IDENTITY-MAKING: A MULTIMODAL APPROACH FOR RESEARCHING IDENTITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Complete Research

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Abstract

As social media becomes ubiquitous in people's lives, concepts of identity and self-presentation are increasingly drawn upon to understand its use and value. However, the growing body of literature is lacking in conceptual clarity. Moreover, our current understanding of identity is severely circumscribed by what has been called an essentialist view of identity that leads to unhelpful distinctions between people's offline, 'real' identities and their presentation 'online'. In this conceptual paper we turn to the broader multidisciplinary literature to develop a coherent non-essentialist alternative for understanding self and identity. We derive a framework that describes identity-making as an active achievement involving reflective, narrative and active modes. We illustrate the usefulness of our framework for revealing identity-related phenomena in both public and workplace social media. We offer our framework as a way to ask new questions and reveal in new ways existing identity-related phenomena within the IS discipline.

Keywords: Identity, self, social media, social networking philosophy.

1   Introduction

The topic of this conceptual paper is identity in social media. Social media is becoming increasingly ubiquitous and part of people's daily lives, as well as embedded in organisational practices. Social media is now central to how many of us gather information, read news, communicate, interact, socialise, or carry out work. What sets these technologies apart from other information systems is the ways in which they create public spaces for social conversations and for connecting with other people. Thus, they allow people to present themselves through activities such as impression management (Hall et al. 2013) or self-presentation (Gonzales and Hancock 2011). In this respect social media might not be much different from traditional discussion boards. Yet, what is different is the scale and scope with which social media has become part of people's everyday live. It is against this backdrop that identity emerges as a central concept for understanding the use, nature and value of social media.

However, we argue that the ways in which matters of self and identity in social media have been framed in extant IS literature is limiting our ability to fully appreciate the role identity-related matters play in constituting social media use. The dominant understanding of self and identity has been grounded in what is known as an essentialist position. Alternative, non-essentialist positions are far less common. At the same time the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the concepts of identity and self have been comparatively under-explored in the IS literature rendering this avenue of research under-utilised. Without connection to these deeper theoretical and philosophical roots our ability to grasp the ways in which social media is not just a place for self-presentation, but becomes an active part of how people form identities and how they come to understand themselves, is narrowed. Hence, the current understanding misses how everyday acting in social media affects one's identity.

Against this background we aim to 1) utilise the multidisciplinary literature of self and identity outside of the IS discipline to provide conceptual clarity regarding these concepts, 2) derive a comprehensive model for studying self and identity in social media that aligns more closely with the evidence for how we are actually using these technologies, and 3) demonstrate by way of example how this model can be used to ask new questions about and analyse identity-related phenomena in social media.

We will demonstrate how the current, essentialist understanding of self and identity is grounded in a certain everyday understanding of self-experience that is characteristic of modern Western thinking (Spinosa et al. 1997). When applied to social media this understanding leads to a series of dualities such as 'offline self vs. online presentation' that are unhelpful for understanding the role of social media in people's lives. The core of our paper is devoted to deriving a non-essentialist understanding of identity from a comprehensive engagement with related works in philosophy, organisation studies and adjacent fields. We will show that identity is not fixed but actively created. We develop a comprehensive framework that incorporates reflective, narrative, and active modes of identity formation, termed *identity-making*. In doing so, we reconcile the notion of multiple, socially shaped identities with the everyday experience of a coherent self.

In order to understand the significance of social media for people's lives, we need to understand how it affects their identity and sense of self, at work and otherwise. Against current shortcomings, our contribution lies in providing a new grounding for carrying out identity-related research. We provide a more nuanced understanding of concepts like self, identity and self-presentation for future study, and contribute a framework that offers new distinctions for analysing identity-related phenomena. And rather than treating social media narrowly as spaces for self-presentation, our multimodal framework reveals the various different ways in which the use of social media takes part in the process of people's active identity formation.

We begin by unearthing the understanding of self and identity in extant social media research (section 2), before we outline an understanding of identity that moves beyond the implicit, everyday understanding found in most existing studies (section 3). Section 4 is devoted to the core conceptual work of deriving our framework. In section 5 we discuss how the resulting framework can usefully inform the study of identity in social media, before we consolidate our contributions in a conclusion section.

2 Identity and self in extant social media research

In this section we provide a brief overview of research on identity and self-presentation in social media, with a particular focus on social networking sites (SNS). Social networking sites (SNS) are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd and Ellison 2007, para 4). The definition points to the importance of self-presentation in the context of SNS. Accordingly, user self-presentation and impression management have been identified as a major stream in social media research (Richter et al. 2011).

So far, research addressing identity-related topics, in online communication more general and in social media and SNS in particular, has investigated whether individuals are indeed using SNSs to self-present (Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Naaman et al. 2010) or more negatively, for deceptive self-promotion (Underwood et al. 2011); whether individuals' 'online' presentation corresponds with their 'offline' ones (Back et al. 2010; Howard 2000; Schau and Gilly 2003; Sessions 2009); whether SNS self-presentations are narcissistic or self-esteem enhancing (Gonzales and Hancock 2011; Mehdizadeh 2010; Ong et al. 2011; Steinfield et al. 2008); whether self-presentation and impression management is a motivation for participation (Krämer and Winter 2008); the extent and nature of individual's self-disclosure (Attrill and Jalil 2011; Boyle and Johnson 2010; Nosko et al. 2010); self-presentation in nonymous versus anonymous environments (Zhao et al. 2008) and the negotiation of different and conflicting contexts for self-presentations (boyd and Heer 2006; Marwick and boyd 2011). It has fur-

ther been reported that self-presentation through social media enhances informal connectivity at work (Zhao and Rosson 2009); increases professional visibility (Gilpen 2011); has significant offline consequences such as recruitment and job opportunities (Labrecque et al. 2011; Lacy 2010) and is considered an important usage by working individuals (Skeels and Grudin 2009).

2.1   General lack of conceptual clarity

A critical examination of the above literature regarding the understanding of self and identity currently employed reveals a rather diverse and diffuse picture. Most often social media researchers do not explicitly discuss the distinctions between identity(ies), self(ves) and self-representation(s). Where made explicit the conceptualisations raise more questions than they answer: the self is seen to drive the activity of an identity (Zhao et al. 2008), identity drives the activity of self-representation (Becker and Stamp 2005), or 'online identities' are driven by an implied embodied identity (Park and Chung 2011).

Difficulties with defining the relationships between self, identity and self-(re)presentations have most commonly been addressed by ignoring identity altogether. Definitions that avoid identity include: Offline versus online "personality traits" where offline personality is the authentic driver (Krämer and Winter 2008); some very early social media studies exclusively mention impression management, which is interested in strategic self-presentation (boyd and Ellison 2007). This behavioural stream focuses on the complexities of online versus offline self-presentation activities (Attrill and Jalil 2011; Tidwell and Walther 2002; Walther 2007; Walther et al. 2010).

2.2   Emerging dualities in the understanding of online identity

While identity and self remain curiously undefined in many studies, it becomes apparent that a certain implicit understanding that revolves around the distinctions being made between the online, or 'virtual' world and the offline, or 'real' world dominates. In the following, we will show how this view results in a series of unhelpful distinctions between online and offline versions of self/identity. Further analysis reveals that there are two distinct lineages from which this understanding of identity and self-presentation in social media derives. The first can be traced back to an almost universal but particular interpretation of the work of social theorist Erving Goffman (1959). The second, for social technologies more generally, can be traced to the work of psychologist Sherry Turkle (1995).

Two streams of research have been derived from Goffman's work; one focuses on the aspects of impression management and the tactics and strategies used to self-present (Becker and Stamp 2005); the second focuses on Goffman's analogy of the 'performance of self' (Donath 1999; Ellison et al. 2006; Hogan 2010; Papacharissi 2002a; Papacharissi 2002b). It is the second, theatrical orientation that is predominately influential in later works on self-presentation in online environments (see for example Dominick 1999; Donath 2007; Papacharissi 2009). Specifically, Goffman's theatrical metaphor of identity is used, where he argues that the 'self is performed' and draws the analogy between the theatre and life; in life as in theatre there is a 'backstage' and a 'front stage' (Goffman 1959). In the social media literature this metaphor is almost universally interpreted in the sense that the 'backstage' self, the individual by itself, is somehow more real, or authentic, than the 'front stage' self that is performing in the company of others.

Turkle (1995; 1999) conducted some of the very earliest studies of identity on the Internet and in the process developed a new understanding of the ways in which identities are constructed. It was argued that because of the disembodiment and anonymity created in computer-mediated environments a new mode of identity production was occurring (Zhao et al. 2008). This new mode had the important characteristic of enabling or encouraging creation of online personas that were said to differ from 'real life' identities. Specifically, Turkle (1995) was interested in the ways in which game playing on the Internet allowed individuals to play with different personas or identities. Yet, what Turkle saw as multiple identities others later interpreted as different identity performances of the single self and placed them in opposition to one another, as 'actual' or 'true' selves in opposition to idealised self-presentations.

It is evident that the preoccupation with interpreting the online channel as a 'new' or 'virtual' space in opposition to the offline, or 'real' world contributes to the creation of a series of dualities, such as 'true selves versus virtual selves' (Bargh et al. 2002), 'real selves versus deceptive online presentation' (Whitty 2008), or 'actual selves versus idealised online selves' (Higgins 1987), even though examination of these dualities frequently result in conflicting results. For example, Back et al. (2010) find that individuals tend to present their 'real' (i.e., offline) personality in their online profiles, whereas Ellison et al. (2012) find that users of a dating site do not present 'real' but idealized versions of themselves. In social media research these dualities further manifest in the way in which authenticity is seen as the match between online and offline identity (Sessions 2009), or credibility is seen to arise from a match between 'offline' identity and its online presentation (Back et al. 2010; Mallan 2009).

While these dualities might have been suitable at a time when the Internet and related phenomena first emerged, e.g. to bring into view certain differences between online and offline activity, they limit our understanding of the role of social media for self and identity today. In a world in which the Internet in general and social media in particular have become an integral part of people's lives, those distinctions are no longer productive and will cover up the ways in which social media takes part in the formation of people's identities more that they illuminate. Moreover, such a view takes identity (or self) as something *pre-given*, an entity that resides in the individual, separated in its existence from (re-)presentation in the SNS. Such a view however does not effectively enable researchers to investigate the ways in which acting in social media shapes identities and becomes an integral part of people's self-understanding.

In the following we will first unearth the underlying, common sense view of identity, before we challenge this view and move to the core of our paper, in which we present a more comprehensive, alternative understanding, which will however still accommodate our everyday, common sense understanding of self and identity.

3 Moving beyond the everyday view of identity

In this section we will first show that the current understanding of identity in social media is dominated by what is commonly known as the *essentialist view* of identity. We will then outline an ongoing shift towards a non-essentialist understanding that is under way in the broader literature outside of the IS discipline. Ultimately we argue that non-essentialist views provide a richer alternative view that simultaneously affords greater explanatory range and flexibility in making sense of how humans draw identity from their involvement in social media.

3.1 The dominant essentialist understanding of self and identity

When we reflect on who we are we tend to think of ourselves as an individual person, different from other people and the world of things in general, clearly demarcated and owned by one's own body and in control of one's own actions. We tend to consider ourselves to be the same person as when we were children and will continue to do so as we age, despite observations that we change. We also have a sense of a private inner experience of our selves, separate from the shared experience of the outside world. Whether we believe it is material or not, we believe there is a 'part' of ourselves that is who we are and we tend to think of it as a stable core, relatively untouched or stable at the deepest level.

This is the intuitive way of thinking about our selves and thus this view seems self-evident. This common-sense view forms the basis of what we term the essentialist view of self, which dominates the literature. This essentialist view conforms to how we reflect on ourselves because it is embedded in the wider modernist, rationalist worldview that has come to permeate Western thinking since the enlightenment (Chia 2003; Spinosa et al. 1997).

The essentialist view frames a person as a distinct, self-contained individual with an internal cognitive driver that directs the physical and communicative representations of that core self, e.g. when acting in social media. Thus, under this view the self is afforded the privilege of being considered the unchang-

ing locus of control, intentionality and agency within every person. Furthermore, this view implies separateness between the individual inner self and the outside world, whereby the body encases and in some meaningful way delimits the human subject from the world. Identity in turn is then only expressible to the outside world via communication and presentation. In doing so, the self is able to direct many different self-presentations (or identities) in different contexts that are driven by various motivations (e.g., see Boyle and Johnson 2010).

Not surprisingly, essentialist views permeate many fields and disciplines. In the social sciences (to which we count Information Systems) an essentialist understanding of self and identity underpins the conceptions of individuals as being the ultimate unit of social reality, and the most basic unit of analysis for theorizing social phenomena. Individuals are seen as unquestionable stable units and form the basis of 'attributing properties, capabilities, and intentions' and who we are as separate agents interacting with the world (Chia 2003, 104). We have already outlined that the essentialist view also underpins extant literature on social media. Not only is it evident in the discussion of how online communication matches the 'real' person 'behind' the communication (See for example Back et al. 2010; Bargh et al. 2002; Schau and Gilly 2003), it is also dominant in the way the relatively new phenomenon of avatars is understood, where an avatar is a visual representation of the embodied 'physical' subject separate from and limited to being mirrored by its virtual alternative (Mazalek et al. 2011; Schultze and Leahy 2009).

3.2   Unravelling the essentialist understanding of self

In this section we demonstrate how the essentialist lens unravels when set against a number of certain experiential and conceptual perspectives. To this end we will first evoke some everyday phenomena that we expect to be familiar or at least experientially accessible to the reader.

When we bring to mind the people that we are friends with on Facebook, those who send us greetings on our birthday, who are all these friends sending birthday wishes to? Are they congratulating the skinny child they know from primary school? Or are they congratulating the quirky high school student with obscure hobbies; the charismatic college union leader; the reliable yet at times over-punctual professional and colleague; or the parent of their child's school friend? Which one of these is not us, which one defines us completely? Who of all of these people are not seeing the 'real me'? While we reflect on ourselves as a unified and coherent self we live our everyday lives as multiple selves. And while we tend to think of our self as self-contained and "in here", our selves depend a great deal on other people and our membership in social groups and contexts "out there". Who we are is co-defined by how we relate to others and how they relate to us. We are the skinny or overweight child only because others are overweight or skinny, we are quirky only against what counts as normal in a social group, we are leaders because others follow us, we can be reliable only in a practice that values punctuality, and finally we are parents only through our children. Our self is multiple and it is constantly socially shaped, co-produced, and reaffirmed by membership in various social groups and contexts.

Scholars in a range of disciplines such as neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology have contributed to challenging the essentialist view of self that tends to dominate each of these disciplines. Works in neuroscience have begun to unravel the belief in the existence of a place or control center in the brain that is home to who we are, a region that brings all the pieces of our neuropsychological self together (Broks 2003; Feinberg 2000; Feinberg 2001; Gazzaniga et al. 1962; Sperry 1966). It is now accepted that this region does not exist. Prior to this, various philosophers have challenged the notion of a controlling centre in the brain, employing the notion of the homunculus fallacy, or Dennett's Cartesian Theatre, to argue against a unified centre of consciousness inside us, from where a 'little experiencer' views the movie of our lives (Dennett 1991). In psychology scholars have challenged the notion that the essentialist self is grounded in our memory, said to provide psychological continuity as the basis of a stable self. It has been shown that memory creation is complex, in that we do not remember our past in a coherent way to create a straightforward understanding of our self (Baggini 2011, 51).

3.3 Towards a non-essentialist understanding of self and identity

Rather than offering a coherent notion of self and identity, the essentialist understanding appears to be a contingent product of how we have come to *think* of ourselves as influenced by what has become a common folk ontology that we learn from pre-school years (Gelman 2003). By contrast a non-essentialist understanding is able to grasp the multiple and social nature of identity formation, where identity is 1) not simply an accumulation of memories, 2) comprised of multiple identities, 3) socially constructed, and 4) grounded in actively living our everyday lives in a material world.

In the following we will draw on bodies of literature mainly from philosophy and organisation studies in order to derive an alternative, non-essentialist understanding of self and identity as the basis for studying phenomena of identity in IS, in particular concerning social media. In doing so, we will be able to further disentangle the notions of self and identity. Under this view identity evolves over time and is a product of our engagement in various contexts such as work, family and other social contexts. Such a view will allow us to understand the *formation of multiple identities* and the *experience of a coherent self* as two distinct, albeit related phenomena, which will contribute to greater conceptual clarity in framing notions of 'identity' and 'self' as the basis for future research.

4 A multi-model identity framework

In the broader literature a shift is under way from the essentialist to a non-essentialist understanding of identity. Non-essentialism sees a person as not having a stable, central, and unified self but views the self as continuously being constituted and reaffirmed by being part of various social practices and contexts. As such, non-essentialist views provide a richer alternative that simultaneously provides for a greater explanatory range and flexibility in making sense of how humans draw identity from their involvements in the social world. This will lead us to propose a multimodal framework that views identity as an active and ongoing achievement and the result of involvement in various contexts, online and offline.

4.1 Narrative understandings of identity and identity formation

The non-essentialist notion of identity stresses the social, and multiple nature of identity. A lineage of thinkers that has contributed significantly to establishing this view employs the concept of *narrative*, whereby the creation of identity is seen as a matter of narrating one's life against the canvass of the social world and the shared stories that characterize our relationships with others.

As a leading exponent, Somers (1994) is concerned with the *social nature of identity*. She shows how our identity is formed by way of multiple identifications to various social groupings that together form an understanding of who we are. Narration is how "we come to know, understand, and make sense of the world" and it is through these narrative understandings that we come to "constitute our social identities" (p.606). Under this view shared narrative themes are selectively appropriated and in turn form the basis upon which one's life events are given meaning. Narrative identities are not internalized within individuals, they are formed at the intersection of multiple social (shared) narratives and because of this they are always fragmented, ambiguous, contradictory and partial.

Similar to Somers, Ricoeur (1992) also draws on the theory of narrative identity, yet his concern is with the "puzzles and paradoxes of personal identity" (p.114), and how a non-essentialist identity can still provide a focal point for moral and physical accountability. He argues that the process of narrative identity formation creates a non-essentialist personal identity that is at the same time social, yet singular and distinguished from all others, and thus allows for the permanence of a self to be maintained so that self-constancy can form the basis of moral responsibility (Atkins 2004; Taylor 1976).

Finally, Bruner (1991) shows that people use interpretation and metaphors to create narrative accounts of their 'life' (Bruner 1991, 70). These narrative and interpretative activities are used to organize our life experiences and create coherence. But they are always expressed or developed for a reason, in that

we do not develop them about ordinary, everyday aspects of our lives. Rather, they are created around the more exceptional or visible aspects of what we do, when a shift of thought is needed to re-integrate a certain event or life episode (e.g. accepting a job offer) into the overall narrative of our life, referred to as, "highlighting or 'marking' of 'turning points'" (Bruner 1991, 73). Simultaneously, we use narrative accounts to both entrench us within our social world as well as to narrate ourselves as individuals where society expects us to. In this process we create ourselves as individuals in response to the expected practice within the culture in which we belong (e.g. as a certain kind of academic).

Consequently, the notion of narrative identity accounts for 1) the social aspect of our identity creation, 2) the multiple nature of our identities that arises at the intersection of shared social narratives, 3) the active nature of narrating our life story in the face of certain life episodes and turning points, and 4) the ways in which individuality is created against what counts as 'normal' in various social practices.

4.2 Autobiographical self: Accounting for the experience of a coherent self

Having outlined the importance of narrative in deriving a non-essentialist understanding of identity, where identity is always social and multiple, at the same time, we have to account for our everyday experience of the stable and coherent self that forms the basis of the essentialist view.

Autobiographical theories of self argue that the continuity and uniqueness that we experience as our sense of self is formed from a continuously renewed and remade stock of autobiographical memories. At the most fundamental level we continuously construct our sense of self from the mental images of ourselves that we develop and redevelop over our lives (Damasio 1999). On this account, our autobiographical self is created in an ongoing process of making sets of these personal records explicit and reconstructing these images as needed during our lives. Our sense of self-permanence comes from this continuous reflective reconstruction as new, often conflicting experiences and their associated dispositions are being updated and made sense of against our present understanding and the formulation of explicit future plans. Similarly, it has been argued that the self is a subjective, experiential position maintained in a 'web of discourses' (Dennett 1991, 410). As such, language is central to accounts of autobiographical selves: language is the medium through which we incorporate our world into our personal narratives and so in this view our relationship to the world is always reflectively interpreted.

It emerges that in both Damasio's and Dennett's accounts the sense of self is experiential in that it emerges through acts of reflection and sense-making. While these accounts make reference to the influence of the social world in constructing the self, these authors are more concerned with the individual as the bearer, creator, and experiencer of self. As such they provide the missing link between 1) narrative as the key to creating multiple social identities, and 2) the experience of a coherent individual self that retains some stability over time, when we engage in reflective thinking about our selves.

We conclude that both reflection and narrative take part in the creation of identity and a sense of self. Yet, at the same time we want to point out that both accounts are in some way or other grounded in language and how we think and talk about each other. In the following we argue that a missing link to completing our understanding of identity lies in the ways in which our everyday *acting* in the world, our engaged activity, takes part in the construction of identity at the most basic level.

4.3 Engaged activity: a missing link in explaining identity formation

Narrative identity and autobiographical theories of self have had some success in addressing the reflexive definition of self, and explaining the multiple nature of identity in a non-essentialist way. What is not addressed in this view however is how we create ourselves when we are not thinking about ourselves. We argue that at the most fundamental level identity formation does not just take place at the life-changing turning points but rather lies in our everyday activity. This form of identity creation is in many ways central yet invisible to us.

Identity formation cannot be treated as a purely linguistic, symbolic or conscious phenomenon (Schatzki 2002b, 49). We do not just create ourselves when we are thinking about who we are but we

also create ourselves through our everyday actions and how we live our lives (Dreyfus 1991, Loc 1274 and loc 1282)). In fact, the "lion's share" of our acting in the world and so our identity formation is unreflective in the sense that conscious thinking or deliberation does not precede or accompany it (Schatzki 1996, 58). So in trying to understand who we are in the world, we cannot neglect the role "nonlinguistic nonsaying doings" play (Schatzki 2002b, 76-77). This active way of forming identity through acting in the world can suitably be explained by employing a practice theoretical lens.

Practice theory refers to a body of work in the social sciences that has emerged in direct response to a deeply held dissatisfaction with various individualist accounts of human organizing (Reckwitz 2002). In practice theory the term 'practice' takes on a precise meaning that is different from the common usage that denotes 'routines', 'a collection of actions' or simply 'what people do'. The notion of practice employed here sees practice as the "site" (Schatzki 2002a) or "house of the social" (Nicolini 2012) and thus shifts emphasis as well as the unit of analysis. Practice theory effectively decentres the human actor as the primary unit of analysis and has at its core "an interest in the 'everyday' and 'lifeworld'" (Reckwitz 2002, 244). Hence, under a practice theoretical understanding the engagement in everyday, non-reflective activities becomes central to identity formation.

Conceptually, a practice theoretical understanding allows us to expound on 1) how we take on social identities by enrolling into existing practices, 2) how our identity is determined not just by how we think about ourselves but rather how we go about living our lives unreflectively, and 3) how identity formation is always guided by a purpose that orients our lives.

We live our lives as members of many different, yet over-lapping professional and social life practices. Importantly, whenever we enrol in a new practice, be it a professional practice (e.g. studying to become an accountant) or an everyday practice (e.g. starting to use Facebook), we learn "how to act, how to speak, how to feel, what to expect, and what things mean" (Nicolini 2012, 5) within that particular practice. We learn the skills, use the tools and take up the routine actions of this practice. In doing so, we become enrolled in the practice and become part of a community of people who share a social identity (as accountants or Facebook users), against which we can define our own 'version' of this shared identity. Hence, a practice view allows us to grasp the way in which identity formation and the process of individualization happens by way of being part of specific communities (Wenger 1998).

Finally, in living our everyday lives we are engaged in the world practically and for the most part unreflectively. Yet in doing so, we already express a certain practical self-understanding by way of how we go about our daily business (e.g. as a mother, as an accountant). Hence, identity formation is inherently bound up with and achieved through the ways in which we engage actively and practically with the world and with the technology that is embedded in our practices. In doing so, the way in which this form of identity formation happens is not cognitive or thinking; it is "our most basic ability to live in and cope skilfully with our world" (Hoy 1993, 173). Consequently, who we are is not primarily about who we think we are but how we engage in our everyday activities practically (Blattner 2006, 88-91).

4.4   Multimodality of identity-making: Identity as active achievement

In this section we have progressively developed a richer, non-essentialist understanding of identity and self. We have demonstrated the role narratives play in the formation of our multiple identities in various social contexts and shown how, at the same time, we come to understand ourselves as coherent selves when we reflect on who we are. In addition, we have further demonstrated the role our active engagement in social practices plays, in that identity formation takes place in a largely non-reflective way, by way of simply doing "what one does" as members of various social communities.

We argue that the above understandings can be interpreted as distinct, yet related modes of identity formation. On this view identity is not pre-given, but an active achievement, which we capture in the term *identity-making*. We distinguish three modes of identity-making which are derived from and correspond to the three lineages of identity research presented above:

1. *Reflective identity-making* captures how we experience our selves when we think about who we are or who we want to become. It describes how we set explicit goals for ourselves and execute deliberate strategies in shaping our *identity*. It further captures how we come to experience a coherent *self* in the face of contradicting events and life episodes.

2. *Narrative identity-making* captures how we narrate our own life story when we make sense of episodes and turning-points in our lives and how we narrate ourselves into (or understand ourselves against) the shared stories that capture the social expectations in various social contexts.

3. *Active identity-making* captures how our unreflective acting in the world already shapes who we are. It captures how we appropriate social identities when we learn the skills and intricacies of social practices (e.g. of a profession) and how our various identities are always bound up with activity and the use of tools and technology in our everyday lives.

We argue that *combining* and incorporating these three modes presents an effective approach for researching identity formation. Identity-making on this view reflects a continual and active process, which entails a seamless moving between our ongoing absorbed, non-reflective engagement in our physical and social worlds and our deliberate, reflective engagement with our selves. We argue that such an understanding is particularly pertinent when attempting to understand how and why people engage with technology in an everyday sense when living their lives. Table 1 provides brief definitions of the three identity-making modes.

Identity-making mode	Definition
Reflective	Deliberate forward-looking strategizing about one's identity in the form of goal setting.
Narrative	Narrating one's (past) life events into a coherent life story that fits into the various shared stories of one's social contexts.
Active	Identity is shaped through our actions and interactions in the world. This includes assuming social identities through learning skills and socialisation into social practices (professions) and their interpretation and enactment in day-to-day life.

Table 1. Brief definition of identity-making modes

5   Discussion

In this conceptual paper, we set out to derive an alternative understanding of self and identity that takes note of the ways in which social media not only provides spaces for self-presentation, but becomes part of people's lives, at work and otherwise, and thus how they actively co-create their identities. By employing a multi-disciplinary body of literature we were able to 1) derive an alternative, non-essentialist conceptualisation of self and identity that clarifies these often-used terms, and 2) derive a multimodal understanding of how identity can be seen as an active achievement. In the following we consolidate these two main contributions. We begin by clarifying often-used terms, before we discuss how the identity-making framework adds to the IS researcher's toolbox a way to grasp the interplay between social media and identity in more productive ways.

5.1   Re-conceptualization of self, identity and self-presentation

We have argued that in existing works the notion of self or identity often remains undefined. Rather, authors invoke an everyday understanding of self and identity. We have outlined how this understanding is grounded in a taken-for-granted worldview that permeates much of Western culture (Chia 2003; Spinosa et al. 1997). Under this essentialist view, self and identity are commonly used interchangeably. As such they denote "who a person is", whereby self / identity inhere in the person as a stable core - what is 'real' about this person. Framed in opposition to this is how people present in the vicinity of others, captured in the notion of self-(re)presentation, which stresses the notion of a pre-existing self to be *re*-presented in ways that are more or less authentic compared to the 'real self'.

By drawing on works from a wide range of disciplines, we hope to have convincingly challenged this view and developed a conceptually clearer and richer understanding. In doing so, we come to differentiate self and identity as two distinct yet related concepts. *Identity* captures the ways in which we actively live our lives in various contexts, how we are shaped by social practices, other people and acting in the world. Identity in this view is 1) multiple, social and a constant becoming and thus never final, and 2) an active achievement, formed through what we have termed identity-making. *Self* on the other hand captures how we come to understand ourselves as coherent individuals despite the multiplicity of identities. In other words, self denotes how we experience an 'I' that is always 'mine', while identity denotes how we become 'someone' when we are with others in various social practices, where this identity is always shared and never fully individually owned (e.g. a mother needs a child, a doctor needs an already existing medical practice for being a doctor). Finally, the notion of *self-presentation* can now be seen as just one way of identity-making, when people act strategically to shape their identity. Yet, self-*re*presentation, because it assumes an essential self to *re*-present, is no longer a helpful category. Table 2 summarises our conceptualisations.

Concept	Dominant 'essentialist' view	Alternative 'Non-essentialist' view
Identity	Self and identity are often used inter-changeably. They generally denote 'who one is'. Self / identity inheres in the person, it forms the core or essence of who that person is. This is an essential notion of self / identity.	Identity is multiple and always social. Identity captures 'who one is' in various social practices (contexts), and arises from how one lives their life. This is a performative notion of identity.
Self		Self captures how we come to experience a coherent 'me' in the face of the multiplicity of identity; how we experience ourselves as an individual upon reflection. This is an experiential notion of self.
Self-presentation	Captures how people present when with others: authentically in keeping with, or in-authentically disguising their 'real' self / identity.	Self-presentation is just one part of how identity is formed. It is part of identity-making in the reflective mode.
Self-representation	Often synonymous with self-presentation, yet stresses the fact that a pre-existing self is *re*-presented.	Self-representation is not a helpful category, as it is founded upon assumptions of the essentialist view.

Table 2. Re-conceptualisation of key terms

5.2 Grasping identity-making in social media spaces

Social media, such as social networking platforms, offer users a wide range of functionality and affordances (Richter and Riemer 2013). They are at once spaces for self-presenting through user profiles, communication spaces for multi-user conversations and spaces for action, used to co-create and engage in collaborative activity. We have argued that all of these aspects contribute to the formation of people's identity – deliberate presentation, conversation and narration, as well as acting with or in the presence of others. Our framework aims to offer IS researchers a more complete tool to grasp identity formation in social media by taking into account these different modes and their interaction. In the following we briefly outline how the three modes are helpful for investigating identity-related phenomena in both public social media (e.g. Facebook) or at work (e.g. Enterprise Social Networks).

5.2.1 Facebook: Identity-making in public social media spaces

Much research has been undertaken on Facebook, in both IS and neighbouring fields. In line with our observations, the vast majority of works on identity have concentrated on matters of self-presentation, grasped by the reflection mode in our framework. Much fewer examples can be found that correspond to the other two modes. We briefly outline what the three modes will allow IS researchers to 'see'.

The *reflection mode* allows grasping how Facebook provides a platform for intentional self-presentation (Winter et al. 2014) that enables users to actively and strategically express aspects of themselves to their friends through profile pictures, status updates and photos (Ellis 2010), intentional-

ly disclose certain information or manage incidents of unintentional disclosures (Duguay 2014), or deliberately shape images of themselves in order to 'fit in' with peer groups (Ridout et al. 2012).

The *narration mode* enables an investigation of the role of Facebook beyond deliberate, utilitarian impression management and self-presentation. Only very few studies in IS have hinted at this richer notion; a notable example is Kreps' (2010) essay on post-structuralism, which uses Facebook as an example. A narrative perspective provides IS researchers with ways to grasp the role of Facebook as a public platform in which people narrate their lives and understand themselves vis-à-vis various social contexts they engage in (Sauter 2014). On Facebook, people engage in conversation with others and progressively narrate their own life stories and take part in the creation of shared narratives in order to find their social place within the collective (Williams 2008). Users collectively engage in making sense of life events, such as holidays, births, weddings, or deaths. Thus, the narration mode allows investigation of how Facebook takes part in identity-making at the intersections between different life contexts, as people manage their membership in different groupings fluently, yet sometimes with frictions. We assert that this perspective exhibits many untapped research potentials for IS researchers.

The *action mode* allows grasping multiple related aspects: 1) how the use of Facebook itself becomes part of one's identity, 2) how every action on Facebook contributes to identity-making, and 3) how identity-making is often a by-product of social activity that is beyond the control of the individual. First, the mere fact that one is using (or not using) Facebook already becomes part of one's identity as 'a Facebook (non)user'. This allows investigation of how Facebook becomes an integral part of people's identity by way of it shaping how one lives their lives. Second, every action in Facebook (e.g. accepting a friend connection, liking a friend's post) leaves a trace, which in turn shapes who one becomes in the eyes of others. In doing so, social media over time takes part in creating pictures of our lives (Rettberg 2009). On Facebook, the emerging network of relationships conveys a picture of a user's social identity (boyd 2006; Dalsgaard 2008), while the timeline feature organises the user's life into a comprehensive picture by chronologically collating every activity (van Dijck 2013). Finally, the action mode allows us to see the ways people's identity is shaped and made for them as a by-product of or by other people's actions. For example, other users might post on a user's wall or tag the user in pictures they post, thereby inadvertently revealing certain aspects about a user (e.g. drug or alcohol use)(van Hoof et al. 2014). Hence, identity formation can be passive in that other users contribute to defining one's identity by influencing the perceptions of others (Lang and Barton 2015). While we find some studies that reveal ways in which Facebook activity contributes to identity formation as a by-product of action, studies that deliberately take this perspective are so far lacking.

5.2.2 Enterprise Social Networking: Identity-making in the digital workplace

Social media makes fast inroads into people's workplaces (Leonardi et al. 2013). Facebook-like technologies in the form of Enterprise Social Networks offer similar features sets to their public counter parts, albeit resulting in very different use practices (Richter and Riemer 2013). Yet, much like in the public space, identity emerges as an important topic in ESN (e.g. Orsatti and Riemer 2012). Again, we briefly outline the applicability of the three modes of our identity-making framework.

The *reflection mode* brings to the fore how ESN afford professionals to position themselves in certain ways, for example as experts in certain topic areas through their profiles or by deliberately acting in certain ways (Richter and Riemer 2009). While some initial work on impression-management exists (Ortbach and Recker 2014), overall little work has addressed self-presentation in ESN so far. One recent study looked into how CEOs shape their image within the organisation (Alghawi et al. 2014).

The *narration mode* captures how ESN become spaces for collective sense-making about organisational events enabling employees to 'write their shared story', thereby simultaneously shaping organisational and individual identities. While we are not aware of any studies in IS that have investigated identity directly, some studies have surfaced related aspects. For example, ESN have been found to promote positive emotions of playfulness during on-boarding processes, which allowed new employees to develop a relationship with their new organisation (Koch et al. 2012). Furthermore, ESNs have

been shown to assist with organisational sense-making of new or geographically isolated employees by communicating organisational beliefs and values (Thom-Santelli et al. 2011) and developing a shared identity and sense of belonging (Thom and Millen 2012). In an older study, a related technology – online forums – have been found to allow employees to express both resistance and support in response to organisational change thus enabling a cathartic process of collective identity change (da Cunha and Orlikowski 2008). While not explicitly employing narrative techniques these examples hint at the ways in which ESN can take part in identity-making by creating spaces for shared narration.

The *action mode* finally grasps how ESN are spaces for acting and interacting, which allow users to engage in practices of problem-solving, work coordination and knowledge work activities (Riemer and Scifleet 2012), all of which have identity implications. We have argued that at the most basic level we are defined by what we do. Thus, acting in ESN naturally takes part in identity-making, in particular as it increases visibility of one's actions among ESN users (Leonardi et al. 2013). As one acts in ESN one creates an identity as a by-product of engaging with others in certain ways, e.g. as experts, contributors, problem-solvers, caring colleagues etc. We want to stress again that identity-making also happens through the actions of others. When people adopt and are active on ESN, others have their identities made for them, as non-adopters, luddites, or lurkers (Sun et al. 2014).

5.2.3   Summary

Our brief analysis of the two social media contexts illustrates the usefulness of the identity-making framework for revealing various aspects of identity formation in social media. In doing so, our main point is that, while each of the three modes reveals certain aspects, identity-making should be investigated holistically by applying all three modes at once, as all three are always simultaneously at work in identity-making, whereas the distinction is merely an analytical one.

For example, in order to understand how one becomes an expert in ESN all three modes have to be employed together. In the reflection mode, a user might want to present deliberately and strategically as a topic expert. Yet, recognition of an expert depends on what is regarded a valuable contribution within the organisation, an aspect which can only be unearthed by employing the narration mode. At the same time, what makes an expert depends as much on presentation as on action – self-proclaimed experts have to back up their claims with actions on a daily basis.

Consequently, the three modes intertwine and combined form a richer understanding of the role of identity in social media than is available under the essentialist view. While each mode reveals certain aspects of identity-making, together they can be used to analyse identity implications of particular practices, events or episodes at an individual or social level. Table 3 summarises our analysis.

Mode	Description of mode	Exemplary application to social media
Reflection	Reflective identity-making captures how people experience a coherent self when thinking about themselves, and subsequently form goals and act strategically in shaping their identities, e.g. through particular ways of self-presentation.	Allows for analysis of how people present themselves in social media strategically as a way to form a certain identity; it allows grasping the widely researched phenomena of self-presentation and impression management.
Narration	Narrative identity-making captures how people make sense of life events, and how they narrate themselves into shared stories in various practices; how they take on, define, demarcate themselves from the social expectations captured in the 'sayings and doings' of a social practice.	Allows for analysis of how people narrate themselves into the shared stories of the communities they are part of both online and offline, and conversely how social media becomes part of their own life. Allows grasping how social media are spaces for collective identity-making through enabling shared narration.
Action	Active identity-making captures how people become who they are by way of what they do, by going about their daily lives and routine work tasks in certain ways that conform or stand out from the social norm.	Enables fine-grained analysis of how people's use (or non-use) of social media takes part in forming identities as 'power users', 'experts', 'lurkers', or 'laggards', often as byproduct of what they do, as traces of action become visibility to others.

Table 3. Multi-model framework of identity-making

6   Conclusion

Identity in social media is currently dominated by an essentialist view, which reflects how we experience the world as individuals, but fails to address other aspects of identity formation including the social and multiple nature of identity and the way identity is shaped as a (by-)product of everyday acting in the world. Against this background, the main contributions of this paper are 1) the formulation of a coherent 'non-essentialist' alternative and re-conceptualisation of key terms, and 2) a multimodal framework of identity-making for grasping phenomena of identity in social media in nuanced ways.

To the best of our knowledge this work is the first to introduce to the IS literature a comprehensive non-essentialist conception of identity. We recognise that some recent studies in IS and neighbouring disciplines have engaged with certain aspects of what we term identity-making, such as narrative identity on Facebook (Sauter 2013), the formation of self-narratives among IT professionals (Stein et al. 2013), or identity formation through bodily enactments in virtual worlds (Schultze 2014). Yet, none has provided a comprehensive framework or recognises the action mode of identity-making.

We have developed our framework from comprehensive bodies of literature in philosophy, organisation studies and neighbouring disciplines. While this literature presents different loosely connected discourses on the nature of self and identity, our framework integrates these perspectives with the purpose of providing a coherent basis for researching identity-related phenomena, in particular regarding the (everyday) use of technology. We note that, while the reflective and narrative modes constitute long-standing streams of work in the study of organisations, the active mode has so far been largely overlooked outside of the field of philosophy.

We offer our framework as a way to ask new questions or reveal in new ways important identity-related phenomena in IS. We expect our framework to be useful beyond the social media field for the study of identity in IS more broadly, capturing how IT use influences and shapes people's identity-making activities. We expect our framework to be useful in 1) revisiting the nature and conception of existing IT-related identities such as that of the 'lurker' or 'digital native', 2) unpacking people's relationships with personal devices (e.g. mobile phones), and how these devices increasingly become part of people's self experience, or 3) more generally how IT-induced change in workplaces sets off dynamics of identity-(re)making as part of technology adoption (or resistance) processes.

While we have demonstrated briefly the applicability of identity-making to social media phenomena, future work will have to develop the framework into a detailed methodology that guides the analysis of empirical data in systematic ways and in different contexts, be it corporate or otherwise.

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