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I Communicate, Therefore I Belong: Processes of Identification Among Organizational Representatives

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Abstract
Although research has explored employees' organizational identification, few scholars have investigated liminal workers' identification. This gap is problematic because nonmembers represent organizations and their attachments may influence their work. To understand this poorly understood phenomenon, we conducted interviews with agency social media writers who were not employed by organizations they represented online. Contrary to practitioners avowing that only internal employees can communicate via social media, we found agency writers adopt multiple identification lenses, which lead to different work practices. These results contribute to organizational, stakeholder, and consumer-company identification research and help social media writers better communicate on behalf of organizations.

Keywords
organizational communication, identification, social media

Scholars have long demonstrated the benefits of employee identification. When people feel part of an organization, they are more likely to work harder, cooperate more, and perform better in their roles (Bartel, 2001; Carmeli, Gilat, & Waldman, 2007; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002). Over the past several decades, extensive theoretical (B. E.

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Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; C. R. Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998) and empirical (Henderson, Cheney, & Weaver, 2015; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001) work has established organizational identification as a root construct in business and professional communication.

However, the bulk of research in this area still focuses on members' identification with their employers, which overlooks nonemployees who may identify with organizations in less understood ways. As Pratt (1998) has noted, scholars must explore other forms of identification, "as our notion of what an 'organizational member' is becomes broader and the boundaries between organizational insiders and outsiders becomes more diffuse" (pp. 174-175). Although nonemployees may experience identification, theory and research has yet to fully explain the attachment process for people outside traditional organizational boundaries.

This gap is problematic because nonmembers—individuals who are not company employees—often represent organizations publicly, and their sense of identification may influence their work. As companies increasingly use social media technologies—blogs, wikis, social networking sites, social tagging, and microblogging—to communicate their corporate brands (Vernuccio, 2014), social media writers are speaking on behalf of companies without being part of them.

The practice of producing and publishing online content for an organization inherently involves some level of association between authors and the organizations represented through this communication. Agency writers, however, are not employed by the organization and may have limited contact with the organization. For example, many organizations outsource their social media efforts to marketing, public relations, or digital agencies that specialize in brand communication. Because agency employees write social media content for a number of clients simultaneously, such writers may not be socialized into client companies in a manner similar to organizational employees (B. K. Ashforth & Saks, 1996) and may not adopt the same values or beliefs of the multiple organizations they represent (Cheney, 1983). Unlike other client-oriented positions, like accountants or consultants, in which individuals are charged with remaining detached from their clients, social media writers have to overcome these barriers so they can act on behalf of clients and interact with clients' customers as if they were organizational employees. For example, whereas research cautions auditors against identifying with their client for the risk of undermining objectivity (Bamber & Iyer, 2007) and warns consultants of developing conflicting loyalties (Alvesson, 2000), social media writers' work may be positively or negatively influenced by relationships with organizations they represent online.

This study, therefore, investigates how social media writers represent organizations online by exploring the work practices of people who produce content for client organizations. Since scholars do not know a great deal about identification outside of organizational membership (Elsbach, 1998), exploring how social media writers' different relationships with organizations shape their work offers the opportunity to significantly extend the identification literature. Research has shown that identification leads to beneficial employee behavior (Bartel, 2001; Carmeli et al., 2007; Dukerich et al., 2002), but in the context of social media, identification may be a *necessity* for task effectiveness—organizations need their online representatives to align with attributes that define the business. Using social identity theory, this study explores social media writers' identification and investigates the impact of attachments on work to better understand this communication practice in the workplace.

The Complexity of Writers' Identifications

Social identity theory is an overarching framework that explains people's connections with organizations. According to the theory, individuals' self-concepts contain various social categories, including groups and organizations (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), and people identify with organizations when they define or refer to themselves in terms of that organization (B. E. Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Several areas of research have used social identity theory to explain members', stakeholders', and consumers' organizational attachments. Specifically, the *organizational identification* literature uses social identity theory to demonstrate how workers feel a sense of oneness with their employer, *stakeholder identification* explains stakeholders' connections to organizations, and *consumer-company identification* describes customers' organizational attachments. Although the following research sheds light on writers' identifications in part, none completely accounts for the complex process of writers' identification, since writers may be organizational members, stakeholders, and/or consumers.

Organizational Identification (Member to Organization)

Organizational identification describes the perception of oneness or belongingness to an organization in which a person "defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). In-house social media writers who work in organizations they represent online may experience organizational identification if they describe themselves by the same attributes of their companies. Organizational identification may shape in-house writers' content because they may be more likely to make decisions on behalf of the company and its values (Cheney, 1983).

However, the member-organization identification literature is limited in that past organizational identification research has focused on employees' relationships with their employers (e.g., Carmeli et al., 2007) and members' affiliations with nonprofits (e.g., Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As Cheney, Christensen, and Dailey (2013) noted in their review of the identification literature, "much theorizing continues to think of an organization's communication as something that occurs *within* the organizational setting" (p. 701, emphasis added). With this critique of identification research in mind, some scholars (Fonner & Roloff, 2012; Gossett, 2002) have begun to explore identification outside of traditional employment, focusing on virtual and temporary workers' identities. Similar to these nontraditional employees, social media writers work for agencies and do not work inside the organizations for which they produce content. Furthermore, this perspective does not fully explain writers' attachments because agency writers are not employees (and may not even interact) with their client organizations.

Stakeholder Identification (Stakeholder to Organization)

Other scholars have contended that people identify with organizations in the absence of formal memberships. Pratt (1998) proposed that people "need not become organizational members in order to identify with an organization" and that identification may take place from a distance, as is the case with social media writers who represent organizations to which they do not belong (p. 174). Furthermore, in their theory of stakeholder identification, S. G. Scott and Lane (2000) drew on social identity theory to present a model to explain how identification emerges—through interactions between managers, organizational members, and other stakeholders, such as suppliers. Stakeholder identification may shape writers' content by accentuating the organization's image and identity, or, as the authors warn, stakeholders may come to identify more with each other as "social media writers" rather than their organizations.

Although this perspective would explain social media writers' identification process, S. G. Scott and Lane (2000) take a manager-centered approach, which limits this perspective. According to the model, managers influence stakeholder identification, because "only managers are formally charged and granted access to organizational resources in order to . . . construct and present desired organizational images" (S. G. Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 56). Scholars who have tested S. G. Scott and Lane's (2000) model have critiqued the theoretical framework, noting that although one of the main goals of leaders is to manage organizations' identities, other actors, including advertising agencies and suppliers, also communicate and influence identities (Scharf, Fernandes, & Kormann, 2012). In their study of identity construction of major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games, Parent and Foreman (2007) found that "certain stakeholders, such as the media, play a particularly important and distinct role in the process, a role not found in the Scott and Lane OIC [organizational identity construction] framework" (p. 32).

Likewise, in the case of social media, writers, not managers, are primarily responsible for producing organizational images, which limits the explanatory nature of this framework for the current study. Thus, although this perspective recognizes the possibility of outsiders identifying with an organization, it views this process as primarily influenced by organizational managers. This study considers how additional relationships influence processes of identification for people outside organizations.

Consumer-Company Identification (Consumer to Organization)

The final stream of literature uses social identity theory to describe consumers' relationships with organizations. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) first posited consumer-company identification, the notion that consumers identify with companies that satisfy one or more important self-definitional needs. Consumer-company identification makes consumers champions of the organizations with which they relate. Studies in the fields of marketing and public relations have demonstrated several beneficial outcomes of consumer-company identification, including positive word-of-mouth communication about the organization (Hong & Yang, 2009), greater customer loyalty and purchase behaviors (Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, & Maxham, 2010; Netemeyer, Heilman, & Maxham, 2012), and increased immunization against competitors and attacks on the organization (Einwiller & Johar, 2013; Haumann, Quaiser, Wieseke, & Rese, 2014).

Despite these advances in research, scholars have critiqued consumer-company identification scholarship, which has yet to understand the role of physical interaction in the identification process. For example, Marín and Ruiz de Maya (2013) have contended that consumers build better relationships and identify with companies that they frequently visit (e.g., banks, retailers), and Elbedweihy and Jayawardhena (2014) have suggested that future research explore whether a product being visibly consumed may influence consumer-company identification. In addition, Sen, Johnson, Bhattacharya, and Wang (2015, pp. 171-172) have called for studies to investigate if "actual physical interaction with the brand may be more central to attachment."

In the context of social media, an agency writer may be a loyal consumer of a company's products or services, perceive the organization's social identity as attractive and meaningful, and therefore identify with the business the writer represents online. Greater consumer-company identification may motivate writers to produce better content because they identify positively with the organization. However, many social media writers do not live and work in the same city or even state of the companies for which they write content, limiting their ability to have any physical interaction as consumers of the brand. Thus, despite the utility of this theory, not all social media writers may be customers who can interact with the companies they represent online.

In sum, because the manner by which social media writers can identify with organizations can take many forms—as members, stakeholders, or consumers—it is important to consider how writers negotiate their identities within organizations they represent, but to which they do not formally belong. Scholarship acknowledges that identification is not a fixed attribute; rather, it is a more complicated process that ebbs and flows across different experiences (Bullis & Bach, 1989). Furthermore, work has demonstrated the various ways in which member, stakeholder, and consumer identifications influence organizational and individual work outcomes, but we lack an understanding of how social media writers' sense of identity influences their daily practices. To address this gap, this study asks two research questions:

Research Question 1: How do social media writers identify with their work?
Research Question 2: How do social media writers' attachments influence their work?

Method

Research Setting

To answer scholars' calls to explore people's identification with organizations of which they are not members (Elsbach, 1998; Pratt, 1998), this project examined social media writers' attachments and work practices. We investigated writers who worked at agencies that provided professional communication services, rather than in-house (i.e., a member of the communications department in an organization) writers, because such writers represent clients' identities online despite their lack of membership in the company. Specifically, participants worked at organizations they identified as advertising agencies, marketing agencies, and social media strategy firms. These organizations shared a number of attributes that make them appropriate for the analysis of identification in this study: They provided services to multiple organizations, they employed writers who produced social media content, and they had individual workers who communicated with clients but did not work in client locations.

We recruited participants through three interrelated methods: (a) posting the study's information to an online community of social media professionals working in an urban area in the southern United States, (b) contacting working professionals known to the authors that met the requirements for inclusion, and (c) using a snowball approach whereby informants recommended other social media writers.

In total, 22 people participated in this study. In every case, participants had at some point held a position where they had responsibility for the creation of content that was to be distributed onto a public-facing social media platform. Two informants were not actively working on a social media project at the time of the interview, so these participants were asked to reflect on past experiences. Specific social media platforms mentioned in interviews included the English versions of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, Google+, Yelp, Foursquare, Tumblr, and company-hosted blogs. Here, we refer to all employees generally as "social media writers" and use pseudonyms for all proper nouns. Although, in some cases, organizations employ social media writers to support internal communication, the primary audiences for the writers in this study were external to both the clients and the writers' agencies (i.e., consumers, business partners, prospective employees, fans).

Participants used various titles to identify their social media role: community manager ($n = 9$); consultant, coordinator, or specialist ($n = 5$); strategist ($n = 5$); and manager or director ($n = 3$). The number of informants' clients ranged from 1 to approximately 100 for some community managers ($M = 36.2$, $SD = 41.6$). All organizations were located in the United States. Most informants (62%) were female and had worked in their organization for nearly 2 years ($SD = 19.7$ months). Although we did not ask about participants' age, most people ranged in age from their early 20s to mid-40s.

Data

All three authors conducted semistructured interviews (Kvale, 1996) with participants both in person and over the phone. The researchers split the workload based on availability to interview every potential participant. Whenever possible, we interviewed participants in person; however, social media writers living in other cities had to be interviewed over the phone (11 interviews were conducted remotely). Although mediated interviews allowed us to reach more participants who were distributed across a wide geographical area, phone interviews are limited in that they provide less nonverbal data and pose an increased risk of participant distraction (Tracy, 2012). To check for meaningful differences between in-person interviews and phone interviews, we compared the lengths of conversations as a rough proxy for the richness of discussions and found no significant difference between the interview types. We also reviewed the distribution of codes applied to the transcripts, both by category and frequency, and found no systematic differences between the interview types. Based on these reliability checks, we included all interviews in our analysis.

Using a protocol as a guide for discussions, we asked informants a series of open-ended questions within five general areas: (a) participants' roles and responsibilities, including his or her work background prior to the current position; (b) participants' work practices, technologies or processes used, and relationships with their clients; (c) perceptions of the skills, knowledge, abilities, and actions needed to complete tasks effectively; (d) participants' sense of identification with their work; and (e) the value provided to organizations through the work completed. Throughout the interviews, authors probed for details regarding participants' goals for actions, the importance of those actions, and if they had considered alternatives. The protocol asked participants to describe not only their use of technology but also the nature of their role and their relationships and attachments at work. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 87 minutes (M = 55 minutes) and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We concluded data collection when all researchers agreed that interviews were not generating any new insights (Kvale, 1996) and we had reached data saturation (Tracy, 2012).

Data Analysis

Given the uncertainty of how identification might apply to the work of participants, the first author analyzed data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) with an iterative lens (Tracy, 2012) to reveal relevant influences and relationships present. Specifically, the first author undertook three major steps moving iteratively between the data and a reexamination of emergent findings. The phases of data analysis are presented in Table 1 and described in detail below.

In the first step, the first author engaged in open coding, reading through transcripts and ascribing text to initial emergent categories using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). She coded all instances of learning, establishing work practices, perceptions of identification, and work outcomes; grouping these instances together to form categories; and assigning conceptual labels to each code (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following this open-coding stage, all authors engaged in discussion reflecting on the emergent findings, with the specific purpose of identifying patterns, discrepancies, and unusual occurrences both within and across coding categories.

In the second step, the first author conducted axial coding, which involved "integrating categories and their properties" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106). The goal of this stage of analysis was to look for connections between categories and collapse codes into broader themes that spanned categories. As a result, codes became more

Table 1. Overview of Data Structure.

First-order codes	Axial codes	Aggregate theoretical dimensions
Statements about personal interests, prior work, or expertise developed in an industry; discussing competitors' social media posts	Industry Knowledge	Knowledge Domains
Statements about the culture, mission, voice, values, and vision of an organization; understanding the organization's identity	Organizational Knowledge	
Statements about an organization's products; gathering information through familiarity or research	Product Knowledge	
Statements about social media trends; acknowledging social media expertise	Social Media Knowledge	
Statements about customer expectations, norms, and preferences	Customer Knowledge	
Connection to a certain industry; defining oneself in terms of an industry	Industry Identification	Identification Lenses
Connection to a certain organization; defining oneself in terms of an organization	Organizational Identification	
Connection to a certain product; defining oneself in terms of a product	Product Identification	
Connection to the role of a social media writer; defining oneself in terms of his or her role	Role Identification	
Connection to an imagined identity; putting oneself in the shoes of someone who identifies with the organization	Pseudoidentification	
Describing work as simple, second nature, natural; completing work quickly, individually, and enjoyably	Writing With Ease	Work Practices
Describing work as embodying the organization; being the client's voice, face, and personality	Personifying the Client	
Describing work as adapting to clients; writing for a variety of organizations at a fast pace	Switching Focus	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

First-order codes	Axial codes	Aggregate theoretical dimensions
Making adjustments based on incongruences between content produced and clients' preferences	Misalignment Between Writers and Clients	Negative Feedback
Making adjustments based on customer complaints, negative reviews, and organizational crises	Negative Customer Comments	
Making adjustments based on met social media goals (e.g., strong engagement, more followers)	Social Media Successes	Positive Feedback
Making adjustments based on positive reactions to posts (e.g., accolades, "likes," or reposts)	Positive Customer Comments	

theoretical and more abstract (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This phase resulted in 17 axial codes. For example, "product knowledge," "pseudoidentification," and "misalignment between writers and client" were all axial codes.

Third, the first author further collapsed these 17 axial codes through selective coding, "the process by which *all* categories are unified around a 'core category' . . . [which] represents the central phenomenon of the study" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14). In this step, constant comparison was used to relate 17 axial codes into five more abstract theoretical dimensions. Last, on identifying these aggregate dimensions, we reexamined the data's fit/misfit to ensure the best explanation of the study's theoretical goals (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To understand "the general drift of the data more easily" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013, p. 283), the first author created a table listing informants' names, the identification lenses each informant discussed using, and the work practices each informant performed. Following axial and selective coding, all of the researchers discussed the theoretical findings in order to reflect on the face validity of the core themes and to surface any alternative interpretations or negative cases relevant to the analysis. The analysis of the interviews concluded when all researchers felt that the core themes represented a valid and meaningful reflection of the data.

Validity Check

Because this study was motivated by the need to explore nonmember identification, all authors conducted additional interviews as a validity check on the distinctiveness of agency social media writers. Whereas our primary (N = 22) interviews explored the nonmember identification and work practices of social media writers who worked for an agency, we also conducted eight interviews to investigate member identification and work practices of internal social media writers. In other words, we wanted to compare agency and in-house social media writers to understand if the nonmember

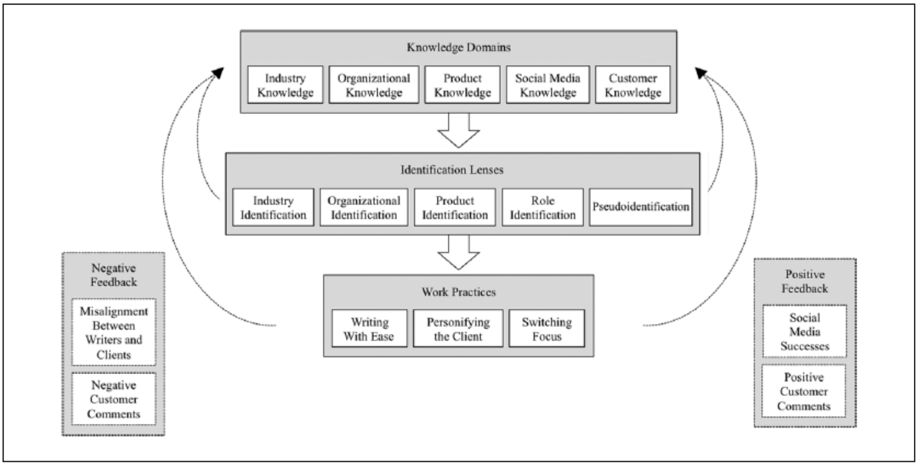

Figure 1. Model of identification via social media writing.

identification process was truly distinct from the member identification process of employees engaged in similar tasks.

Findings

Two main findings became apparent through our analysis. First, interviews revealed the consistent presence of social media writers' identification; writers indicated that some type of identification was essential to accomplishing their work. Second, the writers' different identification lenses influenced various work practices. In this way, identification affected writers' content production.

In this section, we describe the model of identification via social media writing (see Figure 1), which explains how in the process of representing clients online, writers developed various *knowledge domains* about their clients' organizations. Similar to other identification models that begin with perception (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994), you have to understand something (an industry, organization, etc.) before you identify with it. This knowledge, in turn, fostered different forms of *identification lenses* that writers used to speak on behalf of their clients. As we explain in detail below, writers referenced distinct *work practices* that different identification lenses afforded. Furthermore, *negative and positive feedback* shaped writers' knowledge, making identification a mutually inclusive process.

Knowledge Domains

Throughout the interviews, informants often noted how they were constantly learning about the industries, organizations, products, or customers for which they were writing content. In addition, participants were constantly seeking information about social media technologies, which change very rapidly. We call these areas of learning knowledge domains, because they represented various subjects that writers needed to understand to do their work. Below, we discuss five knowledge domains and how knowledge informed social media writers' identifications.

Industry knowledge. Throughout participant interviews, writers discussed the importance of industry knowledge in their work. Some writers had knowledge about certain industries already, either from their personal interests or prior work experience, which allowed them to perform their role. Some agencies specialized in various industries, like politics or healthcare, and writers described how businesses would seek help from agencies because of the agency's expertise. Below, Garrett explained his knowledge of the healthcare industry:

> I used to be in the Texas Hospital Association. I understand what they're dealing with . . . what they have done historically, and what they are trying to do. . . . Just like anybody who's working in the industry, I know the lingo, I know the acronyms, I know who the players are.

Other writers discussed how their work involved learning about industries for which they were writing. When informants would take on new clients, they discussed the importance of becoming immersed in that industry. For instance, Anona noted,

> I have a bakery as a client, and I make a point to follow other bakeries whether they're in the same city or around the nation. If they have a strong social media presence, I want to know how they're talking. What are they talking about?

This informant's comment about competitors in the industry was fairly common among writers. Participants mentioned following other companies in certain industries on social media to keep track of trends and norms within the field. As we discuss later, this knowledge led to informants' attachments to industries, but not specific companies.

Organizational knowledge. Social media writers discussed the importance of knowing details about organizations, including their culture, mission, and voice, before writing their content. Writers also discussed their need to relate to clients and understand the nature of the organizations for which they were writing. When talking about one of the restaurants for which she wrote content, Elle shared details about the owner's culinary background and said, "I just understand them." As another informant (Karl) commented,

> If I get a new client assigned to me, it's important that you can relate to them. That's part of this process of getting to know them is that you understand where they're coming from and you're understanding that a lot of these people are working really hard at what they're doing and we're just a small part of their success.

As we will discuss later, when writers understood organizations, they were able to overlap their self-concept with that of the organization.

Product knowledge. Social media writers also discussed learning about the different products within organizations. Participants tried to write content for organizations that sold products the writers were already familiar with; otherwise, writers had to conduct research about the products so they could represent the products accurately:

> You have to always resort to Google just to find an answer to something that you don't know because that's not particularly in your field of expertise. But . . . we really try to match certain community managers with their interests for clients so that you do perform the best. (Olivia)

Karen, another writer, also spoke about her lack of identification with car products—"They said my carburetor was doing this and this and this; I literally have no idea what this means"—which inhibited her ability to identify and write content for organizations that dealt with unfamiliar products.

Social media knowledge. Because social media practices change so frequently, informants described the need to continually learn about social media trends. As Andrew noted

> You hire us not because we are the best writers or because we know you the best, you hire us because we approach social media like a passion and a science. I care a lot about my own ongoing taste in social media, and I apply my own taste to my clients.

Writers felt they had deep knowledge of social media because of the number of clients they served and their ability to measure client successes. For example, Diane commented, "I do it for a living. . . . I'm obviously good at this. I have X amount of clients. I've had success with X amount of clients. I've been doing this this long." Furthermore, writers believed they had social media competence because of their passion, crosscutting knowledge, and undivided attention to social media. As we discuss later, writers' social media expertise led to a role identification lens.

Customer knowledge. Last, informants discussed learning about customers' expectations and norms. One way writers gained this knowledge was by using their intuition and experiences as customers. Nikki said,

> Just having the general knowledge of what kind of—how you would usually act or how a staff would usually act at a certain type of place. . . . This is the kind of thing people expect from them. This is how they usually interact with people.

Others talked about reading past posts on organizations' social media to learn about customers' preferences. Customer knowledge also developed over time, through different experiences of writing content. As Genie discussed, "You think about what . . . the customers of the business that we're representing would want to talk about. A lot of it is just a learning process." Her comment indicates the ways writers tried to align with the identity of customers when developing social media content.

In conclusion, writers learned about industries, organizations, products, social media, and customers to accomplish their work. Through our analysis, knowledge in a certain domain clearly prompted writers to use corresponding identification lenses, which we discuss next.

Identification Lenses

Coding revealed that of our 22 respondents, 19 (86%) indicated the use of an identification lens to accomplish their work. Identification involves a perceived overlap of individual and organizational identities (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004); however, our findings indicate that the nature of organizational identity took different forms. In representing organizations through social media, writers saw their self-concept overlapping with some group or part of the organization—but the target of identification was an industry, the organization itself, various products, one's role as a social media writer, or a pseudogroup. Below, we describe these lenses and then discuss the lenses' influence on work practices.

Industry identification. Many writers defined themselves by their area of industry expertise. Put simply, writers developed identification with certain industries from their knowledge of that industry. Elle described how learning about home services prompted her identification with clients in that industry:

> I think it just came from—I got a plumber, and . . . I just started researching plumbing facts, plumbing infographics, plumbing humor, all this stuff on Pinterest, and read it, and relied pretty heavily on the Internet to teach me about what they do. And somehow, got really good at writing posts . . . I really enjoy writing for home service clients: plumbers, HVAC. It came as a shock to me, but now, I'm the HVAC girl.

Another writer, Genie, described a similar process with the construction industry: "I really like construction clients, for some weird reason, and so, whenever we get new [construction] clients, they'll be given to me."

Furthermore, some writers already had passion and knowledge for a particular industry, which prompted them to use an industry identification lens in their work. When writers connected with a particular industry, they approached their work through the lens of that industry, defining themselves in terms of that industry (e.g., "I'm the restaurant writer"). Informants used their connection with a general industry as a way to facilitate writing for specific organizations related to that type of business. Because the identification was to the industry and not the specific organization, writers were able to apply specific industry-related knowledge even if the particular client they represented changed over time.

Organizational identification. Writers who identified with their client organizations typically described their attachments as being fostered through strong relationships with their clients. Informants took on the identity of organizations when they became close to the organizations, almost feeling as if they were members of the companies themselves, as Anona explained:

> I am good friends with all my clients, and that's a rule. . . . I really get along with you, and I love talking about what you do. . . . It's easy for me to become a part of that family, and I almost immediately feel a responsibility for your company. . . . I want you to succeed, and not just for me. Like I truly believe in what you're doing, all my clients, and I truly believe they are all the best in what they have to offer, and so I want people to go there. . . . We're talking, like I am part of your company.

Research has shown how interaction with members in the organization prompts identification (Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), but few studies have described this nonmember identification happening virtually, as is the case with many writers. Yet many informants discussed organizational identification as a cognitive connection they had with companies, despite any physical interaction with the business. Diane told one of our researchers about her organizational identification and how this lens changed her work:

Researcher:	Do you identify with the different companies that you work with?
Diane:	Oh, 100%. Always. I'm trying to get business in their doors 100%. I remember there's this one customer I had, and their cover photo was a picture of their family. . . . For some reason, seeing their picture made it ten times stronger—me rooting for them. I don't know why. It's just some psychological, weird thing happening, but I'm 100% always rooting for my customers. That's my job. I'm trying to get their business to kick ass.
Researcher:	Do you have favorites and not favorites that you spend more time with or don't?
Diane:	Yeah. . . . It's like we care more about what's happening on their social sites I guess because we're proud. . . . Creating content for my number one favorite client is just—it's something I get excited to do because . . . I'm really proud of it.

Thus, writers identified with organizations regardless of whether they were employed in the organization for which they wrote content.

Product identification. Not all writers identified with specific organizations, but many writers expressed a connection with their clients' products. Knowledge of certain products fostered this attachment, which writers used as a lens when producing content. Karen talked about her connection to craft beer, and she believed her identification to that product "makes a difference" when she writes for brewery clients. For this writer, creating social media content for a brewery was "more fun for me. . . . It's a little bright spot in the day." When writers felt a certain product was part of their self-concept, they used their attachment as a lens to speak on behalf of that client.

When asked if there was a difference between writers, Nikki talked about another writer's identification to products as opposed to her neutral attitude toward those products:

> He had a lot of auto, skate, and tattoo shops because he likes cars and skating and tattoos. . . . He's more interested in those kind of things, he's going to know more about it and be able to probably create something more relevant than me, who has zero knowledge of tattoos.

In sum, when writers had knowledge of certain products (e.g., auto, skate, tattoo), they adopted a product identification lens (e.g., "I'm a skater") to accomplish their work.

Role identification. Because writers were very proud of their social media expertise, many identified with their role as a social media writer and used this lens in their work. Role identification entailed informants defining themselves in terms of their role (e.g., "I am a social media writer"). Writers expressed their role identification in several ways. First, many informants analogized writing content to having children, including Tony, who described having a "parental attachment" with his content:

> It's fun to put out content and be able to say, "look what I did" and have the community respond in a positive way and hit your goals. That's really satisfying. That's a level of satisfaction that I haven't gotten before, saying, "here's the finished product." Here's something I did. I have made fire, you know, look, look at my fire.

Second, writers referenced their personal ownership of their content. Rather than seeing an organization's social media content as belonging to the organization, writers who identified strongly with their role saw an organization's social media content as belonging to them. For example, Les felt like he personally owned his content, and Andrew mentioned that writers "need to be strong in your own confidence in yourself," stressing the pride that writers should feel in producing their content. Third, informants expressed role identification by defining themselves with specific writing styles. Diane identified with her role as the "short and sweet person." She explained, "I feel I have found my own personal [style]—through my clients, I have found that the shorter, the better." Because some writers felt a strong connection to their role, they used this attachment as a way to approach their work.

Pseudoidentification. The last lens that participants used in developing content was a fake sense of attachment with organizations, which entailed envisioning oneself as a customer or fan of the organization. Informants like Les used their customer knowledge to pseudoidentify: "I often pretend that our client has helped me, so I started to get a connection with some of that." This false identification lens involved forging words that an identified person would ideally say. Andrew explained his pseudoidentification in this way: "In an agency, I don't care equally about all my clients, but I try to. When I'm in the writing mode, I try to put myself in the mindset of somebody who cares very deeply about it." In this fifth and final identification lens, writers seemed to understand the importance of some overlap with their clients, but they realized this attachment was not always possible. Consequently, writers would pseudoidentify by pretending to be an identified customer. As Aaron explained, "I almost treat myself as if like, would I want to read this? . . . I know I'm not everyone, but I try and put myself in their shoes." With this lens, informants produced content vicariously, using others' feelings or actions to speak on behalf of organizations. Pseudoidentifications served as a makeshift lens to help writers produce content.

Identification Lenses Validity Check

As a validity check on the distinctiveness of social media writers' multiple identification lenses, we conducted interviews with eight in-house social media writers. Our follow-up analysis suggested that internal writers did identify with their organizations, but they did not express attachments with their industry, product, role, or pseudogroups in the same way that agency social media writers did. In-house writers only used an organizational identification lens to speak on behalf of the company, never referencing how their self-concept overlapped with the industry, product, role, or pseudogroup.

Internal writers often identified with their organization because they were representing a high-profile or prestigious company on social media, a known antecedent of members' organizational identification (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Dutton et al., 1994; Smidts et al., 2001). When asked how connected he felt to his company, Tia Juanita's, one in-house writer answered,

> I feel incredibly close with just about every part of the company . . . especially being the online voice of Tia Juanita's. . . . There's a desire to represent our company at its best at all times, and to cover every great thing that we're doing . . . just sharing the good word. I love it. I can't imagine doing anything else. (Larry)

Furthermore, in-house writers used an organizational identification lens to accomplish their work when their core values overlapped with the organization's mission and values. This value congruency that in-house writers expressed aligned with prior studies' conceptualizations of organizational identification (e.g., Hall et al., 1970). Phoebe did not align her identity with the organization and said that when she wrote content for a previous employer, "there were times when I was writing for that brand . . . that I was having to separate myself from my personal opinion." In sum, this validity check confirmed our assumption that the multiple identification lenses used by agency social media writers to accomplish their work were unique from internal writers' attachments.

Table 2. Work Practices Provided by Identification Lenses.

	Identification lenses				
Work Practices	Industry identification	Organizational identification	Product identification	Role identification	Pseudoidentification
Writing with ease		×	×	×	
Personifying the client		×	×	×	×
Switching focus	×		×	×	×

Work Practices

Although the presence of different forms of identification lenses is interesting, more important is the way identification influenced how social media writers worked. When writers would discuss their identification lenses, they would often connect those lenses with different writing outcomes. Table 2 visually shows how various lenses produced disparate work practices. Each of these four practices is discussed in more detail below.

Writing with ease. When informants identified with an organization, product, or role, they said it made the task of developing content easier. Specifically, writers talked about how identification lenses made their work feel natural and that the content they created felt instinctive to them. Through identification, informants could write content quicker, avoid using outside resources, and enjoy their work. Three identification lenses enabled this work practice: organizational identification, product identification, and role identification.

First, organizational identification fostered writing with ease. When writers felt their identity was part of an organization, it was easier for them to craft content. Anona, for example, who we discussed as feeling very attached to her clients, said she enjoyed "having my own company because that way I get to be picky and pick my clients and say what I want to talk about every day." Speaking on behalf of organizations that aligned with her self-concept made Anona's work more effortless.

Second, product identification fostered writing with ease. Tony talked about the time and effort it took to develop content for unfamiliar products versus items to which he felt connected:

> It's hard if they're a more technical client. . . . It takes a lot longer to sit down and kind of read through it, understand it and then get the message across in a brief and engaging way. . . . [But] if you're promoting a concert, it's like "come see this band because this band is awesome." You like music, and I like music. Whereas in IT security . . . it takes longer to do that.

Third, role identification fostered writing with ease. In fact, managers would even use role identification as a "work-around" to achieve better results if writers did not have other forms of identification from which to draw. Rae explained how writers could create better content if their role allowed them to feel personally invested:

> They need to be interested, because it will show in the results. I think there are some sort of workarounds to that. So, for some of our customers where we may have insight, maybe sales is a goal. . . . So, [a writer] gets excited when we achieve them, what they want us to achieve. . . . I honestly believe that "if there's a will there's a way."

This comment indicates that some writers attempted to act in accordance with how they felt an effective social media writer would behave, and this eased work even in the absence of identification with any single organization. In sum, organizational, product, and role identification all helped writers perform their job easier by giving participants an attachment to guide actions. These connections made work feel more natural and helped them produce content.

Personifying the client. Informants who experienced organizational, product, role, or pseudoidentification believed these lenses helped them personify the client. Personifying entailed capturing the voice of the organization and representing the personality behind the client. According to participants, this work practice involved embodying the organization's style, level of humor, and tone. Four identification lenses enabled this work practice.

First, organizational identification helped writers personify their clients. Many participants talked about how they identified with the organization's personality and could therefore be the mouthpiece of the brand. Second, product identification fostered participants' ability to personify clients. Through learning about the organization's products, writers became connected to the organization's products or services, which helped writers assume the face of the organization:

> As you learn more and the more content you produce, the more you relate to the customer, the more you understand, the more that you take on that voice, the better you get it, taking it on and it becomes more personal and you're like oh, wow, now I can answer these questions without looking through all these resources. (Tony)

Third, role identification helped writers personify their clients. Informants' sense of ownership and pride in their content allowed writers to embody the organization. Les, who felt a "personal sense of ownership" and approached work through the lens of role identification, said: "I respect the brand and I'm going to talk about the brand, you know, as the brand, like I'm a human being." Thus, he adopted the brand's persona because he felt this was the type of activity a social media writer should do.

Fourth and finally, pseudoidentification fostered client personification. For example, when one researcher asked Phillip how he embodied the organization online, he talked about pretending to be the customer: "My biggest approach is to continually ask the question: If I was reading the hospital's Facebook page, would I care about this? Who does this matter to?" Phillip felt as if he would be personifying the organization if he represented it in a way that customers would recognize. Pseudoidentification allowed participants to see organizations as an outsider would, and this in turn eased the process of developing content that would effectively represent the organization online. In conclusion, various identification lenses helped writers take on their clients' voice and personality on social media.

Switching focus. Identification lenses allowed writers to switch clients or write content for different organizations simultaneously. Informants discussed how they often had multiple accounts open and adapted content for different organizations because of certain identification lenses. Writers experienced this work practice when adopting industry, product, role, and pseudoidentification lenses. First, industry identification enabled switching focus. Informants who felt connected to a particular industry could tweak their posts from the same industry to use on multiple clients. As Genie noted, "If I'm creating a post for one client, I can just reword it, or change it a little bit, and it'll work for a lot of clients." Because some writers produced content for up to 100 organizations, an industry identification lens could save them a great deal of time and effort.

Second, product identification enabled switching focus because writers had multiple products in which they were interested, so they could change accounts at any time to avoid tedium. Olivia, whose agency matched her with companies who offered products or services she liked, said, "You have to put on different hats, but it's kind of nice doing that because I never get bored being on the same client every day. So I like that variety."

Third, role identification helped writers switch focus. Writers who felt connected with their job as social media writers and took pride in their content noted their ability to apply their expertise across different accounts. Andrew mentioned,

> They hire us because nobody at their team has the time to own that, with that depth of passion, and to also be able to apply lessons from across a number of clients. Like nobody who works for Starbucks—nobody who works for some organization has that ownership.

Fourth, writers could switch focus because of pseudoidentification. Being able to assume other identities helped writers adapt to different clients quickly. For instance, when we asked Aaron what makes a social media writer successful, he answered,

> Probably just the ability to adapt. . . . Can you adapt to another personality that's not yours? . . . The pace is really fast. . . . It's not like just sitting on one product for 40 hours and just soaking that in.

In sum, several different identification lenses helped writers modify content for multiple clients. Thus far, we have discussed how writers developed various knowledge domains about their clients' organizations, which fostered different identification lenses that led to unique work practices. Throughout this process, negative and positive feedback continually shaped writers' knowledge.

Negative Feedback

Misalignment between writers and clients. Writers described how incongruences between their work and their clients served as a form of negative feedback that informed social media writers' knowledge. This type of negative feedback occurred when writers received criticism from their clients about their content. For example, informants explained how organizations might ask writers to alter the tone of their messages to target the organization's audience (e.g., Rae's client asked her to "be more fun") or to change their messages to promote different aspects of the business. Writers explained how they adjusted work based on client feedback, despite often disagreeing with clients' preferences. For example,

> I have this crystal shop that sells like crystals for jewelry . . . and I thought it would be really cool to do a post about different celebrities. . . . They hated it. . . . They were mad, because they only wanted pictures from their own website, which are really bad. . . . It can be frustrating. (Genie)

Thus, feedback informed writers' knowledge in the beginning of a new client relationship and also over time, because companies would reevaluate their content as they grew and changed.

Negative customer comments. Informants experienced customer complaints, negative reviews, and organizational crises. When writers felt a strong sense of identification, they took these negative comments quite seriously. Karen, who identified with a client's organization, explained how her attachment influenced her feelings about the business:

> When you've been doing the work for them for so long and you like feel like you know them as a business, and then someone will write a nasty Yelp review about them. You're like, "No, they're my client. You can't say that about them!" . . . We'll get like a little heart pang.

Positive Feedback

Social media successes. When writers met social media goals, they felt proud and encouraged in their work. Many participants mentioned specific key performance indicators of social media success, such as eliciting strong engagement:

> We talk about it a lot. We talk about the engagement. There's so much information out there now today, to get your information noticed can be very challenging. It does feel good when things are going well. (Catherine)

Therefore, when social media writers met their goals, this success would validate their content strategy and bolster their knowledge domains.

Positive customer comments. In addition to general successes, writers also mentioned specific comments as a source of positive feedback. When writers received positive reactions to a post, in the form of accolades, "likes," or reposts, they felt personally "rewarded" (Elle) by their work. Karl suggested,

> It's great to see something do really well because, on Facebook, if somebody shares a post that you made . . . then you know it's reaching a ton of people that possibly hadn't heard of this business . . . that's a huge thing for that small business.

When writers received positive customer comments, the feedback reinforced their knowledge domains (industry, organization, product, etc.) and subsequent work practices.

To conclude, negative and positive feedback mutually influenced identification by reshaping the knowledge domains that fostered identification lenses. Thus, the identification process that occurred through social media writing is fluid rather than fixed in time.

Discussion

This research builds theory to explain how identification emerges ineluctably through social media writing. Our findings show that to represent an organization's identity online, social media writers employ a variety of identification lenses. Specifically, writers experienced industry, product, role, and pseudoidentification, leading them to carry out different work practices. Through interviews with social media writers, we presented a model of identification via social media writing, which describes how writers develop knowledge domains about organizations, resulting in different forms or lenses of identification and distinct work practices. Writers also receive negative and positive feedback throughout the identification process, which shapes their knowledge domains. These results hold a number of theoretical implications that have the potential to stimulate further business communication research and shape business and professional communication practices.

Implications for Theory

Previous research has clearly articulated that identification influences key outcomes of work (Bartel, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The current study challenges and extends this scholarship by demonstrating that various forms of workers' identification have differential consequences for individual work practices. In other words, our findings indicate that identification does not just help organizations reach their goals; rather, identification is required for people to accomplish their work. Although not every social media writer experienced some form of identification when engaging in the process of representing organizations online, different forms of identification (e.g., industry, product, etc.) helped them accomplish work goals in distinct ways.

Similar to Dutton et al.'s (1994) model of member identification, which posits that people's perceived organizational identity influences employees' attachments, the model we present here begins with people's perceptions or knowledge domains. Yet when social media writers talked about their identification, they did not reference other known organizational antecedents, such as distinctiveness, prestige, or satisfaction (Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts et al., 2001). Instead, writers' identification was influenced purely by their knowledge of the industry, organization, product, and the like. For organizational employees, simple knowledge or understanding of a company's identity is not enough; the employee has to perceive that identity as attractive (Dutton et al., 1994). For nonmembers who speak on behalf of organizations, however, identification may be so necessary that these antecedents are less important. These findings demonstrate the contribution of exploring social media writers' identification, a unique population that falls in between the attachment literatures of organizational identification, stakeholder identification, and consumer-company identification.

Because social media writers may be organizational employees, stakeholders, and/or consumers, they experience identification differently. Our findings speak to each of these literatures and suggest new ways to approach these three streams of research. First, this research adds to the *organizational identification* literature by demonstrating how nonemployees can identify with organizations. Although extensive theory and research have explored employees' organizational identification, scholars have paid little attention to people with liminal relationships who might identify with organizations. Formal definitions of identification begin with the assumption of organizational membership (Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), but in reality, organizational memberships and organizational attachments are often ambiguous (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Scholars often manage this complexity by controlling variables like rank, tenure, hours worked, or physical proximity (e.g., C. R. Scott et al., 1999) rather than exploring them in more depth. This study illuminates the effects of ambiguous members' attachments in cases that do not clearly delineate whether a person is an insider or outsider, as both internal and agency social media writers used an organizational identification lens in their roles. These findings stimulate future studies to explore nonmembers even further removed from the organization, like fans or groupies, who identify and speak on behalf of organizations.

Second, results from this study contribute to our understanding of *stakeholder identification* by showing that organizational images are created and maintained not only by managers (S. G. Scott & Lane, 2000) but social media writers, too. This discovery offers the potential to investigate how stakeholders, in addition to managers, promote desired organizational images. With the growing trend of using social media, managers are no longer the only agents who "choose organizational images" (S. G. Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 47) in business and professional communication. But even as social media writers may have the ability to shape an organization's identity by posting content online, the current study sheds light on the consequences that arise from the misalignment of stakeholder and managerial images. In the current study, informants had to amend any content that did not meet client expectations. Additional studies should further investigate the role that identification plays in the tension between social media writers and managers in representing companies online. Relatedly, research might seek to understand the attachment process driving customers to post social media content either praising or disparaging organizations' products, views, or leaders.

Third, this study speaks to theory and research in *consumer-company identification*. Findings indicate that writers can pseudoidentify with organizations by imagining themselves as a consumer. Several "darker" forms of identification have been discussed in the literature, including dis-, de-, under-, over-, and schizoidentification (see Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004), but our study seems to be the first to reveal pseudoidentification. We encourage scholars to develop this concept through additional research, which would add insight into the multiple ways people define themselves through organizational attachments. Here, pseudoidentification enabled writers to personify clients and switch focus.

Future research should explore pseudoidentification in other contexts and explore the outcomes of this vicarious form of attachment. Emotion labor literature may be a useful frame to further investigate pseudoidentification, which involves "faking it" at work. Similar to Tracy's (2000) research on cruise ship employees, customers may serve as a source of management for social media writers, too. Additional research might examine if pseudoidentification can be sustained over a long period of time, or if this form of attachment leads to burnout, like much of the emotion labor research has found (Zapf, 2002). Or, does the computer-mediated nature of social media writers' work enable them to sustain emotion labor in a way that face-to-face communication would not allow (Morris & Feldman, 1996)? In sum, our findings hold implications for several bodies of literature and offer ways to grow these areas of research. Furthermore, we suggest several practical implications of the current study.

Implications for Pedagogy and Practice

In addition to filling this gap in theory, findings from the current study inform the teaching of business and professional communication in the academy and workplace. For instance, beyond teaching students typical social media topics, such as measuring impact and managing crises, undergraduate courses in social media should explain the value of different identification lenses. A fruitful classroom activity, for example, might involve students writing content for different clients and exercising various forms of identification. Students could select a product they identify strongly with and one in which they do not identify with and compare the process of writing social media content for both products. A discussion on the differences between writing through a product identification lens and a pseudoidentification lens would contribute greatly to students' understanding of the potential challenges in writing content for organizations on social media. As this study's results demonstrate, the more adept students become at utilizing multiple identification lenses, the better they can accomplish their future work as social media writers.

In the workplace, agencies should seek to enhance social media writers' knowledge domains to help foster the identification requisite for social media writing. Agencies should consider hosting workshops to inform writers about their clients' industries, products, and customers, or allow extra time for social media writers to explore these knowledge domains on their own. For example, an employee who has never had a manicure may be writing content for a nail salon. To help writers build knowledge, foster identification, and write better content, agencies may sanction extra activities (such as an employee going to get his or her first manicure) to strengthen writers' work practices.

Furthermore, the current study seeks to answer a dilemma that organizational leaders increasingly face: Should our company dedicate internal resources to managing social media efforts or outsource social media communication? Social media practitioners have debated about which approach to social media—in-house or agency—is more effective. Advocates of in-house social media staff contend that agency writers cannot understand or fully represent the brand online. As Devaney and Stein (2013) noted in a *Forbes* article, "Companies that outsource all their accounts often end up with a bland voice and distant customer relationships" (para. 14). Because social media content plays an influential role in business practices—from how customers evaluate products (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014), engage with brands (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and receive assistance with products or services (Canhoto & Clark, 2013)—organizational leaders need to understand the differences between in-house and agency writers to make key business decisions. Our findings suggest that social media writers use multiple identification lenses to carry out their work, and that these different attachments influence various work practices—writing with ease, personifying the client, and switching focus—in disparate ways. Thus, with our focus on external, liminal members, it seems that managers may benefit from hiring agency social media writers, rather than in-house writers, because of the productive work practices that multiple identification lenses afford.

Although the debate regarding whether external organizational communication efforts should be handled in-house versus by an agency has been an ongoing concern even before the advent of social media, this decision holds different implications for social media writers. Internet communication, and social media particularly, offers organizations and individuals representing companies the unique opportunity to communicate directly with publics with a scale, specificity, and speed that was previously difficult or costly to achieve (McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In turn, the communication demands and responsibilities of agency social media writers differ from those of more traditional conceptions of copywriters or spokespeople, and therefore call into question the processes of identification of workers in these emerging professional roles. Findings from this study demonstrate how social media writers navigate their work responsibilities by drawing on multiple identifications. Future studies can investigate how the findings of this study compare with the experiences of workers in traditional public relations, marketing, and advertising agency roles, and explore whether the processes of identification are less varied when workers are not required to communicate directly, or quickly, with stakeholders.

Indeed, our findings have the potential to change managerial practices by highlighting the numerous identification lenses that agency writers' used in producing content. Several studies have compared identification targets (Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; Richter, West, van Dick, & Dawson, 2006; van Knippenberg & van

Schie, 2000), but scholars have called for research to explore the coexistence and mutual interrelatedness of these identifications (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). We addressed this gap in the literature by investigating multiple identification foci in a new context, improving our understanding of identification targets. Managers may use these findings in teaching new agency writers how to speak on behalf of organizations to which they do not belong. Specifically, training might encourage writers to learn about clients' industries, organizations, and products, for example, so that writers can use multiple identification lenses to accomplish their work.

Other studies that have explored how people identify with a client organization have involved contract work, and therefore provided somewhat narrow conclusions regarding the identification of liminal employees. For example, George and Chattopadhyay (2005) found that contract workers' identification was associated only with the quality of relations with their colleagues and supervisors in the client organization. Furthermore, Gossett (2002) observed that client organizations limited contract workers' ability to fully identify. Whereas client identification seems to be more restricted for contract workers, the current study demonstrates that social media writers employ more identification lenses when they serve external organizations. We attribute these differences to the fact that social media writers are more involved in the routines and goals of the client organization, unlike contract workers who "rarely reported that the projects they worked on were a central aspect of the organization's mission or goals" (George & Chattopadhyay, 2005, p. 89). Furthermore, agency writers make decisions on behalf of their clients, whereas "temps did not really engage in the decision making process of the client firms" (Gossett, 2002, p. 394). Therefore, this study illuminates crucial differences in various forms of client identification, and managers should be aware of how they assign and label social media work.

Limitations and Other Areas for Future Research

Like all research, these findings have several limitations, which suggest opportunities for subsequent studies. First, we based our results on interview data rather than post content on social media or in situ communication of writers. Although sensemaking comprises an important piece of our identity narratives (B. E. Ashforth et al., 2008), future research could explore decision-making processes that guide social media writers' practices, supplementing interviews with observational research or quantitative indicators of success. Second, the current study did not specifically explore disidentification, when people separate their identities from organizations (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Although two informants described how they disagreed with organizations' products, we did not actively explore this concept in our interviews. Third, future research should more fully compare internal and external writers' identification lenses. This study suggests that agency writers may be more adept at producing content because they draw on multiple lenses to sustain various work practices, but scholars should further investigate the differences between internal and agency writers, writers who have had both agency and client work experience, and those who write both internal- and external-facing content.

In sum, this study contributes to business and professional communication research and praxis by exploring identification outside of organizational membership. Interviews with social media writers led to the construction of a model that explains how writers identify with organizations and illustrates the impact their attachments have on work. The results enhance identification research by showing the necessity of identification, as writers used identification lenses to connect with organizations they represented online. This study takes an important step in understanding identification outside traditional organizational employment, and we hope this research encourages future studies in this area.

Authors' Note

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