

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Building better employer brands through employee social media competence and online social capital

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Abstract

Despite the significant and increasing influence of social media on employees' work lives, there is limited focus on employees' social media competencies from an employer branding or internal marketing perspective. Building on social identity and social exchange theories, this paper links employees' social media competence to an increase in online brand citizenship behaviour and reduction in feelings of psychological contract violation towards their employer's brand. We also examine the distinct mediatory effects of two forms of online social capital—bonding mediates the influence of employee social media competence on online brand citizenship and feelings of psychological contract violation, whilst Bridging only mediates the effect of social media competence on feelings of psychological contract violation. In doing so, we contribute to extant literature in two ways: (1) Address the need for research on social media in relation to employer branding; and (2) highlight the importance of building employee-to-employee and employee-to-employer relationships by virtual means in the context of employer branding. Therefore, this paper responds to calls for research that advances more responsible approaches to employer branding and internal marketing; that is, approaches that take into account employee competencies (emphasise need for skill development) as well as wellbeing (emphasise need for support).

KEYWORDS

employer brand, internal marketing, online social capital, responsible social media, social exchange, social identity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Employee behaviours play an important role in employer branding due to the influence they have on customers and other stakeholders (Morhart et al., 2009; Sirianni et al., 2013). Since the proliferation of social media, employees' online behaviours are considered particularly vital for developing and maintaining the reputation of employer brands (Osburg et al., 2020; Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2018). Even so, the internal market (i.e., employees) has received limited attention from researchers in

contrast to the consumer perspective (e.g., Alves et al., 2016; Barcelos et al., 2018). To develop a strong employer brand image externally, there must first exist a good internal relationship between employees and their employer's brand (Yoganathan et al., 2018), which necessitates organisational support systems for ensuring employee wellbeing and resilience. Additionally, fuelled by the current coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the earlier rise in the "gig economy," there is now a growing need for virtual or online organisational support structures in the context of employer branding (Connaughton & Lewis, 2020; Schmidt

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et al., 2016). Consequently, a need arises for research that elucidates how such online support systems can be formed and what impact they have on employer branding.

Separate streams of extant literature reveal that employees use social media to build connections with co-workers and develop online social capital (Huang & Liu, 2017), whilst employee competence (or lack thereof) in the responsible use of social media has implications for the reputation of employer brands (Walsh et al., 2016). Hence, employees' social media competence could be a key antecedent in developing an online support system that has positive outcomes for employer branding, but these effects remain empirically untested. Also, from a broader perspective, there have long been calls to examine the marketing discipline's role in social media-influenced work environments, so that internal marketing can better ensure the welfare and development of employees in the digital age (Du et al., 2015; Weinberg et al., 2013). Therefore, this paper examines the role of employee competencies for using social media responsibly in helping them form better networks with co-workers online (i.e., online social capital), and thereby develop favourable outcomes for the employer brand internally (i.e., psychological contract) and externally (i.e., employee online brand citizenship).

Competencies enable people to build better and wider connections with others. Once such connections are formed in a group, individuals act in ways that benefit the group and ultimately themselves. The reason for the ultimate pro-group behaviour can be either because of the identity shared between close connections (i.e., bonding) or the exchange of reciprocal benefits between weak connections (i.e., bridging). As such, we build on the well-established foundations of social identity theory (STI) and social exchange theory (SET) to achieve the following: (1) Link employees' social media competence to internal and external employer branding outcomes via online social capital; and (2) differentiate between the two forms of online social capital to account for strong and weak networks, thus identify two corresponding mediatory mechanisms for the influence of employee social media competence on employer branding outcomes.

Our aforementioned empirical efforts contribute to extant literature in three ways: (1) Addressing the need for research on social media in relation to employer branding and internal marketing; (2) Highlighting the importance of building employee-to-employee and employee-to-employer relationships by virtual means in the context of employer branding, especially when physical socialising is restricted; and (3) Responding to calls for research advancing more responsible approaches to employer branding and internal marketing; that is, approaches that take into account employee competencies (emphasise need for skill development) as well as wellbeing (emphasise need for support).

2 | BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH GAPS

2.1 | Employee behaviour and relevance to marketing

Employee behaviour has been an important topic for marketing scholars, stemming from a service marketing focus whereby theoretical

developments in areas, such as Service Profit Chain and Service Dominant Logic have underscored the importance of employee behaviour for customer satisfaction and subsequent firm performance (Bitner et al., 1994; Homburg et al., 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). A later development in this area of research has been motivated by internal marketing and employer branding perspectives (Morhart et al., 2009; Sirianni et al., 2013). Whilst the importance of employees' impact on consumer behaviour and overall performance of firms or brands cannot be overstated, this link has already been very well-established in existing literature (e.g., see: Hogreve et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2014; and Plouffe et al., 2016). Hence, there is much interest in marketing research to better understand the employee behavioral nuances and conditions under which different types of employee attitudes and behaviour arise (Menguc et al., 2016; Zablah et al., 2012). Specifically, there has been increasing attention within mainstream marketing research on internal organisational aspects that influence employee attitudes and behaviours, such as workplace factors that give rise to stress and frustration (Leischnig et al., 2015), or different styles of leadership (Morhart et al., 2009). A later development in this respect is the focus on employee behaviour online and especially on social media platforms (Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019; Walsh et al., 2016).

2.2 | The social media perspective

Due to its ubiquity and pervasiveness, social media usage invariably influences employees' work lives (Zhang et al., 2018); a better understanding of this influence is pivotal to meeting the challenges of maintaining a responsible, as well as successful, employer brand (Rokka et al., 2014; Stohl et al., 2017). Employees' competent social media utilization is crucial to ensuring a positive perception of the company in public, but simultaneously, employees' use of social media can at times be harmful to themselves, their co-workers, and ultimately their employer's brand (Mainiero & Jones, 2013; Miles & Mangold, 2014; Walsh et al., 2016). An example of this type of negative outcome is the case of a British Airways cabin crew member who shared a racist outburst on Snapchat about passengers whilst on duty, and consequently lost her job (The Telegraph, 2017). Thus, possessing a good level of social media competence implies that employees will be able to avoid harmful outcomes and build better relationships with their employer and co-workers. In this respect, we consider employees' social media competence as being an important prerequisite for developing online social capital, which refers to an individual's online social network and the resources it provides (Huang & Liu, 2017). To our knowledge, extant literature on employer branding or internal marketing has not sufficiently addressed the link between employees' social media competences and internal/external employer branding outcomes.

It is important to consider that employees use social media to develop networks with others, including especially their co-workers, which culminates in the formation of online social capital (Huang & Liu, 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Park et al., 2015). Previous work in employer branding and internal marketing have somewhat overlooked this aspect, and there is subsequently a dearth of research that we

aim to address. Moreover, at a time when physical socialising is curtailed due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is particularly crucial for responsible employer brands to ensure the wellbeing of employees through employer-employee and employee-employee socialisation and networking via social media (Connaughton & Lewis, 2020). As such, understanding employees' online social capital formation is currently of vital importance for employer branding. Hence, on the one hand we examine the link between employee social media competence and online social capital with co-workers, and on the other hand we investigate how online social capital with co-workers leads to internal and external benefits for an employer brand—specifically, mitigation in employee feelings of psychological contract violation (internal) and enhancement of employee online brand citizenship behaviour (external).

2.3 | Psychological contract and online brand citizenship outcomes

Psychological contract encompasses the substantial psychological aspects of the employer-employee relationship that are not part of the (legal) employment contract (Soares & Mosquera, 2019), and is therefore an integral and internal aspect of good employer branding (Biswas & Suar, 2016). When employees feel that their psychological contract has been violated for whatever reason, their affinity to the employer brand is severely affected and results in negative outcomes for the employer brand, such as lack of loyalty (Abimbola et al., 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). We propose that possessing online social capital with co-workers can make employees resilient to feelings of psychological contract violation towards their employer brand, since having closer connections (thus, social capital) with others in the conventional sense often forms a “social safety net” that builds psychological resistance in individuals (Bagozzi et al., 2010; Henry, 2004).

In addition, we propose that employees' online brand citizenship behaviour, which comprises their positive, extra-mile contributions towards an employer brand through related social media activities (Kane, 2015; Ye et al., 2012), will be a positive outcome of online social capital. Greater affinity with the employer brand puts employees in a favourable mindset to contribute positively towards the brand (Piehler et al., 2016), and having close ties with co-workers leads to an increased tendency among employees to promote their employer brand online (Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019). As such, employee online brand citizenship behaviour is a positive and externally oriented outcome, whereas an attenuation in employees' feelings of psychological contract violation is a positive internally focused outcome for employer branding.

We draw on social identity and social exchange theories to link employee social media competence to the aforementioned internal and external employer branding outcomes via online social capital. We draw on two theoretical bases because we distinguish between two types of online social capital: Bonding

(strong connections between similar people) is linked to the SIT perspective, and Bridging (weak connections between people with significant dissimilarities) aligns with the SET perspective. A differentiation between bonding and bridging social capitals is particularly important in the online context since the belongingness to a community (social identity), and information or knowledge exchange (social exchange) can both drive positive employer branding outcomes (Löhdorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). In sum, we find that social media competencies enable employees to build better and wider connections with co-workers, and once such connections are formed, employees act in ways that benefit the group (i.e., co-workers and employer brand community). The reason for the ultimate pro-group behaviour can be either because of the identity shared between close connections (i.e., bonding) or the exchange of reciprocal benefits between weak connections (i.e., bridging).

In the following sections, we introduce our theoretical foundations and hypotheses, and discuss study methodology, followed by results and findings. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for marketing theory and practice.

3 | THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 | Bonding and bridging social capitals

Social capital describes the “features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). It therefore refers to an individual's social network and the resources it provides (Huang & Liu, 2017). Following Putnam (2000), two forms of social capital should be distinguished. Bonding social capital brings together similar people (i.e., strong ties), and captures an individual's close network, in which existing skills and expertise are known. As such, individuals interact with others, with whom they can identify easily. Bridging social capital provides connections between people with significant dissimilarities (i.e., weak ties), for example, in terms of beliefs and background. Management scholars have also drawn this distinction between Bonding (close network) and Bridging (distant network; Cao et al., 2012; Payne et al., 2010). An individual can have both forms of social capital in a group, but Bonding occurs between individuals with far more similarities than differences, and with strong personal connections, whereas Bridging occurs between those with weak connections and diverse backgrounds (Norris, 2002; Williams, 2006).

Social capital may emerge differently when comparing online and offline environments due to the influence of new media and forms of communication affecting the formations of strong and weak ties (Williams, 2006). Online media may increase both forms of social capital in that it allows like-minded individuals to meet in web fora, online communities and groups (bonding), and simultaneously encourages interactions and exchanges between different individuals

through the increased anonymity of online communication (bridging) (Norris, 2002).

3.2 | Social identity theory perspective

3.2.1 | Development of bonding and role of social media competence

It has been observed that engagement in social media is a form of social identity creation, which is driven by an individual's need for belongingness and strengthening of self-identity (Krishen et al., 2019; Pagani et al., 2011; Rauschnabel et al., 2019). The SIT perspective holds that individuals join various groups (e.g., organisations, clubs, social media groups) to develop their identity or self-perception, and they form strong connections (i.e., bonds) with others who have very similar personal characteristics or interests, giving rise to a shared group identity (as opposed to personal identity; Beck et al., 2014; Dutot, 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Similarly, as discussed earlier, bonding social capital (as opposed to bridging) forms when individuals affiliate with people who share similar interests, values, norms etc; thus, the common (shared) identity in a group becomes more prominent through bonding (Williams, 2006). In this way, the process of developing bonding social capital (i.e., strong ties forging a group identity) can be explained by the SIT perspective.

To become part of a desired group and to form shared group identity, individuals may call upon resources they possess, which include specific competencies, and individuals with developed competencies are more likely to accumulate social capital (Baron & Markman, 2000). Specifically, in the social media context, possessing the necessary social media competencies to engage appropriately with likeminded others makes an individual's social identity more salient and would lead to bonding. For example, users who share similarities in terms of their specific preferences and means of communicating online (e.g., frequently using the "like" function as opposed to status updates), form better bonding social capital online (Lee et al., 2019). In the same vein, being able to use social media in a way that avoids reputational harm for the group (e.g., employer brand community in the case of employees) can be expected to have a positive impact on the bonds between individuals (e.g., co-workers) on social media (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Pastoriza et al., 2009; Rokka et al., 2014). Therefore, from a SIT perspective, employees' formation of bonding social capital online will be positively influenced by their possession of appropriate social media competence.

H 1. *Employees' social media competence has a positive effect on their bonding social capital online.*

3.2.2 | Bonding and employer branding outcomes

The SIT perspective posits that once aligned with a group, the group's identity motivates pro-group behaviour in individuals

(Mousavi et al., 2017). For example, individuals with a strong group identity promote their group online and in the case of employees, promote their employer brand (e.g., by contributing positively to employer's social media pages) and support co-workers (e.g., help co-workers with information) on social media (Huang & Liu, 2017; Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019). As such, from a SIT perspective, employees' bonding social capital (i.e., emerging from strong ties with co-workers) is likely to motivate their brand citizenship behaviour, which comprises behaviours that are beyond formal contractual duties including regularly promoting the brand, disseminating information/knowledge about the brand and voluntary problem solving to support co-workers (King & Grace, 2010, 2012; Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019). In the social media context, brand citizenship behaviour can be translated into active engagement with an employer's social media group and coworker groups online, contributing to activities such as knowledge sharing and problem solving in these social media groups (Chang et al., 2012). Such behaviour is likely to be highly motivated by the strength of bonds that exist between the members of the group and their shared identity (Huang & Liu, 2017; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019). Hence, from the preceding discussion based on the SIT perspective, we hypothesise that bonding will have a positive influence on online brand citizenship behaviour.

H 2. *Bonding increases employee online brand citizenship behaviour.*

While online brand citizenship behaviours are largely externally-focused in that they capture behaviours reflective of employees' identification with their employer brand, but enacted on social media, it is also important to consider more internal aspects of the employees' relationship with the employer brand. Similar to the voluntary, extra-role nature of online brand citizenship behaviour, there are psychological aspects of an employees' relationship with the employer brand that are not part of the formal employment contract; these are encapsulated under the theoretical concept of psychological contract (Biswas & Suar, 2016; Soares & Mosquera, 2019). Viewed from a SIT perspective, the fulfilment/violation of psychological contract, which consists of unwritten beliefs that employees hold in relation to their employer brand's obligations towards them, is closely linked to their identification with the employer brand (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Ye et al., 2012). Strong relationships with co-workers, and the support that can be derived from these (both emotional and skills-based), can in turn have positive consequences for the performance and well-being of employees (Huang & Liu, 2017). Following from this, where employees perceive that their employer brand has violated the psychological contract, the close ties that they may have forged with their co-workers and the resulting group identity can serve as a support system, thus mitigating adverse feelings of psychological contract violation (Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Coulson, 2005; Oh et al., 2014). Hence, bonding social capital is expected to reduce feelings of psychological contract violation.

H 3. *Bonding decreases feelings of psychological contract violation.*

3.2.3 | Mediatory role of bonding

Competencies enable people to build better and wider connections with others, and once such connections are formed in a group, individuals act in ways that benefit the group (thus, ultimately themselves). As hypothesised earlier, employees' social media competence is expected to increase bonding social capital, and bonding in turn is expected to increase online brand citizenship behaviour and reduce feelings of psychological contract violation. These relationships imply that employee social media competence may indirectly influence the two employer branding outcomes (increase in online brand citizenship and mitigation of feelings of psychological contract violation) via bonding social capital. Indeed, based on the SIT perspective, the shared group identity motivates pro-group behaviour, so that individuals use their resources (e.g., skills, connections) to improve or strengthen the identity of the group and their position or status within it (Beck et al., 2014; Löhrndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Mousavi et al., 2017).

From a SIT perspective, competencies help shape an employee's bonding social capital through strengthening his/her strong ties (Lans et al., 2015), which reflect a strong identification with the group; in addition, employees' promotion of their employer brand online is contingent on the strength of their identification with the employer's brand (Smith et al., 2017). Therefore, in the social media context, employees may call upon their competence in using social media appropriately to build closer connections with co-workers online (i.e., bonding), which in turn motivates them to contribute positively towards their employer brand online (i.e., online brand citizenship) and mitigates potential negative feelings they may have towards the employer brand (i.e., feelings of psychological contract violation). This is further supported by prior SIT-based studies that have investigated similar variables. For instance, employees who are trained to use social media responsibly tend to actively contribute towards promoting their employer online via word-of-mouth (Dreher, 2014; Kane, 2015), and employee competencies in general are found to reduce adverse psychological contract outcomes, chiefly including the alleviation of feelings of violation (Braekkan, 2012).

H 4a. *Employee social media competence has a positive indirect effect on employee online brand citizenship behaviour via bonding.*

H 4b. *Employee social media competence has a negative indirect effect on feelings of psychological contract violation via bonding.*

3.3 | Social exchange theory perspective

3.3.1 | Development of bridging, and role of social media competence

Bridging is based on reciprocal benefits and wider opportunities, since "weaker ties tend to be to those people less like the first person, they lead to more people in different life situations and thus to a broader set of information and opportunities" (Williams, 2006,

p. 597). Bridging allows for exchanges between different networks and resources, including information, knowledge, and benefits; thus, relationships are formed on a somewhat *quid pro quo* basis (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Hence, the development of bridging is best explained by the SET perspective, which posits that interactions between entities depend on perceived costs and benefits, and positive interactions occur if the perceived benefits outweigh the costs (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Oh & Syn, 2015). Competence, in this sense, becomes a resource or an asset with which broader relationships can be accessed and developed through social exchanges (Muthusamy & White, 2005). An employee's competencies do not only strengthen their strong ties, but also their weak ties, and so allow for access to a broader range of resources and knowledge (Lans et al., 2015). Therefore, an individual's specific competencies will positively influence their ability to develop wider connections with individuals with different competencies, knowledge, or information (i.e., bridging social capital).

H 5. *Employees' social media competence has a positive effect on their bridging social capital online.*

3.3.2 | Bridging and employer branding outcomes

SET approaches individuals' pro-group behaviours from the perspective of a cost-benefit analysis in that the individual expects a reciprocal reward, which outweighs his/her contributions to the group (Oh & Syn, 2015). We know that online social capital can induce positive outcomes through exchange of relevant information and knowledge (exchange perspective; Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Coulson, 2005; Oh et al., 2014). Individuals with bridging social capital overcome boundaries between different networks and support systems, thus drawing from a diverse range of resources and knowledge, which they can utilise for personal and organisational benefit (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). In this way, social exchanges allow the use of linkages between different entities to facilitate knowledge and information exchange, which can in turn be used to contribute positively towards an employer's organisational goals (Newell et al., 2004). Hence, we posit that bridging will have a positive influence on employees' online brand citizenship behaviour.

H 6. *Bridging increases employee online brand citizenship behaviour.*

Similarly, psychological contract-related outcomes can also be understood from a SET perspective in that they are based on an expectation of reciprocal benefits between employee and employer (De Cuyper et al., 2011). From a SET perspective, the accessibility and availability of resources from a wider network can make employees cope better with challenging or ambiguous situations, since resilience can stem from access to additional information, network, support and resource structures (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Hence, bridging will have a positive influence on the mitigation of employee feelings of psychological contract violation.

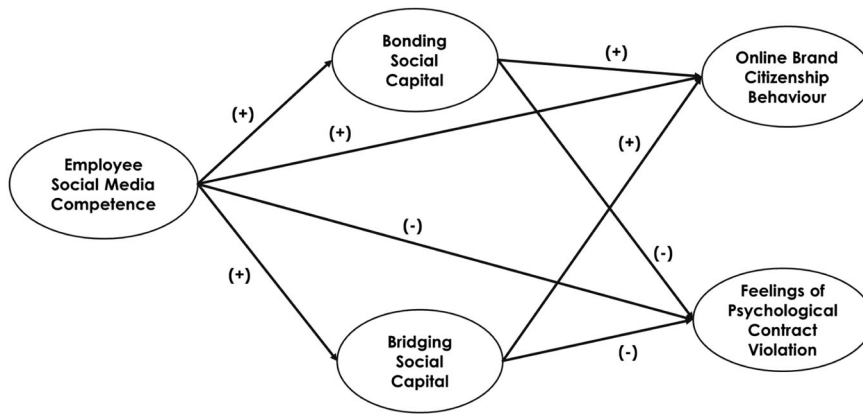


FIGURE 1 Model of hypothesised relationships

H 7. *Bridging decreases feelings of psychological contract violation.*

3.3.3 | Mediatory role of bridging

As discussed earlier, the connections individuals form with others in a group can be the intermediary link in the process of how they utilise their competencies for the eventual benefit of the group (thus, indirectly benefit themselves). Notably though, the reasons why individuals choose to utilise their competencies in pro-group behaviour differ—in the case of bonding, the underlying motivation is identity-based, whereas social exchanges provide the basis for bridging. From a SET point of view, where employees possess specific competencies that can benefit co-workers and ultimately their employer brand, they undertake a cognitive evaluation and find that the potential reciprocal rewards would outweigh his/her contributions, which make use of their competencies (Newell et al., 2004; Oh & Syn, 2015). As such, SET provides an explanation for the process through which competent employees come to exhibit brand citizenship behaviours (Löhdorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). We know also from previous related work that competencies positively affect the formation of social capital, which ultimately determines employee performance related outcomes; particularly where social capital with co-workers is concerned, it can serve as mediator between employee competence and a range of employee-based outcomes, specifically including proactive behaviours, as well as intrinsic work motivation and job satisfaction (Bizzi, 2017; Bufquin et al., 2017; Whipple et al., 2015). Hence, employee social media competence is likely to increase online brand citizenship behaviours through the development of bridging.

H 8a. *Employee social media competence has a positive indirect effect on employee online brand citizenship behaviour via bridging.*

Some of the reasons underlying employees' adverse feelings towards the employer include the absence/inadequacy of socialisation processes, and limited interaction and information exchange (Miles et al., 2011; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). As such, the formation of bridging online social capital can make employees more resistant towards the emergence of adverse feelings towards the

employer by providing them with a wider network of organisational support and providing a mechanism for organisational socialisation (Fang et al., 2010; Schmidt et al., 2016). Employee competencies increase their potential for developing bridging social capital, enabling them to reach out to different sources of information and knowledge exchange to derive resilience (Lans et al., 2015; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). Hence, from a SET perspective, employee social media competence can lead to the mitigation of feelings of violation through the development of bridging social capital.

H 8b. *Employee social media competence has a negative indirect effect on feelings of psychological contract violation via bridging.*

Hypotheses are summarised in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

4 | DESIGN AND MEASURES

An online survey was conducted using Qualtrics, whereby individuals employed in the UK service industry were selected to take part in the survey. Participants were randomly recruited from the UK consumer pool by the panel provider (Qualtrics) at the cost of approximately £8 per response. At the beginning, a set of filter questions identified the respondents' age, country, and work status/industry, based on which the sample was selected (Age ≥ 18; country: UK; and employed in service industry). No other filtering criteria were specified to the panel provider for selecting the sample. As per standard practice in online surveys, a pilot test was conducted, whereby an average response time was calculated (≈6 min). In the main survey a minimum response time was specified based on this average time as a measure of respondent's attention and engagement (Brace, 2008; Malhotra, 2008), and only those responses that met the minimum completion time (or took longer) were recorded. The responses that took shorter than the minimum completion time were not recorded, and therefore not counted in the final random sample of 309 complete responses (48.9% female).

In the design of the survey, care was taken to randomise questions (construct items), so as to avoid any order effects and to

mitigate common method bias (Brace, 2008; Podsakoff et al., 2003). All constructs were assessed with established scales measured on a seven-point Likert: (1) Employees' social media competence was measured using the "company reputation-related social media scale" (Walsh et al., 2016); (2) bonding and bridging online social capitals were measured using Huang and Liu's (2017) scale, which is adapted from Williams (2006); (3) feelings of psychological contract violation was measured using Robinson and Morrison's scale (2000); and (4) employee online brand citizenship behaviour was measured using Chang et al.'s (2012) scale. At the beginning of the survey, it was explained to participants that the study relates to coworker interactions on Facebook or other social media; this was emphasised before answering questions on bonding and bridging social capitals. It was also made clear to participants that online brand citizenship related questions were specifically about contributing to their employer's social media page/site. Where necessary, very minor modifications to items were carried out to match with the current research context.

5 | DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 | Initial analysis and psychometric properties of scales

A table of constructs, item descriptions, and key statistics can be found in supplementary material online. Initial analysis of exploratory factor analysis resulted in five orthogonal factors based on Eigenvalues >1. Only one item (BRIDG2) was found to be problematic due to weak loading (0.2) and therefore excluded from subsequent analyses. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to verify the underlying factor structures of the five constructs of interest: social media competence, bonding, bridging, online brand citizenship behaviour, and feelings of psychological contract violation. Composite reliability for all constructs was found to be greater than 0.7, and average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5 for each construct, which establishes convergent validity. With exceptions of bonding and bridging, the square-root of AVE ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$) for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs whilst being less than the maximum shared variance; thus, discriminant validity was also established (Hair et al., 2010).

The $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ for bridging (0.742) is only marginally smaller than its correlation with bonding (0.782). Further, the measurement model with bridging and bonding treated as separate constructs (AIC = 2935.056) is a better fit compared to a model in which both bridging and bonding items load on a single construct (AIC = 3114.545; Dayton, 2003). Hence, we assume discriminant validity for bonding and bridging. The presence of common method variance was eliminated using the common latent factor method (Podsakoff et al., 2003); the regression weights of the focal constructs were unaffected by the introduction of a

common latent factor, on which every item in the model was allowed to load.

5.2 | Direct effects

For hypothesis testing including mediation analyses, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 4) was used in accordance with current standard practice; bootstrapped samples ($n = 5000$) were obtained for 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals and standard errors. The results are summarised in Table 1.

According to the results, social media competence increases bonding ($\beta = 0.22$; $p < 0.01$), which supports H1. In turn, bonding increases employee online brand citizenship ($\beta = 0.65$; $p < 0.01$) and decreases feelings of psychological contract violation ($\beta = -0.24$; $p < 0.01$); thus, H2 and H3 are supported.

Further, social media competence increases bridging ($\beta = 0.17$; $p < 0.01$), which supports H5. Bridging increases employee online brand citizenship ($\beta = 0.16$; $p < 0.05$) and decreases feelings of psychological contract violation ($\beta = -0.44$; $p < 0.01$); hence, H6 and H7 are also supported.

Additionally, social media competence does not directly increase employee online brand citizenship, as the direct effect is not statistically significant. However, social media competence does decrease feelings of psychological contract violation ($\beta = 0.10$; $p < 0.05$).

5.3 | Indirect effects

Social media competence has a statistically significant and positive indirect effect on employee online brand citizenship behaviour ($\beta = 0.14$; $p < 0.05$), and a negative indirect effect on feelings of psychological contract violation ($\beta = -0.07$; $p < 0.05$) via bonding. These results support both H4a and H4b.

On the other hand, social media competence does not have a statistically significant indirect effect on online brand citizenship behaviour via bridging, so H8a is not supported. Nevertheless, social media competence has a statistically significant and negative indirect effect on feelings of psychological contract violation via bridging ($\beta = -0.08$; $p < 0.05$); thus, H8b is supported.

5.4 | Effect of control variables

The path model was tested across the categories of four control variables (i.e. age, gender, education, and work role), and only gender was found to have a significant, albeit a minor, influence. Gender moderates the effect of social media competence on bonding ($\beta = -0.2$; $p < 0.05$); social media competence increases bonding in males, more than in females. Further, bonding's effect on feelings of violation is also moderated by gender ($\beta = 0.26$; $p < 0.05$); bonding decreases feelings of violation in males, more than in females, but only marginally.

TABLE 1 Results of hypothesis testing

			β	SE	p
Direct effects					
Social media competence	→ Bonding social capital		0.22*	0.05	0.000
	→ Bridging social capital		0.17*	0.04	0.000
	→ Employee online brand citizenship behaviour		0.06	0.05	0.227
	→ Feelings of psychological contract violation		−0.10*	0.04	0.018
Bonding social capital	→ Employee online brand citizenship behaviour		0.65*	0.07	0.000
	→ Feelings of psychological contract violation		−0.24*	0.07	0.001
Bridging social capital	→ Employee online brand citizenship behaviour		0.16*	0.08	0.039
	→ Feelings of psychological contract violation		−0.44*	0.07	0.000
Indirect effects					
Social media competence	→ Bonding	→ Employee online brand citizenship behaviour	0.14*	0.04	$p < 0.05$
		→ Feelings of psychological contract violation	−0.07*	0.03	$p < 0.05$
	→ Bridging	→ Employee online brand citizenship behaviour	0.03	0.02	$p > 0.05$
		→ Feelings of psychological contract violation	−0.08*	0.03	$p < 0.05$
Total indirect effects					
Social media competence → Employee online brand citizenship Behaviour			0.17*	0.04	$p < 0.01$
Social media competence → Feelings of psychological contract violation			−0.15*	0.04	$p < 0.01$
Total effects					
Social media competence → Employee online brand citizenship behaviour			0.23*	0.06	$p < 0.05$
Social media competence → Feelings of psychological contract violation			−0.25*	0.05	$p < 0.01$

*Statistically significant effect.

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | Theoretical implications

Previous research on employer branding has somewhat overlooked the competencies of employees in relation to responsible use of social media and the significant role of employee socialisation with co-workers using social media platforms as a beneficial process for the development of individual employees, and ultimately the employer brand. The present research addresses this gap by highlighting how employees' social media competence can positively influence employer brand-related outcomes from social identity and social exchange perspectives. We show that

employee's social media competencies make them more resilient when they are faced with ambiguous or challenging situations, therefore contributing to calls for a deeper understanding of adverse psychological contract effects (Braekkan, 2012; De Cuyper et al., 2011). In addition to the alleviation of negative psychological contract-related outcomes, social media competence increases employees' online brand citizenship behaviours, which includes sharing knowledge/information with co-workers on social media and promoting their employer via social media. These findings are important contributions in light of the need for more cohesive work environments that build internal brand identity (internal focus) as well as more authentic efforts to promote employer brands online (external focus; Du et al., 2015; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos,

2014; Osburg et al., 2020; Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019; Yoganathan et al., 2018).

Notably, employee social media competencies do not affect on-line brand citizenship behaviour directly, suggesting that employees do not automatically promote their employer online given high level of competencies. It is rather the formation of online social capital that serves as the crucial link between social media competence and online brand citizenship behaviour as well as the alleviation of feelings of psychological contract violation towards the employer brand. Findings show that social media competence gives rise to both bonding and bridging social capitals online, which is explained by social identity and social exchange perspectives, respectively. Employees with a higher degree of social media competence can better communicate and leverage social media functionalities to form strong work ties with like-minded co-workers (social identity perspective), whilst having more to offer to weak work-ties in terms of knowledge and information for the same reason (social exchange perspective). These findings extend the contribution of previous research linking intense (De Zúñiga et al., 2012; Steinfield et al., 2008) and sophisticated (Lee et al., 2019) social media usage with social capital formation, but also add support to previous studies highlighting that the ability to avoid harmful media usage by employees is beneficial towards their coworker connections and ultimately, the employer brand's reputation (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Rokka et al., 2014; Walsh et al., 2016).

Subsequently, online social capital (both bonding and bridging) is found to have a positive influence on psychological contract outcomes. First, bonding and bridging increase employees' online brand citizenship behaviour. Thus, employees appear to be motivated to promote their employer through interactions with strong- and weak-tie networks. Bonding has a stronger influence on online brand citizenship behaviour than bridging, suggesting that group identity is important for engaging with, and supporting, the employer brand (Beck et al., 2014). Second, both types of social capital serve to mitigate employees' feelings of psychological contract violation. Interestingly, bridging has a stronger influence on reducing negative psychological contract effects compared to bonding, indicating that access to additional resources and information by leveraging weak-tie networks may be more important in developing resilience in the workplace, compared with the emotional support provided by strong-tie networks. Taken together, these findings add to extant literature on online social capital effects (Huang & Liu, 2017; Williams, 2006), particularly in relation to psychological contract.

Ultimately, this study contributes to our theoretical understanding about the psychological mechanisms that explain how social media competence affects psychological contract outcomes; this is done by establishing bonding and bridging online social capitals as key mediators. Specifically, employees' social media competence was found to mitigate feelings of violation via both forms of social capital. On the other hand, social media competence increases online brand citizenship behaviour through bonding social capital, but not via bridging social capital. This indicates that interactions with weak ties are not fundamental to translating social media competence into activities that promote the employer brand online. It is rather an

employee's identification with the strong ties which make it likely that social media competence leads to employer-promoting activities on-line. Overall, this brings together and extends findings from previous research on social media usage and relational employee benefits for employer branding by combining the social identity and social exchange theoretical bases (Huang & Liu, 2017; Walsh et al., 2016).

Finally, extant literature suggests that the use of social media by males is more likely to be motivated by social identity, thus leading to the formation of social capital which is based on closer emotional connections (Barker, 2009; van Emmerik, 2006). Also, prior research points to gender differences in social capital related effects, whereby females use their networks as a social support structure (Broadbridge, 2010). Hence, it is important to reflect on our findings regarding the effects. In line with previous research, we found that social media competence increases bonding in males, which in turn has a greater impact on the alleviation of feelings of violation in males. As discussed before, bonding is the result of individuals forming group or social identity with others (social identity theory perspective). Following from this, our findings are congruent with previous research in that social media usage by males is motivated more by the need to form such group or social identity, and therefore more likely to result in social capital that is founded upon close connections (i.e., strong ties; Barker, 2009; van Emmerik, 2006).

6.2 | Managerial implications

Regardless of gender, age, education, or work role, increased employee competence in using social media in a way that avoids harm to their co-workers and employer, as well as to their own careers, leads to the mitigation of feelings of violation toward the employer and encourages online brand citizenship behaviour by building online social capital. Millennial employees, for example, seek much greater socialisation and engagement on social media, the impact of which on workplace attitudes and behaviour is neither fully understood nor straightforward to understand (Bolton et al., 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Many organisations assume that their employees, especially younger generations, readily possess competencies relating to social media (Hershatner & Epstein, 2010). We stress that this assumption ought to be reconsidered, and the need to provide appropriate training should be taken seriously if organisations are to achieve competitive advantage through employees and protect their reputations in an increasingly digitalised environment (Schaarschmidt & Könsgen, 2019; Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2018). The current COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the need for such training, since remote working may yet become the norm.

In parallel, previous research on social capital points out that responsible work environments are expected to facilitate the development of (organisational) social capital (Pastoriza et al., 2009) as part of an organisation's intellectual capital (Su, 2014). Internal marketing research has also emphasised the need for organisational paradigm change in that participation and collaboration through communities using social media are facilitated to empower employees (and

customers; Weinberg et al., 2013; Yoganathan et al., 2018). All things considered therefore, a more responsible approach to internal marketing may be ultimately important for successful development of employer brands, through the development of individual social capital of employees and their social media competence.

Hence, the present findings call for an internal social marketing approach in organisations. This behoves organisations to invest in developing relevant and specific competencies of employees in relation to social media, including technical (e.g., privacy settings) and socio-communicative aspects (e.g., awareness of impact). Other researchers have issued similar calls from external marketing (Miles & Mangold, 2014; Miles et al., 2011; Rokka et al., 2014) and internal marketing (Smith & O'Sullivan, 2012; Vasconcelos, 2008) perspectives to maintain responsible and successful employer brands by applying social marketing principles. However, until now internal marketing approaches have rarely been articulated with adequate insight into employees' social media usage and related competencies. Thus, the present findings contribute to the development of an internal social marketing approach fit for the digital age.

6.3 | Future research

Further work is needed to fully understand the benefits of employees' responsible social media competence and online social capital on employer branding outcomes across different cultures, since ours is based on a single country sample. Future research may also focus on examining the efficacy of specific aspects of internal marketing (e.g., leadership, internal communications) in developing responsible social media competence and online social capital. Moreover, as social media platforms continue to diversify and proliferate, further investigation into how online social capital evolves and varies across platforms would be useful. Finally, how online social capital and corresponding employer branding consequences are affected where employees have no choice but to work remotely, and what role does personal characteristics, such as employee personalities play in this?—these are additional questions for future researchers to consider.

7 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Prior research highlights the importance of social media for employees and ultimately for the employer brand, especially as employees increasingly socialise with one another on public social media (Huang & Liu, 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Smith & Gallicano, 2015). This, coupled with the growth of casual working and the more recent trend of remote working due to the COVID-19 crisis, point to the significance of understanding organisational socialisation processes on social media platforms (Connaughton & Lewis, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2016). Our study contributes to this by shedding light on the role of employees' social media competence and forms of online social capital in relation to employer branding outcomes.

Whilst traditionally organisations have been more directive about positioning their brand externally using carefully crafted marketing messages, the proliferation and influence of social media platforms is a major challenge to this approach. Much attention has been paid to user-generated marketing (Dhar & Chang, 2009), but less so in relation to employees, who may well choose to react negatively towards their employer brand online (Cervellon & Lirio, 2017). The solution to cultivating a strong employer brand may lie in ensuring employee well-being and satisfaction, but also the adequate development of responsible social media competence. The present study strengthens the case for this, and adds to a budding stream of research that highlights the responsibility aspect of marketing internally (to develop skills etc.), which is pivotal for maintaining organisational reputation externally, and ensuring employee development, well-being, and satisfaction internally.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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