

## Generative Nonprofits will Co-create Services using Social Media Platforms

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### Abstract

While previous research explores the use of social media in nonprofits, the key emerging event(s) (or outcome) and mechanisms capable of producing these events remain insufficiently explained. We observe that the growing use of social media in nonprofits is intended to attract public involvement, participation, and engagement in the provision of nonprofit services. This paper, therefore, identifies co-creation of nonprofit services as a key event in nonprofit use of social media, and the structure of social media in nonprofits (i.e., affordances, symbolic expressions, and privacy preferences) offers the mechanisms producing this event. Social media supports organization-public relationships (OPR) in nonprofits as a key mechanism; however, such relationships remain unexplored. Drawing on dynamic capabilities theory, we propose organizational generativity as a promising capability for the actualization of social media structure, OPR to realize service co-creation. This paper argues, hypothetically, that organization generativity is positively related to the structure of social media in nonprofits, OPR, and service co-creation as an overall outcome

**Keywords:** Service Co-creation, Social Media, OPR, Organizational Generativity, Dynamic Capabilities.

### 1. Introduction

Social media is increasingly emerging as a key avenue for organizations to co-create services with their customers. “Finland’s national airline, Finnair, succeeded in co-creating service ideas by using a variety of social media technologies and socialization tactics” [1]. Cause brand communities in Australia use social media posts as resources that enable customer engagement through events, donations and fundraising, and social justice [2]. Nonprofits, e.g., Care2 and United Way Toronto, and for-profit organizations, e.g., Ford Motor company use Twitter to build and strengthen relationships and donor engagement towards improved services [3]. Consequently, social media is a major channel that enables customers to interact with the organization as well as other customers leading to service co-creation [4]. Social media platforms act as resource integrators that “expose modular resources to facilitate higher order resource formations through the active participation of non-intermediary actors (i.e., customers and firms); which otherwise limits the ability of firms and customers to realize their optimal value co-creation potential” [5].

Despite the increasing role of social technologies in service co-creation, across for-profit organizations and the public sector, very few studies explore and explain how social

technologies such as social media support service co-creation for nonprofits. Existing scholarship on social media use in nonprofits suggests that these platforms afford nonprofits to communicate, share information, create communities and build relationships, and call for collective action [6-10]. Such functions have enabled nonprofits to attract public participation, involvement, and engagement in the provision of nonprofit service [3], which create a potential for co-creation of services [11]. Nonprofits, however, are faced with a challenge in understanding and developing appropriate strategies to increase public involvement and engagement coupled with an unclear understanding of service-related outcomes of public involvement and engagement on social media [12].

It is also of strategic importance to understand how social media affords organizations different opportunities for co-creation activities [5]. To do so, the organization may consider their social media activities, its level of interactivity with target groups, its social networks, and technology modularity and interoperability as factors that facilitate co-creation processes [13, 14]. On the other hand, the user's perceived usefulness, involvement, attitudes, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, and intention to co-create are also key antecedents of service co-creation in social media [4]. However, studying the role of social media without unbundling its structural features and the meaning these platforms convey to organizations, we may not offer sufficient insights on how organizations appropriate social media for service co-creation [15]. The organization's ability to reconfigure and utilize its resources to operate productively on social media is crucial; e.g., its technology capacity and skills [16]. Further still utilizing social capital embedded in OPR requires the organization as a principal actor to have sufficient capabilities to do so [17]. Organizations need to embrace, build, and evaluate their generative capabilities in technology and innovation because generative capability is essential for innovation and significantly improves firm performance [18, 19]. However, the role of generative capabilities in social media interactions and collaborative processes such as service co-creation remains unexplored.

This paper proposes a study that analyses the empirical prevalence of social media enabled service co-creation and explores how organizational generativity facilitates social media interactions towards service co-creation. To study this phenomenon, we suggest that three things are important, i.e., recognizing that social media provides not just functions but an overarching structure comprised of functional affordances, symbolic expressions and privacy preferences as mechanisms for nonprofit service co-creation. Second, OPR is a key mechanism producing service co-creation. Third, such mechanisms require organizational generativity, which is the organization's capability to act in new ways, rejuvenate, reproduce, and transform its actions to achieve service co-creation. Moreover, existing studies [15, 20, 21] suggest that exploring technologies such as social media requires one to examine the technology's functional affordances and its symbolic expressions to a group of users. Given the nature of social media, it is also important to consider that user privacy preferences, concerns or privacy protective behavior would be closely associated with the users' actions and goals on social media [14]. On the other hand, social media allows organizations to build relationships and networks with target stakeholders such as publics or customers [10, 22]. When visibly articulated, such relationships would almost certainly create a foundation for participation, involvement, and engagement, which are drivers for service co-creation [11]. Lastly, understanding the capabilities required to achieve co-creation practices is also crucial [23].

In what follows, we provide theoretical and empirical views on service co-creation, social media structure, OPR, and organization generativity. We then provide a theoretical model and research propositions on the relationship between organizational generativity, social media interactions, and service co-creation. Finally, we discuss the implications of the study and propose a critical realist approach as sufficient to explore this phenomenon.

## **2. Service Co-creation**

Service co-creation is 'the activity, practice, or process of jointly creating services in specific business context' [11]. Customers actively participate in service co-creation by "contributing information about their own needs and suggesting ideas for future services

that they would value being able to use" [24]. Depending on the context, e.g., the nature of the firm and its services, service co-creation will usually manifest in multiple forms [11, 25]. Potential forms of service co-creation that would emerge given the structure of social media may include but not limited to, the following.

*Co-ideation* allows the organization and service consumers to express the problem context, conceptualize solutions to problems, and contribute ideas for improving or modifying a solution, product, or service [26]. Social media has become a pool of ideas for organizations to strategically harness to improve products and services. Interacting with the target groups on social media could enable the organization to identify ideas, select ideas, and put key ideas into action. Co-ideation could be closely associated with other forms such as knowledge co-creation in social networks [27], co-conception of ideas, and co-meaning creation [28].

*Co-initiation* of services allows the organization and service consumers to co-sense and learn service needs and capabilities for service co-creation [29]. Through activities such as social media campaigns, social media community could contribute towards tailoring services incrementally to suit emerging their needs and challenges not yet recognized by the organization.

*Co-delivery* of services involves service user participation and involvement in the supply and consumption of services. Social media supports service delivery through activities such as a co-financing through fundraising and donations, enrolment of volunteers, emotional support and advice, and response to event notifications.

*Co-promotion* of services "lies in managing content information and mass appeal to overcome the initial diffidence toward unknown and provisory services and push the users to try them" [25]. With social media, firms can build closer relationships with customers, which foster electronic word of mouth and customer evangelism [30]. Socially rich and interactive dialogue on social media could turn customers into brand protagonists in their social networks, increase the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing campaigns, and increase service success [30].

*Co-evaluation* of services occurs as the organization connects, socializes, and attracts service consumers to appraise services or ideas. Social media like Facebook, support approval of ideas, propositions, and services through simple mechanisms such as likes [25]. Likes, views, shares are increasingly becoming a key reflection of public vote or interest in the organization. These social media features are thus becoming a strategy for evaluating consumer's response to organization activities.

*Service experience co-creation* occurs when one consumer's interaction with other consumers is in or beyond the service setting influences one's subjective response to or interpretation of the elements of the service [31]. Social media supports service co-experiencing because it offers a pervasive technology environment that brings previously separate user experiences together [32]. Co-experiences can be hedonic, cognitive, social, personal, pragmatic, and economic, which ultimately influence one's overall co-creation experience [33].

### **3. The Structure of Social Media**

Social media 'employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content' [34]. Social media interactions emerge as social structures that enable purposeful functioning of social media communities. But such social structures do not exist independent of human agency, ability, or action because they are not material entities – social structures manifest in human action [21]. Social media, therefore, becomes a product and a medium of human action, which can 'facilitate and constrain human action through the provision of interpretive schemes, facilities, and norms' originating from its material agency" [35]. To understand how social media shape social interaction and therefore human actions, one may consider that structural features of social media afford users to achieve desired outcomes (i.e., functional affordances) but also have communicative abilities to support user's perception of its meaning and values (i.e., symbolic expressions) [15, 20, 21]. The growing privacy concerns and user's privacy

protective behaviors on social media cannot be underestimated [36] because such concerns trigger selective disclosure of personal information and/or exposure of one self [37].

### 3.1. Functional Affordances of Social Media

Affordances refer to what the environment or object offers to occupant or user and will differ in respect to the user intended goals [38]. Social media affordances are action possibilities that social media affords to organizations and individuals about their goals [39] and therefore may differ from one individual to another or one organization to another. We recognize, based on existing empirical evidence, that social media offers the following affordances to nonprofits. *Socialization and community affordances* evolve as social media users, individuals, and organizations, create an identity (profile), connect with others, and converse [40]. Some nonprofits are using social media to engage in conversation and create a sense of community [8]. Other nonprofits socialize to foster bonds of reciprocity, trust, belonging, and emotional and communal support [9]. *Communication and information sharing affordances* are possibilities afforded by social media to allow organizations, like individuals, to create and publish content in a variety of content formats, particularly text, video, and audio. Social media affords communication and information sharing by enabling content creation and consumption, dialogue and rapport, broadcasting, and immediacy (real-time communication). *Visibility and reputation building affordances*. While social media can ignite organization crisis and pose a reputation risk due to spread rumors and misinformation [41], they afford nonprofits to increase visibility among target communities [42] and build a reputation that enables them to work closely with target communities [43]. Nonprofits build a reputation on social media through practices of transparency, openness, making accountability, and taking responsibility for their community programs and interventions [41]. *Collaboration and collective action affordances* indicate action possibilities that allow the organization to co-operate and work together with service consumers towards a common goal. Social media platforms generally support collaborative and innovative activities [44]. Social media supports collaboration and collective action by enabling nonprofits to access group effort through advocates and supporters, encourage public participation, call for action, and mobilize resources [6, 45].

### 3.2. Symbolic Expressions of Social Media

Symbolic expressions relate to the communicative abilities of social media [20, 21] and therefore, the tendencies of organizations and individuals to act based on their meaning towards social media [46]. Technologies such as social media will shape technology outcomes through *the communication of meaning* and *communication of values* [20]. Social media features communicate some meaning which we can measure through the user's ability to understand the basic functionality of social media and how social media works [20]. On the other hand, social media features also convey some values, which we can measure as induced perceptions about the functionalities of social media [20]. Such values may include actuality, control, reliability, productivity, etc. [20].

### 3.3. Privacy Preferences on Social Media

Privacy is a desire by individuals, groups, or institutions to have some control over interactions with others in a given environment [47]. Privacy, in our context, relates to boundary regulation, controlling how much (or how little) contact an individual (or organization) maintains with its service users or the public at large [48]. Privacy preferences on social media represent the organization's choices of privacy features, selective control over its boundary, and protective behaviors. We suggest two privacy preferences that could shape service co-creation outcomes on social media, i.e., disclosure preferences and interaction preferences. *Disclosure preferences* would relate to regulating identity and information sharing [37, 49]. Disclosure preferences can be revealed by the depth and breadth of information that one reveals [48]. Social media functions that enable one to control information sharing, creating and supporting one's identity could constitute disclosure preferences. *Interaction preferences* would relate to regulating potential interaction with the organization, e.g., engaging through closed groups [49]. The organization's interaction preferences may shape its social media based customer

relationships, communities, and consumer networks. Interaction preferences are aimed at controlling who, what, when, and where encounters with the public to achieve security, affiliation, and intimacy needs [50].

#### **4. Organisation-Public Relationships (OPR)**

Organizations intentionally or unintentionally build relationships with the public by using social media platforms – c.f. [3, 7]; however, an empirical examination of the nature of such relationships is lacking. OPR represent "patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics" [51]. Publics include people, organizations, or any entity of interest to the organization, e.g., employees, community, government, media, customers, etc. [52]. Drawing on the concept and theory of OPR [51], there will be different types of OPR and relationship properties that affect organization goal achievement.

##### **4.1. Types of OPR**

There three common types of OPR that organizations build in the course of their interaction with the public, i.e., exchange and communal OPR.

*A communal relationship* involves an outstanding actor who ‘gives benefits in response to the needs or to demonstrate a general concern for the other’ [53]. Organizations that establish communal relationships will show greater concern towards community support, and therefore, will mainly keep track of community needs without necessarily focusing on reciprocation [54]. In essence, communal relationships maybe more relevant to nonprofits because such organizations tend to seek for social responsibility and social value [52].

*Exchange relationships* emerge from the belief that “benefits are given with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return” [53]. These relationships capitalize on "trading of benefits between the organization and market or community" [55]. Exchange relationships involve greater concern for the other to reciprocate; therefore, an organization will mainly keep track of the ability to receive reciprocated benefits from the community without necessarily focusing on changing needs of their community [54].

##### **4.2. Properties of OPR**

OPR properties are recurrent patterns of organisation-public interaction [51]. There several relationship properties embedded in OPR, e.g., intimacy, trust, control, frequency and duration, symmetry, reciprocity, stability, etc. [51]. In online environments, one can define the structure of a relationship by content, strength, and direction of interaction or communication between two actors (symmetry) [56]. This study identifies strong and symmetrical interaction as key mechanisms for social media outcomes.

*Strong interaction* on social media is mainly characterized by frequent, prolonged, and intense interaction [57, 58]. Strong relationships may also emerge through the depth and breadth of content, discussions, and events between the organization and its target entities [58]. There is evidence to suggest strong relationships through active participatory behavior – such frequent communication and emotional appeal are of desirable value to nonprofits [3] and are long-lasting and less vulnerable [57].

*Symmetrical interaction*, also known as reciprocated or dialogic relationships, occur when the organization engages in the negotiated exchange of ideas and opinion [59]. A two-way symmetrical relationship positions the organization's target community as part of the strategic advisors to the organization, and that gives them the power to influence the organization's activities [60]. Symmetrical relationships will involve holism, interdependence, and openness, which tends to support innovation [61].

#### **5. Organizational Generativity**

Generativity is an attribute rooted in the works of social psychologist Erikson. It refers to one's ability to originate, produce, and procreate [62]. In organizations, generativity draws heavily on the organization's dynamic capabilities, which refer to “the firm's ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments” [63]. Organisations could build generativity by drawing on its

dynamic capabilities to rejuvenate and reproduce ways to challenge the status quo and therefore transform their actions to support innovation [18]. In the social media environment, IT-business spanning capabilities, relational capabilities, and adaptive capability are potential generative capabilities that could drive social media interaction towards service co-creation.

*IT-business spanning* represents the firm's ability to explore the potential of social technology and align this technology to organization operations to improve performance. To understand IT-business spanning capabilities for service co-creation, we suggest that organizations may have to consider their ability to take advantage of social technology infrastructure, align social technology to business operations and its technology proactive stance [64].

*Relational capability* relates to the organization's ability to acquire social capital by utilizing resources embedded in its networks towards achieving its goals and objectives [65]. To foster social media interaction for service co-creation, organizations may need relationship management capabilities, relationship learning capabilities, and relationship behavioral capabilities [66].

The *adaptive capability* is the firm's ability to identify emerging opportunities, respond to such opportunities, and adapt processes to suite emerging opportunities [67]. For service innovations, an organization will need the ability to sense market intelligence, seize such intelligence, and reconfigure its resources to take advantage of changes in its environment [68].

### 6. Theoretical Propositions

According to [15], the essence a technology constitutes its features, their symbolic expressions, the user affordances, and the values that emerge from the affordances of technology for a given group of users. Considering the nature of social media, the emerging values-related factor that could support or constrain social media support for co-creation are the privacy preferences of the users [14]. IS scholars [15, 20, 21] propose that one can illuminate human-technology interaction by exploring technology affordances and symbolic expressions. However, affordances are potentially a mechanism producing an event or ultimate outcome [69]. Additionally, OPR varies in relationship type and properties and are related to the ultimate consequences or achievements [51]. We relate these views in the theoretical model provided in Fig. 1.

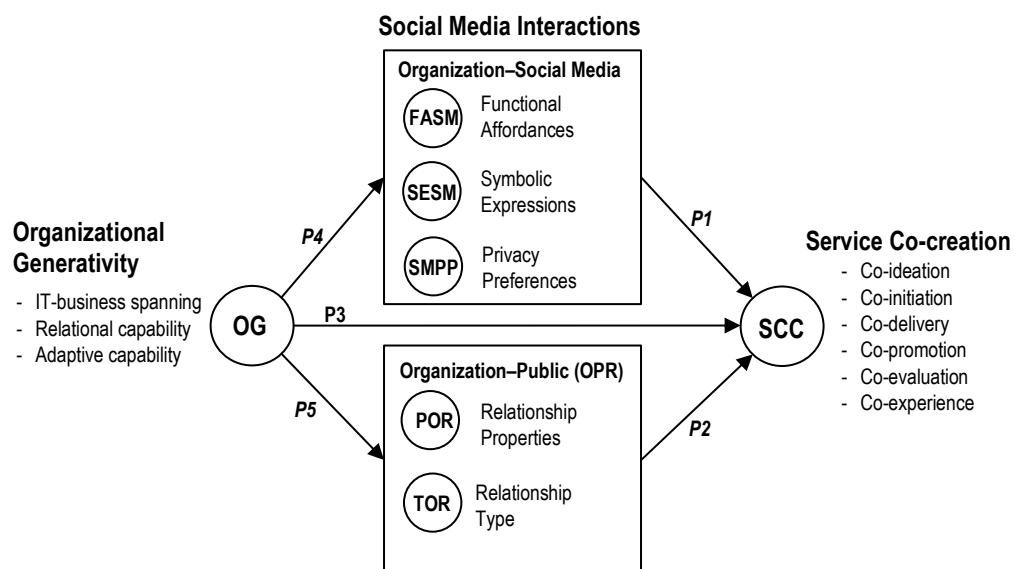


Fig. 1. A Theoretical Model of Social Media Enabled Service Co-creation

*Social Media and Service Co-creation.* Social media activities such as authoring, posting, sharing and commenting are a fundamental resource for organizations to engage with the public in the coproduction of content for a specific goal [70], such as service co-creation [2]. Organizations drive service co-creation by involving, engaging, and allowing

service consumers to participate in service processes [11]. Because of social media foster collective participation, involvement, and engagement, they offer a rich context for service co-creation. Social media has thus enabled nonprofits to attract public participation, involvement, and engagement in nonprofit services through mechanisms such as communication, information sharing, community creation and relationships, collective action, and resource mobilization. On the other hand, social media, through its structural features, conveys meaning and values surrounding its functionality and the interaction with other users [15, 20, 21]. Social media could shape the organization's perception of this technology and ultimately shape how the organization applies this technology to achieve its goals [71]. Furthermore, social media use evolves around the privacy concerns and preferences of its users (i.e., organization and consumers), which also shapes one's intention to co-create and ultimate service co-creation behavior [4]. We, therefore, propose that; **Proposition 1:** Social Media structure, which represents in the context of this study organization-social media interaction through functional affordances, symbolic expressions, and privacy preferences is positively related to service co-creation on social media.

*OPR and Service Co-creation.* Social innovation and service co-creation thrive in a multi-actor network [11]. Building and maintaining public relationships on social media increases public involvement and participation in organization activities [7]. Building communal or exchange OPR tends to influence the public propensity to donate and support nonprofit activities [72]. The interaction sequence in such networks will influence co-creation processes [13]. Interactions in multi-actor networks may involve frequent and bidirectional communication that support co-creation processes, in general [73]. Moreover, the organization will need to focus on the frequency of interaction, direction of communication, modality, and content to support service co-creation [74]. We, therefore, propose that; **Proposition 2:** Organization-public interaction represented by the type of OPR (i.e., communal and exchange) and the structural properties of OPR (i.e., strong and symmetrical) is positively related to service co-creation on social media.

*Organization generativity and service co-creation.* Generativity is associated with openness to ideas, experimentations, and risk-taking [75]. It is also characteristic of exploration and exploitation of creativity and innovation in collective activities [62, 76]. Overall, organizations that build their dynamic capabilities have more potential for co-creation [77] and value co-creation [78]. Such organizations are usually able to move from passive involvement to active co-development with customers [79]. Adaptive capability, for example, supports innovation related outcomes [80], because it enables the organization to sense environmental changes, seize opportunities, and reconfigure resources towards service innovations [68]. Relational capabilities, on the other hand, enable the organization to initiate and implement innovations [65]. The organization's ability to reconfigure, rejuvenate, and operate in new ways is critical for successful collaboration and co-creation networks [78]. We, therefore, suggest that; **Proposition 3:** Organization generativity represented by sub-abilities of IT-business spanning, relational and adaptivity is positively related to service co-creation on social media

*Organization generativity and social media interactions.* First, actors in sociomaterial interactions require the capacity or capability to act [81]. Generativity builds the drive towards revitalizing one's possibilities in a given context [62, 76, 82]. It shapes the actor's perception and realization of designed, improvised, and emergent affordances of a technology [82]. Second, actualizing affordances requires the entity to have the ability to act on and leverage the available opportunities for goal-oriented action [82]. Such opportunities for action will range from broader functional affordances to specific affordances like OPR. Overall, generativity shapes collective activities and patterns of conduct in social interactions [62]. We, therefore, suggest that; **Proposition 4:** Organization generativity is positively related to social media structure (i.e., functional affordances, symbolic expressions, and privacy preferences). **Proposition 5:** Organization generativity is positively related to the organization-public relationship (OPR).

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explicates service co-creation as an event in nonprofit use of social media. We indicate that service co-creation is not a homogenous incident, but an event that manifests in multiple emerging forms. The structure of social media (in nonprofits) provides the underlying mechanisms producing service co-creation, which include the functional affordances of social media, its symbolic expressions to the organization, and the privacy preferences of the organization. On the other hand, we elaborate a key mechanism in service co-creation, which is OPR. Overall, we indicate that these events and mechanisms are positively related to organizational generativity.

Service co-creation is a key event in social media use among nonprofits. Service co-creation is not a single activity but occurs in multiple forms [11]; therefore a model of service co-creation on social media will constitute different forms such as co-ideation, co-initiation, co-development, co-promotion, co-delivery, co-evaluation, and co-experiencing. Understanding these forms in the social media context could reveal key target activities that nonprofits could strive for during social media interactions. Knowledge of these forms improves nonprofit practitioners' ability to make informed decisions on expected service related activities and develop better strategies to enable service co-creation.

Technology structures differ from one user to another, depending on user goals [15, 20]. In nonprofits, key functional affordances of social media will include socialization and community creation, communication and information sharing, visibility and reputation building, and collaboration and collective action. Knowledge of these affordances informs nonprofit practitioners of the key target social media activities enabling service co-creation. Understanding social media structure also supports our understanding of the communicative abilities of social media technologies that shape the organization and public interpretation of social media and interaction thereby shaping the nature of its relationships and service co-creation outcomes.

OPR is defined by type and properties of relationships [51]. Therefore, organisation-public interaction on social media manifests through different types and structures of relationships. Because service co-creation is largely shaped by technology and relationships (or networks), a comprehensive understanding of OPR on social media equips nonprofit practitioners with the knowledge of appropriate relational behavior that fosters service co-creation through social media.

To support social media interactions, organizations would need to recognize, embrace, and build generative capabilities because of the evolving and ever-changing nature of social media. Organizational generativity in the context of service co-creation on social media can be broken down into sub-abilities such as IT-business spanning, relational, and adaptive capabilities as essential abilities to support the organization's activities on social media. When we consider adaptive capabilities, for instance, as organizations develop the current generation of social media interaction and social media enabled services, a generative organization would sense and seize emerging opportunities while allowing for reconfiguring and adapting to new ways for better performance in this environment. Nonetheless, generative based relational abilities would allow the organization to initiate, maintain, and continuously shape organization relationships on social media to increasingly productive relations and new outcomes.

The role of social media in service co-creation is largely unnoticed in the literature on social media use in nonprofits as well as scholarship on social media and service management. This study attempts to minimize this deficiency in the two bodies of scholarship and posits that understanding the role of social media in service co-creation paves the way for nonprofit practitioners to engage in a productive social media interaction that encourages them in some way to increase public participation, involvement, and engagement in their activities. This would contribute towards gaining more insight on community needs and challenges and thus an avenue to designing and providing relevant service with the assistance of service users, volunteers, and donors.

We conclude by proposing that a critical realist approach provides a rich perspective to generate useful insights on the above raise issues. A critical realist approach would allow



us to explicate service co-creation events in nonprofit use of social media while retroductively identifying the underlying mechanisms producing these events. A mixed methods approach using interviews, content analysis, and survey would provide a rich method to corroboration of findings and generating insightful interpretations.

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