

**THE CREATION AND PRESENTATION OF  
CYBER IDENTITIES IN CYBER ORGANISATIONAL SOCIETIES: TOWARDS A  
CONCEPTUAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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# THE CREATION AND PRESENTATION OF CYBER IDENTITIES IN CYBER ORGANISATIONAL SOCIETIES: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## ABSTRACT

This article presents a conceptual theoretical framework for the study of the creation and presentation of multiple cyber identities in online social networks from a communicative perspective, subsequently referred to as 'cyber organisational societies'. It is argued that a multi-dimensional approach to multiple cyber identities could assist organisations to discover and understand the incoherence that exists in social reality and real life and the iconic existence of these identities through a subjective dimension and evaluation of the concept from different interdisciplinary theories to re-enforce and explain the existence of these identities. Therefore this article has as a main objective to define, identify, contextualise, theorise and debate the multiple approaches to cyber identities in cyber organisational societies; and to propose a conceptual theoretical framework of the social and communication processes and phenomena in the formation of cyber identity research in cyber organisational societies based on a systematic review of relevant theories.

## INTRODUCTION

*Where social identity becomes relatively more salient than personal identity, individuals see themselves less as differing individual persons and more as the similar, prototypical representatives of their in-group category ... the identity perspective reinstates the group as a psychological reality and not merely a convenient label for describing the outcome of interpersonal processes and relations. (Turner 1999:11)*

This article is built on the premise that individuals present multiple cyber identities in online social networks and argues that these identities can be quite explicitly tied to the context, knowledge and understanding within cyber organizational societies. Authors like Littlejohn and Foss (2008:251,277), Steinberg (2007:20) and Wood (2004:20), explain that individuals need to be able to interact and communicate effectively and comfortably within organizational contexts and that it is imperative for organizations to understand how individuals that deviate from the norm, function within these environments. According to Sedereviciute and Valentini (2011), little research has been done on the benefits for organizations to understand online social networks in cyberspace and the cyber identities created through stakeholder relationships. From a cyber perspective, it is argued that individuals create and present cyber identities to communicate effectively, both internally and externally, to build relationships. Furthermore, individuals embrace their identities and individuality within an cyber organization (Wood 2004:20) to communicate with 'imagined stakeholders', the mental conceptualisation of whom we are communicating with, which is one of the most fundamental attributes of being human (Litt 2010:331).

Various debates are evident in the literature on whether cyber identities created and presented in cyber organizational societies are in fact artificial and/or real and whether it can be

managed or not. This is mainly due to the fact that the cyber world creates the opportunity for individuals to present a cyber identity which might be totally different and/or what they want others to perceive them to be 'accepted' by the group. Individuals therefore create cyber 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 cyber identities in online social networks, limited theory-guided research has been conducted, hence this study set out to address this problem.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The main aim of this article is to address the research problem that a lack of theoretical explorations to investigate the creation and presentation of cyber identities in online social networks exist. Hence, this article presents a systematic review of the most relevant theories for cyber identity formation in online social networks.

For the purpose of this article it is assumed that individuals construct identities and realities through social interactions. This study uses an exploratory qualitative literature review which is conducted within an organizational context and provides a contextual foundation for the study, drawing from various interdisciplinary theories as foundation for the proposed conceptual theoretical framework. The main aim of this article is hence to address the problem of a lack of theoretical explorations to investigate the creation and presentation of cyber identities through communication in cyber organizational societies. The main motivation is to contextualise the multiplicity of cyber identities in cyber organizational societies through the following: definitions of each, relevant theoretical underpinnings, identify and discuss constructs of cyber identity as well as the variables and characteristics that shape and emerge from these cyber identities, and to propose a conceptual theoretical framework to provide a better understanding of this communication phenomenon.

## **CYBER IDENTITY IN CYBER ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIETIES**

An organization emerges whenever individuals come together for some kind of collective action such as organizing themselves in order to complete tasks (Littlejohn & Foss 2008:251). Within an organization, organizational communication takes place which is according to Angelopulo and Barker (2013) instrumental from a functional perspective to look at isolating and manipulating the elements of an organization that contribute to or inhibit its smooth operations, as well as an interpretivist perspective which postulates that reality is socially constructed within an organizational framework. Perspectives of organizational communication are underpinned by a vast area of organizational communication theories from a variety of traditions, but because the focus of this study is on cyber identities in 'cyber organizational societies', the focus will be on theories of identity. In this regard, cyber identities will be framed within the context of cyber organizational societies only as the environment in which these identities are created and presented. According to Jung and Hecht (2008:314) communication plays an important role in identity formation and that the majority of communication theories are based on elements of the psychological, social and social psychological theories. Because communication identity theories are still in its infancy stages, the need hence exists to analyse and critique these theories from a communication perspective. This is reiterated by Mobley (2010) who argues that communication scholars need to investigate the communication changes of the behavioural, socially constructed and created identities in terms of these interdisciplinary approaches.

Two aspects will be considered: the importance of creating and sharing cyber identities through communication to obtain trust and commitment in support of the strategic intent of the organization; and the social, personal and professional component to ensure a positive cyber organizational society is created to enhance the needs of individuals to categorize themselves into a specific cyber organizational society. According to Elving (2005:132), “organizational communication can be considered as an important antecedent of the self-categorisation process, which helps to define the identity of a group and to create a community spirit, which fits into organizational requirements” and it is argued that it will ultimately determine how each individual identifies with and feels part of the cyber organizational society.

### **Identity and cyber identity**

The origin of the term identity dates 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 it is studied from philosophical, social, psychological and other points of view, thereby making it possible to study identities in social groups or networks from different perspectives. Buckingham (2007:1) explains the debate around identity as deriving from the tension between aspects such as ‘be myself’, ‘find my true self’ or ‘seek multiple identifications with others’ and argue that ‘who I am’ (or think I am) varies according to ‘who I am with’ which varies on the basis of social, cultural and biological characteristics, as well as shared values, personal histories and interests. Similarly, Shapiro (2010:10) argues that identity is probably best defined as an individual’s sense of self. 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?’.

According to Rimskii (2011:79-80), the interpretation of identity most appropriate for the analysis of identity in cyber 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 of studying cyber identity which are constructed collaboratively by and reflective of the peer groups in the cyber organizational society. Although two main types of identity are prominent in the literature, namely personal identity (which is the personal characteristics and meanings that an individual associates with him-/herself as an individual and with his/her social groups) and social identity (which aligns the social categorisation of individuals into a group) (Fearon 1999; Moeng 2009; Puusa & Tolvanen 2006), it will be posited that various cyber identities can be constructed in cyber organizational societies.

### **Cyber organizational societies**

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 cyber networks in cyber

organizational societies created the opportunity for individuals to create and present cyber identities in unprecedented ways opening up entirely new ways to present themselves as human and social beings. Various analogies have been used in the literature to compare cyberspace (or in the context of this article ‘cyber organizational societies’) with the real world based on different philosophical viewpoints. These include the viewpoint of Gibson (1984) 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’ (Barker 2013). This indicates that cyberspace should not be viewed as a vague universe of disembodied spirits, but that it constitutes a new independent space where a cyber identity, real or artificial, can be created and presented, thereby creating ‘cyber alien beings’ in cyber organizational societies where these societies entails a structure of process affiliation, impression formation and interpersonal attraction to induce and promote cyber relationships and group cohesion through mutual dependence. For the purpose of this article, the definition proposed by Kee, Sparks, Struppa and Mannucci (2013:36) of social aggregation, which links to the definition of cyber identity, can be used to define cyber organizational societies: “the organization of individuals and interpersonally bonded clusters of individuals, a community of individuals and culturally distinct subgroups, or a collection of human nodes and different united social entities that co-exist within a system”.

## RELEVANCE OF PERTINENT INTERDISCIPLINARY THEORIES

Although a vast number of theories can be used to inform the conceptual theoretical framework of this article, this section focuses on a brief overview of the main theories which could arguably be applied to cyber identity from a communicative perspective, namely social, social psychological, communicative and/or identity perspectives of identity. These theories do not necessarily address the way in which an individual’s create and present cyber identities, but presents the opportunity to investigate the concept from an interdisciplinary approach (Mobley 2010) with the purpose of explaining it from a communicative perspective which could be used in the development of a conceptual theoretical framework. Table 1 presents the 10 main selected theories followed by a brief overview of each theory.

**Table 1: Theoretical perspectives on cyber identity**

Perspective	Theory	Main thrust(s)
Social	Social constructionism	Meaning based on interpretation of knowledge through interaction
	Constructivism	Interpretation reality through social constructs
	Social categorization theory	Extent to which individuals categorize and associate themselves in a specific group to enhance their social identity
	Symbolic Interactionism	The way in which individuals form meaning and structure associated with symbols exchanged through communication and interaction
	Social Psychology	Social Identity theory

		Positive 'identity' created by showing cohesion with in-groups and bias against out-groups
	Identity theory	Individuals have multiple identities determined by roles and norms 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
Communication/ Identity	Knowledge management	Focus on explicit and implicit, embodied, tacit and narrative knowledge, and the 'absent presence' of the body
	Communication theory of Identity	Integrating community, communication, social relationships and self-concepts into the formation of identity symbiotic Relationship between identity and communication
	Theory of Communication and Identity	Connects an individual's communicative choices with their personal narratives, their personal narratives with their bodily experience of emotionality and mood, and each of the former with the environmental resources available for the creation and sustenance of particular identities Communication, personal narrative and mood all work together in order to form and construct an individual's identity and assists in the management of uncertainty within interactions Identity is dynamic and in a continuous state of flux; changing based on situational contexts and the notion of a 'surround force'
	Identity Management Theory	Role of identity in relationship management Cultural communication

Each of these perspectives is briefly discussed below.

### Social perspectives

The four main theories within a social perspective are the following:

- *Social constructionism*

Many versions of social constructionism are available in the literature based on multiple viewpoints of the theorists who developed it. The original social constructionist theory has its roots in interpretivism and was termed 'the social construction of reality' (Berger & Luckmann 1966). It focuses on 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 networks (on individual, interactional and institutional levels) are products of social processes and not naturally or biologically predictable. In other words, social constructionism postulates that reality is not objective and individually constructed, but that the construction of meaning is based on an individual's interpretation of a situation and an individual's social interpretation of phenomena (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2009; Beaumie 2012; Cromby & Nightingale 1999; du Plooy – Cilliers 2010:56-57; Littlejohn & Foss 2008:44-45).

- *Constructivism*

Constructivists believe that individuals will create social realities and develop constructs through human interaction and objects in the environment, or in this case cyber organizational societies (Beaumie 2012). Social constructivists do not deny the existence of a physical reality but postulates that each individual experiences and perceives reality in a different way because each individual is unique and interpret reality according to conceptual categories that are social constructs learnt through interactions with other individuals and these social constructs will have social origins from which they are constructed (du Plooy-Cilliers 2010:70; Brooks 2002; Littlejohn & Foss 2008:123-125).

- *Social categorization theory*

This theory suggests that the identification of an individual 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. 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 cyber network (Jenkins 2004). *Depersonalization* determines whether an individual will conform to group dynamics and behave according to group norms and gives an individual a sense of anonymity in the collective identity.

- *Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic interactionism is a way of thinking about the mind, self and society which all contribute to what Mead (1967) termed a ‘social act’, an action or unit of conduct that can vary in length. Whilst George Herbert Mead is credited for formulating the foundations of the theory, it was Herbert Blumer who systematised the theory and coined the term ‘symbolic interactionism’, which, although it was not supported by Mead, became the commonly used name for this theory (Bergen & Braithwaite 2009:169-170; Hoover & Russo 2002; Mead 1967; Mobley 2010; Steinberg 2007; Wood 2004). Blumer (1986:5-7) posits that, at the simplest level, human beings react towards things based on the meaning that is ascribed to things and meaning is formed through the defining activities of individuals through social interaction. Thus, symbolic interactionism’s main focus is on the way in which individuals form meaning and structure in society and the meaning associated with symbols exchanged through communication. In terms of this article, it hence directly contributes to viewpoints on the meaning ascribed to cyber identities in the cyber organizational societies.

## **Social psychological theories**

The two most prominent theories which are seen as social collectives that require group membership are social identity theory and identity theory (DeRue, Ashford & Cotton 2009).

- *Social identity theory*

Tajfel (1970) developed the social identity theory (SIT) which states that “an individual has not one, ‘personal self’, but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group

membership based on knowledge and emotional significance attached to that meaning. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on the basis of his/her personal, family or national 'level of self' " (University of Twente Sa, 2012). Tajfel (1970) postulates that self-pride and self-esteem are directly linked to groups that individuals belong to because these groups give individuals a sense of social identity. These groups could be any group that an individual belongs to such as social class, family, organization and a team. In this context the group membership that will be focused on is an individual's membership to cyber organizations that allow him/her to complete work orientated tasks. Tajfel (1970) further theorises that individuals have an innate desire to maintain a positive self-esteem and an individual's identity is directly linked to self-esteem. The social identity theory thus holds that the way individuals 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). Although Allport (1954) first proposed the 'us' and 'them' as in-groups and out-groups, Tajfel (1970) formalized this theory and argue that in order to maintain a positive self-concept and self-esteem, it is important for individuals to have a continual positive disposition to the group(s) to which they belong, also known as 'in-groups' (Rivenburgh 2000; Scott 2008:125). The main focus of this theory is hence that an individual not only has one personal self, but multiple selves that correspond with the expectations of the groups. The basic phenomenon is that individuals attempt to establish a positive 'identity' by showing cohesion with their in-group and bias against out-groups where Tajfel (1970) refers to an in-group as, "a group to which an individual belongs or thinks he/she belongs" and an out-group as, "a group to which an individual does not belong or thinks he/she does not belong." The social identity theory is based on the notion that individuals will continually attempt to heighten the status of their in-group and even ridicule their out-group in order to improve their own self-image (McLeod 2008), which means that an individual's personal and social identity play a role in the construction of his/her identity. The viewpoint of Scott (2007:125) that the link between "one's organizational membership creates a very important social identity for many individuals - organizational identification is thus a specific form of social identification where we refer to the self in terms of our organizational membership" is specifically relevant in the context of this article. In this regard, the cyber identity will lead to an individual's loyalty and identification with the cyber organizational society as a specific group which allows the individual to align a cyber identity within the organization to portray loyalty and trust. Hence, it is important that organizations ensure that a marginalised individual also feels part of the in-group within the organization and thus locates cyber identities within these cyber organizational societies.

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 cyber 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 structures 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.

- *Identity Theory*

This theory, founded by Sheldon Stryker (1968; 2008), also places emphasis on the link between social societies and identity, as well as the interrelationships between self, social roles (mind) and society formulated from Mead's (1934) theory of symbolic interactionism. According to Burke (2003), it is more a theoretical framework than theory *per se*, where identity refers to the meaning an individual ascribes to the different roles played in different contexts within society. 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 cyber organizational societies, 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. The self is seen as being reflexive and it is this spontaneity that can lead to the objectification of an individual's identity and thus categorized in relation to other social categories or groups, in other words that human beings place individuals in different categories and then define themselves and others in relation to these categories. Whilst this phenomenon is referred to as 'categorisation' in the social identity theory as opposed to identification, as it is referred to in identity theory, the terms basically refer to the same phenomenon (Burke 2003; Burke & Stets 2000; Hogg, Terry & White 1995; Stryker 2008).

### **Communication theories**

Because the main aim of communication theory is to show that identities are dynamic and fluid when portrayed through communication, and because identity is constructed through a direct link between communication, identity, social interaction and social construction, the following four main communication theories were identified as the most relevant to this article as it pertains directly to these issues.

- *Knowledge management*

Knowledge contribution can be explained in terms of knowledge creation and sharing in cyber networks, which are generally recognized to be a feature of knowledge-based organizations. Although various theoretical perspectives have been distinguished to define the notion of organizations on the basis of knowledge-based resources, the theory mostly used in research is *knowledge management*. Earlier Knowledge Management studies focused mainly on the capture and dissemination of knowledge. Since the mid 1990s, the focus shifted towards the first community of practice (COP) (or communities of knowledge sharing) which emerged in 1997 (Barker 2103) and in the virtual world refers to virtual communities of practice (VcoP's). Although most traditional approaches to knowledge management assumed this knowledge to be relatively simple, more recent approaches realise that knowledge is in fact complex, factual, conceptual and procedural. A tendency still exists to follow the tradition in thinking of communication as the transfer and processing of information, but the current state of affairs is towards a focus on knowledge creation and sharing where one of the key discourses of the knowledge management paradigm is the focus on explicit and implicit, embodied, tacit and narrative knowledge, and the 'absent presence'

of the body (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) as an essential part of everyday communication because it allows for the transformation, sharing and processing of knowledge. From this perspective, those involved in the life-world are embodied beings which provides a way to know through 'lived situations', wherein the 'living body' mediates between 'internal' and 'external' or 'subjective' and 'objective' experience and meaning and the virtual is not the opposite of the real, but the medial between the real and artificial/imagined (Dreyfus 2001). Although mostly applied in computer science research, knowledge management today is a global organizational practice which focuses on core questions around knowledge sharing and creation characterized by definitional issues and a schism over the nature of knowledge (Barker 2009). It is hence argued that knowledge sharing and contribution is inextricably linked to a cyber-identity construction and one of the essential factors in the success of organizational communication. By definition individuals can construct identities in online social networks, but at the same time this can be managed by 'experts' or 'agents' of the organization who becomes part of these 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.

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 organization 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 organization and its individuals. In this context, knowledge is seen as information with specific properties and information as the introductory stage to knowledge in the creation of cyber identities in cyber organizational societies (Lueg 2001; Barker 2006).

- *Communication theory of identity*

The communication theory of identity explores individual, communal and societal as elements of identity formation by integrating community, communication, social relationships and self-concepts into the formation of identity (Hecht & Choi Sa 2012). According to Littlejohn and Foss (2008:88-90) identity can be seen as connection between the individual and society where communication is the link that allows it. The communication theory of identity proposes a move away from the concept of a singular human identity to identity as a social phenomenon because it focuses on individuals as social beings and the important role that communication plays in identity formation. Theorists propose that the personal and ascribed dimensions interact on the basis of four tiers: the personal layer which is an individual's self in relation to a social situation, such as, but not limited to - a social interaction with a colleague(s), attending a meeting or going out with friends; the enactment layer which is other individual's perceptions of the individual and refers to the image that an individual projects to others that, in turn, lead individuals to have insight about the individual; the relational layer which relates to the construction of an individual's identity in relation to his/her interactions with others; and the communal layer which is associated with an individual's identity linked to a larger group or culture (Hecht & Choi Sa; Littlejohn & Foss 2008:89). If applied to this article, all four tiers would be relevant to an individual's interaction behaviour within the cyber organizational context because social interactions with colleague(s) fall within the ambit of the personal layer, other individual's perceptions and the disclosure of identity would be part of the enactment layer, the relational layer would be based on which individuals an individual is interacting with based on roles, and the

communal layer would be how the individual identifies with the culture of the cyber organizational society.

- *Theory of Communication and Identity*

The theory of communication and identity “connects an individual's communicative choices with their personal narratives, their personal narratives with their bodily experience of emotionality and mood, and each of the former with the environmental resources available for the creation and sustenance of particular identities. Communication, personal narrative and mood all work together in order to form and construct an individual's identity and assists in the management of uncertainty within interactions” (Eisenberg 2001:535). Accordingly it is accentuated that identity is dynamic and in a constant state of flux; changing based on situational contexts and the notion of a ‘surround force’, which is defined as all the external influences that play an active role in shaping an individual's moods, life stories and communication (Bergen & Braithwaite 2009: 169; Mobley 2010). Because of the connection of an individual's communicative choice with their personal narratives, this theory is relevant for the purpose of this study as interaction behaviour and experiences within a professional context will be through personal narratives of positive and negative experiences the individual experience in the cyber organizational society.

- *Identity management theory*

The identity management theory was influenced by Stella Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory, specifically the postulation that identity is formulated within two domains, namely the primary and the situational domain (Littlejohn & Foss 2008). In primary domain is developed in the family structure at an early age, whereas the situation domain is influenced by external factors which is in a state of flux and influenced by circumstances (Littlejohn & Foss 2008:90-91; Mobley 2010). According to Imahori and Cupach (2005) the main emphasis of the theory is that communication competence requires the effective management of relational and cultural identities. The identity management theory presents a move away from identity being based on individual communicators and focuses specifically on the role of identity in relationship management. Thus within a cyber organizational society identity management will be an important part of an individual's organizational identity and reputation. Hence this theory comprises the establishment, maintenance and change of cyber identities within relationships and how an individual constantly negotiates identities with those with whom relationships exist. This theory also emphasises aspects of cultural communication which could be relevant in this context (Imahori & Cupach 2005).

## **CHARACTERISTICS AND VARIABLES OF CYBER IDENTITY**

Various *characteristics* of cyber identity are proposed in the literature, including the following: individuals are consciously able to construct the online presentation of the self; a cyber identity can either conform to or is rejected by the cyber network members; individuals internalise elements acquired from the cyber network in their cyber identity based on the attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, judgements, opinions, assessments, priorities, tastes, ways of life and characteristics of the group; cyber identity is created through procedures to share and create information and knowledge; cyber 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; cyber identity is influenced by anonymity through the use of nicknames, only revealing selected information, nonverbal elements, etc.; cyber 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; cyber identities presented in cyber networks have no restrictions through morality; it is easier to create a cyber identity based on the provisional features of the cyber network to allow individuals access based on the created identity which do not need a copy of a real identity document; it can be multiple and fragmented or fluid and flexible; and individuals have the freedom to create multiple cyber identities (with some social restrictions) which can be used simultaneously and be experimented with (Barker 2013; Marwick 2005).

In addition, the following main aspects were eminent from research conducted on identity which the author subsequently identified and termed as *variables* of cyber identity: power (certain stakeholders can obtain power through interconnectedness and positioning to gain greater urgency by sharing contents online); asynchronous communication (provide individuals the opportunity to reflect on insights while reacting to and engaging with each other); social capital (relationships within and between networks have value through bonding, bridging and linking); trust and belonging (creating cyber identities based on expertise and experience and participation); multiplicity and multidimensionality (different layers of cyber identity); impersonal nature (may lead to impoverished form of socialisation); temporal (time factors); duration of relationships (length of time); salience (the significance of being seen in a particular way); ideology (an individual's beliefs, opinions and attitudes to the cyber identity); narratives (to reveal inner thoughts, desires and feelings); connectivity versus isolation (if individuals feel isolated, they might feel disconnected from peers and the organization); narratives (through story telling); centrality (which refers to the extent to which an individual defines him/herself through interconnectedness); and relational ties and intimacy (formed in the group) (Oztok 2012; Bourdieu 1983; Sedereviciute & Valentini 2011).

## CONSTRUCTS OF CYBER IDENTITIES

In the context of this article, a construct is seen as an idea or theory containing various conceptual elements, typically one considered to be subjective and not based on empirical evidence. In evaluating and reflecting on cyber identities, it is important to realise that no inherent clear conceptualization of the construction of cyber identities is evident from the literature, but the author attempted to reflect on the heterogeneity of the construct, and (in some cases based on past research and existing theoretical viewpoints), proposed broad categories to function as a simple conduit or guideline of the several cyber identity constructs developed, defined and/or applied for the purpose of this article, namely:

- *Relational construct*: Borrowing from Caspi and Blau's (2008) definition of social presence, it is argued that the relational construct is a combination of an individual's ability to project themselves as real and salient social actors in the cyber organizational societies, the extent to which they see and interpret the presence of others in this structure and the degree to which they feel connected and relate to other in the group, social or cyber organizational society.
- *Social construct*: The social construct of 'being there' is simply an analogue of physical presence in cyber societies which involves subjective projections of the self as subject into technology mediated environments, subjective assessments of others' presence and assessments of the subject's relations with others (Kehrwald 2010:41).
- *Behavioural construct*: In its fullest development, the construction of cyber identities involves highly complex interpersonal connections which include mutually dependent behavioural interaction and some sense of 'knowing' of the others in the cyber

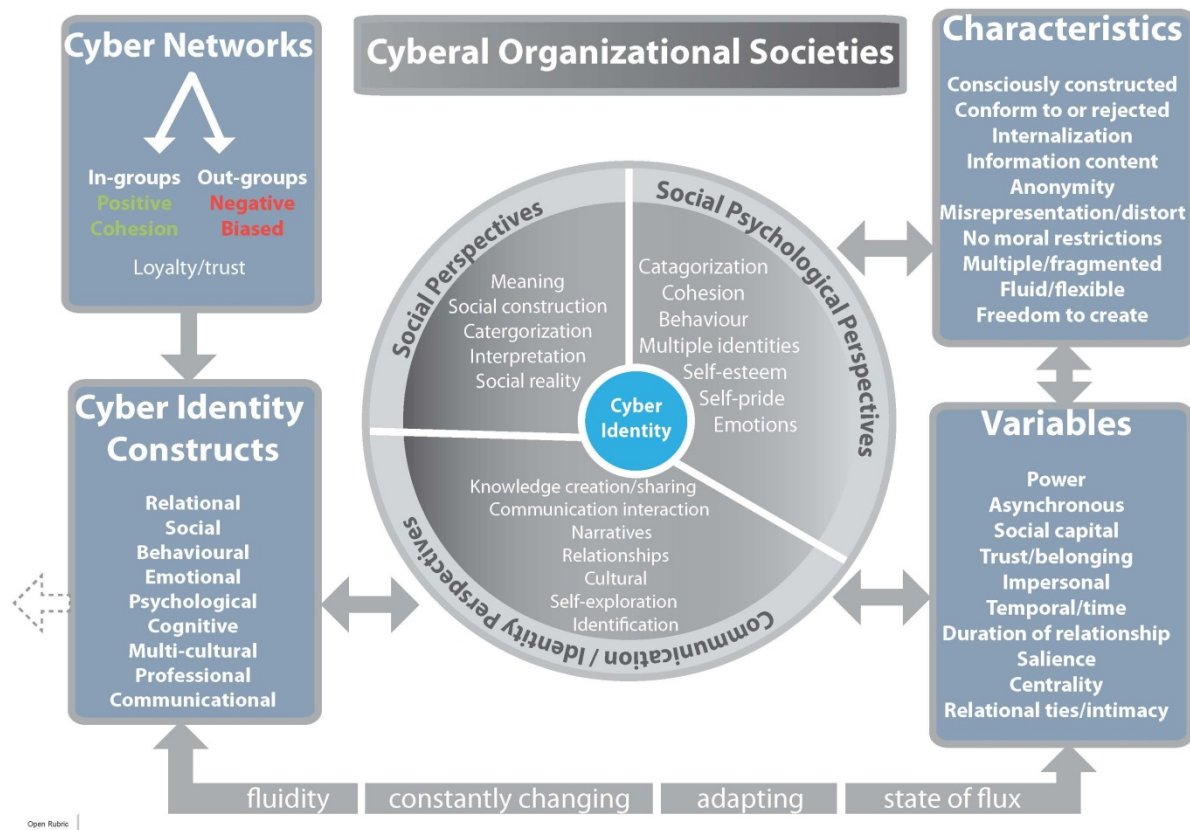
organizational society (Gunawardena 1995) which to an extent resembles 'reading another mind' (Biocca, Harms & Gregg 2001) and leads to some action.

- *Emotional construct*: Emotional constructs include personality, emotions and values of socially participating individuals, and although physically absent in cyber organizational societies, the participation of the 'whole person' should be reconceptualised as dialogic exchanges involving the interpersonal and emotional social relations (Wenger 1998). This enhances the viewpoint that cyber identity construction through interactions is an ongoing process of negotiation between the self and others and is linked to 'real' contexts which establish that when individuals socialise, so do too exist their identities and a sense of who they are and are becoming in the redefinition of the self and identity in response to the social context which perpetuates the interaction necessary to sustain collaborative group work.
- *Psychological construct*: This construct involves the projection of the cyber identity into the group or structure, access to other's minds, the development of relationships and subjectivity. Access to other's minds mainly refers to the emotional openness, increased dependence and risk-taking between members in the group and relationships include psychological well-being (loneliness and social support) and online identity experimentation (Leung 2011). According to De Sousa (2002) three forms of subjectivity is prevalent, namely: perspective (an individual's view related to his/her position in space/time), agency or titularity (an individual's actions are their own and theirs alone and has the privilege to access their own mental states and cognitive states, see something as one thing and not another thing, projection of characteristics to other subjects which do not actually exist and the incorrigibility of appearance through a subjective apprehension of truth and reality) and intersubjectivity (the interplay between subjectivity and intersubjectivity through interactions with others). Florida (2005) highlights the presence of long-standing question of the subject and subjectivity: the mind/body problem, identity in different contexts, the tension between reality and 'mere appearance' and notions of 'action-at-a-distance'.
- *Cognitive construct*: The cognitive construct refers to the effective thoughts and understanding of who and what we are (Schouten 1991) based on, inter alia, a reflexive evaluation of the way we believe others see us (Solomon 1983) through self-conception, self-definition and self-esteem (Turkle 1996) to allow anonymous persona, invisibility, multiplicity and a fluid identity.
- *Multi-cultural construct*: Individuals share their expertise and professional history and relate that to knowledge in their environment to a specific cultural context which supports a specific group to strengthen and maintain cyber identities based on the power of the dominant culture or ethnic group with unique characteristics such as language, nationality, stereotypes, etc. (Croucher 2011).
- *Professional construct*: Sharing of professional knowledge obtained through personal experiences and insight could enhance the collective experiences and collaboration within the cyber organizational structure (Oztok 2012).
- *Communicational construct*: This construct refers to the symbiotic relationship between identity and communication, hence identity is seen as an internal influence formed by outside influence, where identity is a role that is performed and formed through communication with others and is both the means by which identity is established and the change agent for identity (Littlejohn & Foss 2008:88-90; Mobley 2010).

It is argued that these constructs ultimately influence and determine the cyber identity presented in cyberspace which emphasises the multiplicity of the concept.

## A CONCEPTUAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CYBER IDENTITY IN CYBER ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIETIES

Figure 1 presents the conceptual theoretical framework for the creation and sharing of cyber identities through communication as a summary derived from the preceding critical theoretical discussions.



**Figure 1: A conceptual theoretical framework for cyber identities in cyber organizational societies**

Based on this conceptual theoretical framework, it is posited that a reciprocal process approach to the creation and presentation of cyber identities in cyber organizational societies is essential to explore the blurred boundary of in-groups and out-groups as part of all the cyber networks in these societies. It is argued that cyber identities have immanent, nonlinear, relational and contextual characteristics as well as various variables which form a transcendental and real realm in this space. From the constant incurrence of changes in the cyber organizational societies, the continuous presentation of multiple identities to feel part of and adapt to the in-group of out-group in the cyber organizational society is evident and it is argued that it is influenced by fluidity, constant changes and adapting to these changes to ensure a state of flux. Furthermore it is postulated that the notions demarcated in the theoretical perspectives included in this article also influences the cyber identity created in real and cyber space and ultimately determine and influence the construction of temporary unities between the different selves in cyberspace which the author labelled as cyber identity constructs for the purpose of this study. The dotted arrow on the left indicate that this is an initial contextualization of cyber identity and its constructs and that further research will be

conducted to address the degree of intensity and impact of these cyber identities on the functioning of cyber organizational societies.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This article highlights and integrates the key theoretical constructs and relevant phenomena in the study of cyber identities in cyber organizational societies in an attempt to address the gap in the literature which presents limited information and mostly in a fragmented way. In addition, it proposed and explained the identified constructs in terms of the most eminent theoretical perspectives and suggests that it can be used as basis for further research. The implications of this theoretical exploration for further research is the development of a measurement instrument to investigate the relationship between identity formation and use of online social networks to determine which cyber identity constructs influence cyber identity creation and ultimately derive to different types of cyber identities and how to identify and manage it in support of the strategic intent of the organization. This initial study can be seen as an important first attempt to integrate existing interdisciplinary viewpoints of cyber identity in a conceptual theoretical framework which could be used in further categorical and/or experimental explorations.

## **CONCLUSION**

In light of the apparent complexities of cyber identities evoked in cyber organizational societies, it seems important to acknowledge the intrinsic heterogeneity and multiplicity of cyber identity, as well as the implications thereof. While some forms of cyber organizational societies may lend themselves to simple constructions of the self, in other contexts the complexity of the interpretative nature of cyber identities is replaced by fluidity and multiplicity, progressing from the literal to the interpretive and even to the symbolic.

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 cyber identity in cyber organizational societies 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 cyber 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 cyber identities in cyber organizational societies, or in the words of Dreyfus (2001:94): *Obviously we need to foster a symbiosis in which we use our bodies and their positive powers, to find what is relevant, learn skills through involvement, get a grip on reality, and make the risky commitments that give life meaning, while letting the Web contribute ... to experiment without risk with other worlds and selves.*

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