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## Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres)

## Should employees be “dooced” for a social media post? The role of social media marketing governance

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Social media marketing governance

Termination fairness

Justice theory

Social convergence

Role theory

Script theory

## ABSTRACT

Instances of employees being ‘dooced’ because of a social media post are becoming commonplace. Three research questions are presented to better understand workplace firings due to social media posts using justice theory and social convergence to fit within the nomological net. The first question examines employees’ awareness of their employer’s social media policy. The second question examines the role of offensiveness in the perceived fairness of the termination. The third question asks whether work-related posts (social convergence) and the presence of a social media policy (social media governance) influence the perception of termination fairness. Two data collection efforts are presented to test the research questions. The research findings extend the social media marketing governance literature by incorporating role theory and script theory. Managerial implications include the importance of developing and communicating to employees the organization’s social media policies.

## 1. Introduction

According to a study conducted by the [Pew Research Center \(2018\)](#), it is estimated that 69% of adults in the United States (U.S.) participate in social media. Social media is defined as Internet-based technologies that allow the creation, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content ([Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010](#)).

Sometimes, a social media post may result in unintended negative consequences such as involuntary termination. An employee’s involuntary termination due to posting on social media is referred to as the employee being ‘dooced’ ([Cote, 2007](#); [Dennis, 2011](#)). Heather Armstrong, a blogger who started [dooce.com](#), was the first employee known to be fired after writing satirical statements and stories about her work and co-workers on her blog ([Waters, 2005](#)). Dooced is now commonly used to refer to someone who was terminated for posting a message, picture, or video on social media or as comments to other users’ posts ([Cortini & Fantinelli, 2018](#)). Despite the increasing occurrence of employees being dooced, a recent study by the Pew Research Center shows only 32% of employees are aware their employer’s have social media policies pertaining to personal social media use ([Olmstead, Lampe, & Ellison, 2016](#)).

Additionally, dooced employees frequently bring unwanted

negative attention to both the company and themselves. As some of these posts go viral, other social media users engage in debates over whether the employee should be fired. Groups of social media users have demanded the firing of an employee, started boycotts of the brand, and have even made threats against the company. This online phenomenon has been labeled a Collaborative Brand Attack (CBA) and refers to “such joint, event-induced, dynamic, and public offenses from a large number of Internet users via social media platforms on a brand that are aimed to harm it and/or to force it to change its behavior” ([Rauschnabel, Kammerlander, & Ivens, 2016, p. 381](#)). A journalist, John Ronson, noticed the number of news stories about people who were dooced and wrote a book on how to recover from social media shaming ([Ronson, 2015](#)).

Recognizing that the body of literature on social media management was somewhat disjointed, [Felix, Rauschnabel, and Hinsch \(2017\)](#) developed a framework for strategic social media marketing based on four elements: scope, culture, structure, and governance. Dooced employees fall within the social media governance element through social media policies and are the focus of this research. To date, most of the academic literature on employees being dooced has focused on its legal aspects ([Cote, 2007](#); [Dennis, 2011](#); [Mercado-Kierkegaard, 2006](#)). The current literature related to employee social media use is limited and mostly

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exploratory; thus, further research is necessary.

This research begins with a preliminary investigation of the Fortune 500 companies' social media policies that were publicly available. This investigation guided the first research question which examines employees' knowledge of their employers' social media policies and is addressed in Study 1. Study 1 also addresses the second research question by using four real-life scenarios to determine whether perceptions of termination fairness and obligation to retain are influenced by the perceived offensiveness level of the social media post. For research question three, Study 2 utilizes a 2 × 2 online experiment to examine perceptions of termination fairness depending on whether an employee's personal social media post is about the workplace or not (social convergence) and whether employees are provided with a formal social media policy (social media governance). We extend the holistic strategic social media marketing framework developed by Felix et al. (2017) by incorporating role theory and script theory to support the importance of implementing and effectively communicating a social media marketing governance plan. The research concludes with theoretical and managerial implications as well as suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Social convergence

Individuals use social media for self-expression about their opinions, ideas, personal branding, and matters concerning their daily lives, such as their employment. Boyd (2008, p. 18) states “that social convergence occurs when disparate social contexts are collapsed into one” and “social convergence requires people to handle disparate audiences simultaneously without a social script.” Thus, for social media use, social convergence erupts when individuals add co-workers, subordinates, and supervisors as ‘friends,’ or when they post about work-related issues on their personal social media accounts, causing the lines between personal and work life to be blurred. 86% of employees are connected to at least one coworker on social media (O'Connor, Schmidt, & Drouin, 2016) and half of all employees have posted about their employer or workplace on social media (Weber Shandwick, 2014). When employees post about their employment on social media 41% discuss their job with 13% being negative, 22% discuss customers with 16% being negative, 19% discuss coworkers with 9% being negative (O'Connor et al., 2016), and 16% make negative or criticizing posts about their employer (Weber Shandwick, 2014).

### 2.2. Social media governance

To date, research in social media governance is limited. One study used content analysis to examine how 20 international companies communicate their social media policies to employees (Fuduric & Mandelli, 2014). Other studies investigated individuals' knowledge of their employer's social media policies and discovered many people are unaware of a social media policy being present (Cortini & Fantinelli, 2018), the restrictions for posting on social media and the consequences of violating the policy (O'Connor et al., 2016). These studies focused on employee's knowledge, but none investigated the perception of termination fairness when an employee was terminated for a social media post.

With the widespread adaptation of social media by marketers, developing a holistic framework for strategic social media marketing was needed. Felix et al. (2017) developed a framework that included four elements. The *social media marketing scope* addresses how marketers use social media and whether it is a mostly one-way communication tool with a few stakeholders or if it is used as a collaboration tool. The *social media marketing culture* distinguishes between a conservative approach focused on more traditional advertising and a modern approach that embraces social media and the opportunities that it offers. The *social*

*media marketing structure* differentiates between a more hierarchical, centralized social media approach and one that is decentralized with all employees contributing to the social media marketing of the organization. The final element that they proposed is *social media marketing governance* which focuses on the rules and guidelines of the company for social media use both by the company and its' employees in an official capacity as well as personal social media use. The framework includes a continuum for governance that ranges from the extreme positions of anarchy (no policies) to autocracy (very detailed and specific policies). In their research, they found that most companies fell somewhere on the continuum.

Employees have roles to play based on the expectations of customers and supervisors. Role theory and script theory suggests that employees will perform these roles based on service scripts that provide employees guidance during the service encounter (Nguyen, Groth, Walsh, & Hennig-Thurau, 2014; Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). When social media governance is implemented, employees are provided with defined roles and scripts that address their expected social media behavior. Employee conduct (roles and scripts) should also include procedures for addressing a violation as well as consequences.

This research extends the element of social media marketing governance by incorporating role theory and script theory to illustrate further the need for employers to create and disseminate to all employees the organization's social media policies. The growing phenomenon of social convergence reinforces the need to provide social scripts to employees in order for employees to perform their roles appropriately, while at work as well as while on their personal time, and posting about work on social media. Since social media posts that have led to employment termination often become part of public debate, an evaluation of the general public's perception of the termination fairness is warranted.

### 2.3. Termination fairness and obligation to retain

Termination fairness refers to the belief that an employee's involuntary discharge was just (Rousseau & Anton, 1988, 1991; Rousseau & Aquino, 1993). It is a function of an individual's distributive and procedural justice perceptions (Lind & Tyler, 1988); therefore, individuals rely on a combination of the two justice evaluations to determine whether termination fairness or unfairness occurred. The obligation to retain refers to the belief that an employer has the responsibility to keep the individual as an employee (Rousseau & Anton, 1988, 1991; Rousseau & Aquino, 1993). Since the obligation to retain was studied as an alternative to the dependent variable of termination fairness, it is expected that perceptions of the obligation to retain will also be a function of an individual's distributive and procedural justice perceptions.

Involuntary terminations play a functional role in the organization and how employers handle these situations can influence a variety of reactions from the terminated employees and outsiders (e.g., customers and society). Involuntary terminations may be due to cause (e.g., fired for policy violation) or no cause on the employee's part (e.g., downsizing). It is crucial for employers to communicate their social media policies and procedures for handling violations to employees; otherwise, the implied contract may be violated. An implied contract is a mutual obligation emerging from the employer-employee relationship (Rousseau & Anton, 1988). The relationship is based on a contractual obligation through an exchange of consideration for a promise (Rousseau & Anton, 1991; Rousseau & Aquino, 1993), such as an employee accepting a job with the expectation of being fully informed about all company policies including social media policies and violation procedures.

## 2.4. Justice

The justice framework following the event paradigm (Cropanzano, Byrne, Bobocel, & Rupp, 2001) provides a theoretical rationale for outsider's perceptions of termination fairness and obligation to retain regarding employees being dooced or an outsider's reaction to a conflict situation based on company actions (del Río-Lanza, Vázquez-Casielles, & Díaz-Martín, 2013; Konovsky, 2000). According to justice theory, individuals consider the distributive and procedural justice perceptions of a situation, event, or action from others (e.g., individuals or organizations) to determine whether fairness occurred in the workplace (Cropanzano et al., 2001). Distributive justice and procedural justice are the components that align with termination fairness and the reactions of outsiders (e.g., customers or society) (Cropanzano et al., 2001).

Distributive justice refers to the fairness of an involuntary termination for an employee action such as a social media post. When forming distributive justice perceptions for dooced employees, outsiders are likely to consider outcomes of the social media post (rather than contributions of the employee), such as the company's tarnished reputation or potential financial loss.

Procedural justice refers to the fairness of the procedures and policies used in an involuntary termination (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). However, policies and violation actions must be communicated to employees for procedural justice to be perceived (rather than injustice) for dooced situations. Outsiders will likely form their procedural justice perceptions for dooced employees based on the termination reason, such as believing the social media post violates the company's policy as well as whether the post is deemed offensive by society.

## 2.5. Offensiveness and offensive speech

The academic literature does not currently have an accepted universal definition for offensive speech, but much of the research on offensiveness has focused on language that is vulgar, hateful, or pornographic (Chen, Zhou, Zhu, & Xu, 2012). This meaning could be considered by some to be too narrow since what offends people varies greatly. For this research, the definition is too broad due to the nature of the social media posts that have caused employees to be dooced. The news articles written about people who had been dooced for social media posts included examples that would be considered sexist, racist, violations of privacy laws, as well as work-related posts that do not fall into any of the typical categories that one thinks of as offensive. The Oxford Dictionaries defines offensive as “causing someone to feel resentful, upset, or annoyed” and is used as an adjective to describe speech (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.) In the Merriam-Webster Law Dictionary, a broader definition of offensive speech is “causing displeasure or resentment or, especially, contrary to a particular or prevailing sense of what is decent, proper, or moral” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) For this research, offensive speech is defined as speech that causes someone to feel resentful, upset or annoyed due to being contrary to what is considered decent, moral, or proper speech whether or not the offense was intended.

## 3. Research questions

A preliminary investigation provided guidance for Study 1 by examining the social media policies of the Fortune 500 companies that were publicly available resulting in Research Question One (RQ1) which asks, “to what extent are employees aware of their employer's social media policies and its' specific elements?” Research Question 2 (RQ2) asks, “when a person is fired for a personal social media post, does society consider the offensiveness of the post when deciding if the termination is fair or if the company has an obligation to retain the employee?” and is also addressed in Study 1. Research Question 3 (RQ3) asks, “does society consider it to be fairer for a person to be

terminated for personal social media use if the post was work-related (social convergence) and the company has a social media policy in place (social media governance)?” Study 2 investigates RQ3, by utilizing an online experiment.

Customers have certain expectations of employee behavior which organizations can ensure by providing defined roles with accompanying scripts for employees. Customers and society have expectations of appropriate frontline employee behavior, such as acting civil to other employees. Customers who witnessed incivility between employees developed negative generalizations towards the firm in general (Porath, Macinnis, & Folkes, 2010). Customers who overheard employees complaining on the job about their supervisors, other customers, or even feeling overworked, were less likely to intend to return to the retail establishment (Locander, White, & Newman, 2018). Thus, it is expected that when customers, or potential customers, read a social media post by an employee that is negative towards a customer, or is deemed offensive for any reason, the termination of the employee is likely to be perceived as fair when employees have received guidance in the form of policies (scripts).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Preliminary investigation

A preliminary investigation provided guidance for the research questions by examining the 2017 Fortune 500 companies' social media policies to identify common elements. The unit of analysis is the information provided in the social media policies. This information was obtained by searching for “social media policy” on each company's website or the Internet with the company's name and the phrase “social media policy.” This process resulted in 185 of the companies' social media policies being publicly available online, yielding a 37% success rate. Most of the social media policies were found in the company's Code of Conduct/Ethics, which may not include consequences for violations.

The potential consequences for disobeying a social media policy is the most important aspect regarding this paper since it pertains to employees being dooced; however, most companies (86.5%) did not indicate any violation of their social media policy would result in disciplinary consequences. Policies focused on protecting confidential information (89%) and not speaking on the company's behalf (79.4%). Approximately 40% had some policy regarding posting about the company, customers, or other employees (social convergence); whereas most did not address opinions, comments, or pictures that employees might post that would be deemed offensive by those in the general public. This investigation provided guidance for the items used in Study 1, which asked about employee knowledge of the social media policies of their employers. This assisted in choosing scenarios for Study 1 and developing scenarios for Study 2 based on two common elements: protecting the company's reputation and not discussing customers.

### 4.2. Study 1

#### 4.2.1. Scenario selection process

The researchers searched the Internet for stories of people fired for personal social media use. Eight stories were selected that appeared to have varying levels of offensiveness. These situations were written into a standardized format that explained the scenarios were of real people who were fired for personal social media use.

A local car dealership allowed a researcher to visit the waiting room of the service department to recruit customers who were willing to participate in a focus group. This selection process was used to discover the opinions of those in the general public, rather individuals recruited from research pools. Six customers were willing to participate. Age, ethnicity, and gender were recorded for each participant and included the following: a 22-year-old Caucasian male, a 63-year-old Caucasian

female, a 65-year-old Caucasian male, a 43-year-old African-American female, a 55-year-old African-American female, and a 37-year-old Caucasian male. Participants read each scenario and discussed their views on the offensiveness of each scenario. As a group, they ranked the scenarios from least offensive to most offensive. Based on the ranking, selected four were selected that covered the range of offensiveness from least offensive to most offensive.

The four scenarios selected for the research can be found in Appendix A. The scenarios included: 1) a school bus driver who posted on Facebook about his conversation with a young student who said he didn't have lunch money that day, 2) a nurse who posted a photo on Instagram of the emergency room where she worked after a man who was hit by a train was brought in, 3) a liquor store clerk who posted a photo on Instagram of herself with two men dressed for Halloween as Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, and 4) a communications director who Tweeted about not getting AIDS in Africa on her vacation because she was white.

4.2.2. Sample and procedure

Participants, all U.S. residents, were recruited using Mechanical Turk and provided a survey link to Qualtrics. Participants were randomly presented one of the four scenarios found in Appendix A. To ensure participants were attentive, they were asked the occupation of the person in the scenario, with five response options being provided (bus driver, nurse, liquor store clerk, communications director, doctor). Thirty-two participants answered incorrectly and were eliminated from the sample. The final sample size for the following percentages in all cases was  $N = 192$  (54.2% male, 36.5% married, 53.1% had at least a 4-year degree, 48.4% made less than \$40,000 a year,  $M_{age} = 34.02$  years,  $Range_{age} = 18-65$ ).

4.2.3. Measures

The offensiveness level of the social media post was rated by participants using a sliding bar with endpoints of “not offensive at all” (0) and “most offensive post I have ever read” (10).

Termination fairness and obligation to retain were measured using single-item measures developed by Rousseau and Anton (1988, 1991) and Rousseau and Aquino (1993) for policy-capturing studies. Participants evaluated their agreement with the termination fairness using a 7-point scale ranging from very unfair to very fair and the organization's obligation to retain the employee in the scenario using a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Participants were also asked a series of twelve questions about their awareness and knowledge of their current employer's social media policies, with response options being “Yes,” “No,” or “Don't Know.”

4.2.4. Results and discussion

To address RQ1, respondents answered twelve questions regarding their knowledge of social media policies. The sample size for RQ1 is

$n = 175$  due to the removal of seventeen participants for being un-employed. The questions and results are in Table 1. One additional question addressed the disciplinary consequence for violating the social media policy at the participant's current place of employment: 19.4% selected “warning,” 3.4% selected “suspension,” 2% selected “termination,” 25.1% selected “it depends on the offense,” and 49.7% selected “don't know.” Taken collectively, ambiguity exists in the workplace regarding social media policies since for all twelve questions, the percentage who said “yes” to any of the questions ranged from 7.4% to 34.9%.

Study 1 also addressed RQ2, “when a person is fired for a personal social media post, does society consider the offensiveness of the post when deciding if there is termination fairness or does the company have an obligation to retain the employee?” A comparison of the means for the four scenarios indicates that the perceived offensiveness did differ with the following values: bus driver ( $n = 52, M = 1.2, SD = 1.51$ ), nurse ( $n = 50, M = 3.8, SD = 3.23$ ), liquor store clerk ( $n = 40, M = 7.1, SD = 3.05$ ), and communications director ( $n = 50, M = 7.6, SD = 2.12$ ). Using linear regression, two models were tested with the dependent variable being termination fairness in the first model and obligation to retain in the second model. Offensiveness level was the independent variable. Control variables included age, income, gender, and marital status. None of the control variables were significant, so they were removed from the analysis leaving the relationships between offensiveness level ( $M = 4.72, SD = 3.69$ ) and termination fairness ( $M = 3.78, SD = 3.69$ ) and obligation to retain ( $M = 3.81, SD = 1.91$ ) in the models. For termination fairness, skewness is 0.145, and kurtosis is  $-1.50$ . For obligation to retain, skewness is 0.199 and kurtosis is  $-1.11$ . These values are within the accepted ranges, which suggests that normality is not a problem (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010).

The first regression model indicates a significant model ( $F = 320.36, df = 1, p < .01$ ) with an  $R^2 = 0.79$ . The positive and significant relationship between offensiveness and termination fairness ( $\beta = 0.79, t = 17.9, p < .00$ ) suggests perceptions of termination fairness become greater as a social media post's offensiveness level increase.

The second regression model also indicates a significant model ( $F = 75.12, df = 1, p < .00$ ) with an  $R^2 = 0.53$ . The negative and significant relationship between offensiveness and obligation to retain ( $\beta = -0.53, t = -8.67, p < .00$ ) suggests that a company's obligation to retain the employee increases as a social media post becomes less offensive. For R2, the results indicate that respondents relate the offensiveness level of a social media post with termination fairness and a company's obligation to retain the employee.

To test for boundary conditions regarding the relationship between offensiveness and termination fairness, Process Mediation Analysis (Hayes, 2018) was used to assess possible mediators that might provide an alternative relationship between offensiveness and fairness. Following social convergence, we asked respondents if they have posted

**Table 1**  
Study 1: Employees awareness of social media policies.

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
1. Does your current employer have a social media policy?	34.9%	46.9%	18.3%
2. Are you aware of what the social media policy says?	30.3%	55.4%	14.3%
3. Does the social media policy say employees are not allowed to post about your employer at all?	12.6%	57.1%	30.3%
4. Does the social media policy include disciplinary consequences for negative posts about your employer?	22.3%	46.9%	30.9%
5. Does the social media policy include disciplinary consequences for negative posts about your coworkers?	22.3%	44.6%	33.1%
6. Does the social media policy include disciplinary consequences for negative posts about your customers?	24.6%	44.6%	30.9%
7. Does the social media policy include disciplinary consequences for positive posts about your employer?	7.4%	64.0%	28.6%
8. Is the social media policy discussed during employee orientation?	26.9%	66.9%	6.3%
9. Is the social media policy discussed during employee meetings?	22.3%	71.4%	6.3%
10. Are you required to attend a training about the social media policy (whether online or face-to-face)?	18.3%	76.0%	5.7%
11. Are you required to sign a form stating you are aware of and understand the social media policy?	24.0%	70.9%	5.1%
12. Are you aware of any coworkers who have violated the social media policy?	17.1%	73.7%	9.1%

Note:  $n = 175$ .

offensive work-related content. Experience posting negative comments regarding work could serve as a mediator between offensiveness and termination fairness. The relationship between offensiveness and having posted offensive material at work was not significant at any reasonable *p*-value. Further, we also tested the frequency of social media usage overall as a mediator as the more someone uses social media, the more likely it is that they use social media in the workplace. Again, the link between offensiveness and termination fairness was not explained through the frequency of social media usage as the relationship between social media usage and termination fairness was not significant at any reasonable *p*-value.

### 4.3. Study 2

#### 4.3.1. Research methods

A between-subjects randomized experiment consisting of a 2 (work-related versus non-work-related post) × 2 (social media policy versus no social media policy) design was used to examine social convergence and social media governance. The scenarios described a fictional social media post that resulted in the person being fired. Only the two conditions changed in the scenarios, while the other information did not vary across the scenarios. A male avatar with the name Johnathan Taylor with the same photo was used for each scenario. The text for the scenario for work-related/social media policy present reads:

*“Johnathan Taylor is an Assistant Manager at Mama’s Kitchen and is an employee in good standing. One evening after work, he posted the following to his Facebook Account.*

*‘Work tonight at Mama’s Kitchen was a nightmare! The kids in this one family were little animals and ran all over the restaurant. If people can’t make their kids behave, they shouldn’t go out in public. Stay home with your brats!’*

*Within a day of posting this, it was shared over 10,000 times, and people argued about his description of the family at the restaurant and if he should refer to anyone’s children as “brats” or “little animals.” The Store Manager called him into the office and informed him that the HR department at corporate had decided that he should be fired. When Johnathan tried to appeal to HR by stating that this was on his personal social media account, the HR Director reminded him of the Social Media Policies that were written in the Employee Handbook regarding personal social media use. This handbook was sent via email to each employee on an annual basis, and social media was also addressed in new employee orientation. Johnathan’s termination was effective immediately.*

*Please think about this particular social media post and the person who posted it when answering the next set of questions.”*

To manipulate work-related (social convergence), Johnathan worked as either an Assistant Manager at MaMa’s Kitchen and made the post about customers or Johnathan worked as an Assistant Manager at Foster’s Furniture and made the same comment about his experience at the restaurant that night as another customer. For social media policy (social media governance), the other condition was that there was no formal social media policy, but upper management did not believe his post reflected the values of Mama’s Kitchen or Foster’s Furniture.

#### 4.3.2. Sample and procedure

Mechanical Turk was used to recruit subjects that resided in the U.S. Steps were taken to guarantee none of the participants in Study 1 were in Study 2. Subjects were randomly presented one of the four scenarios and then completed the survey. Two attentiveness items were used that asked the person’s occupation and the disciplinary result regarding the scenarios, with four answer options being available. Thirty-two subjects answered at least one attentiveness item incorrectly and were eliminated from the sample. The final sample size in all cases was *N* = 216 (63% male, 36.5% married, 53.1% had at least a 4-year degree, 48.4% made less than \$40,000 a year, *M*<sub>age</sub> = 36 years, *SD*<sub>age</sub> = 9.78, *Range*<sub>age</sub> = 18–65).

#### 4.3.3. Measures

The offensiveness level of the social media post was rated by subjects using a sliding bar with endpoints of “not offensive at all” (0) and “most offensive post I have ever read” (10).

Termination fairness was assessed with an adapted version of Konovsky and Cropanzano’s (1991) scale, which is comprised of two dimensions that focus on distributive justice and procedural justice. The four items were altered to represent termination for a social media post instead of drug testing procedures. Two items assessed the distributive justice aspect of the termination (e.g., “The termination by the company was fair” and “The employee got what he deserved as a result of the social media post”) and the other two items assessed the procedural justice aspect of the termination (e.g., “The termination process was fair” and “The company used fair procedures to terminate the employee”). Therefore, termination fairness was assessed separately based on the two justice aspects (Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991). Both measures utilized a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items were averaged to produce the termination fairness scales (distributive justice aspect:  $\alpha = 0.91$ ; procedural justice aspect:  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

#### 4.3.4. Results

Manipulation checks were included at the end of the survey. Subjects responded to one dichotomous choice question for each experimental variable. One question asked whether the social media post was work-related. The second question asked whether a social media policy was present or not. Subject responses were cross-classified against the experimental variables with each corresponding chi-square being highly significant and the pattern of responses is in the corresponding direction ( $\chi^2_{(work/not\ work\ related)} = 138.57, df = 3, p < .0001$ ;  $\chi^2_{(presence\ of\ social\ media\ policy)} = 175.71, df = 3, p < .0001$ ). Thus, the subjects interpreted the manipulations as intended.

Each condition has between 49 and 63 subjects (Table 2), which ensures adequate power for using an alpha level of 0.05 and allows medium effect sizes to emerge (Cohen, 1992). Neither the Box’s *M* or Levene’s test were significant; thus, the assumptions of equality of variance and co-variance are met. The skewness value is  $-0.17$  for procedural justice and  $-0.035$  distributive justice. The kurtosis value is  $-1.36$  for procedural justice and  $-1.383$  for distributive justice. These values are within the accepted ranges (Hair et al., 2010).

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted with termination fairness of distributive and procedural justice being the dependent variables and offensiveness level included as a covariate in the full-factorial design (Tables 2 and 3). The Wilks Lambda shows the main effect of work-related/non-work-related is significant across all dependent variables ( $p = .01$ ). While the main effect of social media policy/no social media policy present is significant in the model ( $p = .02$ ) but is only significant for procedural justice ( $p = .04$ ). The two-way interaction was not significant. Thus, returning to R3, when the post is work-related, subjects rate the firing to be fairer from both a distributive and procedural perspective. However, the presence of a social media policy only affects procedural justice. These results support the importance of having policies with defined roles and procedures, or scripts, for employees.

**Table 2**  
Means and std. deviation for main effects<sup>a</sup>.

	n	Distributive justice	Procedural justice
Work-related/no policy	53	3.02 (1.37)	3.09 (1.37)
Work-related/policy	63	3.51 (1.15)	3.68 (1.12)
Not work-related/no policy	51	2.23 (1.32)	2.28 (1.33)
Not work-related/policy	49	2.26 (1.28)	2.68 (1.37)

<sup>a</sup> Covariate of offensiveness = 4.0139.

**Table 3**  
Study 2: Test of between-subjects effects.

	Distributive justice			Procedural justice		
	df	F	Sig.	df	F	Sig.
Covariate						
Offensiveness	1	163.83	0.000	1	89.3	0.000
Main Effects						
Work-related	1	8.66	0.004	1	7.35	0.000
Social media policy	1	0.36	n.s.	1	4.15	0.043
Interaction						
Work-related * policy	1	0.47	n.s.	1	0.03	n.s.
Adjusted R-squared values						

Note:  $n = 216$ .  
Distributive justice  $R^2 = 0.51$ .  
Procedural justice  $R^2 = 0.39$ .

To further assess boundary conditions, we tested social media convergence related items such as if the respondent had posted controversial material in the workplace and the frequency of social media usage implying that the more frequent the respondent uses social media the more likely that social media usage is in the workplace. Process mediation analysis is used to assess alternative explanations between the treatment conditions work related and nonwork-related and the presence of social media policy and the justice items.

In the case of the respondent posting controversial material in the workplace, in no case was the relationship between either HR policy presence or work/nonwork-related to posting controversial material in the workplace below a  $p$ -value of .05. Thus, without this step, mediation cannot occur between either policy presence or work/nonwork-related and the dependent variables of distributive or procedural justice.

In the case of the respondent's social media frequency, in no case was either policy or workplace condition related to the frequency of social media usage at any reasonable  $p$ -value when assessed using Process mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018). Without this first step of statistical significance, mediation is not possible. Thus, the relationships found in our MANCOVA experimental design are not better explained through other possible predictors feasible for social convergence.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research extends the social media marketing governance literature by incorporating role theory and script theory (Solomon et al., 1985); thus, illustrating the importance of having clearly outlined social media policies so that employees understand that whether they are on personal time or at work, their use of social media can impact their employment status. This paper also extends justice theory in two ways. Previous research has utilized justice theory to apply to outsiders with a legitimate business relationship with the company, such as customers (del Río-Lanza et al., 2013). This paper expands justice theory to include the perceptions of outsiders, such as society or potential customers. Additionally, justice theory is extended to the social media literature, specifically to the social media marketing governance literature, and explains perceptions of termination fairness of distributive and procedural justice for involuntary terminations that are due to social convergence.

The results of Study 1 indicate that when society reads about these terminations, the company may be viewed as unfair if the post is not perceived as highly offensive. When a social media post is deemed highly offensive, then society is less likely to support the employee and more likely to believe that the termination was fair, and the employer has no further obligation to retain the employee.

As seen in Study 2, terminations that arise from work-related posts (social convergence) are perceived as fairer from both a distributive and procedural perspective. This research suggests that negative posts about the workplace are less tolerated and firings are fairer than non-work-related posts. The presence of a workplace social media policy that employees are aware of is important for the perception of procedural justice. For society, when employees lack awareness of their employers' social media policies for personal use and have not received training on these policies, the employer has violated the psychological contract.

### 5.2. Managerial implications and practice

As a strategic marketing tool, social media provides opportunities and threats to companies simultaneously. For instance, social media may present opportunities for companies to market products and allow employees to network with customers. However, some threats include disparagement of the company or coworkers and harm to the company's reputation (O'Connor et al., 2016), potentially resulting in the company's inability to attract talented applicants or retain good employees (Cortini, 2009). To overcome these threats, companies need to be proactive and have governance over employee usage of social media to minimize risks and potential liabilities, such as negative publicity, reduced employee morale, and lawsuits (Baker et al., 2011). To have social media governance, companies need to adopt specific social media policies that are given to employees and provide appropriate training to employees on their responsibilities when posting on social media (Cortini, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2016). If employees can be terminated for personal social media use, the employer must explain that all employees represent the company even when they are "off the clock." The lack of awareness of social media policies found in Study 1 aligns with the results of other studies (Cortini & Fantinelli, 2018; Olmstead et al., 2016) and provides additional insight by discovering more detailed information that employees lack an understanding of how social convergence may impact their company and employment as well as the consequences of violating social media policies.

In the scenario about the bus driver, Mr. Johnny Cook, many people in the online community perceived his termination to be unfair. While his original post had about 200 likes, the post about his firing was shared over 150,000 times, made national news, and resulted in a CBA that demanded he be reinstated (CBS 46, 2013). The bus driver filed a lawsuit and was represented by the ACLU. Although the terms of the lawsuit settlement are confidential, the ACLU and the Harralson County School District issued a joint press release affirming that Mr. Cook did not violate the school district's written social media policy for employees and he had exercised his right to free speech (ACLU of Georgia, n.d.). Cases such as this illustrate the necessity of developing specific social media policies and procedures related to discipline or termination for violations. The development of a social media governance plan, that clearly defines policies and procedures, and that managers apply and interpret according to the law is crucial to reducing the risk of possible lawsuits from terminated employees as well as society's perceptions of the brand.

### 5.3. Limitations and future research

While the preliminary investigation provided direction for the development of the research questions, findings are limited due to not all the Fortune 500 companies' social media policies being accessible. A study of all the policies would be interesting and could provide further insight; however, it is not likely that all companies would provide their social media policies, possibly due to legal concerns.

Study 1 has several limitations. Using a sample from Mechanical Turk results in a self-selective sample that is also a convenience sample. A comparison of the results from the study by Pew Research (Smith & Anderson, 2018), in which only 32% of respondents were aware of a social media policy for their company, to our results with 33% of

participants being aware of a social media policy, suggests that on awareness, there is consistency across the studies. Another limitation is that it's not possible to test for various effects of specific content when using a sample of real-life scenarios. Future research could use a policy capturing study which would utilize a larger selection. Study 2 has the same sample limitations as Study 1. Additionally, an online experiment was used, thus, increasing internal validity but at the expense of external validity. Finally, the two dimensions of termination fairness were measured using two-item scales (Cropanzano & Konovsky, 1995), which is not optimal for assessing validity. Future research would benefit from the development of a more robust scale.

Our review of the literature uncovered limited previous research into the termination of employees for personal social media use. This exploratory research is the first to examine termination fairness with dooced employees and is an essential first step into developing best practices for employers in creating social media marketing governance. Future research could investigate different social media posts that did

not result in terminations but did result in CBAs. Studies 1 and 2 investigated society's perspective on the fairness of dooced employees. A more focused study on private-sector versus government-sector employees could identify whether society believes it is fairer to terminate employees in one sector who make offensive social media posts. For instance, society may expect government-sector employees to be held to a higher standard when posting on social media. Since the research is limited in this critical area of social media governance, numerous directions can be taken in future research.

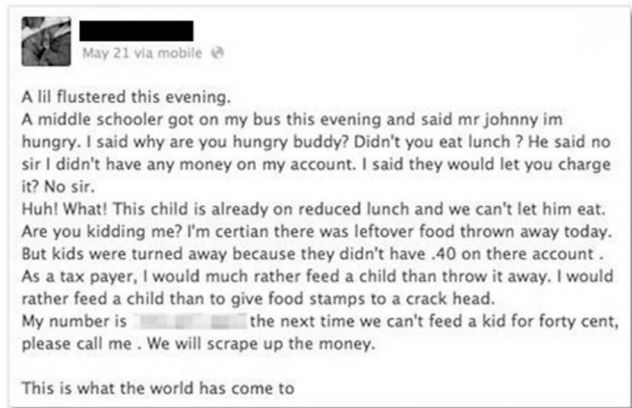
**Acknowledgements**

This research was funded by a grant from James Madison University. The authors would like to thank William T. Faranda for his review of our manuscript and thoughtful comments and edits. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers.

**Appendix A. Scenarios for Study 1**

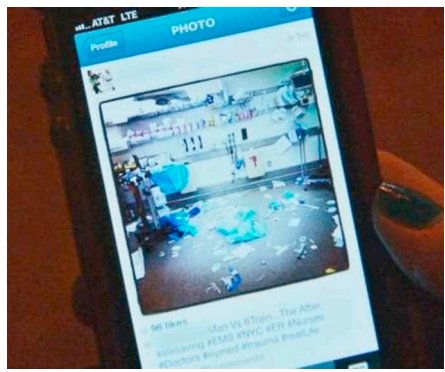
*Scenario 1: bus driver*

Please think about this particular social media post and the person who posted it when answering the next set of questions. This is a real social media post from the past 5 years. A middle school bus driver posted the following statement on his personal Facebook page. The 6th-grade boy wrote a statement about the situation in which he confirmed that everything the man posted was true. The man was fired from his job the following day because he refused to recant and apologize for the Facebook post.



*2: Nurse*

Please think about this particular social media post and the person who posted it when answering the next set of questions. This is a real social media post from the past 5 years. An emergency room nurse reposted the following picture with the statement “#Man vs. 6 train” on her personal Instagram account, which was shared from a doctor's Instagram account that was employed at the same place. The woman was fired by the end of her shift but was told that she did not violate a hospital policy or HIPAA. The doctor who originally posted the picture with the statement was not disciplined.



### Scenario 3: liquor store clerk

Please think about this particular social media post and the person who posted it when answering the next set of questions. This is a real social media post from the past 5 years. A liquor store employee posted the following picture and statement to her personal Facebook and Instagram accounts during a Halloween party. She was fired a few days later.



### Scenario 4: communications director

Please think about this particular social media post and the person who posted it when answering the next set of questions. This is a real social media post from the past 5 years. A communications director (public relations executive) tweeted the following statement as she was boarding a flight from London to South Africa to visit her family for the holidays. By the time her 11-hour flight landed, she was fired.



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