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IDENTITY CREATION IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION

ABSTRACT

Identity and online social networks are phenomena of our time and the search for and research on it is as powerful as the technological change in the history of the globalised world. On the one hand online social networks offer individuals the opportunity to create multiple identities based on valid information, and on the other hand acknowledge the fact these identities might be false and based on misinformation. In spite of the increased use of online social networks, limited research, especially from a communicative perspective, has been conducted on social processes and phenomena which are used to create online identities. One reason might be the social implications from the formation and use of online identities and advancement in processes of their transference into the real world. Based on recommendations by Acun (2011) and Attrill & Jalil (2011) that future research should focus on a theoretical exploration of identities in online social networks, this study sets out to investigate and address these gaps and to present a theoretical overview of the social processes and phenomena in the formation of identity in online social networks through an interpretivistic paradigm to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Drawing from social constructionism, social categorization, identity, social identity and knowledge management theoretical paradigms, as well as a consideration of the notional constructs of identity and online social networks, the main theoretical approaches to and key criteria thereof are proposed. This article therefore aims to serve the purpose to review the theoretical perspectives used to explain the formation of identities in online social networks and to identify the characteristics and factors that impede on it.

Prof Rachel Barker

BA (Communication Science); BA Honours (Communication Science); MA (Communication Science) ; D.Litt. et Phil (Communication Science) ; Post-graduate Certificate in Marketing Management)

Section Head: Organisational Communication

Department of Communication Science

University of South Africa (Unisa)

Email: barker@unisa.ac.za ☐ Tel: +27 12 429 6772 Fax: +27 12 429 3346

☐ PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa



INTRODUCTION

In the 'connected' 21st century, the combination of technological innovation which affects most parts of human existence (Forster 2000:254) and the *virtual community revolution* (Thorne 2005:2) where individuals can interact with both physical and virtual marketplaces, necessitates organisations to obtain power over online social networks to put them in a better position to dominate interactions on the Web (Farquhar & Rowley 2006:162). The emphasis is on the online network society which offers the opportunity to knowledge-based organisations to enhance communication relationships with individuals through online social networks, not only on a one-to-one and one-to-many, but on a *many-to-many* basis, which in essence permits a shift to knowledge creation and sharing through online social networks in cyberspace on a global scale.

Online social networks, like real social networks, help individuals to construct identities through social participation. These networks are a rich means of knowledge creation and sharing where individuals in the groups are united by shared activities, working information and interests, and do not necessarily come together in the real world, but share an active involvement in these online social networks where communication takes place through computer technologies and networks. As a consequence, online social networks creates a different setting of virtuality where an online identity can be created by the way an individual shape their self (body and identity) to their own as well as society's liking. From a communicative perspective, this article propagates that social networks and identity are consequences of the accelerating rate of change and the subsequent 'cyber revolution'.

Various criticisms have been made against online social networks and whether identities created in this cyberworld are in fact artificial and/or real. This is mainly due to the fact that online social networks create the opportunity for people to present an identity which might be totally different and/or what they want others to perceive them to be 'accepted' by the group. Individuals therefore create identities which are in line with the values, norms, expectations and so forth of the other members of the group they want to belong to. In spite of the realisation of the importance of online social networks, limited theory-guided research has been conducted. The main aim of this article is hence to address the problem of a lack of theoretical explorations to investigate the creation of identities in online social networks. An initial theoretical conceptualization will be made within the interpretivist paradigm in terms of the following: Firstly, a discussion of key concepts followed by the main theoretical approaches to online social networks and identity will be presented with deliberative drawing on various psychological, sociological and communicative paradigms; this is followed by a critical discussion on the characteristics and social effects of online social networks; and lastly the presentation of a critical discussion, limitations and recommendations for future research.

KEY CONCEPTS

In order to present a theoretical discussion of identities in online social networks, the following notional constructs are presented briefly.

Identity

No single definition of identity is prevalent in the literature. The origin of the term can probably be dated back to Sigmund Freud's (1900) scientific terms 'identity of perception' and 'identification' in his work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where dreaming maintains the personality's continuity and identity; hence demonstrating the importance of identity in the

human psyche. Today, identity (which encompasses a personal and social identity) is studied from philosophical, social and psychological points of view, thereby making it possible to study identities in social groups or networks from different perspectives. According to Rimskii (2011:79-80), the interpretation of identity most appropriate for the analysis of identity in online social networks on the Internet, is that it is *the state of the individual's consciousness in which, on the basis of the aggregate set of personal characteristics, one knows oneself, one recognizes the stability of one's own personality, and one determines oneself from the surrounding reality, and one determines one's membership in a particular social group and, conversely, acknowledges the impossibility of belonging to other social groups*. This definition forms the basis for this article as it encompasses most of the variables and characteristics (which are biological, psychological, social and cultural in nature) of studying identity in online social networks.

In terms of whether identity in online social networks is artificial or real, various viewpoints exist. For example, according to Shapiro (2010:10), identity is probably best defined as *an individual's sense of self. The answer to the question, 'who am I?'*. Brown (2011:34) indicates that a growing confusion about identity in social networks will go from *'Who am I?' to 'Who, when and where am I?'* because of the multiple identities individuals can present, which will ultimately lead to the question *'Who are you, really?'*.

From a theoretical point of view, it is argued that identity is a state of an individual's consciousness based on personal characteristics and own personality, is created from the self, and determines to which particular social group or social entity it belongs based on social interaction. The creation of this self is developed by who we are by knowing or imagining how other see us through our interactions with them. It is also argued that a *real* identity is usually created by situations around you, whilst an *artificial* identity is made up by oneself based on how they want to be interpreted by others, which is displayed and understood in the own self during social interactions. The latter will typically be a 'digital' or online identity where you can define yourself in multiple ways through the presentation of multiple selves to others. The interpretation of identity is therefore underlined by interactions between society and the individual and how they perceive this self.

The following notions of identity have been identified in the literature: it is a dynamic configuration of defining characteristics (Ruyter & Conroy 2002); identity is fluid and a person presents different identities in different settings (Mead 1934; Code & Zaparyniuk 2010:1346); and identity is formed through social interactions (Harter 1998). Because we have multiple interactions with the others, individuals adopt this identity to become socially acceptable and/or to guide interactions. Metaphorically, this identity can be presented in numerous ways in everyday life, depending on the interpretations of this self and the meaning ascribed to it. If applied to online social networks, the identity is thus dependant on knowledge creation and sharing obtained through interactions and transmitted ubiquitously through social interactions without considering real-world consequences. The identity we create is therefore more easily visible and accepted if presented differently – and the identity created more 'real'. If applied to online social networks, an online identity is created through a relationship of the defining characteristics of a person in the online environment to make the person feel themselves and different from the other (adapted from Kim, Zheng & Gupta 2011:1761; Barker 2008b). In quit essence, individuals then interact with others through the images that represent who they are, who they want to be or an idealized version of them, and because of the anonymity of the online environment, this contributes to the interchangeability of the identity.

Although various aspects can shape identity in social networks and cyberspace, it is argued that identity is, inter alia, created through interaction between knowledge of social concepts, online relationships, the virtual body and the social body. *Social concepts* include a person's identity information and underlying social contexts which allows them to represent different types of identities in cyberspace. *Online relationships* is created through self-expression to facilitate the formation of relationships based on shared values and beliefs which is encouraged through the relative anonymity of online social networks which enables identity experimentation and development. *Virtual body* is when individuals create visual presentations of the self using 'physical' embodiments and identities during real-life experiences with others in cyberspace, and where embodied self refers to a state of being in which the body is the site of meaning, experience and expression of individuals in the world (Shapiro 2010:3). *Social body* refers to an individual product and entity created through social and physical contexts (Shapiro 2010:142).

Social networks and online social networks

A *social network* refers to a structure made up of individuals (or organisations) connected by one or more specific types of characteristics (including friendships, common interest, dislike, relationships of beliefs, knowledge or values, etc.) (Barker 2013). A social network, which is a technically robust, highly bendable, integrated stage that offers relevant impressions and themes in an enacted conduct of performances, can be seen as a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them (Barker 2009). Furthermore, it involves human dynamics where an identity is presented in order to connect all through the acting of certain roles in this cyber setting or 'cyber stage'. It is argued that in order to create an identity through the presentation of the self in social networks in cyberspace, a combination of theoretical notions can be used to present an artificial or real identity to the 'cyber life-world' out there (Barker 2009).

Online social networks refer to personal interactions and human relationships that grow from computer-mediated discussions and conversations among people sharing a common affinity, articulating shared connections and who differ and traverse in other ways through distance, time comprehension, imbeddedness in single locations and space. The following properties of social networks which are applicable to online social networks are prevalent in the literature (adapted from White, Chu & Salehi-Abari 2010:662; Boyd & Ellison 2008:211):

- Community structure: online social networks have an inherently intelligent human-based organisational structure with similar nodes clustered together within a wider network with similar types of topics.
- Small world effect: the distance between two vertices in any network is short where strangers are connected through someone they know who enables users to articulate and make them visible.
- Trust relationships: if an individual is connected through someone they know to the others, there is implicit recognition that making the connection, is trustworthy.

Hence, online social networks are seen mostly as a social space in which social learning is taking place and where the virtuality of social interaction becomes a reality. Although various key terminologies are used to describe this, namely 'brand communities', 'communities of interest', 'virtual communities of consumption' or 'Internet cultures', the most widely used and prominent terms used to refer to online social networks are virtual communities and blogging communities.

Virtual communities

Virtual communities see virtual reality as a simulacrum of reality, not reality itself, or in the words of Grosz (2001:80): *The very term virtual reality attests to a phantasmatic extension, a bizarre contortion to save not the real (which is inevitably denigrated and condemned) but rather the will, desire, mind, beyond body or matter: this is real not quite real, not an ‘actual real’, a ‘really real’, but a real whose reality is at best virtual.* Although this philosophical viewpoint creates confusion around the terms *virtual*, *actual* and *real*, Styhre (2003:21) explains it in that the domain of virtual reality reproduces the ‘real’ through technology which creates ‘reality’ through technology-mediated images and perceptions in cyberspace. Hence the following definition of virtual communities proposed by Barker (2006:132) is pertinent: *personal relationships in cyberspace where computer-mediated space integrates/facilitates knowledge creation and sharing through various participants ... with more or less specific, complex and common goals, value systems, norms, rules and a sense of identity that they want to enhance through electronic communication.*

Blogging communities

Blogging communities, also referred to as blogospheres (White, Chu and Salehi-Abari 2010:662), are similar to virtual communities with the main differences that it has no shared space, clear boundary or membership and is driven by personalities. Blogging communities can therefore be defined as virtual communities *which allow members to post blogs on their website where blogs are an online version of people’s daily diary, which allow anyone to share his or her thoughts and experiences* (Kim et al 2011:1760). Where virtual communities encourage many-to-many communication, blogging communities encourage one-to-many communication with less interaction than virtual communities. Links to other blogs, discussion forums, etc. are also included. Based on the literature (Kim et al; Barker 2006; Barker 2008a; Chiu, Hsu & Wang 2006; White et al 2010:661; Boyd & Ellison 2008), a summary of the main differences and/or similarities between virtual and blogging communities as online social networks are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main differences and/or similarities between virtual and blogging communities as online social networks

Social Networks	
Virtual communities	Blogging communities
Diverse audiences	Help strangers to connect based on shared interests, political views, activities, views, etc.
No such features	Allow members to purchase and use avatars
Knowledge creation and sharing	Knowledge contribution a means to communicate identity – facilitate knowledge exchange
Shared space	No shared space
Identity driven (a sense of Other)	Personality driven (thoughts and experiences)
Support maintenance of social network	Trying to create order amongst the chaos of the web
A lot of interaction	Less interaction – ideal for data mining
Maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections	Maintain and reinforce pre-existing social networks

Many links	Can include some links
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Cyberspace

Shapiro (2010:91) defines cyberspace as the *intangible, metaphorical 'space' that networked computers construct through and for electronic communication* and Venkatesh (1998:667) that it is *a culture of simulation, signification and communication as opposed to realism, representation and objective participation*.

The emergence of online social networks in the cyberspace context, created the opportunity for individuals to develop and create an identity in unprecedented ways opening up entirely new ways to present themselves as human and social beings. Its emphasis on allowing individuals to conceive, construct, mask and present identities in almost boundless ways – whether artificial or real (Fernback 1997, Turkle 1995, Wittel 2001), presented unparalleled ways for individuals to express themselves.

Various analogies have been used in the literature to compare cyberspace with the real world based on different philosophical viewpoints (Barker 2013). These include Gibson's (1984) viewpoint that cyberspace refers to an 'alternative' world which would develop through globalisation and integration of computer mediated communications; Bishop's (2001:1290) viewpoint that it can be seen as the disembodiment of the subject in cyberspace through Froy's perspective of 'overthrowing the organic body', Benedikt's 'foreseeing humans ridding themselves of the ballast of materiality', Gibson's definition of cybernaut's ability to transcend their bodies 'online ... inside the system' and 'when consciousness becomes divided like beads of mercury arcing over an endless beach'. This indicates that cyberspace should not be viewed as a vague universe of disembodied spirits, but that it constitutes a new independent space where an online identity, real or artificial, can be created and presented, thereby creating 'cyber alien beings'.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING: IDENTITY AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Although a vast number of theories can be used to inform the theoretical underpinning of this article, this section focuses on a brief overview of the main theories linking social networks and identity, mainly from a communicative and/or social psychological perspective, including the social constructionism, social categorization, identity, social identity and knowledge management theories.

Social constructionism

Many versions of social constructionism are available in the literature based on multiple viewpoints of the theorists who developed it. The core premise of social constructionism is how human knowledge is linked and created through social interactions based on the meaning assigned based on interpretations of a phenomenon (Littlejohn & Foss 2008:44-45). The most prevalent viewpoint for this article, is that of Shapiro (2010:6) who argues that social constructionism is a theoretical approach where societal structures (on individual, interactional and institutional levels) are products of social processes and not naturally or biologically predictable. This view emphasizes that the forces shaping individual lives are created and recreated over time from social interactions with physical reality guided by societal worldviews. If applied to online social networks and identity, the online social networks can be seen as the intermediary between the identities created to the external world and a visible self of who we are or who we want to portray through this identity (Barker 2013). Although it can

be assumed that identity reside in the self we present, the presentation of this identity in online social networks can be affected by various characteristics in or outside our bodies to tell the world who we want to be, not necessarily who we really are. To create and present an identity which is acceptable in these networks, individuals go through a process of changing between their physical, social and mental selves. Social constructionists belief that there is no 'objective reality' *per se*, but that realities are constantly produced based on interpretations of the online social networks people belong to (Du Plooy-Cilliers 2011:59). The explicit relevance of this theory to this article is that it emphasizes that individuals can create, shape and present their online identity through interactions in the online social networks.

Social categorization theory

This theory suggests that the identification of a person with any group is determined by the extent to which individuals categorize and associate themselves in a specific group in order to enhance their social identity (Hogg & Turner 2011). Code and Zaparyniuk (2010:1351) identify three aspects used for this group formation, namely self-categorization; collective identity; and depersonalization. *Self-categorization* is a cognitive process which helps an individual to focus on contextually relevant and meaningful aspects of the world and categorizes it in terms of important or unimportant, in other words linking the self to a group based on salient characteristics in terms of attitudinal, emotional and behavioral similarities. This in essence, allows individuals to go along with a group as an embodiment of the group. Self-categorization is influenced by factors such as personal identifiability to other group members and attributes towards group or collective identity. *Collective identification* refers to the association between an individual and the group they belong to based on the psychological connections between the self, identity and online social network (Jenkins, 2004). *Depersonalization* determines whether an individual will conform to group dynamics and behave according to group norms and gives a person a sense of anonymity in the collective identity.

Identity theory

This theory, founded by Sheldon Stryker (1968; 2008), also place emphasis on the link between social structures and identity. In this theory identity refers to the meaning an individual ascribes to the different roles played in different contexts within society. This theory forms part of *symbolic interactionism*, a way of thinking about the mind, self and society (Mead 1934) and focuses on the way in which individuals form meaning and structure in society and the meaning associated with symbols exchanged through communication (du Plooy 2011). Once again, it emphasizes that individuals have multiple identities determined by the roles and norms of society where the self is seen as being reflexive which leads to the objectification of identity which is then categorized in relation to other social categories or groups. In the context of online social networks, the individual will place themselves in one of the different categories in which they define themselves and others in relation to these categories which is also referred to as identification.

Social identity theory

The main premise of the social identity theory links closely to the above, but holds that the way people present their identities through a categorization process is influenced by *behavior* and that an individual's identity is directly linked to their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Baumeister, 1998). The social identity theory mainly refers to the fact that individuals are motivated to present an identity, usually positive to enhance their self-esteem, in these groups

through specific behavior which can be extended to online identities where behavior is encouraged through knowledge creation and sharing (Kim et al 2011:1760). The basic phenomenon is that individuals attempt to establish a positive 'identity' by showing cohesion with their in-group and bias against out-groups. The main focus of this theory is that a person not only has one personal self, but multiple selves that correspond with the expectations of the groups. These groups can be any group that they belong to which give the individual a sense of social identity. Two types of groups influence the maintenance of a positive identity, namely in-groups and out-group. In-groups are defined as a group to which a person belongs or thinks he/she belongs and an out-group as a group to which a person does not belong or thinks he/she does not belong. Individuals will continually try and upgrade their status in the in-group and ridicule their out-group to enhance their self-esteem and identity (Tajfel 1970).

Social identity theory contends two types of cyber identities are prevalent in this theory: personal and social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). *Personal identity* is derived from self-knowledge of personality traits and a belief of uniqueness of the self. *Social identity* is derived from an individual based on the perception of belonging to a specific group or what defines the 'us' associated with a specific group. Kim et al (2011:1763) describes the difference as follows: if personal identity is prominent, an individual's behavior is mainly motivated by their needs, standards, beliefs; but when social identity is prominent, an individual's behavior is mainly determined through social categorization and comparisons to the others based on the similarities and/or differences in terms of conditions, collective needs, goals and standards of the social network the individual belongs to. In this theory, categorization (which is similar to the 'identification' in the identity theory) is done in terms of four main aspects: social self-categorization (in groups to simplify our understanding of structure of the social interaction); social comparison (where individuals compare their opinions and abilities with others on a group level); social identity (which refers to the individual's self-concept which derives from knowledge, value and emotional significance through membership of a social group); and self-esteem (which is motivated by the need for a positive self-esteem) (Tajfel 1978). Hence, Code and Zaparyniuk (2010:1350) argue that identity experimentation is motivated by self-exploration on how others react, social compensation to overcome shyness and social facilitation of relationship formation.

Knowledge management

Knowledge contribution is one of the essential factors in the success of online social networks. Hence the importance of knowledge management in the studies of knowledge contribution behaviour can be seen as an extension of the social identity theory in that it assists in the management of this knowledge contribution. Knowledge contribution can be explained in terms of knowledge creation and sharing in online social networks, which are generally recognized to be a feature of knowledge-based organisations. Although various theoretical perspectives have been distinguished to define the notion of organisations on the basis of knowledge-based resources, the theory mostly used in research is *knowledge management*.

According to Bell (2002:49), knowledge management *is crucial because it points the way to comprehensive and clearly understandable management initiatives and procedures*. Aligned with this viewpoint, most knowledge management theorists perceive the organisation as a collective of intellectual resources, implicating knowledge in various forms. Nearly all definitions of knowledge management focus on the generation, storing, representation and sharing of knowledge to the benefit of the organisation and its individuals. In this context, knowledge is seen as information with specific properties and information as the introductory stage to knowledge (Lueg 2001; Barker 2006). Most discussions of knowledge management

refer to a technical component (data gathering, mining and integration, the dissemination of data and direct, real-time interactions to share information) and a human or organisational component (which includes the management of four interrelated elements: choice, adoption and implementation of procedures/methods to link individuals and groups; formal and informal informational settings where interaction occurs; organisational practices to complete tasks; and the organisational context in which interactions and work happen) (Barker 2006:134).

CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL EFFECTS FOR IDENTITY IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

In this section, the characteristics and social effects of identity in online social networks are briefly highlighted.

Characteristics of identity in online social networks

Based on the preceding discussion and the theoretical approaches of the creation of identity in online social networks, as well as research conducted previously (Boyd & Ellison 2008; Marwick 2005), and/or interpretations of the author of existing research, the following characteristics are identified:

- individuals are *consciously able to construct* the online presentation of the self;
- an online identity can either *conform to or is rejected* by the online social network members;
- individuals *internalise elements* acquired from the online social network in their identity based on the attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, judgements, opinions, assessments, priorities, tastes, ways of life and characteristics of the group;
- identity is created through *procedures to share and create* information and knowledge;
- identity is created based on the *content of information* – verbal, literary and textual constructs - through intertext, visual signs, sound, images, verbal descriptions, audio and video images which influence the consciousness of users;
- identity is influenced by *anonymity* through the use of nicknames, only revealing selected information, nonverbal elements, etc.;
- identity can be *misrepresented* through distortion of the meaning of messages and manipulation of information;
- individuals can *try out* and *play with* different identities which is not possible in the real life;
- identities presented in online social networks have *no restrictions* through morality;
- it is easier to create an identity based on the provisional features of the network to allow individuals *access* based on the created identity which do not need a copy of a real identity document; and
- individuals have the *freedom to create multiple identities* (with some social restrictions) which can be used simultaneously and be experimented with.

Positive and negative social effects

In reflecting on the positive and negative social effects of the presentation of identity in online social networks, it is clear that limited research has been done with mostly fragmented results (Boyd & Ellison 2008). According to Rimskaa (2011:100), the presentation of identity in online social networks *cannot be unequivocally assessed as positive or negative*, mainly because of the difficulty of its transference in the real world. In spite of this concern and difficulties, an

attempt is made to integrate, contextualise and compare the most prevalent effects in comparison to each other in Table 2 as a starting point for a theoretical discussion thereof.

Table 2: Positive and negative social effects of online social networks

Positive social effects	Negative social effects
Increased opportunity to achieve self-realisation through new identities and roles	Fixed online identities
Expanded opportunities to communicate	Player addiction and dependencies on 'artificial' identity
Territorial distance no longer a barrier to communication	Narrowing of interests and priorities
Enhanced mental experience to belong to	Internal mental experiences at the expense of achievements in the real world
Can present an artificial identity to comply	Manipulation which can lead to marginalisation through incomplete character of the artificial identity
Freedom to create multiple identities and to use simultaneously a number of different identities	Social restrictions
Can experiment with identities to discover the 'ideal'	Non-traditional creation of identities
Easy access to online social networks based on provisional features of the network	Not the real world which means no need for identity documents which can lead to the creation of new identities in textual communication which can be false or artificial
Provide a rich source of naturalistic behavioural data	Primary information on pre-existing social relations

As a consequence of these effects, it can be argued that the formation and use of online identities in online social networks is an advanced process with various phenomenological aspects, but that their transference from the real world might have far reaching implications. According to Attrill and Jalill (2010:1635), the factors that will impede on these identities will be influenced by trust, the social setting, social identity, intent, privacy and the type of information the individual is willing to expose or present. It can be concluded that the way in which identity is presented in these online social networks depends on whether the profile is 'artificial' (confirming to the rigidity of the requirements of being a member) and/or 'real' (for example using a real photo instead of an image or drawing as indicator of authenticity). This is ultimately influenced by the information individuals give or give off, which links to the knowledge management paradigm which focuses on the creation, sharing and contribution of information.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF IDENTITY IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

The presentation of identity is seen as an imperative facet of the *modus operandi* of online social networks, reflecting the complex social web in which the self is acted and acted upon. It influences the behaviour, thoughts and emotions of embodied members through the creation of artificial and/or real identities that shape the orientation of the everyday 'cyber life-world'. Individuals with artificial selves create symbolic means through which they share and present their perceived identities using narratives, implicit and tacit knowledge to enact and act an

identity which is not only embodied in the self, but also provide a dramatic identity based on accounts of performances and accounts of life events as a medium one lives in or a stage one acts on. This identity is enacted in the moment of being told, and its existence is virtual, actualised and adapted in the context of the situation or setting in which the narrative takes place – acting out a role to create knowledge of the self as a human being. The identity can be entirely free from or oppressed by the online social networks be reduced to an object or be valued as a human being acting a role in this environment.

This means that the virtual individual can present any identity, artificial or real, and if not accepted, not take responsibility for it. Or in the words of Andrews and Baird (1986:149): *When we are wearing a 'front' or playing some social role, we can always rationalize away rejections when they occur. After all it was not us they rejected, just our front. But if we present our true selves and are rejected, there is no place to which to retreat – our very essence has been deemed unacceptable.*

As part of the reflection and evaluation of identity in online social networks, it is posited that it is embedded and entangled in complex disperses and needs to respond to various critiques and elements in the emergence thereof. What an appropriate identity require, is to allow the emergence of implicit, narrative and embodied knowledge to create and share an online identity through expressions in the cyber life-world, whether real or not, or in the words of Burke (1989:139) *whether profoundly or trivially, truthfully or falsely.*

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This article highlights and integrates the key theoretical constructs and relevant phenomena in the study on identity in online social networks in an attempt to address the gap in the literature which presents this information mostly in a fragmented way. In addition, it explained the identified constructs in terms of the most eminent theoretical perspectives and suggests that it be used as basis for further research. The implications of this theoretical exploration for further research include an exploration of identity in online social networks within existing theoretical frameworks to propose a model which can be used in future research to look at the participative interaction in these social networks in more detail. What is also needed are more detailed case studies to provide further evidence focusing on the impact this has in real-life situations.

Despite the need for a theoretical framework for identities in online social networks, the main limitation of this study is that it is exploratory in nature and that little has been proven about the content thereof. Another limitation is that it presents an initial theoretical discussion which needs to be expanded in future, possibly also to propose a model and/or measuring instrument. However, this initial study can be seen as an important first attempt to integrate existing viewpoints on identity in online social networks which could be used in further categorical and/or experimental explorations.

CONCLUSION

Identity and online social networks are phenomena of our time, driven by the recognition of the need to propose new theoretical perspectives and enabling factors to manage it effectively. It is suggested here that the presentation of identity in online social networks through interpretative communicative analogies can be seen as a deliberative process to reveal an artificial and/or real self. From an online identity perspective, this study has shown that whether identity creation and sharing is artificial or real, it can be a powerful character which needs to be managed to the benefit of the organization.

To conclude, given the scarcity of research in this new and relatively under-explored area of research, this article can be seen as an important starting point for future research to clarify and consider the wider implications of identity in online social networks in theory and in practice, where the former may evoke enhancements in research in general and the latter may be across different areas and sectors. In this way, the different approaches to identity in online social networks can be investigated under different contexts and allow researchers to go beyond and present complementary frameworks or measuring instruments for the systematic analysis thereof. While this article outlined some of the basic concepts and approaches, much remains to be done and several options exist to further extend this initial approach and realise the importance to 'create, shape and structure' these identities, or in the words of Szasz (1973): *People often say that this or that person has not yet found himself. But the self is not something one finds, it is something one creates.*

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