



Employers' Relational Work on Social Media¹

■ **Eva Lindell²**

Senior Lecturer, School of Business, Society and Engineering, Mälardalen University, Sweden

■ **Lucia Crevani**

Professor, School of Business, Society and Engineering, Mälardalen University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Given how social media are commonly used in contemporary Nordic countries, social media platforms are emerging as crucial for relational work between employers, employees, and potential employees. By means of a discursive psychology approach, this study investigates employers' constructs of relational work on social media through the use of two interpretative repertoires: the repertoire of loss of control and the repertoire of ever-presence. The consequences of these interpretative repertoires are a masking of power relations, especially between employers and young employees in precarious labor market positions and those with limited digital knowledge or financial means. Further, the positioning of social media as part of a private sphere of life means the invasion of not only employees', but also managers' private time and persona. The result of this study hence calls for the need to understand relational work on social media as part of normative managerial work.

KEYWORDS

Discursive psychology / interpretative repertoires / relational work / social media

Relations between employers, employees, and potential (not yet employed) employees are not established solely through labor market institutions (such as trade unions) or legal and financial contracts, but are rather ongoing constructs in 'the everyday events that make up all of our working lives' (Lewis et al. 2003. p. ix). These relations are sustained in the daily work of human resource management (Berkley & Watson 2009; Bal et al. 2015), and direct management (Stewart 2004), and internal employees are often seen as primary stakeholders (cf. Cortini 2009; Bal et al. 2015; Berkley & Watson 2009; Ehrlich 1994; Stewart 2004; Wilner et al. 2017). Relational work can be understood as part of a 'caring' discourse of HRM (Damm 1993) and management or through an 'engagement' discourse closely related to ideas of commitment, motivation, loyalty, and work-life balance (Francis 2006. p. 70).

The importance of employer-employee relationships has been described as 'a fundamental building block to an organization's ethics' (Berkley & Watson 2009, p. 277), and several scholars have shown how relational work is performed through talk in organizations (e.g., Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). However, as relations between employers, employees, and potential employees evolve through the 21st century, these relationships take place not only in the premises of the organization, but also in different virtual spaces in online social networking sites (Backman & Hedenus 2019; Cortini 2009;

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² Corresponding author: Eva Lindell, Mälardalen University, Box 883, 72123 Västerås.
E-mail: eva.lindell@mdh.se.



Wilner et al. 2017). In this respect, employer-employee relations can be defined as the everyday interaction between managers or HR managers and employees or potential (not yet employed) employees, in the premises of the organization or in arenas outside it, as in this case of social media platforms. In such arenas, employers and employees/potential employees can interact directly (for instance via direct messages or when 'liking' posts), or indirectly when reading posts or information as one-way communication (for instance when employers carry out profiling on applicants' personal sites).

The Nordic countries are among the leading countries in the world when it comes to internet use in general, with Norway and Denmark in the lead, having about 98% of the population connected to the internet (Statista Research Department 2021b). The equivalent number in Sweden is an internet access rate of 94% of the population (Internetstiftelsen 2021). Furthermore, in the Nordic countries, more than 80% of the population have access to social media (Statista Research Department 2021a). Social media use in Sweden has grown rapidly over the past decade, from 54% in 2011 to 82% in 2021, representing up the largest number of social media users in the Nordics with more than 8.3 million Swedish social media users (Statista Research Department 2021a). The employer-employee relational work over social media that is currently evolving in Sweden may therefore provide insight into other Nordic countries in similar situations, as well as in other parts of the world where social media are not yet as widely used.

While we know that search engines and social media platforms are of increasing importance for employers (Berkelaar & Buzzanell 2015), we still know little about how relational work over the Internet is affecting the relational work of managers and HR professionals (Cortini 2009; McDonald & Thompson 2016). While previous studies highlight relational work on social media as both an opportunity and a risk for employees and employers, what many of them have in common is the focus on employees as stakeholders of management concern.

Even though the internet has made possible communication with stakeholders through two-way channels, and may be seen as essentially democratic (Blood 2003; Morsing & Schultz 2006), it has been pointed out that it is imbued with ideological constructs of emancipation versus power controlled by a few (Miranda et al. 2016). Communication on the internet has been said to imply a potential to shift the power of voice from employees to employers (Scott 2005), highlighting the importance of exploring employers' constructions of relational work on the internet. Internet media's role as a 'double-edged sword' of control and surveillance thus calls for research on internet communication with a special focus on the experience of employers (Cortini 2009, p. 301; Trottier 2012). Building on previous works on discursive constructions of relations in social media use by, for instance, Backman and Hedenus (2019), the aim of this study is to develop knowledge on the interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987) used by representatives of employers (which includes both managers and human resources professionals), in their constructs of relational work with employees and potential employees on social media platforms.

The article is organized as follows: after this introduction, we problematize how the use of social media may be understood in relation to working life through a discourse analysis lens. Then, we provide a description of the chosen theoretical perspective, building on a discursive psychology approach. Thereafter follows a discussion of methodological considerations. The analysis presents two discourses-in-use: the interpretative repertoire of loss of control and the interpretative repertoire of ever-presence. We discuss

the consequences of these interpretative repertoires: the hiding of power relations and the consequences of social media being part of a private sphere of life. Finally, we present our conclusions and managerial implications.

Social media in working life

The rapid increase in digital tools in labor market communication has been described as an unstoppable and unproblematized process of management fashion that is becoming legitimized through normative discourses and practices (Jemine et al. 2019). This basic assumption of digital tools as non-ideological and post-political, must be questioned, as any shift in society needs to be understood as ideological, political and therefore imbued with power imbalances (Fejes & Rahm 2017). Social media, as one form of digital mass media that allows for human interaction, comes imbued with contradictions relating to power distribution; between emancipatory discourses of accessibility, and hegemonic discourses of control by a minority (Miranda et al. 2016).

Labor market communication over social media platforms presents several tensions, for instance in situations when employers are profiling employees or potential employees via their private social media pages, when employees publish derogatory posts about their employers or when they are using social media for private purposes on work time (McDonald & Thompson 2016). Online media has, in some countries, even been the subject of legal cases where employees are put in jeopardy, when revealing information about their employers on social media (Lichtenstein & Darrow 2006; Mercado-Kierkegaard 2006). Further, relations between employers and employees via online tools has been said to transform organizational control (Cortini 2009; Wilner et al. 2017), enabling employees to control employers through the internet's options for free expression whereas employers might control employees through organizational policies (Cortini 2009). Use of information and communication technology are further said to create ambiguities of understandings of public and private spaces, of authenticity and performance, and of power as redistribution, exercised through control (Wilner et al. 2017).

With roots in the industrial revolution, discursive constructs of work-life boundaries were shaped by the idea of separate spheres between work and family, affecting expanded relations on the labor market and putting focus on the role of discursive practice for maintaining and challenging such relations (Kirby et al. 2003). Social media today is a virtual context where boundaries between such cultural spheres are blurred, yet also restored, through discursive practices of normative managerial work (Backman & Hedenus 2019; Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2013; Trottier 2012). The increase in digital tools and social media use, may thus alter the discourses available to draw upon and change the discursive construction of management work (Backman & Hedenus 2019; Golden & Geisler 2007).

The increasing use of digital technology in working life work calls for studies on discursive constructs of power shifts and power conflicts embedded in the use of digital tools (Johansson et al. 2017). Social media as containing tensions of public versus private visibility and surveillance, calls for studies where in particular employers' experience of these tensions needs further research (Trottier 2012). The perspective of discourse analysis can inform us how discursive practices operate against the background of such tensions (Mumby & Stohl 1996).



Discursive psychology approach

Building on speech act theory, ethnomethodology, and post-structuralist works, discursive psychology considers the use of language performative and thus as ‘a dynamic form of social practice which shapes the social world including identities, social relations and understandings of the world’ (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 96; Wetherell & Potter 1988). Within the theoretical frame of discursive psychology, the term ‘discourse’ refers to an instance of situated language use aiming to ‘make visible how certain representations of events or persons are being achieved’ (Burr 2003, p. 63). Hence, discourses are seen as constituted through linguistic assemblages around particular versions of the world (Mueller & Whittle 2011).

Discourse analysis embraces a wide variety of angles. However, a boundary line (Wetherell 1998) or d/D split (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000) is usually drawn in order to differentiate the discursive psychology angle from Foucauldian macro social constructionism that comes with a more limiting approach to the capability of humans to challenge the use of discourse (Burr 2003). Within discursive psychology, the term interpretative repertoires is usually used to describe the use of discourse. Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 149) define interpretative repertoires as ‘recurrent systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena’, emphasizing the *use* of discourse in language, that comes with intended as well as unintended consequences. Further, interpretative repertoires include both language and practice; as language is ‘seen as a *social practice* itself, as opposed to a neutral transmitter, with its own characteristic features and practical consequences’ (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 168; Wetherell & Potter 1988). Hence, with this approach, language is not only seen as reflecting the world, language creates the world and therefore language has practical consequences (Potter 1996; Wetherell & Potter 1993). As the discursive psychology tradition views language as a resource for human agency, this angle becomes useful when engaging in multi-faceted areas discerning conflicts and tensions in the use of discourse (Wetherell & Potter 1988).

Through the investigation of discourses in use through language, we can explore how linguistic representations and arguments are used to constitute the ‘taken for granted’ around a phenomena (Wetherell & Potter 1993). But as language is at the same time both rigid and flexible, humans are capable of simultaneously reinforcing and challenging socially shared norms (Potter & Wetherell 1987). When interacting, we continuously choose which interpretative repertoires to use in order to make sense and describe ourselves in credible ways. Discourses of working life relations are hence both culturally and socially inherited, and situated in local contexts (Kirby et al. 2003). The increasing use of social media in society at large as well as organizations, might both problematize and enable management, confirming the emancipatory power in the use of interpretative repertoires (cf. Edley 2001).

Method

The empirical material for this study is situated in the Swedish labor market, including both public and private organizations. The material was produced in three different research projects, all related to the impact of digital technology in organizations,

and changes in work and labor relations due to digitalization. The empirical material included several workshops with public and private employers, interviews, and observations as well as workshops with shop-floor workers, HR professionals, and management. All organizations were located in Middle Sweden.

For the scope of this paper, we selected 12 interviews conducted with managers and HR professionals in which the importance of relational work on social media emerged as a theme. The first author conducted all interviews using semi-structured questions on the impact of digital technology and changes in work and labor relations due to digitalization. All interviews were conducted at the premises of the respondent's organization, lasted 50-90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim (Table 1 provides an overview).

Table 1 Empirical material, list of interviews

Title	Type of organization	Gender
Manager	Temporary employment agency	Female
Manager	Temporary employment agency	Male
HR manager	Private construction company	Female
Manager	Private fast-food chain	Male
Manager	Private store chain	Male
HR director	Private process industry	Male
Manager	Private process industry	Male
HR partner	Public company	Female
Manager	Public company	Male
HR director	Municipality	Female
HR manager	Municipality	Female
HR manager	Municipality	Female

The inclusion criterion in this study was that social media was elaborated on by the respondent as an arena where any kind of relational work towards employees or potential employees was constructed. Social media use was not in our main research focus at first, however, since use of digital technology in organizations and working life was in focus in the projects, and use of social media can be understood as digital mass media enabling everyday human interaction in working life (Miranda et al. 2016), the appearance of social media use must be seen as far from unexpected. In the first interviews social media use was introduced by the respondent, but as we became intrigued by the tensions described, in the following interviews, social media was either introduced by the respondent or the interviewer.

Even as 12 interviews is a small sample, we feel bold enough to claim that the daily use of social media played a crucial role in the daily practice of the managers and HR managers taking part in the different research projects and is worth close investigation. Even small samples of rich empirical material have previously been proven to be sufficient for discovering representations of linguistic patterns (cf. Seymour-Smith et al. 2002).



Analysis

Our goal when approaching the empirical material was to systematically analyze how employers made sense of relational work on social media. Given that the realm of social media is still a rather unexplored phenomenon concerning relational work on the labor market (cf. Backman & Hedenus 2019), the aim of our study called for a qualitative approach to analysis. As discourse and practice are mutually constitutive (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002), the relational work described by our respondents is to be treated as ‘talk-about-practice’ (Golden & Geisler 2007, p. 531). This means that our approach towards the empirical material is based on the ideas of subjective meaning and practice as entangled, and not as dichotomous phenomena, discerning underlying assumptions in talk and possible consequences of such assumptions (Talja 1997). This had further implications to how we treated the empirical interview transcripts, searching for the relationship between practice and meaning unraveled in the linguistic use of interpretative repertoires.

In a first round of analysis, the first author read and reread the empirical material in order to extract sequences where social media use was elaborated on by the respondent in relation to relational work. In this first round of coding our aim was to catch both varieties and similarities in the material. We therefore tried to be as inclusive as possible (Höglund & Svårdsten 2018). Further, in this first round of coding, we sought both explicit accounts and implicit accounts of relational work on social media (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

This led to the second round of analysis, where the two authors took turns in mapping the empirical material, until finalizing the structure of the two interpretative repertoires. The criterion for establishing a repertoire in this second phase was a consistent linguistic pattern that did not go hand in hand with other repertoires (Ostendorp & Steyaert 2009). However, the repertoires were not exclusive, as both repertoires could be present in the same extract (Potter & Wetherell 1987).

In the third round of analysis, the first author carefully selected extracts that captured the core as well as the variation in each interpretative repertoire, in order to enable transparency and engagement in the interpretation by the reader (Pratt 2008). When writing up the analysis, we turned back to the interview contexts in order not to miss variation as well as contradictions and tensions between and within the use of repertoires in relation to the research context (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wetherell & Potter 1988). The multilingual nature of our scholarship (Steyaert & Janssens 2012) meant that all interviews were performed in Swedish and translated into English by the authors. When translating chosen extracts, precise wordings are always lost, which is a methodological challenge, especially when using linguistically sensitive methods. In this case, in the third round of analysis, we carefully translated the extracts to produce an arrangement close to the original but presented in readable English.

Interpretative repertoires of relational work on social media

Through the analysis, we found two influential repertoires that were used by the managers and HR professionals to construct relational work with employees and potential employees on social media: *the repertoire of loss of control* and *the repertoire of ever-presence*.

The repertoire of loss of control

In the interviews, when talking about social media the managers or HR managers repeatedly described loss of control in interactions (that can be put in relation to being in control in physical interactions within the organization premises). For instance, the respondents described situations where they did not know whether they were in the right social media platform, and whether they were missing what employees and potential employees engage with as appropriate virtual arenas:

We [employers] are left behind them, I think. We hardly know where they are moving right now on the internet. It is clear that they don't read a job ad anymore, they don't care, they are on other spaces, other ways. I think we always have to keep awake, and we have to advertise our jobs on Facebook and LinkedIn and you know all sorts of social media. (Municipality HR director)

In this quote, the director distinguishes between a 'we' and a 'them'/'they' that might describe both a divide between employer and employees/potential employees and a generational divide. Positioning herself or the 'we' in comparison to the 'they' that 'don't care', the director describes herself as 'left behind' and needing 'to keep awake' and as not being knowledgeable of the joint arena of social media where relations are (or should be) taking place. Instead of an arena that is constructed as controlled by the employer, movements on social media are constructed by this HR director as controlled by the employees/potential employees.

A similar construct is present in descriptions of changing practices for managers and HR workers. One example was a manager describing posting advertisements for job applications as a practice of the past, whereas a tendency nowadays is that potential employees post job-related information about themselves on social media, possibly with links to personal web pages, and employers are expected to actively find them.

We see how people tend to seek jobs differently nowadays, they do not apply for jobs in the same way today as they used to. Today you want to be sought after. (Temporary employment agency manager)

In the interview, this manager described how she and her co-workers nowadays must search for potential applicants with job-related information displayed in order to get in touch with potential workers. In the quote above she described how potential employees, or 'they', as a group have changed their ways of doing relational work towards potential employers. Instead of applying, they 'want to be sought after'. As in the previous quote, the potential employees are described as being in charge of social media, while the employer must search for the right place to be and the right way to relate.

Also, when a person is employed, the managers describe how they may still need to pay attention to what that person continuously puts on social media. One example was the description of a young employee writing on his Facebook account when he was ill. According to this manager, this young employee (described as 'this specific generation') has thus found in social media a way of communicating to both work and private relations at the same time, and the manager describes her frustration over this:



They want to call in sick on Facebook. [the manager simulating a dialogue:] But you and I are not friends on Facebook. [in a different voice:] 'No, but I have an open profile so you see.' [the manager's voice again:] But I can't look up 1200 people on Facebook every day. [again in the other voice:] 'Well, but this was just me.' [the manager's voice again] Yes, but it doesn't matter, you have to call in when you are ill. There is so much ... No, they take a lot of time and energy, this specific generation, they do. (Temporary employment agency manager)

In the three quotes above, the interviewed managers described the need to keep track of actual and potential employees on the changing landscape of social media. The actual or potential employee puts up information on social media, in the expectation of being searched for, found, and considered by the employer who always seems to be left behind, unable to keep up.

With an increase in part-time jobs, some employers say that they accept, or even expect, their employees to work for several employers. On the other hand, one manager explained that this leads to a risk of sensitive information from one organization being disclosed to another. Trawling through Facebook can then be constructed as a peephole into the employees' private lives and work at the other organizations, to make sure the situation is under control. However, even as information on social media is described as useful by employers, not all information can be used, resulting in that the control the manager gained, is lost again. For instance, one manager described a case where he saw miscrediting information on a coworkers Facebook:

But what the hell, I can read on Facebook that she has been out and about! Yes, then you [the union] claim it is not certain that it is this person who has written on Facebook. No, but ...! So, we had to back down to the union. (Private store chain manager)

In this quote, despite reading information that could be regarded as social control, the manager describes himself as unable to rely on this information and take legal action. But social media was not only described as a way for employers to search for information on employees, but the other way around, as an arena where employees and potential employees could evaluate different employers and potential employers, as exemplified in this quote:

We have to understand that they are reviewing us. It's about us having good websites and good Facebook pages or Instagram pages or LinkedIn pages, or whatever. We are not the only ones out scouting them, they are assessing us in the same way. (Municipality HR director)

In this quote, 'assessing' is used to describe the mutual review of employers and employees. Here, the employer/potential employers and employees/potential employees are constructed as equals; through the use of social media both parties have an equal opportunity to scout and assess each other. However, this construct of equality exemplified in the quote above was not common in the interview material. Instead, we saw a repeated construct of managers, constructing themselves, their work or their organization as being exposed in relation to social media. For instance, described in this quote:

There are some unofficial Facebook pages that are used by some [groups] (...) those are more personal initiatives. That is nothing made by the company (...) But it has been perceived sometimes as, there is much bullshit on them, there can be personal attacks and there can be gnarl pages and such. (Private process industry HR manager)

In this quote, relational work is described as out of control both for managers, organizations, and teams, as Facebook groups are formed by employees themselves without managers' involvement, and those who are invited are outside the employer's control as 'nothing made by the company'. The urge to act on social media, but at the same time risk losing control as a manager was further elaborated by the private construction HR manager, commenting social media use as problematic due to relational work being upheld without physical closeness to employees, with the words: *How can we affect them, when we are not there to tell them what is right or wrong?* According to this manager, relational work over social media, with the mere physical distance between employers and employees, caused loss of control of what is considered 'right or wrong' when communicating in the workplace.

The construct of social media as an arena independent of organizational control could also be expanded beyond employer-employee relations. Especially in the public sector, employees and potential employees might be both professionals in and customers of the same service. This was described in a quote exemplifying how employees take part in social media groups for parents when having their children in municipal schools:

It depends on how you communicate in this group. It is appealing if it runs smoothly, if you know what I mean, professionally. But if it starts to degenerate there, then we don't have any say so (...) There can be very aggressive groups where we don't have a say so. There can be employees and there can also be parents [in the same group]. They are our customers, you know. (Municipality HR director)

This quote shows a construct of social media as an arena where the organization itself is out of control in relation to customers, as the manager says, 'we don't have a say so'. This manager distinguishes social media groups that are unproblematic or even beneficial for the employer as 'professional' and groups that are problematic for the employer as 'aggressive'. Further, this quote shows a construct of social media as spanning over multiple relations at the same time: employers, employees and customers or other stakeholders which furthers the construct of loss of control.

Social media as an arena where information or rumor gets out of hand and might spread was further elaborated by a manager, describing a critical incident in his organization:

We want to help ourselves and we want to help the coworker, before it [the incident] takes other ways on Facebook, you know. (...) Social media, that is very positive, great, it helps us communicate. But at the same time it is dangerous. You can take down an organization through it. (Private fast-food chain manager)

This manager described the frequent use of Facebook in his communication with employees as 'dangerous' and social media management as needing to 'help ourselves' as an organization, as well as helping coworkers. But it was not only the organization that



was constructed as exposed due to social media use. Also, the manager herself exposed as private figure on social media was elaborated on in some interviews:

It's a brand. [Managers name] is [Managers name] no matter what. You won't be able to separate that this is working life and this is private life, it's rather how you take control of your [social media] flow. (Municipality HR manager)

This manager pointed to the *need* of taking control of an arena where her private persona and work-related persona becomes integrated. Even as the outstretch of private-public spheres are constructed as an opportunity to 'take control of your flow', this was not common in the interviews. Instead, social media was elaborated as an arena outside of the comfort zone or control of the managers working role. For instance, one HR partner described in an ironic voice the need to be present on social media as decided by 'some company star'. Later, she continued:

I would need competence development if I were to be there [on social media] (...) I don't want to communicate with my coworkers in that way. We are all different. I have a very high integrity as a human being. I don't chit-chat on social media privately either. I feel more comfortable sending e-mails to everyone then putting it out in the public, if you pardon the expression. (Public company HR partner)

Compared to the quote above on the requirement of taking 'control of your flow' and adapt to the merger of public and private persona, this manager constructed a tension of not having the knowledge nor the drive to blur her public and private persona in relation to her coworkers. This tension was further stressed, as development towards social media use in managerial roles was repeatedly constructed as far from voluntary:

I think it is deeply rooted that leadership takes place through interaction. And now we have a new generation that actually interact through the smartphone. So, it might not be enough. I think it's a matter of generations. Our managers are new to social media, but their coworkers prefer to meet their manager over WhatsUp or Snapchat (HR manager municipality)

In this quote, social media use was related to the generational divide, constructing 'managers' as a group unprepared for social media interaction as part of their managerial practice, and the managerial practice of interaction as 'might not be enough' in relation to 'a new generation' that dictate the conditions for how leadership should be performed.

In summary, the interpretative repertoire of loss of control constructed the managers themselves, as well as their organizations, as being left behind in an arena controlled by a new generation of employees. And even if social media enabled both employers and employees to access information, social media was elaborated as an arena out of organizational and managerial control.

The repertoire of ever-presence

The other repertoire we would like to display, the repertoire of ever-presence, is already present in several of the quotes above, for instance in the construct of social media as a

meeting place for employers, employees and different sorts of customers and stakeholders, as well as stretching over public and private spheres. However, we wish to further elaborate on this repertoire.

By some respondents, becoming friends and sharing information, for instance on Facebook, was described as a way to enhance communication between the employer and the employee. One operations manager described how he put in many hours every week keeping in touch with his employees via Facebook, gaining knowledge in their habits, interests, and family issues. In the interview, he elaborated on the importance of social media in his relation to the employees:

I'm in the Facebook group and I like things and I praise people, so [...] I talk to all the employees. [...] I mean we broaden our leadership, and we try to tell our employees that you are welcome to contact us anytime, so it's an open-door policy. (Private food chain manager)

In this quote, the manager constructs his relational work on social media as 'broaden our leadership', he uses wording such as 'all the employees', 'welcome any time', and 'an open-door policy'. The construct here is an ever-present virtual arena where everyone in the organization at any time can communicate with the manager. Even though in practice this would be impossible, the construct of social media as ever-present for relational work, as a benefit for the employees, is produced.

For other managers, the construct of ever-presence was constructed as negative. One manager described the constant access via social media through portable technical devices, such as office and private smartphones, as problematic for his own personal privacy.

One notices how easily reached one is, both through the phone and social media and e-mail and everything, one notices that as a manager today the phone beeps around the clock, it might beep in the middle of the night, one gets a notification. There is always a way to reach you and you get constant information on everything. Even in your free time, it affects you. (Public owned company manager)

Here, the expected relational work on social media as ever-present is described as 'around the clock', present at all times and everywhere, even in his private bedroom 'in the middle of the night'. Compared to the construct of loss of control, where the employee might become constructed as in control of social media and the employer as having lost control, the two quotes above show how ever-presence becomes constructed as positive for employees ('welcome any time') but negative for employers ('even in your free time, it affects you'). This stretching over public and private spheres was repeatedly constructed in the interviews. For instance, by this HR director describing the relational work by managers in her organization:

Well, you use private [social media accounts], and you construct a group named (...) Group A. (...) But it's more, not private initiatives, but individual initiatives, leading to this. It's not 'private-private', but it's not something we organize as an organization. But it's very successful, It's a way to reach each other. (Municipality HR director)



This construct of the ever-presence of social media as blurring the private/public ('it's not private-private, but it's not something we organize as an organization'), puts focus on social media accounts as of importance for reaching out in relational work ('it's very successful. It's a way to reach each other'), but not being supported as an organizational tool for the managers nor the employees that take part, instead require the use of private accounts.

As we can see, constructing younger employees as the only ones mastering social media, and viewing the employer as the only position losing control through social media, or constructing social media as ever-present for everyone and everywhere, would be an oversimplification. Not providing smartphones as work tools was common in the majority of the studied organizations. As one municipality HR director describes with a sweeping generalization:

Our coworkers are in very different environments, and part of these environments, for example home care, they don't use computers. It could be smartphone nowadays, but they are not in an environment where one uses digital solutions primarily. (Municipality HR director)

The construct of 'they are not in an environment where one uses digital solutions primarily' creates a tension in the material, as this organization in other parts rely heavily on communication over digital tools such as social media. The coworkers in home care are however a group where access to computers or smartphones is not expected, nor supported by the organization. Similarly, one manager described the use of Facebook at his plant. Today, he said, both young and old employees use their smartphones during the coffee break. They communicate with their friends through social media, but not necessarily with their colleagues drinking coffee next to them, leading to interaction beyond the factory walls, but not always within them. In some teams, Facebook is described by the manager as creating stronger bonds between members of the team, with past and present colleagues sharing pictures and comments both at work and in their free time. For other teams, this is described as distancing team members who do not communicate over coffee at all:

There is one team, they have their own group on Facebook where they can run all their communication. And it is smooth, of course, but it is not... they simply own it themselves, there is no initiative from the company to have it that way, it is just for their own convenience (...) and as I said previously not everybody has Facebook [in the group]. And then somebody is left outside anyway. (Manager Private process industry)

In this quote, access to proper material devices such as a smartphone or digital knowledge to access a social media account are constructed as a prerequisite for inclusion in the ever-present relational work. In this plant, smartphones were not provided by the employer, and hence the Facebook groups where relational work between colleagues were performed was also discursively placed outside of work. Hence, in these two quotes, the material prerequisites are described as limiting the ever-presence of social media.

In summary, the interpretative repertoire of ever-presence constructs social media as enabling leadership 'anytime', possibly positive for employees but negative for employers'

work-life balance. Further, this repertoire came with tensions related to certain groups or individuals. As devices are not provided by the employer, access to the ever-present virtual space of relations on social media becomes a question of material access, financial means, digital knowledge, and integrity for the private employee or potential employee. This is a telling example of how constructs of relational work on social media create boundaries, which mirror economic power relations in society at large.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to develop knowledge on the interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987) used by representatives of employers in their constructs of relational work with employees and potential employees on social media. Through a discursive psychology approach and leaning on the notion of linguistic constructions as the use of interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wetherell & Potter 1988), foregrounding tensions and conflicts in discursive practices (Mumby & Stohl 1996), we can learn something new about how relational work in the contemporary labor market is constructed by employers, and discern possible consequences of such constructs. We believe that such an analysis adds to a discussion about power relations, surveillance, and boundaries enacted in communication on social media (Backman & Hedenus 2019; Cortini 2009; Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2013), and social media as a discursively constructed ‘contested terrain’, where the separation of spheres as drawn and redrawn needs to be further theorized (McDonald & Thompson 2016).

Previous studies have provided interesting insights on how employer-employee relationships are constituted through talk (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012), continuously changing and shaped by developing information and communication technology (Backman & Hedenus, 2019; Cortini 2009; Wilner et al. 2017). Exploring how employers talked about relational work, our analysis adds to previous research foregrounding the role played by technology in labor market changes (Oppegaard 2020).

According to Marder et al. (2016), social media can be described as an arena of surveillance, holding the potential of the manager controlling employees and potential employees, but it can also be understood the other way around, thus constructing social media as an ambiguous arena, adding to previous claims of information- and communication technology as a ‘double-edged sword’ of control (Cortini 2009, p. 301). Even though relationships established through two-way communication over the internet can be understood as essentially democratic (Blood 2003; Morsing & Schultz 2006), issues related to power are still very present. We claim that the discursive constructs observed in this study come with consequences largely related to uneven societal power relations. The use of the interpretative repertoires of relational work on social media as loss of control and ever-presence points to consequences related to power for the understanding of the work situation of both the employees and employers.

Hiding power relations

Through the use of the repertoire of loss of control, employees – especially ‘younger’ employees (without definitions of specific ages) – often described in relation to parallel



employment or otherwise precarious contracts, are positioned as in control of movements and prerequisites for relations performed on social media platforms. This is contrary to previous research that highlighted social media use as a potential to shift the power of voice from employees to employers (Scott 2005). The discursive construct of employees as *in control* of movements and prerequisites for relations performed on social media platforms might thus be seductive, or even treacherous.

Critical scholars of management have foregrounded precarious consequences of changes in the contemporary labor market (Standing 2011), in particular giving voice to those who are marginalized or exploited as economic privileges are maintained (Nadesan 2001). Discursive constructs of the individual as responsible for his/her own employability (Fejes 2010), as well as for his/her own working conditions (Franco 2019), shifts emphasis from relations within the organization, to relational work between the individual employee and the employer. One effect of such changes on the labor market is that relational work needs to be performed in new arenas that lie not within, but in between organizations and individuals, as we see in our empirical material in relation to 'younger' employees and potential employees. Winkler (2011) argues for the need to take these differences into consideration since employees and potential employees in a precarious labor market relate differently to managers – there is, in other words, a need to better understand the relation between employers and flexible employees.

The changing structure of the labor market is characterized by a core of employees with relatively secure labor market status surrounded by spheres and sectors with more unstable and insecure work arrangements, consisting of a growing number of temporary jobs, parallel part-time jobs, commission-paid, freelancers, and temporal agencies, as well as individuals moving between employers, trades, and professions (Beck 2014; Franco 2019; Oppgaard 2020; Standing 2011). Until the end of the last millennium, the Swedish labor market was characterized by stability, and an increased flexibilization among workers between geographical and organizational boundaries was requested in labor policies (Israelsson et al. 2003). Further, the proportion of time-limited employment in relation to the total number of positions in Sweden doubled from 8% in 1990 to 15% in 2015 (Statistics Sweden 2021). Also, profit-based temporary employment agencies today employ about 1.7 % of the Swedish workforce (Statistics Sweden 2021). In temporary employment agencies, workers are usually employed by the agency, offering permanent positions with guaranteed salaries, but perform their work in client companies (Olofsdotter 2012). Even though the circumstances in Sweden differ from the circumstances in, for instance, the USA where temporary employees may be without pay between assignments (Garsten 1999), these are trends that point to an increase in insecure labor market conditions for an increasing part of the population, especially among 'younger' employees.

In the Nordic countries, union membership is, in comparison to the rest of Europe and USA, high. Numbers from 2016 show that trade union membership spans from 52% in Norway, to 84% in Iceland, where Sweden lies on the equivalent of 66% (Logue 2019). However, in the last decade the Nordic countries have seen trade union membership falling. One interpretation of this shift in labor market structures is a societal process of individualistic discourses prevailing over collective discourses (Peetz 2010). Kelan (2008) described how discourses of individualization constructs women as ideal workers of the future, constructing subordination of women in contemporary working life as obscured or even irrelevant. We believe that the positioning of employees

in precarious relations, through the repertoire of loss of control among the variety of employers in our study, points in a similar direction. By positioning the employee as in control of movements and prerequisites for relations performed on social media platforms, the precarious relationship between employer and employee is hidden. The use of discourse might thus help hide incremental power differences in contemporary labor market relations. This is not a conscious move made by employers, but a result of the interpretative repertoire used for making sense of the situation from their point of view.

Constructs of private spheres and material boundaries

Another consequence of the use of the repertoires relates to the managers' own work-life situations. Some managers we talked to explained how they used Facebook in their managerial activities, although it is more private in nature than other platforms, such as LinkedIn (Caers & Castelyns 2011). Its private nature becomes an issue: the managers described how social media is used to keep an eye on their current and potential employees, at all times and in every segment of their lives, even in the most private settings. Previous research has described how the mere architecture of social media shapes employer-employee relationships as belonging to a private sphere instead of a public sphere (where interaction traditionally would occur in the physical realms of the organization or in organizationally controlled e-mail systems) (McDonald & Thompson 2016). The private nature of social media use in the workplace among employees has previously been described as 'cyberloafing' (cf. Oravec 2018) or fall under the realm of 'empty labor' (Paulsen 2014). However, what we see in our study is that social media is in fact described as a main portal for managerial work, but nevertheless described as an arena where the manager's appearance as private/public individual is blurred. The use of social media must here rather be compared to company kick-off sites or parties, where the manager appears in her work role, but is expected to interact with employees in a private surrounding and fashion.

As social media is described as crucial for managerial work, the ever-presence of social media risks becoming a work-life hazard for managers. Through the repertoire of ever-presence, social media building on a private sphere logic allows for an invasion of private physical space, as in the case of the presence of Facebook alerts in the manager's private bedroom at night. This is not to be understood as sloppy or naïve use of the media by individual managers. Instead, these constructs put focus on the force of discursive constructs. When the respondents are 'repeating the assumptions of their time' (p 1), patterns of power are reproduced, positioning the individual as both master over and slave under discourses-in-use (Billig 1991). This calls for an urgent shift in the understanding of social media on an organizational level. Managers' everyday conversations with employees over social media accounts must be understood as a professional undertaking, not as a private one. Since managers' behavior might set standards also for subordinates' behavior, availability restricted to work hours might be beneficial for employees too.

The managers in our study expressed worries about how what they wrote was shared and about what others wrote about them. In fact, unlike many other communicational spaces used in organizational contexts, social media allow for uncensored, unpredictable



two-way communication (Champoux et al. 2012). Albu and Etter describe how the fluidity of social media 'allows individuals to remove information from any context (especially the organizational context in which it was produced) and use it to coproduce, reproduce, undermine, or contest an organizational actor for their own interests' (2016, p. 11).

The relational work that is described in our study is thus constructed as ambiguous, enabling interactions and actions that are not predictable and not easy for the individual manager to make sense of. As the opportunities for relational work change due to increased use of social media, expectations of social media interaction may affect the wellbeing of HR professionals and managers if we do not develop knowledge relevant to this particular situation that can help employers make sense of the relational work.

Finally, the discursive construct of social media as ever-present comes not only with boundaries between work and private contexts, but also with boundaries connected to the mere material prerequisites for social media use. Being part of the ever-present network of social media users requires the ownership of a smartphone, tablet, or computer. If these are not provided by an employer, the employee or potential employee needs to use her/his own financial means to buy one. Even though a vast majority of residents in the Nordic countries have access to such devices, apparently not everyone does. This implies that the interpretative repertoire of social media as ever-present also risks masking power imbalances, as only those with the right financial means and right abilities can be included in the ever-present network of social media users.

Conclusions and managerial implications

Building on the theoretical framework of discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wetherell & Potter 1988), this study shows how relational work on social media is discursively constructed by managers and HR managers through the use of an interpretative repertoire of loss of control and an interpretative repertoire of ever-presence. However, even though discourses-in-use constitute the taken-for-granted (Wetherell & Potter 1993), humans are capable of resisting, challenging and rejecting social practice (Potter & Wetherell 1987). Even though prominent discourses set the horizons for what can be thought or said in a specific context (Seymour-Smith et al. 2002), we need to highlight how language is used around a phenomena, in order to make social change possible (Edley 2001).

Even though social media has previously been described as imbued with tensions of accessibility for everyone, and power controlled by a few (Miranda et al. 2016), social media has also been described as arenas where resistance towards norms is possible: in the tension between perceptions of private-public, of spontaneous-preformed, and of distribution-control of power (Wilner et al. 2017). The use of interpretative repertoires in this study implies a risk of hiding unbalanced power relations, where especially young employees in precarious relations to employers are constructed as in control of movements, and prerequisites for relations performed on various social media.

Based on our study, we further propose moving the discursive understanding of social media for employers from the private to the office sphere, and hence managers interacting with employees and potential employees on social media accounts separate from their private accounts. Friendship relations between employers and employees, whereas in the physical organization or in virtual platforms, must be handled responsibly

upholding managerial professional obligations (cf. Caldwell et al. 2021). Enabling an understanding of relational work on social media as *work*, might help managers create resilience in already stressful working life situations, as well as provide means to separate their private persona from their work role. One way forward would thus be for organizations to provide managers and HR managers with office accounts on for instance Facebook, in order to separate their work-related social media presence from their private social media presence.

Understanding social media as an arena where work relations take place implies a shift in our understanding of organizational support systems. If social media use is to be understood as part of regular working life, devices for such use must be provided by organizations or even included in social support systems, and support in how to use and interact via these devices must be provided, in order for individuals of all ages and financial means to be included in ongoing relational work in the Nordic labor market.

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