In addition to this, social media users are confronted with numerous perceptual gaps simultaneously, making it increasingly challenging to assess the type of performance to give. Although performers deal with missing information in other technologically mediated situations (Rettie, 2009; Raghuram, 2013), in this setting the interplay of a number of perceptual gaps combined with a paucity of heuristic material to make informed judgements appears to increase the likelihood of an inappropriate performance. This would suggest that performers have a tolerance level for perceptual gaps, which, when surpassed increases the likelihood of an inappropriate performance. This leads us to submit that the ascription "situation-like" (Goffman, 1959) is not a static description but more akin to a scale of more or less situation-like. The more perceptual gaps inherent



in a performance situation the less situation-like it becomes in the mind of the performer. Similarly, the front and back-stage environs of social media may appear to offer bounded, delineated performance spaces but these can be undermined if performers fail in their judgement of what constitutes an appropriate performance. This makes the performers' interpretation of whether they are in a front or back-stage setting as important as where they actually are. Thus, there may not be an easily identifiable, "true" front-stage or back-stage on social media, as these notions become much more associated with subjective interpretations and are based on fewer cues.

Leonardi and Barley (2008) suggest that "understanding how people deal with an information technologies materiality seems essential for developing a broader and fuller understanding of organizing" (2008:172). Recent scholarly on sociomateriality has highlighted the interplay of social and material influences on organizational life (Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014; Leonardi, 2013; Scott and Orlikowski, 2014). We propose that the notion of situation-like encounters is complementary to this stream of research. Situation-like encounters on social media constrain and enable communication in particular ways. For example, some recent studies give accounts of how social media differently impacts interactions with known (Leonardi and Treem, 2012; Huang *et al.*, 2013) and anonymous, unknown audiences (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014). We add to this stream of enquiry, by showing that as a social media communication becomes less situation-like in the minds of performers they become more prone to the triggers that can negatively affect their ability to manage impressions, regardless of the type of audience they are addressing. Further research is needed to advance understanding of how impressions are managed as communicating in digital, situation-like contexts becomes increasingly common.

The majority of studies to date have focused either on the sociological side of social media use, or the material constitution of the platforms. However, in light of the discussion above it appears that in order to more fully understand the impact of social media on impression management the sociological and material factors need to be considered simultaneously. Although the philosophical debates underpinning the term are on-going (Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.*, 2014; Leonardi, 2013; Scott and Orlikowski, 2014), there is broad agreement that the notion of sociomateriality highlights the "entanglement" (Scott and Orlikowski, 2014) of the social and material features of technological artefacts. We would argue that the four triggers described in this paper, and indeed social media more generally are sociomaterial in nature. It follows that neither the materiality of the technologies, nor the social norms prevalent in the use of social media are, on their own, responsible for triggering inappropriate posts. Indeed, distinguishing the strictly sociological or material factors influencing social media might almost be impossible. Social norms and material affordances appear to be converging in practice causing individuals to experience social media use as sociomaterial.

#### *Practical implications*

This study offers a variety of practical contributions for managers and those using social media in situ. Our employment of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor demonstrates the useful role that metaphors can play in helping managers to understand their relationship with social media. Drawing on the vocabulary of front and back-stage performances may provide practitioners with an important discursive resource for implementing social media strategies. For example, we discussed the crucial role of cues in prompting teams to adopt a front-stage style of expression. By establishing a set of cues that indicate that front-stage conduct is now in order,

practitioners may improve their ability to avoid the triggers that cause regression in to back-stage behaviours.

Another possible implication relates to how “time” is perceived on social media platforms. Whilst many of our informants made reference to the need for speedy responses our findings suggest that speed may not always be a virtue in social media environments. In most instances, the quest for speed prevented careful consideration and thoughtful formulation of an appropriate post. Our findings suggest the need to engage in practices that will prevent reactive posting to social media accounts. Such practices could include using others to vet posts before they are made or advanced preparation of strategies for situations that might require a quick response. The act of formalizing social media strategies may also help reposition social media as a deliberate front-stage setting in the mind of “actors”, enabling them to retain a higher level of cognitive engagement.

### *Limitations and future research*

The study was conducted among small organizations based in the UK and caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings to other regions or to larger organizations. We acknowledge that some of the behaviours described by our informants are less likely to be displayed on social media accounts in large organizations. However, we would argue that the triggers contributing to inappropriate posts are not unique to small organizations alone. Given their structural similarities (e.g. the presence of teams who post content to business accounts), it would be fruitful to compare and contrast these findings with a study of individuals in large organizations.

Technological advancements have enabled individuals to access their social media accounts in a variety of different ways including company desktops, laptops, tablets and mobile devices. In our study we have not focused on whether attributes of particular devices used to access social media platforms trigger inappropriate posts. The extent to which the use of particular devices may lead to inappropriate social media posts represents a promising avenue for future research.

We acknowledge that there could be variations in the consequences of inappropriate social media posts. The extent of the backlash faced by an organization for inappropriate posts/comments on social media is certainly linked to the seriousness on the impropriety. It is also reasonable to assume that social media posts that are tolerated and accepted by one culture may be viewed as objectionable or offensive by another. These tolerances may also vary over time, reflective of societal changes. In this study we have not compared the level of seriousness (from legal and moral stand points) of different informants’ indiscretions. Further research is required in order to garner a more detailed understanding of impression management failures in social media settings.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to explore the triggers of inappropriate social media posts that impact organizations. Goffman’s (1959) notion of impression management helped us highlight key aspects of face-to-face communication and contrast it with typical social media encounters. Our findings highlighted four key triggers of contextually inappropriate posts made to social media accounts. We also extended Goffman’s assertion that technologically enabled interactions are “situation-like” by connecting it with the concept of sociomateriality, which provides a more nuanced understanding of

why the four triggers complicate impression management on social media. We advocate the view that social media and its related phenomenon be treated as sociomaterial constructions, a position which enables social media scholars to more clearly articulate the fundamental nature of a social media encounter. Our study demonstrates the ways in which social media can have an impact on individuals enacting their professional roles and thereby have consequences on the organization. By understanding and managing the four triggers of inappropriate behaviour teams posting to social media have a better chance of presenting a consistently favourable impression in a society that is increasingly interacting online.

#### Note

1. According to the European Union: "A microenterprise is defined as an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 2 million". Source: [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/enterprise/business\\_environment/n26026\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/enterprise/business_environment/n26026_en.htm)

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### Corresponding author

M.N. Ravishankar can be contacted at: [M.N.Ravishankar@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:M.N.Ravishankar@lboro.ac.uk)

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