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Alter-identity work via Social Media in Professional Service Contexts

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Abstract

In this research-in-progress paper, I show how individuals in a professional service firm passionately, and of their own volition, engage in work activities across multiple social media, that fall well outside of formal work requirements. I refer to the personas these workers create as "alter-identities" to signify that this form of identity work sits alongside formal work roles. Utilising a reflexive research approach, I set out to explore 1) how professionals maintain alter-identities and 2) implications vis-à-vis organisational expectations. I offer initial insights into the role of social media, and the ways in which individuals reconcile alter-identities with formal requirements. I will contribute new insights on the role of digital technologies, such as social media, in knowledge work contexts, and theorise the role of alter-identity performance as a way for organisations to innovate formal work models in a bottom-up, employee-driven way. Such practices might foster organisational responsiveness in rapidly changing environments.

Keywords Social media, Identity work, work innovation, knowledge work, Qualitative research

1   Introduction

Social media has fast become an integral part of our collective lives, enabling people to stay connected and communicate with their personal and professional networks or to access news in real time (boyd and Ellison 2007; Richter and Koch 2008; Richter and Riemer 2009). At the same time, social media is a way for people to express themselves (Zhao et al. 2008), and to join or start conversations to reach new audiences with their ideas, while blurring the boundaries between professional and private aspects of life (Köffer et al. 2015; Leonardi et al. 2013). For organisations, social media is variously seen as a distraction to individuals (Brooks 2015), as a tool for customer engagement (Osch et al. 2015), or simply as a way to spread work-related information to employees (Treem and Leonardi 2012).

In this research-in-progress paper, I present a social media and identity-related phenomenon that I first observed in a professional services firm in which I've worked as an embedded researcher. I noticed that some employees of this firm were drawing heavily on various social media platforms to engage in activities that fell, sometimes far, outside of their formal job requirements. These individuals appeared to passionately build professional personas for themselves around certain subject matter expertise or other areas of professional skills that were not expected or required of them by the organisation. Furthermore, these individuals were dedicating significant amounts of time to maintaining these identities, which appeared to be primarily sustained by using a number of social media platforms.

I propose to call this phenomenon "alter-identity" performance, whereby professionals, enabled by social media, perform certain (knowledge) work outside of their formal work assignments, yet often during regular office hours, reaching audiences within and outside of their organisation. I became curious about why these employees are so passionate about spending so much time online doing additional work outside of their primary work role and job description, what the implications would be for how they perform their primary role, and how they are subsequently perceived more generally. Accordingly, I ask: What motivates professionals to engage in such alternative work? What are the benefits or costs to the organisation? And how does an employee's manager or colleagues respond to them engaging in this work?

I begin with an overview of research into the professional and organisational use of social media, and identity work in professional services to clarify my research questions. Then, I provide my study overview, research approach, and participating case organisation, before I present some preliminary findings to motivate my main study. I offer some initial insights into the creation and maintenance of professional alter-identities and the role of social media, and the impacts vis-à-vis the organisation.

My research contributes to the literature on organisational social media use by outlining a new and exciting phenomenon. I further aim to extend the existing literature on identity work in social media (Orsatti and Riemer 2012) with the phenomenon of alter-identities. Finally, I reason about the role of social media and alter-identity performance as a way of bottom-up innovation of an organisation's formal work model.

2   Background

Here I position the phenomenon I have tentatively termed "alter-identity" in the bodies of literature on the business use of social media and on 'identity work' (Watson 2008).

2.1   Social media in business: interplay between individual and organisation

Organisations are increasingly utilising social media to communicate, collaborate and connect with employees and customers (Richter and Riemer 2009). For example, enterprise social networks (ESNs) offer relationship building, problem solving, collaboration, and knowledge transfer within organisations in a secure, managed digital environment (Leonardi et al. 2013; Riemer and Scifleet 2012). Social media can also be beneficial for organisations who have geographically dispersed workforces, creating a more 'boundary-less' organisation, breaking down internal silos, and increasing the flow of information across the organisation (Gibbs et al. 2014).

For professionals, public social media platforms afford opportunities for networking with colleagues around the world (e.g. DiMicco et al. 2009), ways of seeking new employment (e.g. Ellison et al. 2007), and the ability to start and contribute to work-related conversations (Faraj et al. 2011). For example, LinkedIn, with over 467 million profiles, has for many professionals become an indispensable way to present themselves, manage connections, and seek new opportunities.

Conversely, organisations also use public social media to gain better insight into potential employees during the recruitment process (McDonald et al. 2016). Once employed, how professionals present themselves online is also increasingly relevant to their employers, who recognise both the benefits and

risk of utilising their employees as brand ambassadors through their individual social media use which may reflect on the organisation (Rokka et al. 2013). Given the control that social media platforms afford their users (Treem and Leonardi 2012), organisations find it difficult to manage and control such employee engagement.

Consequently, social media platforms have become another important stage upon which professionals can present themselves (Hogan 2010), establish their professional identity (Wasko and Faraj 2005), and negotiate roles as expert individuals and/or members of the organisation. The nature of social media affords professionals the ability to develop their own social media strategies that are beyond any formal strategy that the organisation may have for itself (Kietzmann et al. 2011). With my research I contribute to this, as an under-researched field of enquiry.

2.2   Identity work: the role of identity in professional services work

The workplace sets the scene for more than just task performance; it is a place where individuals take on a professional role that is often quite different to roles in other areas of life. Employment contracts expect certain outputs, processes followed, and the performance of identities, vis-à-vis colleagues and customers. The effort required by the individual to perform the role of employee with its various social exchanges, is referred to as identity work, defined by Alvesson and Willmott (2001) as an "interpretive activity involved in reproducing and transforming self-identity".

Accordingly, I take a performative view of identity, following Goffman who proposes that identity is defined by how one relates to the social world, as produced or constructed through social interactions (Goffman 1959). In the workplace, these interactions are shaped by the formally bestowed roles and responsibilities, which require workers to follow certain 'scripts' to accommodate organisational expectations, as well as how the individual interprets and enacts such roles vis-à-vis others (Orsatti and Riemer 2012). Work identity is therefore always co-constructed in exchange with other individuals and the organisation.

This "shaping of oneself" in response to the work environment has been shown to require significant effort and comes with the experience of tensions, in particular where individuals need to perform identities that may be inconsistent or 'further away' from other, private identities. For example, Pratt and Rockman demonstrated that professionals undertake a number of strategies to manage tensions and emerging inconsistencies between their personal identity and work tasks required of them (2006). Others have studied the struggle of individuals in management positions to balance the needs of the organisation with their own personal identity narrative, and the conflicts that arise (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

Work identity is thus continually 're-negotiated' not only through social exchanges, but also as individuals change between roles within an organisation (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010). Given that employees invest significant amounts of time and effort to develop positive, effective professional identities in the workplace, such activities should thus itself be considered a form of 'work' (Kuhn 2006). The conceptualisation of identity work as a performative process further implies that individuals can perform multiple identities vis-à-vis different groups and in different context (Orsatti and Riemer 2012). In the following I suggest that social media will add both complexity and new opportunities to the concept of identity work by providing a multitude of additional 'stages' where professional identities can be created and performed.

2.3   Identity formation in social media

An understanding of identity as multiple and actively performed comes with implications for considering identity formation in social media. Firstly, it suggests that as identity is always shaped in a social context; identities performed online are just as 'real' as the various other identities shaped 'offline' at home, with friends, and in the workplace. This is a departure from older research exploring identity in social media using a representational lens, whereby online identity was seen merely as a more or less 'true' representation of a 'real' offline identity (Orsatti and Riemer 2012). Importantly, the online performance of identity relies on the engagement of a receptive audience (Wasko and Faraj 2005), highlighting the 'social' element of social media.

Secondly, with access to multiple social media platforms and their digital communities comes the creation and management of multiple 'online' identities by individuals in these digital spaces, and the need to discuss how such identities overlap, conflict or otherwise interact. Yet, there is surprisingly scant research that explores how individuals curate coherent online identities across multiple platforms. Previous research on identity in social media has tended to focus on how individuals perform multiple identities when engaging with one platform only. For example, research has shown that individuals 'work' to maintain effective boundaries between multiple identities across different groups on the same

platform, often experiencing conflict in maintaining distinctions (e.g. Facebook; Stutzman and Hartzog 2012).

Thirdly, the proliferation of digital technologies, such as mobile technologies and social media, leads to a blurring of lines between where work 'stops' and our personal lives 'begin' (Köffer et al. 2015). Importantly, social media now provides individuals with the ability to perform multiple identities simultaneously as they can switch between contexts seamlessly. For example, employees can engage with social media whilst performing other work, just as they are able to answer work emails whilst cooking dinner at home.

2.4   Research questions

Through my access to the work environment of the Australian arm of a global professional services firm (here called Kappa), I have observed numerous individuals who are actively creating and maintaining what I term "alter-identities", through utilising social media, including the organisation's enterprise social network, but also various public platforms, such as Twitter or LinkedIn. In many cases this work associated with the alter-identity appears to have a degree of relevance to the organisation, but it is often unclear to what extent the organisation is aware of and what stance it takes on such activities, particularly during work hours.

In this study, I aim to explore the ways that social media affords knowledge professionals the opportunity to establish and maintain alter-identities that fall outside of their formal work role. I ask how these identities are co-constructed and 'lived' by participating in social media-enabled practices. In addition, I aim to explore the relationship between such alter-identities and an individual's formal work role and the organisational context. In doing so, I will explore if and in what way the relationship between alter-identity and the organisation varies in different cases.

While I expect the alter-identity to often complement and extend someone's main work identity when there is alignment in the knowledge work practices of the alter-identity and formal work, I equally expect to find some cases with conflict or tensions between these identities. I am then interested in the ways in which individuals go about reconciling or managing the relationship between alter-identity and (conflicting) demands by the organisation. In summary, I will explore two related research questions:

1. How do knowledge professionals use social media to form alter-identities?
2. What are the implications of alter-identity formation for the organisation, both a) with respect to the individual's formal work role, and b) the organisation's expectations?

3   Study Overview

Given that this research is concerned with a novel phenomenon, I propose to take an exploratory, qualitative research approach following a phenomenological methodology, in line with recommendations by Creswell (2007), to understand the essence of the lived experience of how individuals use social media to form and maintain alter-identities. To this end, I follow a reflexive approach to the discovery of alter-identities performed through social media, in line with guidelines by Alvesson and colleagues who propose to iteratively go back and forth between empirical material and the literature in understanding a phenomenon (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). Consequently, in taking an iterative approach to this research, I will equally work with empirical data and go back to the literature to understand the phenomenon better, along the way seeking alternative bodies of literature as it becomes necessary to guide the sense-making process.

3.1   Case and participant sampling

With more than 5,000 employees in numerous offices around Australia, social media forms an important part of the formal work environment at Kappa, with employees having access to the enterprise social network Yammer, and use public social media platforms professionally for client engagement and business development activities.

Participants will be recruited who appear to be using social media to engage in alter-identity activities, through my access to the Kappa Yammer network. I have already identified about 20 potential research candidates who have offered to participate in and support this research. Additional potential participants will be identified through referrals from initial participants, following a passive, snowballing approach. Lastly, I will venture beyond Kappa with participants from other organisations who previously worked for Kappa. I intend to sample a sufficient number of participants to be able to discriminate several different relationships between the alter-identity and their alignment with the organisation. Note that this sampling strategy is appropriate because I am not interested in drawing conclusions regarding *the extent of* such practices but mainly in identifying those relevant for studying

how alter-identity formation is enacted in different ways. Thus, I am interested in variation in the sample for purposes of theoretical generalisation (Myers 2000), rather than representativeness for statistical generalisation.

3.2   Data collection and analysis

Data collected for this study will primarily be qualitative in nature and collected through two main sources over a 12-month period. Firstly, one-on-one in-depth interviews will be carried out with individuals who have been identified as potentially performing alter-identities. The initial interview protocol will be based on the two proposed research questions, which will be refined throughout the research process, in response to new insights and surprises in the data which shape the research direction and theory development (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The interview protocol will be kept flexible to allow individuals to tell their experiences in detail. The aim of these interviews is to generate thick descriptions of individuals (Geertz 1973), rather than seeking to generalise across cases.

Secondly, I will follow and view each participant through the various social media that they engage with, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Yammer, or other social media platforms. I will record samples of their online activity, and explore archived data held by these platforms. I intend to employ communication genre analysis, in order to classify and order this data following guidelines set out by Swales (1990). I'll seek to reveal communication practices through the identification and classification of communication genres, helping to describe the social media practices employed by each individual.

In line with taking an iterative approach, I will continue to sample individuals and oscillate between empirical observations and engagement with the literature until I reach theoretical saturation and am able establish a framework to understand the phenomenon in detail (Dubois and Gadde 2014).

4   Preliminary Insights

I have gathered preliminary data from observations and engagement with selected employees inside Kappa. Specifically, I have observed a number of individuals who actively maintain professional identities in addition to their formal work roles and practices, befitting of my definition of "alter-identity". Below I present characterisations of three individuals. I expound briefly on initial insights corresponding with my two research questions, to illustrate the phenomenon of alter-identity, and to demonstrate the significance and feasibility of the main study.

4.1   Establishing alter-identities through social media

Here I illustrate briefly how these knowledge professionals at Kappa use social media, and how they go about forming alter-identities. The following short vignettes were generated from initial conversations and direct observations of their social media activities.

> Professional 1 is a senior partner in risk and audit advisory. Over the past few years, she has become passionate about design thinking (a newly-popular problem solving methodology). She regularly contributes to online conversations on the organisation's enterprise social network, and produces online content through Kappa's intranet, her personal blog, and through sharing content on Twitter and LinkedIn. Any enterprise online conversations at Kappa on the topic involve her either as the author or as a contributor. She also maintains a personal blog about design thinking in practice which she shares across multiple social media platforms, often shared and commented on by her colleagues.

Professional 1 appears to wear two 'hats' in the organisation. On the one hand, she lives a formal partner identity with senior leader responsibilities and administrative duties. On the other hand, she performs her 'design thinking expert' alter-identity, which transcends her official 'place' within the organisational structure and hierarchy. Accordingly, she has become well-known within the organisation to two different, albeit overlapping, stakeholder groups.

> Professional 2 is an IT systems architect who has been with Kappa for over 15 years. He has developed a passion for robotics, machine learning, and artificial intelligence; technologies not relevant to his day-to-day duties. Like Professional 1, he is an active contributor on Kappa's ESN, where he initiates and contributes to discussions across over 50 technology-related groups. He regularly posts links to news articles and public commentary, encouraging debate within Kappa, and for Kappa's various client groups, on the application of these technologies. He has been involved in several digital innovation initiatives at Kappa, such as online hack-a-thons. In these digital forums, he applies his passion for his topics to emerging commercial endeavours.

Enterprise social media appears to be an important avenue for this professional to build his position of influence on robotics, machine learning, and artificial intelligence at Kappa. I note that without the ESN, this professional would have had no outlet for his passion and no capacity to engage others and grow

this topic into a noteworthy pursuit for the organisation. I also note that, unlike Professional 1, his primary focus has remained internal to Kappa. This might be due to the fact that his formal role is a more internal facing, compared to Professional 1 who has more client interactions and is used to communicating and presenting herself online beyond the boundaries of Kappa.

> Professional 3 is a Client Manager in Tax Advisory at Kappa. She is very enthusiastic about how technological advancements will make radical improvements to the human condition, through embracing a cyborg future. She has established and maintains an active network outside of the organisation, facilitated through online platforms. She regularly shares links and starts discussions about technological breakthroughs to her 20,000 followers on Twitter, extensive LinkedIn network, and the organisation's ESN. As a well-networked professional, Professional 3 has been recognised as active in connecting colleagues across Kappa 'tagging' them into relevant online discussions on Yammer, and making introductions beyond Kappa into her own network through social media.

An important difference between Professional 3 and the other cases is that her alter-identity activities appear less relevant to Kappa, as it is more difficult to draw the link between professional services and her topic, compared to design thinking and artificial intelligence. Hence, while social media is an enabler for Professional 3 to establish her alter-identity, her formal and alter-identities appear to have greater distance and are more separately performed. It was noted by her colleagues that she rarely, if ever, engaged in online discussions about her main role in tax advisory.

All three professionals actively utilise Kappa's ESN, and sometimes public social media, as active contributors to online conversations related to their specific interest areas, usually as initiators or main contributors. Importantly, there appear to be differences in the ways in which these individuals utilise social media in pursuit of alter-identity activities, particularly when compared to other colleagues' social media use, which I intend to investigate further. For example, Professional 1 is more regularly tagged into online conversations by colleagues seeking her input related to her alter-identity, Professional 2 has proactively established and leads discussions across various topic groups on Kappa's ESN related to his alter-identity, and Professional 3 appears to play more of an active 'connector' role for individuals and their knowledge, reflecting her belief in how technology can advance human activities.

Each of these individuals fit my "alter-identity" definition. Importantly, these individuals may not have been able to engage in these activities if it weren't for the existence of and access to networks enabled by social media. Moreover, what makes these cases so interesting or surprising is how these alter-identities have become such an important part of each individual's professional life, in particular when compared to the importance each contributes to their formal job role. This motivates engaging with my second question concerning the relationship with expectations by the organisation regarding alter-identity activities.

4.2   Relationship of alter-identity to organisation

I seek to understand implications of alter-identity formation for the organisation at large, in particular with respect to the individual's formal work role, and the organisation's expectations.

> As a senior partner, Professional 1 is recognised as a high performing employee. Her social media engagement around design thinking reflects her belief that this methodology is not well understood or applied throughout the organisation, and her commitment to help others re-think customer experience and service development. Her colleagues using Yammer and LinkedIn, including more senior leaders, often 'tag' her into conversations or request her input. She has also been asked to run design thinking training for other parts of the organisation, including client engagements.

It appears that Professional 1, perhaps unknowingly, is curating knowledge for Kappa and her external networks through her social media engagement. This collation of knowledge forms not just a part of her own identity, but also a mechanism for their colleagues to access specific knowledge. For example, 'following' Participant 1 on Kappa's enterprise social media would provide an effective way for employees to remain updated with the ongoing discourse around design thinking. It is evident that Kappa benefits from her 'extra-curricular' activities and thus appreciates, at least tolerates, her efforts. Professional 1 in turn can draw satisfaction from engaging with work that she is truly passionate about and to build a reputation and identity with public visibility that transcends Kappa's boundaries.

> Professional 2 is a critical knowledge expert at Kappa. He finds his regular work relatively easy to perform and as such, has a considerable amount of time available for other engagements around his interest areas, both online and offline. His extra engagements appear to be fully endorsed by his manager. Very recently, he has been involved in establishing a new Centre of Excellence at Kappa, with a new role bringing together his existing work in IT systems, with his 'extra-curricular' interests in robotics and automation.

By being a high performer in his formal role, Participant 2 was, left to his own devices by management, able to invest considerable time into other areas of interest. Kappa have recognised the value of his interests, which led to a new formal work role for him. In this case, what started out as alter-identity work has now become a formal assignment. In sum, Kappa appreciates both Professional 1 and 2's additional work, whether by utilising or endorsing their efforts, or establishing new lines of formal work.

> Professional 3 has written several articles on her areas of interest which have been featured on Kappa's official public blog. She also represented Kappa at various networking events for technology start-ups, and provided tax advice to them. At the same time, she expressed frustration about her formal role, as her motivation and energy primarily comes from engaging with her alter-identity activities. She reported feeling stressed about needing to balance formal work with her desire to engage with various online communities and networking events. Compared to the other participants, Participant 3 receives less engagement with her online discussions within Kappa, sharing her areas of interest with a smaller circle of colleagues. Professional 3's colleagues in turn seemed to consider her "outside work" as "quirky" and a distraction to her primary role, to the extent that I was "warned" about being "recruited" to her external interest group.

Professional 3 struggled to reconcile her alter-identity work with demands of her formal role. And while Kappa embraced some of her outputs, reactions from colleagues point to tensions and an unfavourable assessment of her alter-identity activities. Subsequently, this has led to Professional 3 leaving Kappa for a new role at another organisation that revolves more closely around her 'alternative' interests.

The different relationships between alter-identities and the organisation suggest that there is variation not only in how alter-identities are performed, but also in how they are perceived and appreciated. There is likely even more variation in the pool of participants that I will draw from at Kappa for my main research.

5   Discussion and Outlook

My work so far provides some evidence of individuals in Kappa using social media to establish and maintain alter-identities. Moreover, I find various ways in which such alter-identities are treated by the organisation. These findings are encouraging for the project proper. Next, I will set out to deepen the investigation of both the micro-mechanics of how professionals go about forming and enacting alter-identities, and investigate the nature of different kinds of relationships between alter-identity and the individual's formal work as well as perceptions by the organisation.

I propose investigating why in some cases the alter-identity is supported or accepted, and in others merely tolerated, or out-right rejected by the organisation. This is likely to be influenced by the way in which the alter-identity is performed. I thus take interest in what the individual does in order to make the alter-identity successful for both the organisation and themselves.

A methodological challenge in sampling for people to include in the main study lies in the fact that the population of those engaging in alter-identity activities will always be biased toward those appreciated or tolerated by the organisation, as those that are not are likely to leave, as observed in the case of Professional 3. I will thus be open in my sampling approach to venture beyond Kappa and include professionals from other backgrounds and organisations who have previously left Kappa. My short vignettes indicate the value of following these people over time to investigate how their activities evolve, identities form, and tensions manifest and play out. I will thus investigate why these individuals who might previously have performed alter-identities in Kappa have left the organisation, and to what extent they have pursued and extended their endeavours.

I suggest that my research comes with important implications for organisations. As social media is a fairly novel technology, in particular when applied inside organisations, I acknowledge that the alter-identity phenomenon described here will have gone unnoticed in many organisations so far. Though anecdotal evidence suggests that this phenomenon occurs in many professional service, or knowledge work contexts, I assert that unpacking the mechanics of alter-identity performance will help organisations better understand the phenomenon. Given the passion that people invest into their alter-identities, and the benefits for the organisation revealed in my preliminary findings, organisations might find that alter-identities can potentially become a creative and agile way to evolve existing work models and let new topics, work roles, and business ideas emerge in a bottom up way, by embracing and encouraging alter-identity activities. The cases of Professionals 1 and 2 have provided examples of where the organisation encouraged activities seen as valuable or turned activities into an officially recognised project. Hence, being aware of the phenomenon and recognising alter-identity activities might become a way for organisations to tap into the wisdom of the crowd (e.g. Surowiecki 2004) and surface new and valuable expertise that otherwise would go unharnessed. At the same time, activities not valuable to the

organisation might equally be discouraged as was the case with Professional 3. But for this to happen the organisation should develop a way to sense and evaluate such activities in the first place.

My research will contribute to the IS field new insights on social-media based innovation of work, in the form of theorising the role of alter-identity performance in knowledge work practices and the innovation of work models. Alter-identities appear as a promising vehicle for organisations to evolve their work practices, particularly during periods of rapid change. I suggest that individuals, and thus the organisation as a whole, might be better equipped for sensing new opportunities, pursued first in the form of alter-identities, than a traditional top-down, management-driven model would be, the latter being advantageous for pursuing efficiency in times of stability. In that way, social media can be productive in evolving future work practices in organisations in a bottom-up way. Conversely, I suggest that there will be incentives for organisations to allow and encourage their employees to use social media for activities other than those narrowly tied to formal work, or else the expanding horizon of current work practices will be stifled. Helping organisations to recognise, manage, nurture, or discourage alter-identities might thus become a way of evolving work practices in dynamic, responsive, business environments.

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