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### Social media use and organizational identity

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# Social Media Use and Organizational Identity: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** Organizational identity (OI) concept has been used only sporadically in information systems (IS) research despite the fact that technology in general and social media (SM) in particular are transforming the way individuals, groups and organizations think about and define themselves. This study examines the relationship between the extent of employees' SM use for professional purposes and the nature of OI that employees hold about their employer. This relationship was examined in a medium-sized Italian HR Consulting Company. Data were collected by interviewing 22 employees and from examining their LinkedIn accounts. The preliminary findings illustrate that OI might not depend on employees' SM use. Our analysis unearthed both strategic and cultural aspects of employees OI, with the former prevailing, but found that that these aspects do not vary depending on the extent of employees' SM use. Taking into consideration that LinkedIn is the world's largest professional SM, the study also has important practical implications highlighting the need to explain SM use to employees.

**Keywords:** Organizational identity, Social media, Employees, Case study

## 1 Introduction

Does “who we are as an organization” [1] influence how much we use social media (SM) for professional purposes? This question becomes increasingly eminent as both organizations and employees are engaging with SM on a massive scale [2]. For example, through LinkedIn, people channel their professional identity and interact with others mostly for professional purposes [3].

The use of SM by employees for work is claimed to improve employees' commitment level [4], and to facilitate innovative ways of interaction and collaboration that can increase organizational performance [5]. Research tends to link the use of SM for work purposes with features of their organizational culture [4]. For example, the use

of social technologies in the assimilation of new young employees was found to create high morale and increase employees' feelings of cultural belonging [6]. Studies have also found that SM use can facilitate relationship building, open communication and information sharing, leading to more engaged and productive employees [5-8].

Previous SM use research focused predominantly on organizations' motivations for using SM [9] or their SM adoption rates [10]. Though this research enriches our understanding of SM use, despite some exceptions, it, however, majorly overlooks employees' SM use for professional purposes [8] or how by sharing their work-related experiences on SM employees can represent their employer (e.g. [11]). Indeed, in the era of SM not only organizations but every single member of an organization has an equal opportunity to project their perception of the organization – the organizational identity (OI) - externally via their SM accounts.

According to Albert and Whetten [1], OI concerns “Who we are as an organization?”. Thus OI constitutes employees' mental representations of what is central, distinctive and continuous over time about their organization ([1, 12] as cited in [13]). OI concerns how organizational members define themselves as a social group in terms of practices, norms, and values and understand themselves to be different from members of other organizations [14]. Understanding OI is important because it influences the core competencies of an organization [15], and it contributes to the loyalty and commitment of employees [16]. Despite the broad applicability and extensive use of the OI concept in general management and organizational studies, OI has only been sporadically used in IS research [17]. Nevertheless, technology is important in understanding OI, as technology in general and SM in particular is transforming the way individuals, groups and organizations think about and define who they are both as individuals and as a professional group [17]. At the same time, OI also influences the use of these technologies. For example, previous research conducted with 679 communication and marketing managers from over 30 countries claims that there is a positive and strong significant effect between how individuals identify with the attributes recognized as “prototypical” for the members of the organization [18] and confidence in their professional SM use [19]. In particular, individuals who perceived a stronger bond with their organization were found to be more confident in using SM professionally [19]. Building on this previous research on SM and OI, we aim to understand the relationship between the extent of employees' SM use for professional purposes and nature (dimensions) of the OI that an employee holds about their employer (RQ).

Understanding employees' OI in the SM environment is critical for the success of any organizational strategy [20], as the OI each employee projects externally can be observed by other employees, company management, and partners, as well as company customers and competitors. As such the OI they project can have an impact on the company reputation, employer branding or even its competitive advantage. Employees with high OI and high SM use often, for example, become Company Ambassadors [21], while the concerns and dissatisfactions of those with low OI can be fulfilled by knowing exactly which dimensions these are referred to.

In summary, this study will contribute to the research on SM use and OI in several ways: (1) by examining empirically the relationship between SM use and OI, and (2) by providing theoretical and practical implications for OI in SM environment.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a brief literature review on SM use and OI, explaining also the theoretical framework adopted in this study; then we explain our research methodology, which we follow by discussing our results and their significance. In the final section we offer the conclusions of the study, discuss its limitations, and the directions for future research.

## 2 Literature review

Within IS research, OI has been studied in relation to its influence on the implementation of new Information Technology [22]. In SM research, identity has been examined in the context in which users' profile reflects, at least partially, their identity ([23-24], as cited by [9]). Through work-related SM use, employees can emphasize their role as organizational members [9] and engage with their colleagues rapidly [25]. However, the use of SM in the workplace has been mostly studied along specific, isolated organizational dimensions [26] including the effect of SM use on social capital [27], on careers [7], and on the rate of innovation [28] among others, rather than through the lens of OI. Though Forsgren and Bystrom [29] already expressed the need for research beyond the occurrences of SM including such as understanding of how SM incorporate into work.

Gioia and colleagues [30] stated that the rapid expansion of SM have re-invigorated the discussion about OI, changing the way the "identity" is conceptualized, operationalized and measured. However, now as before, the majority of the empirical research is not explicit on how OI is to be operationalized and assessed [31-32]. Indeed, as mentioned by Margolis and Hansen [33] and then confirmed by Hsu and Elsbach [34] there is limited research on the shared aspects (or categorization) of OI, because OI is the discovery of an organization's distinctiveness and a methodology measure based on predetermined categories established by the researchers will most likely not solve the question of OI [35]. The challenges in operationalizing OI is also often attributed to the "fluidity" of the OI concept caused by its constant interrelationships with an organizational image [36], which makes it a constantly changing phenomenon. In a comprehensive work seeking to clarify the different components of OI, Corley [37] identifies four aggregate dimensions of OI including Nature of OI, Identity Discrepancies, Basis of Identity Change, and Identity Change Implementation. His approach examines OI in the context of change. As we are interested primarily in the nature of OI (regardless of whether the context changes or not), we focus here only on the first dimension proposed by Corley [37] (i.e. the nature of OI). The nature of OI covers the cultural and structural (strategic) aspects of the OI. The cultural aspect of OI includes the values and beliefs exposed by the organization, while strategic aspect comprises organizational purpose, mission, and philosophy. According to Corley's [37] study, identity differentiation can occur at different levels of an organization's hierarchy. For example, employees at the top of the hierarchy (i.e. managers) are more likely to see OI in relation to the organization's strategy and purpose, while the perception of OI of employees on the lower levels focuses on the cultural dimensions. This multilevel notion of OI was also recognized by Puusa [38] who studied OI at the individual, group, organization or industry levels [38,39]. At the individual level identity has

been argued to address the psychological motives of employees (self-knowledge, self-expression, self-coherence, self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, self-enhancement). At the organizational level, identity has been argued to differentiate the organization within an industry context. Acknowledging the multilevel nature of OI, in our analysis, we will keep in mind these categories and aim to explore whether they will also emerge in our analysis.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

Taking into consideration the growing attention of contemporary research on OI to consulting firms [40,41] for our case study we selected a medium-sized Italian HR Consulting company with circa 10 international branches. The Company was founded more than 70 years ago and is now an European leader in developing and selling scientific assessment tools, which build the base for their HR consulting activities. The Company belongs to a larger family business, a Group Company which is the second largest in Italy in their specific sector. It has recently (January 2017) changed its name to re-position itself in an international competitive context, and to reemphasize to their customers, suppliers, and employees who they are and what they do. Thus, the self-reflective question “Who are we as an organization” considered relevant in situations of organizational change [41] is pertinent to this organization.

22 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 Company employees chosen to represent employees with different employment tenure, hierarchical roles, and contract types to ensure the variety of the sample.

The questions were guided by the questionnaire based on Margolis and Hansen’s interview protocol [33] that ensured that the interviews were focused on our research question [42].

The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The text of interviews conducted in Italian was translated by one author and checked by another author. Only employees with LinkedIn accounts were interviewed.

The data on employees’ OI were collected from the employees (individual) public LinkedIn profiles in a recent relevant study [45]. It’s important to underline that at that time the Company did not have any guidelines for SM use.

The description of how data were collected is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Approach to data collection

Type of data	Approach to data collection
The extent of SM use	Interviews
OI score	SM data from LinkedIn accounts
Nature of OI	Interviews

## 3.2 Research design

### Extend of SM use

Following Heinrichs and colleagues [43] the data on employees' SM use were manually classified into three categories including employees with low, moderate, and high SM use.

To classify the data to these categories we considered employees' relation with SM, and the frequency of their SM use for both professional and personal purposes. To cross-check and triangulate the results of this analysis additional data obtained from employees on the type of SM content the company publishes was analyzed to verify their effective use and knowledge of SM platforms.

### OI Score

There are several approaches to measure OI [42]. However, Van Rekom and van Rie [44] stated that existing studies on measuring OI are mainly based on primary input from organizational members. Therefore, in this study we used data collected not directly from organizational members, but from secondary sources such as employees' publicly available LinkedIn profiles. Specifically, the data on employees' OI were collected and analyzed in a previous recent study [45] aiming to measure how internal individual organizational members project OI via the external SM channel – LinkedIn.

Moreover, contrary to most of the existing case studies focused on measuring organizational identity qualitatively [42], the empirical case study where OI data were collected [45] used quantitative descriptive statistics and regression analysis.

The OI score was assigned based on a bespoke measure created on a scale of 0-10. This figure aggregates five variables that capture the extent to which employees project their OI on their personal LinkedIn profiles, based on whether:

1. they have a LinkedIn profile;
2. their LinkedIn profile is linked to their employer profile;
3. they specify the name of the Company in the job title/headline;
4. they state the name of the Company in their LinkedIn profile summary;
5. they describe their main work responsibilities or provide a brief introduction to the Company.

Each of these five variables weighted 0 when this information was not present and 2 when it was available. Finally, the data were also grouped into three relevant categories including employees with a low (OI=2-3), moderate (OI=4-6), and high (OI=7-8) OI score. The aim here was to register how strongly employees felt a sense of belonging to the Company and projected their OI through their personal LinkedIn accounts.

### Nature of OI

Instead of analyzing phrases as was done by Corley [37] in his original study, similarly to Lux [46], we analyzed adjectives used by the interviewees to describe the Company together with the adjectives they used when responding to broader questions about the Company to understand the nature of their OI: strategic or cultural [37] (see literature review section for details). The goal here was to identify the types of attributes that may constitute participants' perceived OI which can be considered possible indicators of the content of participant's perceived OI [47]. Crosscheck of the adjectives each interviewee mentioned and the ones they used in their responses to broader questions about the Company revealed that interviewees utilize similar adjectives for the former and the latter.

To ensure qualitative rigor of our research and not to miss any key aspect of member's sensemaking by imposing preordained understanding of member's experience, following the Gioia and colleagues' [42] grounded theory articulation approach we did not cluster the adjectives in some existing terminology or categorization frameworks. The adjectives were manually classified by one author into the emerging categories. This classification was then re-checked by another author. If agreements about some codings/classifications were low, we revisited and discussed the data until arriving at consensual interpretations [42].








It is worthwhile to specify that most of the employees used the same adjectives; few synonyms were identified and classified under the same relevant adjective (e.g. fluid, and in movement). The number of times each adjective was used by interviewees is indicated in Table 2.

Then, the adjectives were clustered according to the two levels - individual, organizational - that emerged from our analysis. With the individual level, we associated the human's behavior and the organizational climate (i.e. needs of employees) as well as their individual aspects/characteristics (e.g. young age). To the organizational level, we linked all the issues and characteristics related to the Company itself (i.e. the distinctive competencies of the Case Company, its attitude, and goal orientation).

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 SM use and OI**

Our findings reveal that among the 22 employees interviewed, there was a homogeneous distribution among the three categories of employees' use of SM - low, moderate, and high -, and that the majority of employees had moderate OI score (see Figure 1). These results suggest that OI might not depend on employee's use of SM (in particular LinkedIn).

	LOW OI (2 employees)	MODERATE OI (18 employees)	HIGH OI (2 employees)
LOW SM USE (6 employees)			
MODERATE SM USE (7 employees)			
HIGH SM USE (9 employees)			

**Fig 1.** Employees' level of OI and SM use

To understand what other factors could explain variance in employees' perceived OI, we also looked at the four extreme cases of employees' low and high OI. Both employees who demonstrated high OI identity, despite describing the Company as fluid or in constant movement, had a clear idea of their role in the Company. Moreover, both employees believed that the Company had a stronger market position compared to its competitors.

One of these employees also had a perception that the Company has strong values (e.g.: "it is a company with many values... and our mission is wellness" [Respondent 5], though this employee also noted that these values might not coincide with the values perceived by other employees in the Company (e.g. "these are the company values for me. I'm not sure that they necessarily coincide with the rest of the company, because we can have different values with [CEO]" [Respondent 5]). The other employee with strong OI also had a perception that he was important for the company only because he had "historic memories of organizational changes that "younger" employees in the company did not have" [Respondent 9]. Also, he mentioned that he now feels more identified with the Company, as in the past he risked losing his job because of the economic crisis.

The other two employees with low OI both described the company as unstructured (in a negative sense), demonstrating their unhappiness about the vagueness of their role in the Company (e.g.: "(Laughs) you tell me what my role is !?" [Respondent 16] or "so even my role and my duties were not clear right away, not even with whom I should interface" [Respondent 10]), and about where and how to find the information useful for their work, which they feel they have to find by themselves (e.g.: "onboarding process was absent at my entrance, thus I had to find all information myself" [Respondent 10]).

#### 4.2 SM use and OI

Both strategic and cultural aspects of the employees' OI emerged from our analysis, although the former prevailed (see Table 2).



**Table 2.** Classification of the adjectives used by employees

Strategic aspect	Number of times mentioned	Cultural aspect	Number of times mentioned
Fluid/in movement	11	Good organizational climate	5
Unstructured	8	Young	5
Scientific	8	Historical	5
Innovative	7	Collaborative	4
International	6	Sympathetic	2
High-quality products and services	6	Ethical	2
Leader	6	Trustworthy	2
Belongs to a family business	3	Motivated	1
Structured	3		

### The strategic aspect of OI

Most of the adjectives used by employees related to the strategic nature of OI (see Table 3). Moreover, the majority of adjectives from this category belonged to the organizational level of analysis regardless of the extent of employees' SM use. Exception to this was "scientific" adjective, which refers to the scientific approach continuously adopted by employees/individuals to develop products or to deliver customer services.

*"This company stands out for making, proposing, selling products and services that are based exclusively on scientific methods and approaches. I give you an example [...] When we build a psychodiagnostic instrument we try it, as if it were a new molecule, like a drug. We try it, we experience it on very large samples. Then we do all the statistical work to make sure that it works...or that its evaluation is reliable" [Respondent 1]"*

**Table 3.** Adjectives related to the strategic aspect of OI

Level of analysis	Adjective	Low SM use	Medium SM use	High SM use
Organizational	Fluid	27,3%	45,4%	27,3%
Organizational	Unstructured	25%	37,5%	37,5%
Organizational	International	0%	16,7%	83,3%
Organizational	High-quality products and services	16,7%	33,3%	50%

Organizational	Leader	16,7%	50%	33,3%
Organizational	Innovative	14,3%	28,6%	57,1%
Organizational	Belong to a family business	66,7%	0%	33,3%
Organizational	Structured	33,3%	33,3%	33,3%
Individual	Scientific	25%	0%	75%

The nature of OI of employees with high SM use was mostly associated with the international presence of the Company, and the scientific, and innovative approaches it adopted to develop products and to deliver services. Employees with high SM use overall were neutral to the Company organizational structure referring to it as neither fluid, unstructured nor structured.

Employees with medium SM use mostly perceived their Company as having fluid organizational structure and being a leader on their market. Meanwhile, employees with low SM use mostly perceived the Company as being part of a larger family traditional business, and very less of being innovative.

*“[...] a company that still has a strong family root, in the sense that belonging to [name of the company group] in my opinion is felt and is important” [Respondent3]*

#### **The cultural aspect of OI**

Most of the adjectives referring to the cultural aspect of OI belonged to the individual level of analysis (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Adjectives related to the cultural aspect of OI

Level of analysis	Adjective	Low SM use	Medium SM use	High SM use
Organizational	Good organizational climate	0%	60%	40%
Individual	Sympathetic	50%	0%	50%
Organizational	Historical	20%	60%	20%
Individual	Young	40%	60%	0%
Individual	Collaborative	25%	25%	50%
Individual	Ethical	50%	0%	50%
Individual	Trustworthy	0%	0%	100%
Individual	Motivated	0%	0%	100%

Organizational level of analysis emerged from the adjectives used primarily by employees with medium SM use who underlined a good organizational climate and a rich historical background of their Company. Employees who describe the Company as formed by young employees were middle-of-the-road users of SM. The nature of OI of employees with equally low and high SM use was both sympathetic and ethical.

*“It is a correct company [...] as such everything is done very correctly here [Respondent 12]”*

Meanwhile, employees with high SM use stressed the collaborative nature of the company, which they linked also to its trustworthiness, and their motivation at work.

*“We are positioned as a trusted, reliable company” [Respondent 17]*

## 5 Discussion

Building on the previous research on SM and OI, we aimed to explore the relationship between the extent of employees’ SM use for professional purposes and the nature of the OI that employees hold about their employer. We identified here a number of patterns: OI perceptions related to innovativeness, large scale and internationalization, and collaboratives and trustworthiness are associated with higher SM use, while perceptions of smaller scale, family business and localization, as well as a differential in age, are associated with lower SM use.

Overall, the analysis revealed that the majority of employees regardless of their SM use or OI levels viewed their organization as unstructured and in constant movement (fluid). This might be associated with the current goal of the Company - leader in the local market in its specific sector and part of the traditional family business - to innovate and to increase its international presence as was highlighted by some interviewees.

At the organizational level, indeed, employees who have a high use of SM saw their organization mostly as international and innovative. This can be explained by the fact that this type of employees uses SM, especially LinkedIn, to be constantly updated about relevant worldwide work-related news, to be inspired with new ideas:

*“While LinkedIn I think is also very useful for professional development because you can see what is new” [Respondent 2]*

They also use LinkedIn to keep in touch with colleagues from international branches, and with other people they need to interact with for work, and overall they see SM as a cost-effective tool to achieve this aim

*“LinkedIn serves me to maintain contacts with the people with whom I have professional relationships” [Respondent 18]*

Vice versa, employees with low SM use see their organization mostly as belonging to a larger company group (which is an Italian family business without a Company LinkedIn page) not recognizing the international aspect of the Company. Though some of these employees with low/moderate OI describe the company as international though they also refer to it as unstructured. The latter has a mostly negative meaning for them:

*“And there are also people who have many roles and this clearly makes the workload bigger [...] it is not that [the Company] is*

*very hierarchical [...] it is more difficult to organize and therefore also internal communication is often left to a goodwill rather than to a structured process. So you always risk losing information, you risk introducing errors". [Respondent 11]*

These employees with low SM use, who see their employer as a leading local company make less use of SM and utilize different means to portray their OI, when choose to do so, such as face-to-face communication or communication via personal networks rather than SM.

The employees with moderate OI describe the Company as fluid, similarly also to some employees with a high OI. Here compared to the unstructured aspect of the Company, which employees view negatively, they acknowledge the fluidity as a positive temperament of the Company.

*"[...] a company is always in turmoil. Uneasy if we want. I find it a great strength - as an imprint to change. Yes, absolutely yes. [...] because I also believe that it is a salt that gives innovation, ideas and avoids sitting down". [Respondent 25]*

At the individual level, employees with high use of SM recognize collaboration and trustworthiness as the main aspects of their colleagues, while employees with low use of SM stress the young age of their colleagues. The good organizational climate is a component that is recognized by employees with both moderate and high use of SM. The trustworthiness, in particular, is an aspect of the Company which emerged only from employees with high SM use. Previous research on OI already recognized that the interactive qualities of SM (e.g. to facilitate the quality of organization–public conversations and generate positive outcomes) affect key relational values of trust [48], fostering brand loyalty and communities [49].

The fact that employees with high intensity of SM use utilize frequently the adjective *innovative* might represent that they see also SM as an innovative technology, as such aligned with the OI of the organization they need to identify with. Therefore, the intensity of their SM use might also change when SM becomes taken for granted. A longitudinal follow-up study could help to confirm or reject this hypothesis. Moreover, our findings also do not fully support the findings of Hall and colleagues [50] who found a relationship between employee perceptions regarding the quality of a firm's offerings and perceived organizational identification, as in our study we did not observe the relationship between the quality of the products and services the employees developed or delivered and their OI.

## **6 Conclusion**

We set out to examine the relationship between the nature of OI and the extent of SM use. Our study contributes both to OI and SM use research.

To OI research, we bring two contributions. First, we identify a number of OI characteristics, both at the organizational and individual levels, which even though are not

strictly dependent on the SM use, could be associated with varying extent of SM use. At the organizational level, these relate to the local versus international dimension, family versus corporate, and the innovative nature of the organization. At the individual level, they relate to the nature of collaboration and degree of trust, and the age differential between employees. Second, this study also draws on a bespoke framework developed for measuring OI via LinkedIn, which is explicit on the criteria employed to measure OI, compared to other existing frameworks that do not do so [42] or that are not specific/applicable for this specific SM platform [51]. Third, in this study instead of applying a pre-existing framework to analyze OI, we rather looked for the emergent themes (adjectives). This from helped to reveal that OI might be socially situated and thus difficult to generalize. Moreover, this approach offers a guide for future scholars on how to identify and possibly measure OI in contexts where existing OI frameworks are not suitable.

This study also brings three main contributions to SM research. First, we explored the role that OI plays in explaining SM use, which is the concept mostly overlooked in this area. In particular, we found that OI does not solely depend on employees' SM use. Thus, we guarantee future research focused on discovering other factors that could explain the extend of employees' SM use for professional purposes. Second, while research related to SM use has begun to consider the motivations of employees in using SM [52], our analysis takes a step further and shows that certain aspects of how employees perceive their OI (e.g. cultural and strategic aspects of OI) can still be important in explaining their engagement with SM for professional purposes. This finding might imply that OI could potentially be an antecedent to SM use, which should be verified by the future research. Finally, we examine a type of SM which is mostly overlooked by existing studies which focus mostly on internal SM channel: LinkedIn which is an external SM channel. Taking into consideration that LinkedIn, with its 645 million users, is the world's largest professional social network on the Internet [53], this study can have important practical implications by revealing to the company management the emerging need for explaining SM use or management practices to employees. In fact, it has already been highlighted that it is important to for organizations to consider the OI which employees can project externally via their SM profiles and whether and how these can affect them.

As any research, this study has some limitations. First of all, it took into account only a small sample of the employees, thus it restrains the formulation of general conclusions and generalizability of research findings. In addition, this case study does not include all the sub-categories developed by Corley [37] for the strategic and cultural nature of OI, which is planned to be addressed in our future analysis.

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