The Role of Enterprise Social Media During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Insights From Leaders' Experience

Ly Fie Sugianto
Monash Business School, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
lyfie.sugianto@monash.edu

Chuying Cheng
Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

Carly Moulang
Monash Business School, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Brett Considine
Monash Business School, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted workplaces, with public health orders requiring people to shift their workplaces into their homes. Consequently, many organisations pivoted to online operation and utilised technology such as Enterprise Social Media (ESM) to help manage this transition. In this study we explore leaders' diverse use of ESM during the pandemic, including whether it was used for performance management and how it shaped leaders' social behaviour. We conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with leaders in a large Australian University using the ESM technology. Our results explore the nuances of ESM use during this time including how it was used as a social tool, a communication tool, and as an informal means to collect performance data. Interviews also revealed concerns with ESM use such as privacy and information redundancy. Our work advances the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) literature by conceptualising cognitive and affective mechanisms to understand how utilisation moderates TTF outcomes. These mechanisms are contingent on how leaders use ESM and the level of their interactions and engagements. We identify practical implications of ESM use at a time of crisis including leader training, clear guidelines for internal communication, efficient information sharing practices, and informed consent for ESM-related data collection practices.

Keywords: Enterprise Social Media, COVID-19, Task-Technology Fit, Performance Management, Social Technology, Leader Member Exchange.

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, social networks, blogs and wikis have been employed at work for both formal and informal purposes to enhance company communication, foster collaboration, and invigorate knowledge sharing (Sun et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2019; Archer-Brown & Kietzmann, 2018; Kwahk & Park, 2016; Ellison, et al., 2015; Riemer & Scifleet, 2012; Wagner, 2004). The reliance on social networks and social technology increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, as public health orders including lockdowns and curfews forced many employees to work remotely. This significant change in work environments and the associated uncertainty resulting from the pandemic led many organisations to deploy or more intensely use Enterprise Social Media (ESM), a social technology specifically designed for internal organisational use (Leonardi et al., 2013).

Studies on the adoption and use of ESM have reported various organisational benefits such as improved operations, innovation and human relations (Kane, 2015), and revised internal communication strategies to increase staff engagement (Ewing et al., 2019). One recent study also reported positive effects on employee creativity (Wang et al., 2022). A glaring omission in the literature, however, concerns the role of leaders[1] in supporting and endorsing ESM. We contend that it is important to understand leaders' perceptions of ESM use since they are the champions, decision makers, and supporters of ESM adoptions and play a significant role in their success (Avanade, 2013). As ESM users, leaders possess specific characteristics that distinguish them from other users due to their roles. For example, leaders have considerable influence on their teams; thus, it is possible that their ESM use, such as the way they communicate, share information and provide feedback, is perceived by employees to carry social influence that can shape employees' behaviours and attitudes. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, research into how leaders' use ESM is non-existent nor is there research on how leaders use ESM during a time of crisis such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ESM presents new opportunities for leaders to shape employees' communications, interactions, engagement and work patterns. It also challenges them to develop new skills in engaging and managing their staff virtually. Existing literature on virtual leadership and team leadership mainly addresses work related matters (rather than social connections), and occasionally discusses technology, albeit as an enabling or supporting structure rather than the study's focus (see Sidorova et al., 2016; Purvanova & Bono, 2009; Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Zigurs, 2003). The extent to which organisations derive benefits from technology relies on leaders' perceptions, attitudes, utilisation and leadership skills. Leaders' abilities to effectively mobilise and integrate people, processes and technology within organisational systems are vital in fostering the analytical capabilities of new technology and generating value for the organisation (Roman et al., 2019; Wee et al., 2022). This argument also has support in recent literature on technology use and leadership style. It has been widely understood that following the deployment of new technology in an organisation, leaders express their attitudes, behaviours, and performance via online social technology to communicate clearly with employees, provide good social connections, and make the team be accountable (Roman et al., 2019). Leaders' use of new technologies helps shape the cognitive and affective process of their employees, develop employees' identification in teams, and establish social capital across the organisation (Kahai et al., 2012; Kahai et al., 2017).

Social technology also allows for a remote workforce which may also include people from other countries, and irrespective of this, an issue of working remotely is that people may not be as aware of colleagues social and cultural identities. Leaders need to understand culture differences and be respectful, inclusive and provide a safe workplace (Kahai et al., 2017).

Trust and leadership are difficult to develop and maintain in virtual environments especially in times of crisis. Some leaders struggle to use new social technology (such as ESM) and manage their team in virtual environments (Mitchell, 2021). Other leaders find creative ways to motivate and engage their teams by establishing goals, communicating regularly, and checking employees' task status (Mitchell, 2021). Leaders also distribute their leadership

[1]In this study, we use the term 'Leaders' to represent senior staff who also have staff supervision responsibilities in terms of managing the performance of other staff.

responsibilities within an organisation in order to improve decision quality via social technology (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Gamo-Sanchez & Cegarra-Navarro, 2015). The new ways leaders manage team performance via social technology could become essential in a pandemic and post-pandemic world. In short, studying leaders' ESM use can potentially reveal their communication patterns and how they manage, engage and connect with employees during a crisis.

Prior studies find that while a leader's ESM engagement can set the tone for the organisation's social media culture, it also blurs the existing hierarchy's relevance as it connects top-end leaders directly with employees (Ewing et al., 2019). It is possible that leaders' activity on social media could be deemed an information source for employee performance management (Sidorova et al., 2016); however, there has been minimal academic enquiry into leaders' perception of ESM as a tool to facilitate performance measurement systems. Little is known about whether leaders' ESM use impinges upon their subjective evaluative performance management decisions. Employees using ESM to promote their work and performance may improve their supervisor's perceptions of their performance (Bauch et al., 2021; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994). A better understanding of the role of ESM in facilitating performance management is vital given the impact of supervisors' judgement on employees' performance, which has direct consequences on workload responsibilities, renumeration and future career trajectories.

As such, the objectives of this paper are twofold: (1) to explore leaders' general use of ESM during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) to examine leaders' specific use of ESM for performance management. To understand ESM perception and use, we conduct a qualitative study and interview people in leadership and supervisory roles at a large Australian University. We use the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) model to study the fit between the organisational tasks and the ESM's technological characteristics, and ESM use. The TTF model has been examined in various contexts and provides evidence that technology can positively impact performance when used to manage tasks (Chang, 2008; Chung et al., 2015; Howard & Rose, 2019). A recent study on work performance during the COVID-19 pandemic reported that the degree of TTF in information and communication technology (ICT) use had both direct and indirect effects on individual performance (Abelsen et al., 2021). Following prior research, we employ TTF as a framework to study the use of and potential benefits organisations can expect from ESM, drawing on the model from Howard and Rose (2019) (See Figure 1).

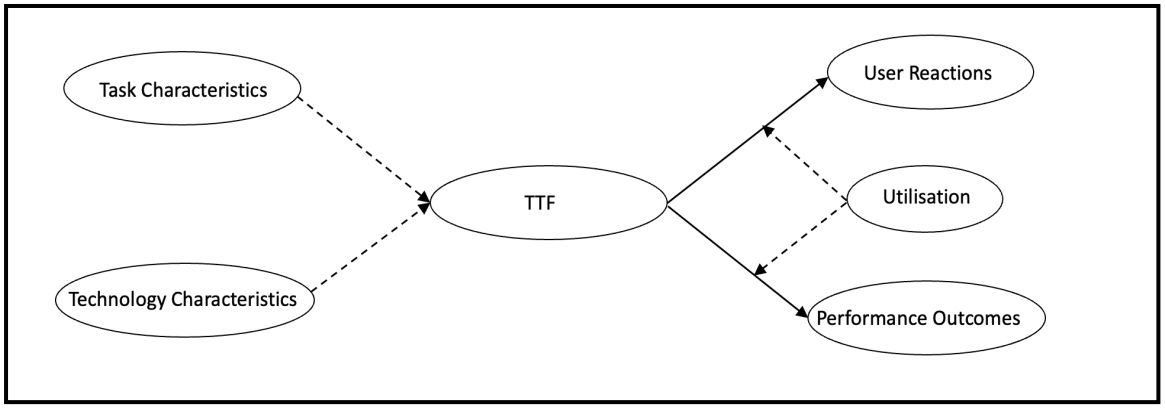

Figure 1. Task-Technology Fit Model (Source: Howard & Rose, 2019)

The theory postulates that when technology is used when conducting a task, the interactive effects of task and technology characteristics are mediated by TTF. It is important to note that the theory does not emphasise any particular task or technology characteristic. Rather, it highlights the overarching dependence on technologies. The theory also posits that the degree of utilisation influences how TTF impacts both user reactions and performance outcomes; thus, utilisation moderates the relationship between TTF and user reactions and performance outcomes. Although Figure 1 portrays several components to illustrate the theory, the primary focus of prior work is on how TTF impacts outcomes. Further, we complement this approach with an outcome-perspective, assessing both the positive outcomes (benefits) and negative outcomes (concerns or drawbacks) resulting from ESM use. While the TTF model does not generally distinguish between different user groups, this study applies TTF to a specific user group – namely leaders with managerial and leadership roles within the organisational unit – to gain deeper insights into their experiences and interactions with ESM. Our complementary approach aims to provide clarity on how leaders use ESM.

During mandatory periods of remote working, organisational leaders need to perform additional tasks to effectively manage their teams and ensure their productivity. These tasks include effectively communicating and collaborating, team building, providing work policies and guidelines, fostering a sense of connectedness, and adapting performance management processes to the remote work environment. Using TTF as the underlying theoretical framework, this study explores leaders' use of ESM to perform these tasks in addition to their other tasks. Furthermore, given leaders' specific role in managing performance and using ESM to enable social connections during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study also applies the Leader-Member exchange (LMX) theory to explore how leaders use social technology to manage their relationships with employees.

Our study contributes to the literature on ESM use in organisations (Bulgurcu et al., 2018; Ewing et al., 2019; Hacker & Riemer, 2021; van Osch & Steinfield, 2018), on digital leadership and the use of advanced information technology (Banks et al., 2022; Larson & DeChurch, 2020; Matthews et al., 2022; Nieken, 2022), and on the TTF model. Earlier research shows that leadership mediated by technology can exhibit the same content and style as traditional face-to-face leadership (Avolio & Kahai, 2003); yet, how technology affects leadership is still unknown (Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Zigurs, 2003). Fu et al. (2020) find that ESM use needs to consider both task environment and technology affordances, highlighting how ESM use emphasises developing connections rather than bonding already strongly tied individuals. Our results add to those survey results by providing a qualitative understanding of how managers engaged with ESM to link organisation members who had their social connections disrupted by the pandemic. As such, it highlights how organisational leaders can engage with ESM and take the initiative in using it to preserve social connections.

The findings on leaders' perceptions enrich the growing literature on digital leadership, e-leadership and leadership effectiveness, by depicting leaders' different technology use behaviours in social settings. We also provide insights into ESM use during the COVID-19 pandemic, which arguably accelerated leaders' uptake and use of ESM. Despite working remotely, ESM affords leaders ongoing 'visibility', facilitates interactions with employees, and provides a formal means of engaging employees to remain productive.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we present a literature review on ESM use in organisations, its impact on leaders' behaviour, and its use in performance

management, which together provide the basis for our research questions. Second, the qualitative research method using thematic analysis is outlined, including data coding and validation. Third, we report the findings on leaders' ESM and two key themes arising: 'positive outcomes on ESM use' and 'concerns over ESM use'. Fourth, we offer a discussion on how the findings answer the research questions and the study's implications. Fifth, we summarise the study, outline its limitations, and identify future research that can complement this study.

2 Literature Review

2.1 ESM Use in Organisations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Enterprise Social Media (ESM) can be defined as a social platform specifically designed for internal use within an organisation to maintain employees' connectedness, collaboration and communication. ESM can also benefit organisational learning, knowledge sharing, and managing human resources (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Ouirdi et al., 2015). Several affordances in ESM that make it unique within the organisational context are reported in Sun et al. (2019), including *associating* (Majchrzak et al., 2013; Oostervink et al., 2016), *visibility* and *persistence* (Oostervink et al., 2016; Leonardi et al., 2013). The *associating* feature enables employees to establish connections among: (1) them as users, (2) content, and (3) between users and content (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). The *visibility* feature enables employees to read other exchanges in ESM, and the *persistence* feature implies that information remains available and does not disappear – both features are valuable for organisational knowledge sharing and providing an information repository. The use of ESM can enhance workplace integration and increase employees' performance by increasing their sense of belonging and increasing their social and emotional interactions (Moqbel & Nah, 2017).

The use of ESM during the COVID-19 pandemic is an example of the potential for technology to allow informal and asynchronous interactions, facilitating staff connectedness and productivity. In this instance, ESM enables staff to connect with their leaders and peers, allowing them to overcome the feeling of loneliness during remote working. In essence, ESM serves as a social technology where social interactions (Abelsen et al., 2021; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2020) and communication occur (van Osch et al., 2015), allowing for collaboration among staff (Harrysson et al., 2016). Typical ESM features include the ability for a user to directly message another user in a public setting (specific to a recipient); broadcast a message (to a specific group or all); indicate connections with other colleagues; post/edit/view messages; respond to a message by commenting, showing "likes", and sharing messages of interest. It also permits more dynamic, multimedia communication, such as video posts. Thus, not only is ESM a means for transferring and preserving organisational knowledge, but it also shapes institutional knowledge through the dynamic process of formal and informal daily interactions. It is within ESM where knowledge sharing, employee collaboration, and organisational learning occurs.

ESM benefits both the organisation and staff, allowing its content to evolve through collaborative processes as staff with different perspectives post their opinions to the extent that consensus decision-making is made possible. Staff are kept up to date with the latest news and can access important information. ESM benefits organisations as staff tend to share posts on perceived important information, enabling the effective sharing of best practice across organisational units. From a management perspective, leading and motivating staff to maintain work productivity is a new challenge in a remote working environment. Thus, ESM

potentially becomes a relevant organisational system for sustaining employee engagement, facilitating communication, and potentially developing deeper connections with employees.

Recent literature has examined ESM features and applications, including affordance for visibility (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Rice et al., 2017), patterns of use (Bulgurcu et al., 2018), use in engaging employees (Ewing et al., 2019), network formation (van Osch & Steinfield, 2018), and the user's role in ESM (Hacker & Riemer, 2021). However, research about leaders' role in supporting and endorsing ESM use is lacking. Leaders' perceptions of ESM use are important because they are often organisational champions who support and endorse the adoption of new systems such as ESM (Avanade, 2013). Yet, research into leaders' ESM use is missing from the literature. Further, the importance of understanding ESM's use during a crisis has come to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic. We address this research gap by exploring how leaders perform their tasks using ESM during the COVID-19 crisis, with TTF as the theoretical framework. Through this study, we seek to understand ESM use by leaders during remote working periods, leading to the first research question:

RQ1: *How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the use of ESM by leaders?*

2.2 ESM as a Social Technology and its Impact on Leaders' Behaviour

Drawing upon the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Liden et al., 2006) which states that organisational members evolve in their roles through the social interactions with their leaders (Graen & Scandura, 1987), leaders' social behaviour and interactions on an open platform like ESM has the potential to shape their employee's behaviours. Specifically, leader's interpersonal emotion regulation motives are related to the quality of the leader-employee relationship and leaders' effectiveness in the group (Vasquez et al., 2021). As such, when leaders express their opinions on ESM, there is a spotlight on their affective tone and social behaviour. Leaders also form cognitive impressions of their employees (Forgas, 1981) as they can view employees' reactions through the comments and their responses (such as through emojis) to postings. In turn, employees will compare their leaders' behaviour relative to those of other leaders in the organisation (Deluga, 1994). Employees' responses to leaders' posts and comparisons of leaders' behaviour will form a reciprocal process which further shapes leaders' social behaviour.

The COVID-19 pandemic potentially placed additional pressure on leaders to engage in more digital labour, enabled by ESM use (Till, 2013, 2014). This could be construed as "cognitive labour" which is characterised by forms of intellectual and affective labour (Till, 2014). The changed work environment resulting from the pandemic required new labour practices, such as leaders relying on alternative means to express support for their employees. This form of affective labour is considered 'immaterial labour', which is '...labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, knowledge or communication' (Hardt, 1999, p. 94; Lazzarato, 1996). Affective labour is one face of immaterial labour in service firms, such as universities, and involves human interaction and communication. While this was traditionally observed "in-person", the evolution of on-line activities means that virtual presence is no longer seen as any less-real than physical presence (Hardt, 1999).

In sum, we anticipate that when leaders express their opinions on an open platform such as ESM, they deliberately focus on the affective tone and are mindful of their social behaviour. Given the potential salience of ESM in supervisory relationships, and the lack of empirical evidence on how it impacts leaders' behaviour (Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Zigurs, 2003), we seek

to understand the effect of ESM on leaders' social behaviour by formulating the second research question as follows:

RQ2: *How does ESM as a social technology shape leaders' social behaviour towards employees?*

2.3 ESM Use and Performance Management

While not designed for performance management, ESM communications include knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition (Sun et al. 2020) which may become a source of information that influences leaders in their performance management roles. This is potentially more salient during a crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required remote supervision of staff in many industries. During this time both leaders and employees could potentially use ESM to convey performance-related information to a broad audience. Employees, through posts, discussions and other ESM interactions, could promote their performance and achievements, including work outside of their official performance metrics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ESM use has helped managers communicate efficiently and effectively with users and make strategic decisions in disaster and emergency situations, increasing operational and social performance (Dwivedi et al., 2022). ESM provides a platform for employees to share and acquire knowledge, and enhance their creative performance (Sun et al., 2020). ESM provides opportunities to manage performance impressions when there are limited informal interactions with leaders and other employees. Leaders may process this information and form impressions of interpersonal-affect towards employees, thus enhancing their 'likability' (Bauch et al., 2021; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994).

The process of subjective performance management can be viewed as a judgement and decision-making task because leaders need to search, integrate and evaluate information to make judgements and decisions about employees' performance (Highhouse et al., 2013). The use of ESM provides an opportunity for leaders to observe employees' performance remotely, potentially leading to more favourable performance outcomes for employees (Judge & Ferris, 1993). When supervisors are making a judgement, they need to retrieve and process information from their memory – including affective information (Forgas & George, 2001). Affective reactions to employees can play a significant role in the cognitive process of 'recall', facilitating information recall about the employee and being consistent with the leader's affective reactions to that employee (Forgas, 1981). The affect-as-information approach demonstrates that affect is a type of information and the information is conveyed by affective feelings (Clore et al., 2001). Leaders' affective attitude towards their employees can also influence their cognitive processes in the performance appraisal process; if an employee is liked, leaders may interpret any poor performance as not meaningful. Robbins and DeNisi (1994, p. 350) conclude that 'affect influences both the processes and outcome of performance evaluation'. If and how ESM was used to support performance management by leaders during COVID-19 leads to our third research question:

RQ3: *Was ESM used by leaders for the purpose of performance management during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

3 Research Method

3.1 Data Collection

This study uses qualitative interviews[2] to capture accounts of "what people are doing…[and] apprehend a new language and form of life" (Chua, 1986, p. 615). The search for an in-depth understanding of how ESM was applied and the different experiences encountered made qualitative semi-structured interviews best suited to our study (Power & Gendron, 2015). This method recognises that "conversations developed in interviews are an indispensable source of rich and new knowledge about social and personal aspects of our lives" (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p.107). Given we collected data about a time when governments enforced social distancing, the social, personal and professional experience of respondents became intrinsically connected. The interview approach allowed us to explore dimensions of ESM use that were meaningful to the respondent and framed in terms of the respondent's experience. It also provided insights into how leaders processed their decisions about ESM use and balanced competing motivations, incentives, and emotional challenges (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). This approach is consistent with prior work that has sought to understand organisational use of technology (see for example, Dowling & Leech, 2014; Treem, 2015).

We conducted fifteen individual semi-structured interviews with senior leaders at a large Australian University[3] that has used an ESM since 2019. The research team developed and reviewed an interview protocol (see Appendix), with the questions informed by prior research on ESM applications and performance management challenges. Participants were put "at ease" (Leech, 2002, p. 665) by first being asked to describe their role and experience at the institution through a "grand tour" (Leech, 2002, p. 667) style question. This provided contextual background for researchers to draw upon in subsequent questions. One member of the research team led the interviews, but other team members were present and could seek clarification, follow up, or raise any further questions during the interview's closing stage. The research team consistently followed the interview protocol in all interviews, providing a constant structure behind the data generation. The majority of interviews were conducted with two or more of the research team present. After each interview concluded the interview team would briefly discuss any interesting ideas that emerged and reflect on the overall interview experience.

Interviews were held between March and June 2021 during which time most university staff were working from home and leaders were remotely supervising staff. To comply with public health orders, Zoom was used to conduct interviews (Archibald et al., 2019; Howlett, 2022; Oliffe et al., 2021; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). While this had the occasional challenge of bandwidth limitations and frame drops, it provided a visual and audible interview that allowed for engagement in conversation and the observation of participant body language and visual cues (Howlett, 2022; Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Participants were recruited based on a review of department lists to identify senior staff who were in supervisory roles, and those

[2] Research ethics clearance was gained through Monash's Human Research Ethics approval process. This occurred before participants were recruited into the study.

[3] The case site is an Australian Universities, where a large majority of teaching has been traditionally based on campus. We refer to it as 'Delta University' in this study to retain anonymity of the organisation. The authors did not have any direct working relationship with any of the interviewees.

individuals were sent email invitations to participate in the study. Table 1 lists the interview participant demographics.

Interviewee number	Male/ Female	Supervisory experience (years)	Number of employees supervised	Number of researchers present at interview	Interview length (minutes)
1	Female	21	9	3	61
2	Male	21	7	3	25.18
3	Male	3	4	2	43.01
4	Female	6	8	1	45.34
5	Male	9	6	2	36.58
6	Male	23	5	2	32.39
7	Male	21	11	1	30.27
8	Female	4	1	2	34.29
9	Female	4	12	2	18.05
10	Female	25	43	4	32.38
11	Female	15	17	3	34.47
12	Female	22	13	2	29.15
13	Female	15	10	3	49.47
14	Female	17	12	3	46.45
15	Female	15	4	3	43.36

Table 1. Interview participants

Leaders with differing roles and responsibilities are coded based on their job characteristics as Type 1[4] and Type 2[5], and were further categorised based on their roles and ESM use characteristics – Table 2 contains this analysis.

	Job Characteristics	
ESM Use Characteristics	**Type 1**	**Type 2**
Active, Regular	5 participants (Interviewee 8, 9, 10, 12, 13)	5 participants (Interviewee 2, 3, 4, 5, 14)
Sparing, Irregular	1 participant (Interviewee 15)	4 participants (Interviewee 1, 6, 7, 11)

Table 2. Profiling the Interviewees with Technology Use and Job Characteristics

3.2 Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim by two researchers. Transcripts were independently reviewed by the other researcher, checking for errors and noting points of interest. The process was consistent with Schmidt (2004), with transcripts read over by the

[4]Job Type 1 involves administrative tasks, focusing on supporting and facilitating the functioning of an organisational unit.

[5] Job Type 2 involves knowledge intensive activities, focusing on the advancement of knowledge, exploration of ideas, curriculum development and other scholarly activities. More specific details of the roles and titles are withheld to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

research team, looking for analytical categories and points of interest, paying attention to "the topics that occur and individual aspects of these which can be related…to the context of the research question(s)" (Schmidt, 2004, p.352). Data coding was hybrid in nature, being both inductive and deductive in nature (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Our initial coding categories were inductive, taking the experiences and perceptions of the users in the empirical data and coding these based on the types of technology, tasks performed, task frequency, extent of social technology use, thoughts on the technology, and other context specific dimensions. This allowed the data to speak on its own terms. The inductive classifications from the initial analysis then allowed for a deductive classification that was derived from the TTF framework. At this stage we paid particular attention to the types of technology used, tasks that participants described, how technology was used, and any evidence of fit/misfit and the different views within the TTF's theoretical constructs. This allowed the collective experiences of all participants to be coded within the TTF framework. Quotes from interviews were then analysed for positive/negative reflections of ESM use. This hybrid induction-deduction process was the basis for the main thematic issues discussed in the following section. It allows the data to speak in the voice of the participants while also coming from an underlying theoretical bases – this provides the basis for further theorisation and discussion. Observations and themes were recorded in a shared spreadsheet the research team then reviewed together and used as the basis for the analytical categories presented in this paper. The transcripts were then coded manually using Excel. A worksheet was set up that contained headings based on the identified emerging themes and quotes were coded based on the themes they referred to. Another member of the research team reviewed the coding, with this providing consistency. All coding occurred in a shared spreadsheet that allowed for the tabulation of interview references based on themes and leader type.

It became apparent that the TTF model offered a way of viewing the data, allowing us to capture the different tasks participants referred to and their varied use of technology. The usage pattern of the interview participants is identified and mapped using the ESM features of creating content, commenting, liking, and forming groups. Apart from developing our understanding of different ESM use patterns, the TTF model was also used to discover emerging themes by analysing the capabilities and limitations of the technology. Taking an outcome-perspective approach, these advantages and disadvantages resulting from the use of ESM are presented as positive outcomes of ESM use and concerns regarding ESM use. Themes emerging from the analysis included social use, communication, team building, recognising achievement, timely feedback, and connecting to others, are grouped into three themes under positive outcomes of ESM use. Themes such as privacy concerns, information overload, work-nonwork boundary concerns, and inappropriate content are grouped into three themes under concerns about ESM use.

Word Clouds[6] were also used as an exploratory qualitative data analysis tool (Cidell, 2010) and helped highlight main themes and key differences across leaders and job characteristics (Suddaby et al., 2015). As a visualization aid for exploratory textual analysis, they helped identify the salient themes and stimulated further "analytic reflection" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 44) on the context in which the word appears.

[6] Generated using Leximancer

4 Results

Several themes emerged from our interviews. Using the TTF model, the themes are summarised in Tables 3 and 4 for tasks based on job type and task-technology mapping.

	Job Type 1	Job Type 2
Communication and Information Sharing		
Communication	X	X
Knowledge Sharing	X	X
Promoting Events	X	X
Connection		
Collaboration	X	X
Team Building	X	-
Employee Engagement	X	X
Sense of Community	X	X
Productivity and Performance		
Recognition for Performance	X	X
Digital workflow	X	-
Learning	X	X

Table 3. Tasks Based on Job Type

	Creating Content	Commenting	Sharing links	Liking/ Emoticon	Groups
Communication	X	X	-	-	-
Knowledge Sharing	X	X	X	-	-
Promoting Events	X	X	X	X	-
Collaboration	X	X	X	X	X
Team Building	X	X	X	X	X
Employee Engagement	X	X	X	X	-
Sense of Community	X	X	-	X	-
Digital workflow	X	-	X	-	X
Learning	X	-	X	-	-
Recognition for Performance	-	X	-	X	-

Table 4. Tasks-Technology Mapping from Interview Data

We broadly categorised the emerging themes as 'positive outcomes of ESM use', namely (1) Communication, (2) Connection, and (3) Recognition and Performance; and 'concerns over ESM use', namely: (1) Privacy, (2) Redundancy, (3) Consent and Control.

4.1 Positive Outcomes of ESM Use

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health orders presented several challenges for many Australian universities, with most staff required to work remotely for an extended period. This required rapid pivoting by all staff to modified ways of working; the effective dissemination of information was critical to this success. The ESM played a key part in providing a forum for communication, connection and recognition of staff that helped them navigate their way through the pandemic crisis.

4.1.1 Communication

Top management used the ESM extensively during COVID-19, using University-wide broadcasts to share information and informative videos. For instance, *'The Vice Chancellor shared that kind of talk a while ago… so you can click on the video to access it quickly; so, it's quite intuitive'* (Interviewee 6). This top-down communication was also described by Interviewee 12 as *'we see that more as an institution-wide sharing tool, … clearly it's a really important communication channel for institutional messaging'*. Key information from the University's Chief Health Officer was also communicated to all staff this way.

Institutional use of ESM during the crisis made leaders consider whether they too should deliberately engage with ESM and make it their 'new normal' way of communicating. As Interviewee 13 observed, *'I made a business decision that I wasn't going to use email to communicate really important messages to the whole group anymore since we've introduced [ESM].... I normally use [ESM] to communicate it'*. Similarly, Interviewee 3 commented, *'I try to avoid using emails. Because we are already swamped with emails from students so I don't intend to go into that space'*. This was also viewed by some as a way to demonstrate more direct engagement between the University and its staff, *'…but that top down information sharing, which is important because you have to get those leadership messages, I think it's become more… perhaps meaningful, in the sense that... it allows for some direct engagement'* (Interviewee 12).

During the pandemic, staff needed access to a wide array of resources; the ESM was a means to access information that was not easily found elsewhere. ESM was seen as a timelier platform to find information: *'in the past we were relying on just Broadcasts and things like that, I find that it's [ESM] a quicker way of finding out information'* (Interviewee 13). The speed of access to information available via the ESM was also described by other leaders; for example, *'so that [ESM] has certainly helped in that you have a quicker way of getting access to information'* (Interviewee 6).

With an abundance of information to share, some users moved away from traditional email communication and onto the ESM, seeing it as a more effective way to relay messages to staff, 'So over COVID it was quite useful to get those messages out' (Interviewee 9). *'So, I actually stopped using our group email address and went across to [ESM]'* (Interviewee 13). As to whether ESM would endure post-pandemic, one participant indicated it might endure, although use may decrease once staff return to campus. *'Since we've been back in the office, certainly usage has dropped off, but again, everyone knows that. So, in a situation like today, there was a bit of activity and, so I think it will endure, but the extent to which it's used on a daily basis will fluctuate depending on circumstances'* (Interviewee 12).

4.1.2 Connection

ESM was also used to help with community building, to form a sense of belonging and unity, and to signal support and socialise. One interviewee described ESM during this time as *'a*

platform for greater interconnectivity between staff' (Interviewee 3). ESM was also used for team building and signalling desired behaviours, along with connectivity and team harmony, *'with our own group, if any member in my team post something I'll make sure that I 'Like' or I comment or I engage in that and try and lead by example'* (Interviewee 13). This described a way that ESM impacted leaders' social behaviour. *'I think, maybe indirectly it improves team harmony and team communication and that's really important for team performance and over the last 18 months, there has been an important level of connectivity'* (Interviewee 15).

The need to feel a sense of belonging to the University was high at this time, particularly when facing so much uncertainty where Australian universities were one of the only sectors not supported by pandemic fiscal measures to retain jobs, leading many universities to substantially cut staffing levels, coupled with a significant drop in overseas students as the country was in lockdown. ESM helped create unity between staff across the University, *'The creation of a kind of unified culture within [Delta] and also with COVID I think that has been useful because it allows everyone to share information and just to know what was there'* (Interviewee 6). Several leaders also raised the importance of bonding, '*Absolutely yes ... makes your relationship with them feel a bit closer and supports the bonds ... particularly important in the last year, given that we have worked remotely'* (Interviewee 13). *'As a broader community and across the […] School, yes, I think there's more bonding'* (Interviewee 12). Bonding as a form of social behaviour across the hierarchy was therefore facilitated by ESM use.

Many leaders also used ESM to show passive support for their staff. Some engaged in this enthusiastically and others felt a sense of obligation to do this while other opportunities to show support were limited. Several leaders gave examples of support and engagement through their social behaviours. This included demonstrating engagement, *'If I 'Like' something and people notice it's good, that they'll know that I'm paying attention in a way that I can't directly do otherwise. When I first took over as interim Dean, I actually posted something via email with an attached video that we put on our YouTube channel, but I put it on [ESM] as well, so I thought a group of people would see, and that was just a really personal outreach about how we're all in this together, kind of as one'* (Interviewee 12). Leaders also used ESM to signal support, *'and every time I see my team posting something or my colleagues posting something, I am taking notice that I'm quite often one of the first to post them a 'thumbs up' or you know some sort of 'Congratulations' message there'* (Interviewee 1). Another leader said they used this to communicate a sense of pride, *'Like if any of our researchers have very good publications, they are launching a book, so I sometimes will even help them to post into the [ESM], just because I feel so proud of them'* (Interviewee 8). Another added, *'I'll get a real buzz, it's not just oh that's great you know they got that big grant from the government or whatever, but it's like you're doing something meaningful and impactful and I feel really proud of that'* (Interviewee 11). This passive support could potentially impact leaders' interpersonal affect towards their employees. As employees are likely to use the ESM to communicate information deemed desirable, this could also result in their leaders perceiving them more positively.

ESM was also used as a mechanism to feel connected to staff by finding out more information about them, and making sense of how individuals present themselves on ESM and enabling collective sense-making. *'This is really called bridging social capital... So, if I compare myself, pre-[ESM] versus post-[ESM], I feel myself more connected to the community. I'm more informed, well informed'* (Interviewee 3). *'And I think it is interesting, we present ourselves individually on [ESM], but we also present ourselves collectively as a department on [ESM]'* (Interviewee 11).

Socialising via ESM was also common through social activities: *'We ran quite a few you know trivia games and things to just get people engaged and I reckon we got more engagement with that than we normally would have pre-[ESM]'* (Interviewee 15). ESM was also used to acknowledge celebrations that may traditionally occur in person or over email, like introducing new staff members and recognising birthdays. For instance, *'I have a team, we established kudos cards, where every month we give kudos to teams, or to people that have done a great job, so we post on there, we also use it to celebrate people's birthdays'* (Interviewee 13).

4.1.3 Recognition and Performance

ESM enabled staff to publicly announce their achievements and receive recognition from leaders. This was viewed as motivational for staff: *'We do make use of [ESM], especially to promote some of the research activities, events and also as a platform to motivate staff, congratulate the achievement, especially for the researchers'* (Interviewee 8). Providing supportive signals like a thumbs up or a comment on achievement posts were ways to provide acknowledgement: *'Yes, there are certain achievements we do feel that needs to be celebrated, so definitely we 'Like' them and [make] 'Comments''* (Interviewee 5).

When staff post on ESM about their activities, they are often viewed as being highly engaged and going 'above and beyond' to leaders. *'Because I think the first thing it will tell me is: they're engaged ... with what's happening on campus; secondly, it fills the gaps in terms of the various activities that they're doing, to either view their career, or to try to meet the targets that we set for them. This will be a sort of, like, informal target, or informal signals for me, and I would leave a 'Comment' and 'Like' on their posts'* (Interviewee 3). When asked about using ESM for performance evaluation purposes, leaders were hesitant to say that information from ESM was used for these purposes. However, there was consensus that ESM provided 'additional information' and a good 'opportunity to observe performance' at a time when physical interactions and informal chats with staff about their activities were restricted. *'I may use it to include into the performance appraisal as seeing the staff that actually have such initiatives to do that. I would see it as something that they do as an extra mile. And then, something that I can include it to the year-end performance appraisal as an additional piece of information in performance evaluation ... I would prefer the staff who are perceived to be more positive to me; who are willing to actually walk the extra miles'* (Interviewee 8).

'Having them (employees) post something online will give me an idea of the kind of research work that they're doing, or whether they attempted to reach out to industry partners by engagement. You know, so without those indicators or signals, I have to rely on other ways to kind of find out what are their strategies? What are the actions that they've taken to increase the research output and to engage with either internal or external stakeholders?' (Interviewee 3). Another leader who was new to their role during the pandemic period used ESM to learn about her employees; *'… the stage of where I'm at, where I'm both still getting to know my staff and I've not been here long enough to know a lot about them, that I'm still learning new things about what they do, as well as observing and thinking about them in an ongoing way …'* (Interviewee 11). Employees can therefore use ESM to make an impression on their supervisor, particularly if it is evident to the employee that their supervisor interacts with their posts.

When employees post about their achievements on ESM it can signal to the supervisor performance outside of the formal performance measurement system metrics. One leader described this as follows: *'Because at the end of the day, as a leader, we still look at the matrix: what is the number of publications? your teaching score, for instance? However, if, let's say someone doesn't*

have a publication out yet, I know that this person has been actively engaged in the research work' (Interviewee 4). Employees who are more prone to post via ESM could also be motivated by potential future benefits and the chance to establish a reputation within the organisation: *'People who post might get a bit more advantage in the sense that, they get better exposure throughout the University'* (Interviewee 5). In addition, ESM is viewed by some as an important place to create their reputation within the University for the purposes of promotion. One leader commented, *'we're not promoting ourselves [face-to-face] and [ESM] is the place we do that, where we build our reputation... you are building your own reputation and you're building our department's reputation'* (Interviewee 11).

ESM use also improved some leaders' supervision ability by allowing them to assess immediate needs: *'it has helped me to be a better supervisor, because I was able to channel the needed resources and the needed knowledge for them to do their job well'* (Interviewee 3). Despite this, some leaders claimed not to use ESM to gather subjective or informal performance information and some expressed concern if supervisors were using ESM in this way. *'If people perceive that it was being used for development purposes in that sense, the way they use it and that might, that might stifle the positives'* (Interviewee 12). There is also a recognition among some leaders that performance information could be collected unconsciously, *'..probably not as a conscious supervision technique, I mean there's no doubt that, you can see who's perhaps more engaged in particular conversations or posts or activities, and you certainly make some value judgments about how staff are interacting with their team members, how they're supporting the other members of the team. If people are posting about good things that they've done, you can sort of see the team members that will be more typically inclined say, "yeah that's great, fantastic"'* (Interviewee 10).

4.2 Concerns Regarding ESM Use

Concerns expressed by participants identified issues around ESM's comparability with institutional procedures and reporting requirements related to performance management. This stems from concerns about privacy and consent. There is also a recognition that multiple systems are in place and ESM use is best described as 'coercively' optional with links to its content disseminated through multiple channels, like global emails. The following subsections address these issues.

4.2.1 Privacy

A general ESM concern identified by participants relates to privacy and data use, particularly where the data is stored, how the data is used, and the potential use of data for evaluating employee performance with particular attention given to the type of information available in the ESM. Showing preference to the existing email-based system of communication was a common response, with indications that this was seen as a more secure means of communicating potentially sensitive information to members of a department. Interviewee 7 noted, *'I would rather have this communication via email than the [ESM]…because some of the content is sensitive…I talk about people that are recruiting, for example…that's the kind of stuff I don't want to have in the [ESM] platform'*. This taps into wider concerns about data use, with Interviewee 3 raising concerns that *'profiling of staff can be done very easily … I won't be surprised if they are using data for that'*. Similar comments were made based on the Facebook-like design of the system and the concerns about privacy and not wanting a presence on the ESM.

The concerns with privacy extended to information about students, with the potential for information to be posted and made visible to the incorrect audience: 'There have been a couple

of times [we] have actually asked somebody to remove their post…and primarily it's around they've included information about a student…on a public forum' (Interviewee 10).

4.2.2 Redundancy

ESM can be perceived as an information repository accessible by all staff from campuses in various locations. However, the University had many communication systems running in parallel, leading to information redundancy and information overload for leaders. In particular, the voluntary use of ESM in the organisation led to some duplication of information across multiple channels. For example, an announcement would be placed in the ESM and a similar message and link to the announcement would be communicated by global email. As Interviewee 4 observed, '*unless it is posted by someone that I know…let's say a sharing notification…I might click on it. But sometimes, when I get too many notifications…I might just ignore them'*.

The duplication of communication channels was highlighted by several leaders, *'Because they're overwhelmed and they're getting a lot of communication, I think the biggest issue is…we have a lot of communication tool[s].....We're still getting global emails and then it's posted on [the ESM]…we've got the intranet, we've got the […] School intranet, we've got the University intranet…there is a lot of mechanisms for people to engage with that can be overwhelming'* (Interviewee 15). Interviewee 7 also noted *'there are all kinds of platforms where I look for information…there is the intranet…we have a Google drive within the department where there is a lot of important information for my colleagues…that works quite well for me, so if [the ESM] would fall apart tomorrow, yeah I don't think my life would be any different'*. These comments highlight the impact of the co-existence of multiple communication platforms and suggest the duplication of information across platforms weakens the benefits of the ESM, meaning that some leaders avoid using it.

In situations that are linked to formalised organisational procedures, like performance management, the availability and reliability of data were a key concern. As Interviewee 1 noted, *'let's go back to the issue of redundancy of information…even before we had our performance reviews done online, I've been arguing for having a kind of opportunity to not repeat the same information in multiple places'* (Interviewee 1).

In other cases, the perceived redundancy of ESM by leaders led to a deliberate choice to use alternative social media channels as a workaround for the ESM system. *'Some things we don't do on [the ESM].. we actually do it on WhatsApp'* (Interviewee 3). They continued, noting the convenience WhatsApp provides since *'WhatsApp is in your phone, you can just tap it on your phone, whereas [the ESM].. you have to log into the browser or you have to download the app'. Others also saw WhatsApp as 'the very primary way of communicating, and that little group I think does make people feel very connected'* (Interviewee 11). Compared to the formal ESM, WhatsApp allows for targeted groups and direct dialogue between users, making communication more targeted, personal, and task relevant. Interestingly, interviewees who used WhatsApp did not mention related privacy concerns or worries about issues related to using a non-University sanctioned technology.

4.2.3 Consent and Control

The University setting sees a range of stakeholders working together, including internal and external bodies. This presented a concern over the consent of individuals and organisations to be included in a post on the ESM. While the ESM is for internal use, there are still potential

sensitivities relating to what can be included, who controls the data in the post, the consent of parties to be included in a post, and how ESM data will be used.

One area where this was apparent was in interdepartmental projects or projects that involved collaboration and cooperation with external parties. As one participant noted, *'Can we post something about our engagement within industry without checking with that organisation first?'* (Interviewee 1). With the ESM seemingly an ideal way to internally share good news and success stories, funding agreements can have specific requirements about asking for consent from the funding body prior to sharing information related to the agreement. The same concern is shared when announcing successful completion in higher degree research programs; as noted by Interviewee 1, *'I would be very cautious…[regarding] my communication about my students completing their PhDs. I would ask them to do it'*. The concern about what happens to posts and data shared through the ESM was also prevalent: *'You have no control over your information…you can't find if you see something negative going on and in an hour and you can't find it…also [there is] a lack of control of what's there and where it ends up'* (Interviewee 6).

To this point the boundaries emphasised were distinctions between formal versus informal procedures, and the personal versus the professional use of the ESM. A related boundary that was identified concerned the internal versus external nature of communication. The information shared on the ESM is internal in nature. This closed-loop communication mode is not facilitating the tertiary institution in generating, promoting and demonstrating engagement with the wider society. As Interviewee 7 noted, *'enterprise media that's…within [the University] is like Facebook-based and…I don't think that's still important for engagement, because the whole idea of engagement is that you go outside the walls of the University and that's not what the system is doing, so I will find it more important if it is about engagement that people are on LinkedIn or Twitter'*. This shows a certain tension between the function of the ESM and the increased prioritisation of external engagement in the tertiary sector.

Encouraging the use external platforms, such as Twitter or LinkedIn, could raise some interesting issues and tensions for the organisation as they have no control of the platform or its use and therefore lose control of the content. First, it encourages the leader to take their professional work into their personal profile space, which is in direct contrast to the noted position against leaders bringing the personal space into the professional space. Second, having leaders establish their own external personal profiles and getting them to push University content could have implications relating to governance and control of social media content.

These insights present an interesting tension in TTF, since participants are not mentioning specific tasks for which they are accessing the ESM. Rather they are acting in a more pervasive manner, browsing and 'Liking' in a transactional way. Something that could almost be akin to Leaders walking around in the electronic environment. In the electronic setting this also means that those who do *not* engage with the ESM are *not* observed, making universal uptake a key issue for resolution before the system could be used in formal appraisal processes.

5 Discussion and Implications

5.1 Key Findings

An increasing number of organisations adopted ESM for the purposes of communication and collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic (Smith, 2020). Our first research question asked,

'How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the use of ESM by leaders?'. Our findings support the contention that ESM can be used as both social technology and a work productivity tool for disseminating information, establishing connections, enabling collaboration, as well as fostering closer working relationships between leaders and employees. Some leaders intuitively associate ESM use with social media platforms and regard ESM as purely a social tool – hence, they choose to distance themselves from it and use it passively. This passive approach also stems from concerns over analytics and recommendation algorithms behind the social media platform, privacy issues, and the blurring of the work/non-work boundary.

There are also concerns that the ESM could afford greater surveillance. Jeske (2021) notes the importance of considering the nature of job types when using remote observation of employees, distinguishing between structured and variable tasks. We see elements of this when we compare our two leader types, with Type I being more positive about the ESM and performing more structured work. Type II leaders showed less enthusiasm, noting issues with observability and concerns about where and how data would be used, while also noting that performance on such tasks was not necessarily observable and often best done in the safety of an invisible space (cf. Jeske, 2021; Bernstein, 2012). These point to different views on the role of ESM and its implications for observability in the organisation.

Brivot and Gendron (2011) offer a starting point for this discussion, noting that electronic surveillance through Knowledge Management Systems extends beyond Foucault's (1991) panopticism, with surveillance possible in numerous means. Leaders' concerns about data, user participation rates, and employees' visibility preference concord with these findings and highlight implications for ESM use.

We did not interview those being supervised by the leaders, so we cannot comment on their perceptions of ESM use. However, the leaders we interviewed showed an awareness of the ESM data being used in digital surveillance, with this framing their own ESM interactions. In the strains of panopticism, they did not necessarily know those to whom they would be visible. However, their awareness of their own observability points to a kind of 'inverted panopticon' that emphasises a flipped and multi-directional observability. Rather than making people visible through a pushed out, organisational-wide system, the ESM in the time of the pandemic became a focal point for pulling distributed employees back into the organisational systems. It became a mechanism for seeking visibility and connection, as opposed to it being imposed upon isolated individuals in a traditional panoptic style (Hafermalz, 2021; McMullan, 2015). It also flipped the observer and the observed, as "each of us gets to play the roles of both jailer and jailed. We are the watcher and the watched, simultaneously" (Carr, 2021, para. 8). This is a very different means of visibility and suggests that, under ESM, individuals become "complicit…in their own surveillance" (Hafermalz, 2021, p. 712). The questions around who is seen and on what terms become clearer in this light, especially when the different nature of the two leader roles is considered.

While the traditional surveillance argument has operated in a top-down manner, with those in power determining when and how observation occurs, the ESM extends this notion of visibility. It is noted that the ESM promotes engagement between levels, with the connections in the ESM putting employees on show to their leaders and leaders on show to their employees. This makes management styles observable and potentially dilutes boundaries. On the other hand, most leaders interviewed perceived ESM as a workplace technology. Depending on their job characteristics, most leaders (of Type 1 job characteristics) managed to

leverage the ESM use beyond informal means. These leaders perceived ESM as a mechanism to engage staff at both formal and informal levels. As a workplace technology, leaders can creatively engage employees by sharing best practices and provide important resources for employees, such as new guidelines and compliance training. In turn, employees are potentially supported in their work role through the provision of resources and are therefore encouraged to use ESM for work purposes.

In addition, leaders can also opt to maintain connectedness with and among staff by designing content which fosters informal interactions among colleagues. We find that the need to feel togetherness and connectedness was paramount during the pandemic period. ESM as a workplace technology enabled organisational leaders to remain visible and portray their confidence in leading staff to navigate through the unprecedented period of uncertainty and crisis. Leaders actively used ESM to show their support to employees by direct engagement through open forums in ESM, and passively by acknowledging and providing signals and short comments when responding to employee-initiated postings.

The voluntary use of ESM in the workplace during the COVID-19 crisis enabled leaders to sustain connections with employees for both work and non-work purposes. As such, this practice blurs the work/non-work boundary, raising some tensions in the conception of the social network in the workplace and the inherent tensions that come from bringing the personal into the professional. Given that working remotely was mandatory for staff during this period, the blurred boundaries allowed both leaders and employees to create entirely new forms of work and social connections through ESM. The ESM seemed to redefine boundaries in the social and work contexts. It is not surprising, though, to find that the boundaries may shift to a different orientation when remote working is no longer mandatory. Excessive use of social technology may also lead to information overload and longer working hours, resulting in burnout and emotional fatigue (Lee et al., 2016). With this comes a re-conceptualisation of social behaviour in the workplace as the social becomes transactional.

Our second research question asked, *'How does ESM as a social technology shape leaders' social behaviour?'* We apply LMX to explain how leaders' social behaviour is shaped by ESM use through affective management. Our results indicate that ESM enables leaders to express their passive support and interpersonal affect towards their employees using the 'Liking' and brief commenting features, particularly for recognition and performance. This gesture can potentially be seen as a strong signal by employees who may in turn reciprocate the social gesture by their leaders. Leaders who previously kept a distance from their employees felt more connected to their employees through their use of the ESM. To that extent, ESM provides opportunities for leaders to establish social connection with their employees during a time of crisis. Furthermore, our findings indicate ESM enables leaders to form bonds when leaders and employees share common interests, and it also serves as a means for bridging social capital for leaders when they are willing to connect and interact with their employees through ESM. This use reflects a period in which cognitive labour, particularly affective labour, on behalf of leaders, was viewed as an effective way to show affective and moral support to employees (Hardt, 1999; Till, 2014). Still, there is scepticism questioning the social (in the conventional sense of the word) versus transactional dimension in the leader-member exchange in acknowledging successes, with there being a sense that this was done as a matter of routine and to keep up appearances.

In addition, some leaders were concerned about the effect of their posting on employees' individual task performance and employees' perception of leaders' affective emotion (Little et al., 2016; Madrid et al., 2018). Our findings also indicate that employees' responses affect leaders' social behaviour on the ESM platform. ESM helps leaders know other leaders' behaviour and in turn, leaders can learn positive behaviour (i.e., self-improvement from their co-workers) (Pan et al., 2021). In summary, the results imply that the affective component in information situated in the ESM becomes a way that leaders express their views. In addition, the use of ESM by employees will also affect the social behaviour of leaders. This study finds evidence on leaders making conscious moves to initiate connections by showing affect and demonstrating support through ESM features. This is an example of how ESM shapes and influences leaders' social behaviour.

Our third research question asked, *'Is the ESM used by leaders for the purpose of performance management during the COVID-19 pandemic?'* We can see from the results that several leaders used ESM to learn more about their employees, to both passively and actively support their employees, to acknowledge their achievements, and to create opportunities for socialising and bonding. These actions can result in affective influences where leaders develop affect for their employees and can also view them as more likeable (Bauch et al., 2021; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994). This can result in an affect-consistency bias that can impact subjective performance evaluations (Bauch et al., 2021; Cardy & Dobbins, 1986; Robbins & DeNisi, 1994). Leaders are varied in their admission of using ESM information to inform performance management, with some acknowledging that it is used and is seen to them as an indicator of engagement, and some acknowledging that it is possible that the information is subconsciously used. It also becomes apparent that some employees deliberately and actively use ESM to communicate their performance, to create a reputation within the University, and to create impressions about their achievements. While we do not explore this behaviour directly with those employees, leaders seem to perceive a motivation for their employees to use ESM in these ways to form favourable impressions on their leaders and others that will benefit themselves in the future. This behaviour by both leaders and employees is also likely to have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic when informal means of communication face-to-face on campus were prohibited.

5.2 Mechanisms and Utilisation in the TTF Model

The findings of this study show that both cognitive and affective mechanisms lead to performance outcomes and users' reactions. As such, we revised Howard and Rose's (2019) conceptual model and included the two mechanisms in Figure 2. Thus, TTF is not the sole mediator in the relationship between the interaction of task and technology characteristics and outcomes. There are also cognitive and affective mechanisms that come from the moderating factor of utilisation. These are linked to the relationship between task and technology characteristics and outcomes. It should be noted that these cognitive and affective mechanisms are contingent on how leaders utilise ESM and the level of their interactions and engagements with contents and employees. Through cognitive mechanisms, leaders use the ESM: as a platform for information gathering and filtering, to stay informed about guidelines and policies; as a decision support tool to gather different perspectives and receive feedback from employees, to make informed decisions; and as a platform for knowledge sharing, collaboration and team building, to tap into the collective knowledge of the organization and foster a culture of continuous learning. Further, the cognitive mechanism (of ESM when used by leaders) also impacts *reactions* - expressed as *concerns of use* in this study.

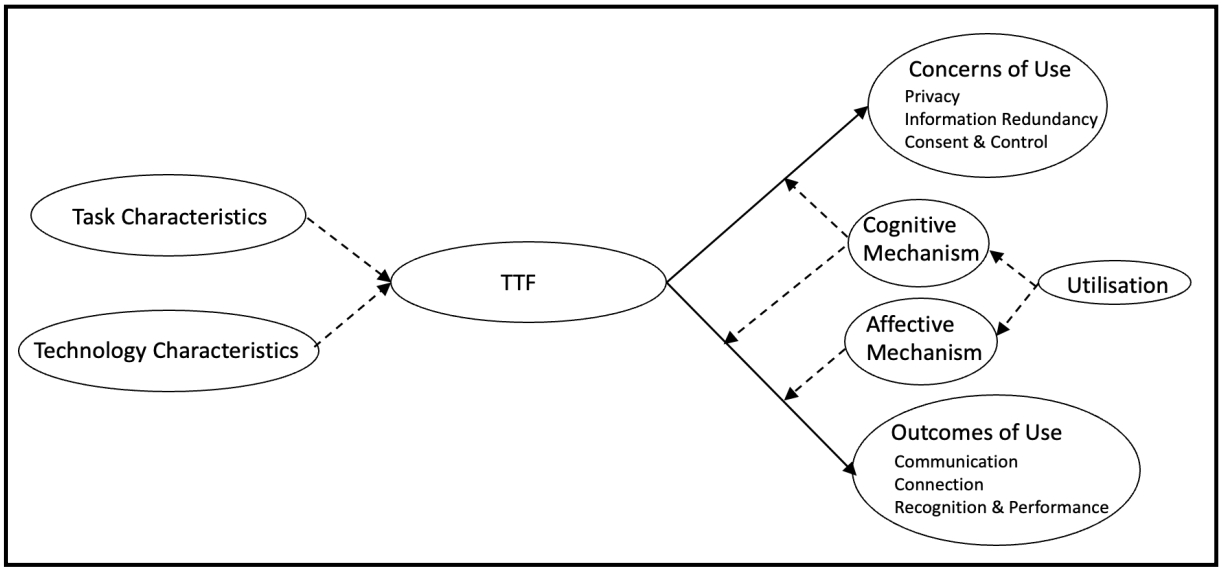

Figure 2. Task-Technology Fit on Leaders' Use of ESM

In figure 2,these concerns of use somewhat represent the negative outcomes that suggest leaders are hesitant to actively use ESM. The study findings indicate the cognitive mechanism specifically impacts *privacy concerns; information redundancy and information overload,* i.e. when the same information is communicated across multiple channels, the cognitive demand of managing and processing large volumes of information can lead to cognitive overload; *consent* related to the appropriateness of which information can be disseminated; and *control* over the spreading of the information beyond those intended.

Through affective mechanisms, leaders use ESM: as a platform to communicate directly with employees, to foster engagement and connection by sharing updates and expressing appreciation; as an instrument to provide recognition and feedback to employees, to evoke positive emotions, such as motivation, empowerment and a sense of accomplishment; as a team building tool for leaders to demonstrate active participation, to instil positive emotions in employees, such as camaraderie and enthusiasm; and as a platform for leaders to provide emotional support to employees during challenging times, to show employees they are cared for.

5.3 Contributions

Recent research on digital leadership emerged because of the increased use of workplace technologies (Banks et al., 2022; Matthews et al., 2022; Nieken, 2022). An increase in hybrid and remote working arrangements post-pandemic requires leaders to strategically adopt work and social technologies to sustain their presence and maintain social influence. Such adoption would benefit from a better understanding on how leaders use ESM and how it impacts their behaviour. To that end, our study makes four contributions.

First, we contribute to the TTF literature by conceptualising the cognitive-affective mechanisms through which TTF, moderated by *utilisation*, leads to outcomes. Given that ESM is a technology that impacts what and how leaders communicate, the cognitive and affective mechanisms are intertwined in the utilisation of ESM and contribute to the operative use of ESM. As such, the findings of this study extend our understanding on how the interactive

effects between technologies and tasks, as well as their perceived matching by leaders, shape leaders' attitudes and behaviours in their utilisation of the technology.

Second, our research adds to the growing literature on the use of ESM in organisations (Bulgurcu et al., 2018; Ewing et al., 2019; Hacker & Riemer, 2021; Huang et al., 2015; Treem, 2015; van Osch et al., 2015). Our study explores how the use of ESM affects the leadership dynamic between leaders and their employees as they form social connections. Our findings indicate that the unique features of ESM, such as 'Liking', commenting and reposting, enable content expression more widely and instantly than other forms of e-leadership (Matthews et al., 2022).

Third, our findings contribute to the literature on digital leadership and the use of advanced information technology (Banks et al., 2022; Nieken, 2022; Matthews et al., 2022) by explaining how technology can influence leaders' behaviour and the limits perceived by leaders on the technology use. ESM provides a mechanism in which leaders leverage their position by exerting informational social influence – clarifying governance, informing realistic expectations on work productivity, informing employees on policies, as well as providing emotional assurances during periods of uncertainty. ESM also facilitates the social influence process by serving as a platform whereby leaders' interaction and engagement with employees could foster trust and be perceived as supportive. Insufficient or irregular ESM engagement, omission of emojis, or absence on the platform, may well create an impression of a distant or disengaged leader. In short, ESM impacts leaders through various affective mechanisms, evoking their emotions, influencing their attitudes and behaviours, particularly when engaging and empowering employees and providing emotional support (Till, 2014).

Fourth, our findings also provide insights about the use of social technology for performance management. The existing literature on leaders' performance management is scant on the role that social technology plays during a crisis and under conditions of remote working. Research has clearly shown, however, that employees' performance information affects managers' performance evaluations (Bauch et al., 2021; DeNisi et al., 1997; Kaplan et al., 2007). In the crisis induced working conditions, appropriating ESM as both productivity and social technologies within organisations became a necessity and it may well endure as some face continued remote working in the post pandemic setting (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Hamouche, 2021). Recent research from Bartsch et al. (2020) investigates employees' work performance and leadership behaviour in digital transformation during the pandemic, but evidence on types of social technologies in their research is limited. Public health orders requiring staff to work from home meant that some performance managers felt that they needed to improvise on the collation of performance data, with ESM being one source. Our study helps answer the call for more research into the role of ESM in support of management accounting and decision-making (Arnaboldi et al., 2017).

5.4 Practical Implications

Our findings also have practical implications. First, our findings indicate that leaders' use of ESM positively impacts employee engagement, team building, and knowledge sharing, from the leaders' perspective. Leaders' consistent visibility helps create an environment that encourages participation, builds trust, and enhances organisational effectiveness. Organisations should offer training programs and resources to help leaders understand the benefits of ESM and how to use it effectively. Training should cover not only the technological

features of ESM, but also effective communication via social technology and leadership skills in the digital context.

Second, our findings indicate that leaders express some concerns on the use of ESM. It should be noted that these concerns may not be inherent to ESM use but rather arise from the cognitive mechanisms involved in its use. Addressing these concerns can help leaders mitigate the drawbacks and leverage ESM to support their leadership practices. To mitigate privacy concerns, organisations should provide training to educate all staff about privacy best practices and the potential risks associated with ESM use. To mitigate concern on information redundancy and overload, organisations should establish clear channels and guidelines for internal communication, defining which types of information should be shared via the ESM platform compared to email and other channels. Organisations should also promote efficient information sharing practices by actively curating and sharing only relevant and valuable information to teams and networks. To mitigate concerns about consent and control, organisations should provide informed consent for data collection and use on ESM. Leaders and employees should be able to opt-out of any data collection practices.

Finally, our study revealed that leaders need to update their leadership skills in relation to their capacity to effectively engage their staff and supervise their employees remotely. Remote working may well become a continuing pattern and leaders should learn new skills building on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to support staff wellbeing and productivity (George et al., 2022).

6 Conclusion

This study aims to explore leaders' general use of ESM during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, as well as leader's specific use of ESM for performance management during this time. Using the TTF model, we identify themes emerging from fifteen interviews with two different types of organisational leaders from an Australian university. Positive outcomes of ESM use include increasing the dissemination of information, establishing and extending connections, and recognising employees' performance. Concerns about ESM use include privacy concerns, information redundancy and information overload, as well as concerns over the need to obtain consent and who has control of data captured.

We conclude that ESM as a social technology enables a new way of institutional messaging. Through its feature for commenting and 'Liking', ESM allows employees to voice their support and concerns to leaders. This feedback mechanism formed an important part of affective labour for leaders and was valuable for leaders to sustain employees' participation and engagement in pursuing organisational goals. Leaders can identify more urgent needs and concerns, the organisation's potency in terms of human and social capital, and other aspects which were previously not visible prior to the use of ESM. As a result, leaders will be better informed to make strategic decisions as the priority areas and concerns will be signalled clearly through ESM. With regards to performance management, given that employees' subordinates' performance and achievement are visible to all, we speculate ESM could be an enabling technology that allows peer evaluation, especially in agile, self-organising team-based structures (Di Fiore & Souza, 2021).

Our study has several limitations. We acknowledge that Universities can be somewhat unique workplace environments and are traditionally very hierarchical. Hence, our findings may not readily translate to other types of workplaces. In addition, although we feel that the interviews

were extensive, participant recruitment during the pandemic was difficult indicating a potential limitation of the study. With more organisations adopting ESM and more case studies conducted in this research realm, comparison of findings across cases will be feasible, resulting in more generalized findings.

Future research could complement this study by examining employees' use of ESM, namely examining their motivations to use ESM and whether they are deliberately using ESM for self-promotion to impact leaders' perceptions of them. In addition to this, exploring employees' perceptions of how their leaders use ESM and the consequences of this from their perspective may help close the loop and provide a better understanding of the impact of ESM use in the workplace. For this purpose, a dyadic approach to study leaders-members exchange through ESM is useful to enrich the current literature. Although this study finds that the use of ESM during the pandemic crisis shaped leaders' social behaviour, it remains an empirical question as to whether the affective tone by leaders through ESM use is sustained after the pandemic and whether the momentum gained by ESM during this time continues to impact leaders' behaviour.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Background and scene setting questions

(1) Can you give a brief overview of your background and experience in the current position?

- Areas of responsibility?
- How many years and months have you worked in your current position?
- How many years of experience do you have as a supervisor?
- How are your employees organised?
- How many locations do you have in Australia? Any internationally based?
- How many people do you supervise?

Social Media use and Applications

(2) Can you please tell us what social media tools have you used for communicating and connecting with others (both internal and external)?

Follow ups include:

- Which social media tools are used?
- Why do you use those social media tools?

How long have you utilized social media for communication?

Social Media style of use

(3) As a supervisor, can you please explain how you use ESM?
(4) Does the use of ESM improve your opportunities to observe your employees performance? (elaborate)**
(5) Do you believe that the use of ESM provides you with relevant performance information about your employees? (elaborate)**

(6) To what extent do you perceive employees' performance information on ESM is dependable?

Follow ups:

- If not, why do you perceive that it is undependable?
- Examples of reliable / unreliable information / factors impacting reliability

(7) To what extent do you perceive employees' performance information on ESM is honest and trustworthy?

- If not, why do you perceive that as dishonest/untrustworthy?

(8) To what extent do you perceive employees' performance information on ESM is reliable?

- If not, why do you perceive that it is unreliable?

(9) Do you have any suggestions as to ways that ESM can be improved in order to ensure higher quality performance information about your employees? (elaborate)**

Follow up on examples mentioned:

- How would it help?
- How does it address concerns previously mentioned?

(10) Does the use of ESM impact how you perceive the closeness of your relationship with your employees? Do you believe that this influences your feelings towards your employees? (elaborate)**

(11) Do you believe that the use of ESM has improved your confidence in the subjective performance evaluations/measurement of your employees? (elaborate)**

Follow up / expansion:

Examples

- How / why?
- Draw on previously mentioned role and experience

(12) Do you think ESM was designed with you in mind? How can ESM be improved in order to improve your confidence in your evaluation of your employees' performance? **

(13) What do you think of the role of ESM in the organisation? How do you perceive that ESM shapes internal communication? How do you expect internal communication to evolve around ESM?

doi: https://doi.org/10.3127/ajis.v27i0.4331