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IDENTITY IN ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS: ARTIFICIAL AND/OR REAL?

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INTRODUCTION

In entering a new era at the dawn of the twenty-first century, categorized by the third wave of technological innovation affecting most parts of human existence (Forster 2000:254), follows what is called the *virtual community revolution*. According to Thorne (2005:2), virtual organisations are *framed as being revolutionary – unencumbered by the material constraints of other organisations*, but can interact with both physical and virtual marketplaces. Farquhar and Rowley (2006:162) argue that organisations with power over online social networks - which they see as an extension of the relationship-marketing paradigm - are in a better position to dominate transactions on the Internet. This network society 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 new paradigm shift, that of knowledge creation and sharing through online social networks in cyberspace on a global scale. Cyberspace, which creates different kinds of online social networks, including virtual and blogging communities (ranging from those who have no social ties to the group to those with strong personal ties), can be seen as *a culture of simulation, signification and communication as opposed to realism, representation and objective participation* (Venkatesh 1998:667).

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. These groups of people do not necessarily come together in the real world, but share an active involvement in these online social networks (virtual or blogging communities) where communication takes place through computer technologies and networks. The realisation that social networks in cyberspace creates a different setting of virtuality where a techno-identity can be created by the way an individual shape their self (body and identity) to their own as well as society's liking, elicits a notion that there was once either an ideal era of bliss or a Utopian promise of universal self-realisation. From a communicative perspective, this paper will propagate how 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 these criticisms, it is argued that the creation of identities in online social networks is a future reality which will become more and more important in organisations, and that organisations should take cognisance of the fact that it will impact on its functioning and ultimately the sine qua non (bottom line).

Against this background, the main aim of this article is to make an initial theoretical conceptualization, therefore this paper is structured as follows: Firstly, based on a discussion of key terminologies, the main theoretical approaches to online social networks and identity, the chapter will combine a modified categorical communicative imperative with deliberative drawing on various psychological, sociological and communicative paradigms; secondly the key concepts, characteristics and social effects of online social networks will be discussed; and lastly a critical discussion, limitations and recommendations for future research will be presented.

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 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 paper 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 where the creation of this self is developed by who we are by knowing or imagining other's 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 by which 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 techno-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 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 the online environment, an online identity is created through a relationship of the defining characteristics of a person in an online environment or social network to make the person feel themselves and different from the other (adapted from Kim, Zheng & Gupta 2011:1761; Barker 2008b). In quit essence, you then interact with others through the images that represent who you are, who you want to be or an idealized version of yourself, 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 us 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 believes which is encourage 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.). 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 are webs of relationships that grow from computer-mediated discussions and conversations among people who share a common affinity (work for same organisation, department, or discipline), articulate a shared connection and who differ and traverse in other ways (distance, time comprehension, imbeddedness in single locations, etc.). In order to communicate across time and space, these conversations take place online, mostly through social online networks. Online social networks grow from personal interactions of human and the technological infrastructure that connects those humans. This means that growing a successful online social network requires social know-how, psychological understanding as well as technical expertise.

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 setting or virtual stage)

Barker (2006) delimitates 'virtual communities' in terms of two interrelated concepts, namely virtual and community. Firstly, the word '*virtual*' refers to something that has an effect on another thing without being that other thing. Applied to a technological environment, this surmise to the idea that something is imitated in the sense that a state of being '*virtual*' is contrasted with that of being '*physical*'. Based on Bergson's concept of '*durée*' or '*duration*' or '*virtuality*', which presents a more philosophical view on knowledge in cyberspace (where the virtual precedes any computer-mediated human-machine interactions and is used to problematise the experience of lived time and is used as an imminent state of the real as a state of experience that is real but not actual), Styhre (2003:18) describes virtual as being '*real without being actual, ideal without being abstract*'. This viewpoint sees 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 these philosophical viewpoints 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 (although in Bergson's perspective virtual is not a matter of technology, but of *durée*, of lived experience of time which is a different concept from mechanical, '*spatial time*'). Secondly, to conceptualise the concept '*community*', some theorists have traced its evolution and progress from the industrial to post-industrial society. According to Sennett (1978:255), the notion of community has evolved from that of *Gemeinschaft* (where relationships are tied to social status and a context of cultural homogeneity) toward that of *Gesellschaft* (where relationships are individualistic, impersonal, contractual based on clear conception of rationality and efficiency). He explains this evolution in terms of the inextricable links between personality and community in the 19th century which led to the expression of individual psyche, followed by the rise of industrialisation and the concept of mass society where people became atomised with a social order characterized by anomie, to the ideological component of community which refers to a sense of common character, identity or interests with social relationships that operate within specific boundaries. It can therefore be argued that the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* examined community within the precincts of the pre-industrial and industrial society where

Gemeinschaft is characterised by an organic sense of community, family, etc bounded together through understanding, consensus and language and *Gesellschaft* is characterised by a form of hyper-individualism with mechanical, transitory and contractually oriented relations among people (Fernback & Thompson 1995:3). From this point of view, it can be argued that urbanisation and industrialisation would destroy *Gemeinschaft* and as a result the traditional community. This leads to the notion of community in the post-industrial area which contains elements of social interaction and a shared value and symbol systems (Van Vliet & Burgers 1987).

Based on the above and for the purpose of this paper, 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

Although blogging communities, also refer to as blogospheres by White, Chu and Salehi-Abari (2010:662), are similar to virtual communities in many ways, the main difference is that it has no shared space, clear boundary or membership and is driven by personalities behind them. Subsequently Kim et al (2011:1760) defines blogging communities (BCs) 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.* Furthermore, this type of community encourages the one-to-many form of communication with less interaction than virtual communities, but can include links to other blogs, discussion forums, etc. The main advantage of this social network is that it can be used strategically to facilitate knowledge exchange between members (Chiu, Hsu & Wang, 2006).

Based on the literature (Kim et al; Barker 2006; Barker 2008a; Chiu et al 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

Cyberspace

Cyberspace, which is defined by Shapiro (2010:91) as the *intangible, metaphorical 'space' that networked computers construct through and for electronic communication*, began as an innocuous technology diversion, an unintended space, limitless, consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of users (Barker 2008a). Nobody foresaw the rapid emergence of online social networks in the cyberspace context, mainly because it is a modern phenomenon, but the importance thereof in the presentation of identity in online social networks has grown exponentially over the last couple of years. Some authors argue that virtuality extends the presentation of an identity in online social networks in unprecedented ways opening up entirely new ways to present the self as human and social being – it allows individuals to conceive, construct, mask and present identities in almost boundless ways – whether artificial or real (Fernback 1997, Turkle 1995, Wittel 2001). Turkle (1996:158) for example states that *People become masters of self-presentation and self-creation. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to 'try out' new ones.* Introna and Brigham (2007:205) argues that technology dissolves boundaries of self and place, and state the following from a post-modern metaphor perspective: *What better way to express post-modern irony, ambiguity, fragmentation, plurality and globalization than through a virtual world, where anyone from anywhere can be anything – an "anything" that can be vaporized into nothing at the decree of its owner ...* This in essence indicate the inevitability of virtual worlds as part of our daily lives, our life-worlds. If this is extended to the online or techno-identity, people are responsible for their own world-view, constructing and presenting an individual identity based on knowledge from other's world views which becomes fluid, relativistic reality and is based on the masking of the real whereby the social networks in cyberspace become the facilitator or agent of knowledge creation and sharing (Barker 2008b).

Cyberspace, which creates different kinds of virtual settings, communities or social networks (ranging from those who have no social ties to the group to those with strong personal ties), can also be seen as *a culture of simulation, signification and communication as opposed to realism, representation and objective participation* (Venkatesh 1998:667). On the one hand, cyberspace is a commercial space (multidimensional and non-dimensional where information exchange and sharing takes place, databases are established and networked or hypertextual links are established between people and their needs); on the other hand a private space, a new kind of social setting, a place for people driven by community concerns or hominoids, replicants, prosthetics – a place where artificial life, simulations and all kinds of virtualities might emerge (Venkatesh 1998), whether idle gossip, spiritual exploration, psychological support, or any other discourse which addresses human interests or needs.

Various analogies have been used in the literature to compare cyberspace with the real world based on different philosophical viewpoints. According to Gibson (1984) cyberspace refer to an 'alternative' world which he felt would develop through globalisation and integration of computer mediated communications. Bishop (2001:1290) summarises contemporary viewpoints which are perceived as the disembodiment of the subject in cyberspace as follows: 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'. He concludes with the viewpoint that cyberspace is

not a vague universe of disembodied spirits, but constitutes new independent space. It is argued that this space is where identity, real or artificial, can be presented, constructed, staged or masked – thereby defining ‘cyber alien beings’.

THEORIES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS AND IDENTITY

This section provides a brief overview of the main theories linking social networks and identity, mainly from a communicative perspective, including the social constructionism, social categorization, social identity and knowledge management theories.

Social constructionism

Shapiro (2010:6) 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. What this means is 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 identity created to the external world and a visible self of who we are (or who we want to portray through this identity). 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 of bodies to tell the world who we want to be, not necessarily who we really are – a process of changing between our physical, social and mental selves to present a self and identity (real or artificial) which we want to be and to create an identity that is acceptable in social networks. This can come about as a result of technologies that make it possible, but also the product of information technologies which allow us to be or portray what we want to be.

Based on various viewpoints, Du Plooy-Cilliers (2011:59) concludes that social constructionists are of the 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.

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.

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* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Baumeister, 1998). The basic phenomenon is that individuals attempt to establish a positive 'identity' by showing cohesion with their in-group and bias against out-groups. According to Kim et al (2011:1760) the social identity theory mainly refers to the fact that individuals are motivated to present an identity in these groups through specific behavior which can be extended to online identities where behavior is encouraged through knowledge creation and sharing. In other words, this theory asserts that individuals communicate or present their identities in everyday social life through behavior.

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 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*. Against 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 an 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 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

Limited research has been done to determine the positive and negative social effects of the presentation of identity in online social networks (Boyd & Ellison 2008), and most of the research were very focused and/or presented fragmented results. According to Rimskii (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 4 as a starting point for a theoretical discussion thereof.

Table 4: 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 are false or artificial
Provide a rich source of naturalistic behavioural data	Primary information on pre-existing social relations

Based on these effects, it is clear that the formation and use of online identities in 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 social networks or environments or 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.

Identity is therefore embedded and entangled in complex disperses and need to respond to various critiques and elements in the emergence thereof. What an appropriate identity require, is allowing the emergence of implicit, narrative and embodied knowledge to create an identity which present an integrative identity that is either constructed, masked, staged and/or real - including expressions of the cyber life-world, to enable the existence of an identity which present the contextual living action as experienced by the individual in cyberspace or on cyber stage. In the grand finale, no play can be produced and acted in any full sense. It depends on the interaction of many actors playing a variety of roles to present a specific act in the way they present themselves to the audience – *whether profoundly or trivially, truthfully or falsely* (Burke 1989:139).

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This paper highlights and integrates the key theoretical constructs and relevant phenomena in the study on identity in online social networks which are presented in a fragmented way in existing literature. In addition, it explained the identified constructs in terms of the most eminent theoretical perspectives and presented the information in a theoretical framework and suggests that it be used as basis for further research. The implications of this theoretical discussion 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. 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 framework 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 step to further categorical and/or experimental explorations.

CONCLUSION

This paper indicated how 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. The discussion was based on sound theoretical notions of communicative action and identification of identity, but at the same time revealed implications thereof. From an online identity perspective, the question surrounding whether it is artificial or real, has been addressed from a theoretical perspective to ensure a rich understanding thereof.

To conclude, given the scarcity of research in this new and relatively under-explored area of research, this paper 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 for the systematic analysis thereof. While this paper outlined some of the basic concepts and approaches, much remains to be done and several

options exist to further extend this initial approach. This paper provide a unifying framework from which one would like to develop a model in which the integrated concepts are detailed and designed in a context which can be used in future.

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 (Szasz 1973)

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