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# Consequences of Social Listening via Mediated Communication Technologies (MCTs):

## Application Across Levels of the Communication Hierarchy

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### ABSTRACT

As mediated communication technologies, or MCTs, are increasingly used to interact, consequences across levels of communication arise. The social listening process using MCTs has positive and negative implications. The process of social listening exists within four levels of communication. The pervasiveness and determinism of MCTs and their impact on communication and social listening are supported by existing and developing research, practical examples, and theoretical frameworks. This critical review of literature discusses potential consequences of social listening via MCTs. These findings (1) demonstrate alignment among levels of communication, relevant theories, and resulting social consequences, such as big data and mediated deception, and (2) support exploratory research investigating mediated deception, which may contribute towards future studies of social listening and MCTs. In closing, a matrix to visualize the communication contexts, theories, and social consequences related to social listening via MCTs is presented.

### KEYWORDS

Communication Hierarchy, Digital Communication, Mediated Communication Technologies (MCTs), Mediated Deception, Social Consequences, Social Listening, Social Media

### INTRODUCTION

This paper [article] seeks to explore the process of social listening via mediated communication technologies, or MCTs, such as social media and digital messaging apps. These intersecting phenomena are examined across four communication levels, or contexts, of the widely recognized

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hierarchy. Technology's pervasiveness in everyday life continues to influence communication, and grasping the implications of these changes present a problem as individual experiences become more nuanced through online interactions. Social listening continues to develop as an emergent dimension of listening via MCTs, presenting a rich opportunity for an exploratory critical review of existing research and information to better the process when using MCTs and among communication contexts. Upon establishing this research baseline for contemporary social listening using MCTs across communication contexts, potential social consequences are identified and discussed. This report concludes by presenting a matrix of information designed to inspire and support forthcoming and future research exploring MCTs.

## PURPOSE STATEMENT

The landscape of MCTs, including social media and mobile technologies, is continuously innovating, while the user base is steadily growing over time. As a result, the process of social listening emerges as a norm for communication interactions facilitated MCTs. Technological determinism represents an opportunity through this current research comprising a critical review of literature to capture a snapshot of contemporary social listening and MCT history to better inform considerations of emerging implications and outcomes. By exploring two (2) broadly designed research questions, the purpose of this report is to capture literature findings which reveal intersecting information about social listening and MCTs across theories, communication contexts, and developing social consequences.

### Research Questions

This review of existing academic and trade literature attempts to uncover potentially meaningful information regarding the intersection of MCTs, social listening, and the levels of communication. As well, the purpose of this work is to identify possible social consequences inductively as they present among these variables. The potential findings from this exploration and critical review address the following research questions:

**RQ1:** In what ways has the persistent user growth and technological innovation of mediated communication technologies (or MCTs) potentially influenced (a) the traditional communication hierarchy, and (b) the social listening process?

**RQ2:** What social consequences are emerging from the persistent user growth and technological innovation of MCTs?

## SOCIAL LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION USING MCTS

Considering the stated purpose and RQs of this project, this section presents the synthesis of ideas emerging from the critical review of literature among three (3) main phenomena: (1) the social listening process, (2) the evolution and determinism of MCTs, and (3) social listening among the levels of the communication hierarchy.

### Defining the Social Listening

Social listening develops from the persistent popularity of MCTs as communication channels.

Social listening is defined by Stewart and Arnold (2018) as "an active process of attending to, observing, interpreting, and responding to a variety of stimuli through mediated, electronic, and social channels" (p. 86). Traditionally, listening is described as "the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural and visual stimuli" (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996, p. 69). Technological innovation and determinism warranted recognizing social listening due to its distinctiveness within mediated contexts. Social listening encompasses the means in which individuals attend to, observe,

interpret, and respond to mediated, electronic, and social messages, such as those exchanged via text message, digital apps, or social media platforms (Stewart & Arnold, 2018).

## MCTs: Description and Evolution

MCTs are described as "Internet related communications technology" (Luthfia & Sofian, 2018, p.1). MCTs arise from technological and behavioral trends in Big Tech(nology), social media, mobile technology, and beyond. The understanding of precisely what encompasses the definition of MCTs is constantly innovating as the digital ecosystem changes; therefore, research that explores MCTs and their effects is relevant. Qualifying the contemporary description of MCTs is beneficial, both to use in this current project ae well as to establish a timely and clear meaning for use in ongoing and future research.

The present work qualifies MCTs as communication channels comprised of social media platforms, mobile apps & devices, and other emerging digital platforms which foster human interaction and mediated engagement. MCTs foster a new environment for human communication, and this results in the users of MCTs their own unique communication cadence online to manage digital behavior and establish personal norms for their interactions on MCTs. Existing data further reveals the importance and need for continuous MCT research.

The growth among American social media users reveals the popularity and pervasiveness of MCTs over time. In 2005 the Pew Research Center (2021) began to track the rate of social media adoption. Back then only 5% of American adults were using social media, which expanded to roughly 50% by 2011. More recently, social media users comprise 72% of American adults (Pew Research Center, 2021). Today, MCT growth globally is evidenced by the 4.76 billion social media users (59.4%) and 5.16 billion users of Internet (64.4%) worldwide (Petrosyan, 2023). Mobile users are consistently increasing worldwide and expected to continue over time. In 2021, 7.1 billion mobile users were reported across the globe with anticipation of reaching over 7.4 billion by 2025 (Taylor, 2023).

## Social Listening Across Communication Contexts

Social listening functions at varying levels of the communication hierarchy, including, but limited to: (1) intrapersonal, (2) interpersonal (3) organizational, and (4) cultural levels when communicating via MCTs (West & Turner, 2018). Luthfia and Sofian (2018) claim that "Internet related communications technology such as social media, mobile phone, SMS, email, online games, blogs, and Skype connects people interpersonally across cultures, nations, time, and space" (p. 2).

### *Intrapersonal*

Exploring intrapersonal communication and social listening begin an introduction to examining nuances to among the hierarchy. Impression management acts as a key component of intrapersonal social listening. Using MCTs to facilitate impression management exemplifies intrapersonal social listening. "Activities people engage in to look good to themselves and others" (p.116) wherein MCT users observe, attend, and respond to their own internal and external stimuli embody social listening at this fundamental level of self-communication (West & Turner, 2018).

Intrapersonal social listening via MCTs may influence an individual's construction of meaning and presentation of self in response to their interaction(s) with content or other users. Findings about behavior uncovered on the professional social networking site (SNS) LinkedIn reveal how impression management embodies social listening. Paliszkiewicz and Mądra-Sawicka (2016) recognize novelties among workforce recruitment because of LinkedIn's features. This MCT platform "allows users to fill in information, which includes profile summary, experience, volunteer experience and causes, projects, languages, certifications, publications, education, discussion posts and comments, recommendations, endorsed skills and expertise, interests, honors and awards, and contact information" (Paliszkiewicz & Mądra-Sawicka, 2016, p. 4). As job seekers build their professional social presence and disclose information about themselves using MCTs, they create professional identities to instill a

positive impression on recruiters and hiring managers. Impression management intended to present and maintain a "best [professional] self" requires attending and responding to digital stimuli, which exemplifies social listening at the intrapersonal level.

### *Interpersonal*

Interpersonal or relational communication is commonly recognized as interaction between two individuals in a personal relationship (West & Turner, 2018). Traditionally, interpersonal communication referred to face-to-face communication between people. As users of MCTs continue to embrace the shift towards mediated communication, individuals engage in social listening by attending to digital stimuli, making sense of their own interpretation of meaning, and responding accordingly. This critical analysis uncovers distinct listening norms and purposes of interpersonal social listening, including (1) social surveillance, (2) appreciation, (3) empathic social listening, and (4) online social support.

### *Social Surveillance*

MCT users listen online to gather social intelligence from and sense-make with digital peers. Social media platforms present a plethora of readily available data about individual users, so when people initiate online connections with peers they are likely exposed to an array of cues. Previously, the breadth and depth of this information might only become available through a series of personal self-disclosures. Existing research appears to support that MCT users readily engage in social listening when attempting to initiate relationships or learn more about digital peers.

The findings about interpersonal social listening for social surveillance are paradoxical. On one hand, engaging with content containing positive and entertaining self-disclosures appears to increase a user's feelings of connection with their online peers (Utz, 2015). Conversely, social media users indicate negative psychological and relational experiences resulting from their use of these MCTs. Increased connectivity, visibility, accessibility, persistence, and social feedback may seem to be beneficial to communication and engagement; however, mediated stressors identified from engaging on Facebook such as managing inappropriate or annoying content, feeling digitally confined, lack of privacy and control, social comparison, jealousy, and relationship conflict (Fox & Moreland, 2015).

These conflicting outcomes indicate that users of MCTs and, more specifically, SNSs are actively listening to peers online and imply the readiness of these platforms to foster interactions within their interpersonal relationships. For example, Facebook users disclose experiencing undesirable feelings simultaneously with the social pressure to maintain presence and be active on the SNS (Fox & Moreland, 2015). These complexities suggest that the increased feelings of social connections may exist concurrently with negative emotions resulting from listening online for the purpose of social surveillance.

### *Appreciative*

Appreciative listening is conceptualized as a highly individualized process of listening to derive pleasure and enjoyment from one's chosen stimulus. Further, a listener's perception, experience, background, expectations, motivation, interest, and previous knowledge influences the experience (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). Appreciative social listening ties directly into subjective well-being which can be defined as "people's positive affective reaction (e.g. positive mood and energy) to the perception of their interactions with others via SNS's" (Chang & Hsu, 2016, p.721). Previous research suggests that social media can enrich users' quality of life by fulfilling users' affective needs (entertaining), cognitive needs (information seeking), social interactive needs, and personal integrative needs (self-presentation). Thus, Chang & Hsu (2016) believe that proper use of social media will lead to higher perception of subjective well-being, and this finding invites consideration about the potential benefits of social listening. Appreciative social listening draws on the notion of the "active audience" which coincides with the climate of MCTs in the interpersonal context. Audience

activity where MCT users engage in appreciative social listening may include utility, intentionality, selectivity, and imperviousness to influence (Chang & Hsu, 2016).

### *Empathic*

Empathy is described as the process of both inferring thoughts and feelings and then responding sensitively to another person's experience (Batson, 2009; West & Turner, 2018). Since MCTs may provide a forum for connection and communication, and the social listening process affords people to identify, develop, and communicate empathy online. Social listening may glean "information [that] might be personal experience, such as emotions and feelings, or narrative accounts of experiences" (Zhao, et al., 2013, p.1042). Engaging in empathic social listening and its subsequent response varies based on an individual's unique digital communication cadence and norms when using MCTs as mentioned earlier. Empathic listening, may also be describes as therapeutic listening because it involves users having emotional understanding and to listen with responsiveness towards their digital peers (Welch & Mickelson, 2020). Empathic social listening contributes to the motivation to participate in social support from online peers which is recognized separately among these interpersonal purposes.

### *Social Support*

Users of MCTs gravitate towards communities or groups online and commonly use these channels to communicate with peers who share similar interests or lifestyle traits and there appear to be positive effects to this engagement online. Cole, et. al., (2017) posit that online social support (1) will be somewhat independent of in-person social support, especially for people with weak in-person social support systems, (2) will be associated with lower levels of depressive thoughts and feelings in ways that complement in-person social support, and (3) will offset some of the adverse effects of peer victimization in a manner similar to the positive effects of in-person social support. MCTs may "fulfill a need for social belongingness, distract people from various stressors, or offer micro-boosts to self-esteem by being "friended," "liked," or "followed," by others" (Cole, Nick, Zelkowitz, Roeder, & Spinelli, 2017, p. 456).

Social listening for social support recognizes a niche that (a) "affords social opportunities that are more radically different for people who have difficulty obtaining social support in the face-to-face world but (b) yields opportunities that largely recapitulate the in-person opportunities already available to people who are socially successful in the face-to face world" (Cole, et. al, 2017, p. 462). Social listening for pharmacovigilance has implications regarding feedback on products, patient experiences, and patient advocacy among health communities on MCTs. The spontaneous communication occurring in the form of interpersonal social support in online health communities also has implications to patient involvement within the organizational communication context as well. Findings suggest that involving patients at various stages of the drug development process using MCTs indicates a willingness among consumers to participate more actively in organic product research through storytelling about patient experiences and health management (Anand, et al., 2017).

### *Organizational*

The social listening process is acknowledged most obviously as it arises within strategic social media and social media marketing for a brand or business. Findings reveal six (6) distinct purposes of social listening within organizational contexts: (1) community building, (2) customer relationship management (CRM), (3) crisis management, (4) product support, (5) competitive insights, and (6) talent recruitment. "Organizations can listen externally to consumers and clients, consumers and clients can listen to one another, and both groups can listen internally to employees and other critical stakeholders" (Stewart & Arnold, 2018, p. 86); thus illustrating an intersection between interpersonal and organizational layers of social listening.

### *Community Building*

Social listening via MCTs enables brands to discover where their community exists online, and to identify new niches and segments within their target audiences. Developing research examining community building on SNSs by organizations may involve forming virtual communities for social interests, marketing, civic engagement, health, content distribution, and education (Cole, et al., 2017; Young & Rossman, 2015). "Organizational social media accounts need to listen to conversations happening online to determine what knowledge or experience they can contribute to followers and/or how they can support them" (Maben & Gearhart, 2018, p. 108). Community building originating from social listening activities suggests an alteration between the perceived value of face-to-face and mediated interactions when using MCTs to engage with consumers. The contemporary hyper-mediated culture has changed global boundaries, and makes the interactions among organizations and the members of their community more immediate and seamless.

### *Customer Relationship Management (CRM)*

Organizational social listening can be recognized "as more than simple eavesdropping for marketing insights, surveillance, or monitoring. To an unknown extent, followers expect to be heard and to receive a quality response of some kind" (Maben & Gearhart, 2018, p. 112). Practical research emerging from social media management also supports opportunities for improved CRM through organizational social listening. According to Bullock (2017), when users reach out to brands via SNSs for CRM "60% of customers expect brands to respond to their queries within an hour. The same study shows that a friendly customer service could encourage 76% of customers to recommend a brand," (section 3, para. 2). Further, MCT users are "looking for a direct response to a problem or question….31% of consumers interact with brands on social to gain direct access to customer services and product experts" (Bullock, 2017, section 3, para.3). With roughly 1/3 of consumers using MCTs as their "preferred channels…to seek customer care from brands," this apparent rise in "social CRM" reinforces the purpose of this current work. Social listening supports social CRM because it provides the opportunity to turn negative situations into positive interactions (Bullock, 2017; Stewart, et.al., 2017). Case study research examining social listening via Twitter at an American university reveals enhanced communication and better relationships among library staff and consumers, and expedient and positive responsiveness appears to impact consumer sentiment from negative to positive (Stewart, et al., 2017).

### *Crisis Management*

During a crisis, social listening is critical to timely response. Mediated crisis communication research uncovers disaster responses on social media which are supported through social listening activities, include "preparing and receiving disaster preparedness information and warnings and signaling and detecting disasters prior to an event to (re)connecting community members following a disaster" (Houston, et al., 2015, p.1). Stewart and Wilson (2016) propose the STREMII model for social media crisis communication, which denotes social listening and surveillance as the initial phase. This developing model emphasizes social listening and responsive engagement via MCTs to communicate with users throughout all stages of a crisis.

During the recent global pandemic, social listening proved to be valuable yet complex regarding communication of important health information among MCT users. MCTs became agents for real-time research about health communication, information and misinformation dissemination, consumer reaction to messages, and public opinion (Burzynska, et. al., 2020; CDC, 2020; Afolabi, et al., 2020). As the Center for Disease Control (CDC) worked carefully to manage their information flow during the pandemic, conversations about COVID-19 via MCTs emphasized the value of organizational social listening in order to be responsive and informative (CDC, 2020). During crisis, MCTs can serve as both an agent of communication and as a utility for real-time data acquisition yet may contribute to

the risk of misinformation or threat(s) to the reputation of an organization. Social listening enables organizations to proactively attend to digital dialogue and provide timely responses among MCT users accordingly.

### *Product Signals*

Social listening via MCTs allows consumers to be heard and feel valued by organizations.

The process provides insights about product popularity, likes and dislikes of consumers, and what the consumers need and/or desire next (Jackson, 2017). Brands demonstrate the benefits of social listening for product signals Lay's Do Us a Flavor campaign exemplifies a strategic combination of social listening, user-generated content, rich media, and increased engagement to generate innovative ideas for their product flavors based on consumer feedback. By social listening to their consumers' preferences, Lay's was able to save money on product prototypes and physical supply costs while gathering consumer data to drive their product development and marketing (Johnson, 2017).

The agency responsible for the campaign cites social listening as the first step in their creative and promotional processes for the Lay's brand (Johnson, 2017). Brands such as Nike and Maybelline have also achieved positive outcomes as a result of social listening for product signals. The relationship between a brand and its consumers influences decision-making, meeting consumers' needs, and motivating the community. Social listening affords businesses a greater understanding about brand sentiment and consumer-brand relationships (Curren, et. al., 2018). Social listening may provide a solution to organizations to gather timely data about product signals from spontaneous digital dialogue on MCTs.

### *Competitive Insights*

Social Listening can even yield new leads and prospects for organizations when consumers are seeking recommendations from peers, or when they express dissatisfied or feel ignored by a brand. When an organization engages with an MCT user who may be seeking out a service or is aimed at a competitor, an opportunity arises to provide value (Barris, 2020; Brennan, 2017). A classic example of the digital "pizza wars" among Pizza Hut, Papa Johns and Dominos concludes that "social media competitive analysis allows a business to gain possible business advantage by analyzing the publicly available social media data of a business and its competitors. A business can compare its social media data to the social media data of their competitors to gain perspective on their performance. The comparison could help a business to identify weaknesses, find new opportunities and adjust their social media strategy" (He, et al., 2013, p. 469).

Social listening for competitive intelligence can encourage competitive collaboration. On occasion, consumers will ask about a competitor's products when they are looking for something specific but are not concerned about the product brand. By social listening and responding in real time, organizations can present solutions in front of a captive audience. Social listening among your niche, across all target audiences and market segments, competitors' and the brand's mentions, handles, and hashtags may potentially foster a healthy competitive digital marketplace (Barris, 2020; Nazarova, 2017). "If you can't solve a client's problem, do not hesitate to recommend your competitors. They can easily recommend you back" (Nazarova, 2017, p. 3).

### *Talent Recruitment*

Social listening can inspire talent recruitment by organizations. In the case of the publishing company Sage North America, a student tweeted about the brand in class and their social listening strategy enabled the brand to respond. The brand sent the student a goodie bag in preparation for final exams as thanks for the positive shout out on Twitter. The conversation continued online, with the student sharing the experience in a social media blog. This engagement resulted in the company inviting the student to visit and share his story with employees about the power of social media. During the meeting, the student mentioned being on the market for an internship opportunity and ended up

joining the organization as a result of the brand's social listening and the student's engagement with the brand online (Kerpen, 2019).

While this example demonstrates how an escalation from spontaneous conversation developed into becoming a member of the organization resulted from social listening and engagement by both parties using MCTs, there are intentional strategies that organizations can implement using the features and reach afforded by these tools. For example, employing keyword searches to support social listening enables organizations to seek out specialized skills or levels of experience. Social listening allows companies to identify and reach out to highly talented individuals who may be assets to their organization even when the MCT user is unaware that an opportunity is available or are not actively job seeking (Robinson, 2015; Smith, 2023).

### *Cultural*

Most recently, the global pandemic revealed social listening at a cultural level occurring routinely as the media, government organizations and agencies, and individuals attempted to access information, remain informed, and execute academic and/or professional duties using MCTs. During this health emergency, users were relying on MCTs to access information and narratives from individuals and agencies across the globe. Health messages and critical content was shared readily using MCTs comprised of important health data, global updates, official statements, personal opinions, humor and memes, images and videos, and political mandates and messages. Social listening in this global context generated a wealth of data and information for individual MCT users as well as the worldwide health community. MCTs provided a time capture of the crisis on a day-by-day and geographic basis (Rosen, 2021; Suarez- Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021).

Throughout this crucial and dynamic exchange, cultural implications regarding information flow and digital communication norms were perceived and portrayed. Among them, some individuals and groups would react by getting offended when others resort to expressing humor on MCTs during a time of crisis, while others perceive it as a healthy and light-hearted coping mechanism. Others may find themselves challenging or scrutinizing sources of information more critically during this time, as the possibility for misinformation to spread via MCTs is easily fostered and represents a potential risk to global health. During a pandemic, an urgency exists to access credible and accurate information. The pandemic exposed many realities about the profound role and potential consequences of using MCTs for communication and social listening within the context of global and intercultural communication (Rosen, 2021; Suarez- Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021).

## COMMUNICATION THEORIES

This critical review identifies three (3) theoretical frameworks from the literature which support ongoing and future exploratory investigations of mediated communication research: (1) Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002); (2) Interpersonal Deception Theory (Buller & Burgoon, 1996); and (3) Truth Deception Theory (Levine, 2014).

### Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM)

CPM offers insight on the phenomenon of social listening within its three (3) main assumptions: (1) Humans are choice makers, (2) humans are rule makers and rule followers, and (3) humans' choices and rules are based on a consideration of others as well as the self (Petronio, 2002). These assumptions suggest implications for social listening, particularly in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural communication contexts. CPM embodies choice making and "is rooted in assumptions about how individuals think and communicate as well as assumptions about the nature of human beings" (West & Turner 2018, p. 207). This framework implies that members of society make choices based on social listening and their use of MCTs to communicate, taking into consideration the influences and perspectives of others before making decisions.

Social listening via MCTs relates to CPM from the phenomena of digital disclosure and life satisfaction. Umphrey & Sherblom (2018) state that "life satisfaction represents a person's cognitive, subjective judgment of how life matches up to a preconceived ideal" (p. 7). Individuals make comparative choices based on their observations of others and the plethora of data readily available on MCTs and increased opportunities for engagement online may influence their levels of digital disclosure as well as life satisfaction, Umphrey & Sherblom (2018) also state that "comparing that evaluation of one's own life accomplishments to a preconceived personal life plan and to the achievements of others" (p. 7) which may occur as the result of social listening and use of MCTs. Nonetheless, there appear to be beneficial outcomes in that "life satisfaction increases when a person listens, connects with others, builds positive relationships, and engages in expressions of empathy, sympathy, compassion, and caring that, in turn, have positive effects on a person's wellbeing" (Umphrey & Sherblom, 2018, p. 7).

## Interpersonal Deception Theory

Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT) also has relevancy when exploring social listening and MCTs. Buller and Burgoon (1996) note describe deception as an ongoing and dynamic process and dependent on the interpersonal features in the relationship, such as being familiar with the dyadic partner, and context or the medium of the interaction with them. IDT denotes interactions in which the communicator believability is in question. A complete comprehension of deception requires approaching it as a "dynamic, iterative process of mutual influence between senders who manipulate information to depart from the truth and receivers who attempt to establish the validity of those messages" (Buller & Burgoon, 1996, p. 235).

The mere act of engaging with one another establishes an implied relationship and these engagements may accelerate among MCTs. Interpersonal deception is grounded within the interpersonal relationship and may or may not be interactive to the extent that there may be delayed turn exchanges or opportunities for immediate feedback. Centrally important is the communication context, and the interdependence and the degree of familiarity among the parties. Interpersonal deception is contingent upon the kind of situation and relationship in which the interaction is embedded (Buller & Burgoon, 1996). "In IDT, the expectations, goals, intentions and motivations, and knowledge possessed by senders and receivers determine the interaction patterns that occur in deceptive exchanges" (Buller & Burgoon, 1996, p. 215). Based on this framework, implications may arise from social listening via MCTs.

## Truth Default Theory (TDT)

Truth Default Theory (TDT) is a relatively new theory of deception and deception detection (Levine, 2014). Levine (2014) states: "Unlike previous theories of deception detection, TDT emphasizes contextualized communication content in deception detection over nonverbal behaviors associated with emotions, arousal, strategic self-presentation, or cognitive effort. The central premise of TDT is that people tend to believe others and that this "truth-default" is adaptive" (p. 378). When communicating with each other, there tends to be this default presumption that the other person is being honest, "this presumption of honesty is highly adaptive" (Levine, 2019, p. 94). Levine (2019) further argues that humans are honest most of the time, but he does note that "the presumption of honesty makes humans vulnerable to deceit" (p. 94).

When situations arise where people abandon the supposition of honesty, then TDT describes when to suspect a lie, how to conclude that a lie is told, and "specifies the conditions under which people are typically honest and the conditions under which people are likely to engage in deception" (Levine, 2014, p. 379). Levine (2014, 2019) suggests that the presumption of honesty trade-off is valuable in that we gain far more efficient communication and social functioning with the mere cost of occasional deceit. However, given the ubiquity of mediated deception, TDT's truth-default premise may create challenges when users engage in social listening on MCTs.

## SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL LISTENING VIA MCTS

MCTs invite opportunities for individuals, organizations, cultures, and societies across the globe to engage in mediated interactions and engage in social listening as the process continuously evolves. The popularity and growth among MCTs alter how traditional listening behavior is enacted within mediated interactions and across communication contexts. This developing phenomenon draws about several recognizable social consequences including big data, deception, social listening and cyberstalking, mediated deception and dark sides.

### Big Data

Big data has quickly become a term ubiquitous in the means by which MCTs are collecting data for use by advertisers, SNSs, and other corporations. Bail (2017) states that "in recent years, social scientists have expressed considerable enthusiasm for the study of organizations and collective behavior using social media data" (p. 2). The term big data intrinsically represents the pervasive collection and analysis of large quantities of information, which is subsequently organized into databases for analysis and operationalization as a monetizable commodity. The richness of mediated communication does not come without complications. Stewart and Arnold (2018) note that "complications arise from the wealth of social data available which can only be harnessed fully by participating in social listening. An overwhelming amount of both positive and negative information is being put out in public view resulting from interpersonal interactions online" (p. 95).

Bukovina (2016) states that social media are a great database of society's behavior, arguing that "sharing" and "conversations" on social media are the most important building block sources for big data (pp. 1-2). Companies like Facebook and Instagram devote considerable resources to the collection and analysis of such data on their applications, meanwhile users are often not aware of the length providers go when collecting and analyzing their data. Muhammad, et al., (2017) contend that "big data digital footprints are digital DNA that customers generate and leave on digital platforms when they interact with and use various media channels, including social media" (p. 1). They describe these digital footprints as social data created by users when interacting with media channels, comprised of memories, moments and behavior (p. 1).

Welch and Mickelson (2020) argue that "different listening environments bring forth different listening demands" (p. 99). As such, understanding the relationship among social listening, MCTs, and big data within practical and academic contexts appears to be increasingly valuable. Social listening has become gradually more important among individuals, organizations, and greater society, especially regarding communication and information exchange. In the ongoing exploration of social listening, considerations regarding the influence of big data and the pervasiveness among MCTs to facilitate human communication must be considered. The ever-evolving influx of data as a result of increased personal and collective exchanges through MCTs are rapidly evolving; thus, shifting the value of the interactions within the broader digital context.

### Deception

Deception may be found in various aspects of society and human behavior, and existing research reveals that deception online is ubiquitous (Drouin, et al., 2016). Regarding intrapersonal deception or self-deception, Knapp, et al., (2016) note that "self-deception is a motivated unawareness of conflicting knowledge in which threatening knowledge is selectively filtered from consciousness as a psychological defense, thereby reducing anxiety and inducing a positive self-bias" (p. 133). Knapp, et al., (2016) state that "one study showed 473 out of 1,100 resumes contained one or more significant inaccuracies" (p. 363).

Deception plays a prevalent role in human communication among MCTs. Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) author of *Everybody Lies* put it simply: "people frequently lie—to themselves and to others" (p. 12). Impression management on MCTs may spiral into a deceptive presentation of self that depicts

a life different from reality. Social listening practices involve responding to the stimuli received during online listening processes. In select cases, the social listening process can manifest in negative ways, such as seen in cyberstalking.

## Social Listening and Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is another social consequence that is relevant when evaluating social listening and MCTs. Smoker and March (2017) define CS as the "stalking of an individual through means of electronic access and communication, including the use of hidden webcams, GPS devices, and SpyWare, to monitor victim's behavior, possibly by pursuit and contact under anonymity through fake online profiles" (p.2). Cyberstalking may be defined further as any action or behavior online in which an offender repeatedly intrudes on the life of another person to the extent that the person feels distressed or unsafe as a result (al-Khateeb, et al., 2017). MCTs may inadvertently foster CS in that it is not uncommon in romantic relationships for couples to frequently scour their lover's social media. Marcum and others (2018) qualify interpersonal electronic surveillance (IES), where a lover spends a significant amount of time monitoring the other's online behavior without their knowledge.

Problems may begin to arise when social listening via MCTs shifts towards CS. "As the romantic relationship flourishes, a partner can continue to monitor behaviors without the knowledge of the other romantic partner, especially if he or she has access to passwords, to e-mail accounts, Facebook profiles, or bank accounts" (Marcum, et al., 2018, p. 3). New communication and social norms emerging from MCTs appear complicated and convoluted regarding appropriate boundaries between social listening and CS. Marcum and others (2018) discovered that people who used social media were less likely to think that their romantic partners would be angry with their CS behavior (pp. 12-13).

A closer look at CS reveals how at its onset it may resemble social listening on MCTs. The aggressor in CS expends significant energies attending to their target's online activities and then responding to those stimuli, often in a nefarious or destructive way. Activities for both social listening and CS exist similarly in mediated contexts further blurring the distinctive boundaries between the two processes. The intent of social listening is to observe, interpret, and respond to various digital stimuli in what should be intended in either an innocent, light-hearted, or informative way. CS takes on a dark manifestation of unwanted, harmful interactions which may cause psychological distress or concerns for safety among victimized MCT users. The inherent nature of MCTs supports the social desire to have other users view the content posted and shared using these channels.

Presence and participation on MCTs implies a desire for others to view your content, albeit with individualized boundaries regarding exclusivity and engagement. This norm may innocently incite CS behaviors due to how they may be perceived by the aggressor as a continuation of presumably innocent social listening activities even after relationship termination (Smoker & March, 2017). Marcum, et al., (2018) indicate that in such cases perpetrators have a distinct advantage if they remain online "friends" with their former partner, allowing them to continue to monitor the individual (p. 4).

The blurred lines between social listening activities and CS are further complicated by big data and MCTs influence on behavioral norms. Stewart and Arnold (2018) note, "an overwhelming amount of both positive and negative information is being put out in public view resulting from interpersonal interactions online" (p. 95). MCTs interactions and engaging in social listening can produce positive or negative perceived emotions depending on the content and the context. This review produced insights into several ways that social listening activities online may contribute towards dark side or potentially deceptive outcomes via MCTs.

## Mediated Deception and Dark Sides

Consequences to social listening and MCTs emerge when considering the dark personality triad comprised of psychopathy, narcisissm, and Machiavellism. Stiff (2019) comments that "the Dark Triad has been shown to influence several behaviors in a variety of domains, usually in a way that is somewhat deviant. The traits, although conceptually distinct also tend to show some overlap in the

way they impact on behavior" (p. 62). When describing how social listening and MCTs contribute to the social consequence of mediated deception online, examining the dark triad provides insights as to potential motivations for deception behaviors which may thrive in digital environments. When social listening online, psychopaths often bully and prey on people that catch their feedback with the goal of using people for some form of self-advancement or social gain (Lopes & Hu, 2017).

Narcissists engage in social listening using MCTs for purposes of comparing themselves to other people. This helps them maintain their overdeveloped views of their own self-importance and self-esteem. (Campbell & Miller, 2011). Narcissists are more frequent users of Facebook online (Ljepava, et al., 2013) and are more likely to accept friend requests from strangers, tag themselves change their profile picture often and respond when socially listening more aggressively to derogatory comments (Carpenter, 2012). Machiavellians practice social listening too maintain a self-interest in that they will deceive, manipulate, and exploit others to reach their personal goals (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). In this sense, Machiavellians and Narcissists have correlated characteristics for manipulating and exploiting others through mediated interactions to promote themselves towards self-advancement (Lopes, & Yu, 2017).

Suler (2005) found that social media facilitates increased Psychopathic personality traits, and one possible explanation is that of the online disinhibition effect where social listening feedback online is anonymous and that contributes to more deviant behavior. The dark triad traits contribute to antisocial behaviors and feedback when engaging in social listening using MCTs. Such behaviors from Narcissists (trolling) (Ferenczi, et al, 2017) and psychopathy have a tendency toward sadism online and Machiavellianism engage in great cyberbullying (Wang, et al, 2016). The environment of MCTs and emerging behavioral norms that foster these deceptive outcomes of the dark triad, as well as deceptive messages containing misinformation, reveal social consequences that expose the dark side of social listening and MCTs.

## DISCUSSION

This manuscript [article] explores the intersection of MCTs, social listening, communication theory, and potential contexts and consequences that may warrant additional or future investigations. In this final section, the RQs presented earlier are revisited and discussed, limitations to the scope of this present work are identified and addressed, and a matrix is presented to support forthcoming and future mediated communication research by aligning the communication theories from this report with coinciding contexts and consequences as springboard for research ideas to explore.

### Addressing RQs: Implications and Takeaways

This project set out to explore the following two (2) broad research inquiries. In response to RQ1, when considering the plethora of ways that persistent user growth and technological innovation of MCTs has potentially influenced the traditional communication hierarchy and social listening process respectively, several emerging ideas are uncovered and synthesized throughout this present work. For more than a decade, MCTs have afforded individuals and organizations new ways to engage and interact. In doing so, they alter the relationship and communication among organizations and their consumers. The ongoing digital migration towards a hyper-mediated global society creates a constant need for communication researchers and practitioners to learn more about the unique ways that MCTs are used by individuals and organizations to achieve all or several of the relational and strategic purposes discussed. This opportunity also invites for ongoing consideration of the positive and negative social consequences of social listening via MCTs, and for seeking out new benefits and pitfalls of social listening during a historical time of persistent innovation to MCTs and continuous and rapid growth of the MCTs user base.

The main body of this current work discusses how the social listening process via MCTs lives among the four main levels of the communication hierarchy including intrapersonal, interpersonal,

organizational, and cultural. Social listening via MCTs intrapersonal communication emphasizes impression management as a primary demonstration of social listening behavior when using MCTs for human communication. Interpersonal communication highlights the use of social media platforms and other interactive MCTs as important mediums of relational and informational exchange where social listening frequently occurs with nuances that are unique to the digital space. This work recognizes and describes four distinct functions of social listening within the interpersonal realm which include social surveillance, appreciative social listening, empathic social listening, and online social support.

Additionally, the findings that emerge from the crossroads of social listening via MCTs regard the implications organizational communication, including corporate communication implications, formatting online and digital communities and work spaces, and using social media to facilitate collaborative projects. This work identifies and describes six strategic purposes of social listening via MCTs for organizational communication including: (1) community building, (2) customer relationship management (CRM), (3) crisis management, (4) competitive insights, (5) product signals, and (6) talent recruitment. These purposes capture the functions of social listening at this contemporary moment in MCT history and are likely to continue evolving as the platforms, tools, features, functions, trends, and audiences do.

Lastly, social listening at the cultural communication level considers how digital consumerism and pervasive adoption may contribute to larger social phenomena, such as information or misinformation dissemination during a global pandemic, and the thriving ecosystem of big data. MCTs are often viewed as tools and communication channels to assist in daily life. Initially, digital technology innovation appeared to have a limited impact on human communication behavior. As it evolved, resulting in the emergence and popularity of MCTs, these platforms appeared as helpful supplements to foster work tasks and improve productivity when communicating electronically. Today, contemporary digital technology and MCTs still strive to enrich the lives of its users and drive productivity, but at the same time they have become something much greater; MCTs now shape society as well. These channels are pushing people to communicate in ways previously unknown and, as a result, are unearthing some social consequences which are discussed in response to RQ2.

The second RQ explored the social consequences emerging from the persistent MCT user growth and technological innovation. Several noteworthy items are acknowledged and considered regarding MCTs and social listening as they continuously evolve for the reasons noted in RQ1. Takeaways here include recognizing the evident paradox arising from the human-digital communication nuances fostered when communicating and social listening via MCTs. Among these identifiable purposes of social listening, several positive outcomes and implications are realized. For example, the opportunity to seek gratification from appreciative listening or social surveillance are generally positive and beneficial outcomes. On the positive side, users generate greater connections through sharing social ties, providing assurances, enhancing relationship maintenance behaviors, and exchanging knowledge and experiences with others openly in their network.

Another takeaway from this research is in how MCTs have cultivated the development of big data and created a digital phenomenon which has become a defining presence in society. The impact of big data includes implications within industries such as ecommerce, law enforcement, Big Tech(nology), and marketing (to name a few) in addition to their impact on human communication behavior, personal relationships, social surveillance, community-building, online dating, and more. The privacy implications of big data's ever-increasing scope of visibility in people's daily lives are potentially very telling. As with any new technology so impactful, society must respond by attempting to understand its social implications. The paradox between bright and dark sides of social listening when communicating via MCTs add to the complexity of understanding this phenomenon.

Possible consequences of social listening via MCTs may lurk on the dark side given the ease of contemporary social surveillance and digital visibility. These consequences may include potentially less serious negative outcomes, including jealousy and the fear of missing out (FOMO), or they may be more threatening such as cyberstalking, narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (dark

triad) as described earlier. Privacy violations caused by digital visibility, connectivity, persistence, the need for social comparison to others, and triggers of jealousy and other negative emotions also emerge as dark side consequences of social listening via MCTs (Fox & Moreland, 2015). Utz, et al., (2015) found differences in levels of jealousy across social media platforms, with Snapchat eliciting greater levels of jealousy than Facebook. Such findings suggest that nuances to social listening and the emerging social consequences may vary by platform. These results also suggest that social listening may contribute to negative relational consequences and relational turbulence due to the public nature of content and conflict fostered by MCTs. Considering these complexities, and the potential challenges they create towards establishing research benchmarks, this current work recognizes several limitations.

## Limitations

The limitations that are addressed here simultaneously recognize additional research opportunities to explore social listening on MCTs and among the various levels of communication. This current project set forth to capture information from a critical review and synthesis of academic and trade literature to describe and discuss the current social listening process using MCTs and among the four major contexts of communication. There are two confounding limitations to acknowledge pertaining to this current report. First, a paradoxical lack and wealth of timely, published academic research and second, an overwhelming scope of practical information available for review and critique from thought leaders and digital professionals across various industries (social media management, social media marketing, corporate communication, etc.).

Academic literature faces the constant risk of innovation among the MCT ecosystem throughout the duration of the research and publication timeline. Any changes to MCTs' platforms or features may impact the research findings as presented. MCT research on highly specific trends or features may be immediately outdated, irrelevant, or void by the time it reaches publication. Despite this possibility, scholars remain dedicated towards research production about MCTs. Thus, while a timely benchmark about MCTs may be difficult to ascertain, there is a plethora of research articles which explore and analyze these platforms and their effects. This wealth of published studies available about MCTs is impossible to comprehensively review and capture within the scope of a single report. The abundance of trade literature readily available describing trends, procedures, best practices, and case studies about MCTs across contexts, purposes, and industries also adds both value and challenges to MCT research. The information provided among these resources appears to be relevant and timely; however, it is not peer-reviewed. Verifying the credibility and critiquing the breadth of works within a single publication would also be impossible to achieve. Further, there are both additional communication contexts and emerging social consequences beyond those reviewed and discussed here. The paradox of having both research challenges and vast information challenges the ability to develop a truly comprehensive understanding of given MCT phenomena.

## Matrix Development

With these limitations in mind, this particular project uses an inductive scope and limits exploration to two broad RQs designed to (1) describe information emerging from a review and critique focusing on the intersecting phenomena of the social listening process and MCTs, and (2) identify potentially relevant theoretical frameworks and social consequences which may inspire future studies. In response to the stated purpose of this research, a matrix is developed to summarize and visualize the communication contexts, theories, and social consequences uncovered from this critical review and analysis.

## Ongoing Research

Most recently, an in-progress exploratory study applying Statement Analysis, or SA specifically modified to analyze data in mediated contexts, namely social media, uncovers potentially meaningful findings. SA is a written textual analysis methodology previously used in law enforcement to look

**Table 1. Theory matrix for communication contexts and social consequences**

| Theory | Hierarchy Level | Social Consequences |
|---|---|---|
| Communication Privacy Management | ■ Intrapersonal<br>■ Interpersonal | ■ Big Data<br>■ Deception<br>■ Cyberstalking<br>■ Privacy<br>■ Jealousy<br>■ Social Surveillance<br>■ Online Empathy<br>■ Social Support<br>■ Talent Recruitment |
| Interpersonal Deception Theory | ■ Intrapersonal<br>■ Interpersonal<br>■ Organizational | ■ Big Data<br>■ Deception<br>■ Misinformation<br>■ Privacy<br>■ Social Support<br>■ Social Surveillance<br>■ Talent Recruitment |
| Truth Default Theory | ■ Intrapersonal<br>■ Interpersonal<br>■ Organizational<br>■ Cultural | ■ Big Data<br>■ Deception<br>■ Misinformation<br>■ Appreciative SL<br>■ Social Support<br>■ Talent Recruitment |

for deceptive statements within criminal testimonies and interview statements (McClish, 2023). This pilot study applying SA to social media posts revealed discoveries on two levels: (1) insights about mediated deception behavior on social media, and (2) observations about using SA as a methodology to study communication facilitated among MCTs.

Preliminary findings from three (3) out of nine (9) modified SA categories reveal statistically significant quantitative data and supporting qualitative results which reveal differences between truthful and untruthful social media posts. T-tests tests revealed that truthful posts contain a higher word count than untruthful posts ($p < .001$) and qualitative analysis indicates more detail and description in truthful posts than their untruthful counterparts. Perhaps most intriguing is the emerging discovery that clusters or combinations of the modified SA categories appear among the data. These clusters may yield novel methods for mediated deception detection and contribute towards MCT research methods as well as exploratory findings about the social consequences of deception. These exploratory findings only represent the very tip of an iceberg given the scope of the present data undergoing analysis when compared to the pilot data set from which the results presented emerge (Arnold & Stewart, 2023).

## Final Thoughts

This report presents a critical synthesis of information about the social listening process, MCTs, and the communication contexts that are relevant at present day and highlight the current season of MCT history among the phenomena and variables described. This work invited the creation of the theory matrix presented in Table 1 as a potential contribution towards developing historical and research baselines among MCT research. The social listening process, the organic growth of big data, and the technological persistence of MCT users represent newer communication occurrences, yet they appear to reveal incredible impact. These concepts are important to continuously explore and analyze based on the information reviewed and presented in this report. Addressing two (2) broad research questions, this report explored social listening via MCTS across the varying levels of the communication hierarchy to include: (1) intrapersonal, (2) interpersonal (3) organizational, and (4)

cultural levels. Within these categories, concepts such as impression management, strategic social listening purposes (6), interpersonal social listening purposes (4) and socio-cultural implications are discussed. The RQs also consider the social consequences to social listening via MCTs from which variables such as misinformation, cyberstalking, privacy, big data, and deception emerge.

The current work derives a research synthesis of emerging consequences and theories specifically at the intersection of social listening and MCTs. An understanding for digital listening behavior as captured is justified by the global increase of mediated interactions. As such, researchers and practitioners alike have a vested interest in continually learning more about the social listening process, especially as MCTs continue to evolve over time. Simultaneously, as the power of big data continues to develop aggressively yet remains dynamic, presenting its own challenges as to how the social listening process across each and all communication levels should be understood and harnessed. Undoubtedly as MCTs change, the development of social listening may face changes in kind over time. For now, by mapping out a matrix of communication theories, communication contexts, and variables of emerging social consequences may be a helpful framework of information from which to devise research ideas from these and related MCT topics.

In closing, the theory matrix presented applies across the two contexts: (1) the information comprising the present report, and (2) as related to both the preliminary results of the exploratory pilot study as well as the stated preview of the forthcoming research intended to further explore this topic using a modified SA method designed for application when analyzing data derived from MCTs. The end goal among this present and ongoing work is to construct a meaningful understanding about digital-human communication and MCTs which includes the process of social listening, in order to grasp the contemporary perspective and fosters ongoing and future research explorations across these stated phenomena.

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