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Identity and Self-Presentation: from a Representational to a Performative Lens in Studying Social Media Engagement in Organisations

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Abstract

Social media make fast inroads into organisations. This raises issues regarding self-presentation and locating experts in these new emerging communication spaces, as the basis for effective social media-enabled knowledge work. However, research on self-presentation and identity in organisational social media is only just emerging and has been founded on broader understandings from studies of public social media. In this literature study we demonstrate that the existing body of research on identity in social media is dominated by a 'representational lens'. Based on an analysis of the historic foundations of this stream of research, we will expose limitations of this lens in capturing contemporary engagement in online spaces and advocate for a 'performative lens' in studying identity work in organisations. We contribute a detailed exposition of the evolution of identity studies in the context of public social media, and we offer an alternative lens for studying the topic in organisational contexts.

Keywords

Identity, Social Media, Self-presentation, Performative lens, Identity work, Knowledge work

INTRODUCTION

Social media is making fast inroads into organisational practice with the aim to improve both communication and knowledge-intensive work practices. As effective organisational knowledge practices (e.g. in consulting businesses) rely heavily on user participation and identifying knowledge bearers, matters of self-presentation in particular and of social identity more generally are of research interest (Leonardi and Treem 2012). Three related issues stand out: 1) As enterprise social media environments are emergent, social interaction and knowledge work effectiveness depend heavily on user engagement, 2) finding and utilizing expertise is essential for effective organisational knowledge work (Kärreman 2010), and thus 3) presenting oneself in this new social media space as knowledgeable is in the best interest of both the organisation and the individual (Alvesson 2001). Against this background, identity in social media presents as a topic of interest.

However, as yet little is known about how individuals go about presenting themselves and acting in these new emerging social media spaces within organisations, nor do we understand how acting in these spaces reflects on the professional identities of the corporate users. Further understanding in the role social media potentially plays in self-presentation and identity construction could contribute to a deeper understanding of the social factors underlying motivations to use and engagement with organisational social media. Current research on identity and self-presentation in social media is dominated by studies on public social media with Facebook being the main research site. In this literature study, we investigate the state-of-the-art in research on identity in social media as a stepping-stone for future research on the role of (social) identity in knowledge-intensive organisational work practices enabled by social media, such as enterprise social networking or microblogging.

In the following we will demonstrate that the existing body of research on identity in social media is dominated by what has been termed the 'representational lens' to understanding identity. This lens views identity as something *pre-given* in essentialist terms, where one's identity is separated in its existence from its representation in the social media space. We argue that this lens has reached its explanatory limits and produces a 'black-boxing' effect on understanding identity in the context of work practices. We further argue that to overcome this effect it is necessary to introduce a 'performative lens' defined briefly as how one's identity is

perpetually articulated, co-constructed and 'lived' through participation in social media-enabled work practices, where one's identity is not something given to be (re)presented but arises holistically and is shaped and changed through every-day participation in social media.

In our analysis of the literature of identity in social media we will show that the current representational view is grounded firstly in early Internet research. Sherry Turkle (1995) was the pioneer of these early approaches and coming from a psychological background focused on the ways individuals used MUD's and online gaming to understand themselves and build identity. In order to develop an understanding of how identities are expressed online the work progressed through developing comparisons of online and offline identities. The nature of the question and the approach meant engagement online was characterised as disembodied and 'virtual' which led to a perceived split between one's offline existence and one's actions and identity presentation online. This view has entered taken-for-granted everyday understanding, which makes the representational lens an intuitive and appealing option. Secondly, we will trace back the lineage of self-presentation research in social media to an almost universal but particular interpretation of the work of social theorist Erving Goffman (1959). We will then revisit Goffman's original work and upon a closer reading we come to question the support of Goffman's work for representationalist interpretations of self, identity and self-presentation. Specifically, we will expose two theoretical breakdowns where representational thinking fails to grasp fully the pertinent matters of participation in social media: 1) engagement in nymous environment, and 2) authenticity in online environments.

Besides a detailed exposition of the evolution of identity studies in the context of social media, the main contribution of this paper is to juxtapose the representational lens with an alternative. Hence, against the backdrop of our critique we then introduce a performative understanding of identity by drawing on the emerging literature on sociomateriality and recent contributions on identity work in organisation studies. We envision this to provide a richer understanding of identity with 1) both self-representation and one's communicative actions to be understood as taking part in identity performance in social media, 2) one's own identity at the same time being continuously co-constituted by participation in social media. Under this lens identity performance in social media and the self are co-constitutive analogous to a 'two-way street'.

BACKGROUND: IDENTITY AND SELF-PRESENTATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In this section we will provide a brief overview of research on identity and self-presentation in social media. This body of research is almost exclusively focused on engagement on the public Internet with only relatively little research touching on professional or organisational social media use.

As our study is a literature study documenting the literature search process is an important step in ensuring transparency and validity (vom Brocke et al. 2009). To develop a corpus of literature that formed the basis of this literature study we searched a broad range of academic databases. In consideration of the highly disparate and far ranging nature of the combined topics of identity and social media, we needed to maximise the range of possible relevant variants of the concept of identity and of social media. For identity, its conceptual and terminological variants such as self-(re)presentation and impression management needed to be included in order to gain an adequate view on how these alternatives are contributing to discussions in understanding social media. Social media is also of interest to many disciplines, further contributing to the broad nature of the approach needed. Interdisciplinary collections were the focus of the search strategy and our final corpus was developed databases including World of Science, JSTOR, PsycInfo, ACM Digital Library and Proquest Central. Many search iterations, in the form of for example, (TS=("self representation" or "self presentation") OR TI=("self representation" or "self presentation")) AND TS=("social media" OR "web 2.0" or communication technolog*), were completed. The principle behind these iterations and the articles collected was that of capturing range and variations in disciplinary and theoretical approaches.

User self-presentation and impression management have been identified as a major stream in social media research (Richter et al. 2011). Despite this, the majority of work has been focused on the student and youth populations with little extending into other contexts including organisational social media. The dominant themes on self-presentation coming from the literature on public social media are whether individuals are using social media to self-present (Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Naaman et al. 2010) or more negatively, deceptive self-promotion (Underwood et al. 2011); whether individuals 'online' presentations correspond with their 'offline' ones (Back et al. 2010; Howard 2000; Schau and Gilly 2003; Sessions 2009); whether social media self-presentations are narcissistic or self-esteem enhancing (Gonzales and Hancock 2011; Mehdizadeh 2010; Ong et al. 2011); 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); and the negotiation of different and often conflicting contexts for self-presentations (boyd and Heer 2006; Marwick and boyd 2011).

On the other hand, research on self-presentation via social media platforms for professional or organisational uses is still very new but increasing. However, the majority of this work is restricted to externally available

platforms. Self-presentation through microblogging about personal or work related activities can help to enhance connectivity function in informal communications at work (Zhao and Rosson 2009). Public relation professionals are using twitter to increase their professional visibility and build an image of themselves as 'entrenched' professionals (Gilpen 2011). Self-presentation in terms of external labor market credentials is seen as an important usage of social media platforms by working individuals (Skeels and Grudin 2009). These studies suggest that self-presentations form a significant role in the work practices of individuals in organisational contexts.

As far as internal use of social media goes, self-presentation practices have only formed components of broader examinations of adoption and use. What has been found is variation of self-presentation practices across contexts, both between internal and external communications and between different individual organisations. Self-presentation practices shift as they are situated in individual organisational uses, for example at Capgemini the "twitter-like behaviour of self-promotion" was found to appear only rarely (Riemer et al. 2011). At the same time at Accenture it was thought to be valuable to gain "a perspective on who you were working with" through self-presentations based on hobbies and other personal information (Richter and Riemer 2009). "Me" messages form only 16% of posts at an unnamed large Fortune 500 company and of these messages 88% were about the person's work (Zhang et al. 2010). The dual functions of expressions of and access to expertise can also be seen to involve self-presentation practices and are found to be key usages of enterprise social networking sites (Richter and Riemer 2009).

From these examples it also becomes evident that self-presentation practices are intertwined with information sharing or connection building. At the same time it becomes apparent that the understanding of self-presentation practice in organisations is derived from studies on self-presentation in the public social media space. Therefore we see the need to examine more closely the applicability of the representationalist lens in studying self-presentation and identity in social media.

THE REPRESENTATIONAL LENS

The representationalist view of identity maintains that identity and its representation(s) are distinct. This separation goes much deeper than an analytical distinction; it is the belief in the power of words to reflect a pre-existing metaphysical substrate that supports social constructionist and traditional realist positions (Barad 2003). Identity in a representationalist view is essentialist. The 'self' is considered to be embodied in an individual's physical body, remaining relatively stable, static and whole. This 'self' directs all other self-communications. It is these representations that communicate and socially interact on the identity's (self's) behalf; in this way the representation of identity is derived in a secondary way through social interactions. Accordingly, researchers in this stream often speak of 'self-representation', rather than 'self-presentation', while generally the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Origins of Self-Representation in Social Media Research

The lineage of self-presentation research in social media can be traced back to an almost universal but particular interpretation of the work of social theorist Erving Goffman (1959). Two (non mutually exclusive) 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' (examples include Donath 1999; Ellison et al. 2006; Papacharissi 2002a; Papacharissi 2002b). It is the second of these, the theatrical orientation of Goffman's work, that has been predominately influential in later work on self-presentation, especially in recent works on 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 as meaning that the 'backstage' self is somehow more real, or authentic while alone, than the 'front stage' self that is in company and performing.

Some of the earliest studies of identity on the Internet developed and introduced new understandings of the ways identities were constructed. It was argued that because of the disembodiment and anonymity created in computer mediated environments a new and emergent mode of identity production was occurring (Turkle 1995; Zhao et al. 2008). This new mode of identity production had the important characteristic of enabling or encouraging creation of persona that differ from 'real life' identities. Turkle (1995) was interested in the ways participation in MUDs and game playing on the Internet allowed individuals to play with different personas or identities and argued that they assisted in further understanding of an individual's 'true self'.

Identity in Online Environments

Turkle's work has inspired a tradition that examines the relationship of 'actual' or 'true' to idealized selves or self-presentations. Bargh et al. (2002) examined, using an experimental design, whether the features of anonymity and disembodiment influence presentation of 'true' selves or 'actual' selves on the Internet as compared with in face-to-face. Whitty (2008) uses the concepts of real and actual to examine the ways individuals present themselves in online dating sites and how these actions are perceived by their audience. In a similar vein studies influenced by Higgins (1987) search for aspects of self or identity based on distinction between 'ideal' and 'actual' selves.

The overall results of these examinations as yet do not find a coherent picture. Back et al. (2010) examine whether profiles represent an 'idealized' self or actual personality where actual personality is measured according to offline characteristics and 'idealized self' is assessed according to the extent that or whether or not the profile matches the offline expressed personality, this study finds that individuals tend to present their 'real' personality. Conversely Ellison et al. (2012) find that users on an online dating site present idealized versions of themselves, framing them as 'profiles as promise'.

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE REPRESENTATIONALIST VIEW

Rethinking Goffman's Self-Presentation

The representationalist view has progressed from a relatively narrow reading of Goffman but an alternative reading of Goffman (1959 p. 252-253) can be considered. Goffman himself does not support or deny the representationalist interpretations of self, identity and presentation, at the very least his position is somewhat ambiguous, his concern is with rich descriptions of the mechanisms and processes that individuals use as they live and perform their selves. It is perhaps this ambiguity in his work that has allowed for a representationalist interpretation to emerge, this interpretation is further supported by symbolic interactionist accounts of Goffman's work (Cahill 1998; Lawler 2008; Stryker and Burke 2000). Goffman certainly acknowledges his extensive use of the theatrical metaphor however in his concluding remarks he says that understanding the 'self-as-character' as 'something housed within the body of its possessor' is a 'bad analysis of the presentation'. Goffman (1959 p. 252-253) explicitly denies an essentialist understanding of his performer / character distinction seeing the self as a '*product* of a scene that comes off, and is not the *cause* of it'(emphasis in the original).

Rethinking Goffman encourages a reconsideration of the ingrained distinctions drawn to try and make sense of possible placement, relationships and definitions of identity(ies), self(ves) and self-representation(s). Most often social media researchers do not discuss these distinctions explicitly. Where they are explicit they are essentialist and either the self drives the activity of the identity (Zhao et al. 2008), the 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 been addressed by ignoring identity altogether. For example, Kramer and Winter (2008) examine "personality traits" where a separate offline personality is the primary and authentic driver. Early reviews of social media exclusively mention impression management, which is primarily interested in strategic self-presentation (boyd and Ellison 2007). Boyle and Johnson (2010) are a relatively recent example of a study that is purely concerned with self-presentation and examines how much and what self-information is disclosed as characterized using demographic statistics. This behavioral stream has developed a large body of knowledge on the complexities of online versus offline self-presentation activities (Attrill and Jalil 2011; Tidwell and Walther 2002; Walther 2007; Walther et al. 2010).

Just very recently there has been a growing inclination to understand the role of self-presentation in knowledge work practices and attempts to come to terms with self-presentation as a performance. Leonardi and Treem (2012) examine the centrality of self-presentation practices as they are represented in organisational knowledge management systems. They present a compelling argument for understanding knowledge management systems as stages for self-presentations of expertise and not only recognise the systems strategic use but also that there is an interactive relationship between the presentation and its reception by others. However even here Goffman and socially constructivist understandings of expertise still underlie and support a representationalist and so essentialist understanding of presentational practices. Put succinctly in this view there is a self that guides the presentation. This essentialist understanding is most evident in the lack of focus on the co-constitutive elements of the self-presentation. A performance understanding, such as that used by Leonardi and Treem (2012), falls short of understanding identity as a constitutive cycle, so how presentations and their reception further reinterpretation by the self and then how these become part of the future practice of the self. The language of

presentation and representation itself makes it all the more difficult to move past essentialist informed positions in understanding these practices and to try and approach them in a consistent way.

Based on this analysis we argue that seeking to understand identity is hindered by the representationalist lens' forced separation of self, identity and representation. This separation means the relationships and dynamics between self, identity and representation should to be accounted for, so that an individual's ability to reflexively participate in identity construction can be understood. An approach that allows for examination without preconceived distinctions opens the possibility for understanding identity work as it is situated within organisational environments and as it is practiced by participants. Developing understanding in this way is supported by analogous work on virtual environments (Schultze 2011).

Two points of theoretical breakdown are introduced; identity representation in so-called nonymous environments, where online and offline are considered crucially linked environments, and the question of what an authentic online identity is, to demonstrate that a representationalist lens no longer functions as an adequate explanatory framework for identity practices within organisational social media environments.

Theoretical Breakdown 1: Merged Identities in nonymous Environments

Online identity as viewed through a representationalist lens does not allow for a reflexive constitutive construction of identity between online and offline environments. This notion can be explored through findings from nonymous online environments, where it becomes apparent quite quickly that virtual environments are no longer, if they ever really were, completely distinct from physical ones. Nonymous environments are defined as being the opposite of anonymous environments, therefore online identity is in some way always linked to offline activities and identity (Zhao et al. 2008). This linking can take a number of forms but in some way an online presence has a relationship to or consequences for what happens offline. An everyday example is the social networking site "LinkedIn" where professional profiles are expected to be extensions of offline professional careers, as evidenced by requesting data such as graduating institutions. A second example is the use of networking sites for professional personal branding which has significant offline consequences such as recruitment and job opportunities (Labrecque et al. 2011; Lacy 2010). An extension and converse example is where offline fame is used to enhance and build the online personal brand, so much so that differentiation is non-existent and in many cases not desirable, for example TV personality Stephen Fry's famous Twitter habit mutually supports both his online-offline celebrity status.

The importance for individuals of having a single identity across online-offline environments is increasing in both workplace and personal spheres. For example, the semi-(a)nonymous or 'mixed-mode' of Internet dating has been the focus of a concerted research effort (Zhao et al. 2008). Ellison et al. (2006) argue that online dating is differentiated from other online environments as individuals necessarily intend to connect offline at some point. This connection to offline worlds means that individuals 'impression-manage' the tensions between attracting partners and presenting an 'authentic' self. However, what has not been accounted for, as these studies use a representationalist lens, is the reflexive nature of the identity performances, and that the 'self' will potentially be modified through participation.

Theoretical Breakdown 2: Authentic Identities in Online Environments

The dominance of the representationalist view of identity is most evident in the way authenticity and credibility are framed in online social networks. Social networking sites (Davis 2010; Donath 2007) and a 'profile as identity' view encourage the perception that individuals have a single and static identity and that there is the one that is 'authentic'. The architecture of social networking sites contributes to a representationalist understanding of identity, which privileges a single 'authentic' and 'real' view of identity. The difficulties arising from the tension of opposing 'real' and 'presented' selves has been experienced by public social media users as limitations of the technology's ability to easily maintain multiple identities through profiles and in maintaining authenticity across multiple audiences (Marwick 2005; Marwick and boyd 2011).

The implications of adopting a representationalist interpretation of Goffman is that questions around 'authenticity' get drawn into preoccupations with a series of binaries such as 'real world selves versus virtual selves', 'real versus fake selves', 'single versus multiple identities', 'private versus public identities', 'professional versus non-professional identities' and 'inert versus responsive selves'. Schultze (2011) also draws attention to this limitation of the representational view in research into virtual spaces. In social media research these binaries are evident in the way authenticity, credibility and reputation are understood. Traditionally, Internet research has defined authenticity as a best match between online and offline identity (Sessions 2009). Credibility is often used synonymously with real and offline matches to online (Back et al. 2010; Mallan 2009; Rowe 2010).

Traditional representationalist understandings of authenticity as 'real' versus 'fake' no longer can be seen as reflecting the practices of social media users. Participants' concerns have shifted to how people across the

spectrum of their life activities perceive them, including their reputations and authenticity. Sessions (2009) finds that users see an authentic identity prominently as 'not deceptive'. Audiences do not want to be 'managed strategically' so photos that appeared to present the author in an overly positive and strategic way were seen as inauthentic.

Online and offline distinctions are breaking down and transforming understanding of authenticity in online environments to reflect offline 'believability' or an "authenticity to constructed self" (Williams and Copes 2005), where authenticity work is "remaining true to the presentation of self one claims" or "self-reflexivity" (p.1089). One such demonstrated strategy of authenticity is the inclusion of an 'appropriate' amount of personal information or 'being human' mixed into professional usages and so adding depth to an online presence (Marwick and boyd 2011).

We argue that these practices of authenticity point to a shift in understanding of what it means to be authentic: authenticity is now practiced as being co-constitutive with the perceptions of audiences. It follows that our understanding of the communication of identity needs to accommodate this shift.

A PERFORMATIVE LENS AS AN ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY UNDERSTANDING

A performative perspective explicitly rejects the belief that the essential properties of things inhere in those things and that we can only access knowledge of these properties through representations of them (Barad 2003). The benefit of adopting a view that rejects representationalism is that there is no longer a mediating layer between essential properties and potential knowledge of them. As the mediating layer dissipates our preconceived distinctions and so understandings brought about by them do too. This means our potential knowledge is no longer constrained by the object/subject and known/knower dualisms that have been the basis of representationalist thought throughout its history (Hall 2000). Boundaries that define the roles of concepts using this lens become fluid and continually redefined as they are situated and as they emerge within the activities and environments they appear in.

Following from the adoption of this lens, identity then is not an essential core held within or solely determined by a bodily casing but rather enacted or performed through communication and discourse which gives the appearance of an essential identity (Butler 1990, as cited in Dunn 1997 p.692). While it appears that we have an essential self-identity, that self-identity is multiple, fluid, socially co-constitutive with ever shifting boundaries that are determined through an ongoing self-identity performance. Performative understandings move the self-identity (subject) from its stable (essentialist) position within the person to its continual performance, or enactment. An individual's self-identity is then continually redefined as the individual goes about being that individual; the individual, their surroundings and social activities contribute to its continual redefinition.

Understanding of what a self-identity is within a performative lens shifts to how it is constituted through discursive practice. Performative identities are strategic and positional, fractured and fragmented "multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall 2000, p.17). Identities are the positions a person takes being continually constructed and articulated within their social practices. Under a performative lens identities are not represented by an author or self but are co-constituted through articulation practices. With this lens the focus shifts from representation to identity articulation practices (Hall 2000).

The significance of applying a performative lens to our understanding of social media is pointed to in a study of a teenage subculture. With this lens the Internet becomes more than a "static cultural object" and takes part in the formation of individual and collective identity. The Internet does not so much "reflect" people but "produces them" and creates experiences (Williams 2006 p.194). Leonardi (2011), following Barad's (2003) performativity, also recognises that technologies themselves have a material agency of their own, meaning that they bring their own actions to an encounter beyond what the human agent can control. Taken together a performative lens compels us to consider the co-constitutive nature of human and material agency and how social media becomes entangled with self-identity construction. A performative lens allows us to reconsider the assumed boundaries between social media and the human and through these also reconsider self-identity as a shifting and multiple phenomenon within new performance spaces (Schultze and Orlikowski 2010).

Understanding of authenticity also changes in the performative view where authentic characteristics are not essentialist: they do "not inhere in the object, person or performance said to be authentic" but authenticity becomes a "claim made by or for someone, thing or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others" (Peterson 2005, p.1086 as cited in Williams 2006 p.177). Adopting a performative lens then allows us a richer, more complete and experienced understanding of the practice of constructing identity. This also suggests the need to understand authenticity not just from the position of the person seeking authenticity but also from the position of those doing the authenticating (Williams and Copes 2005 p.1090).

Reconsidering the way we think about the conceptual positioning of the self is important when investigating self-representation because it fundamentally shifts what is actually being discussed. Our understanding of what self-representation is and its role changes dramatically according to which lens is chosen. Adopting a performative lens as argued by Barad (2003) and Hall (2000) means that identity work and articulation practices are open to investigation leaving behind predefined distinctions and roles developed with a representationalist lens. Such questions include: how are people practicing identity articulation in online environments; and do they or how do they distinguish between articulation and identity practices. Self-identity articulation practices are very much still open to question generally, and more particularly in online environments. As is argued by Svejenova's (2005) findings in a study of authentic creative careers, it is hard to disentangle 'identity expression' (person) and 'image manufacturing' (persona) (p.969).

A performative lens allows us to reconsider these distinctions and further examine the practices that are producing these experiences. We can then begin to understand how the participants are deciding boundaries and making distinctions as they practice and articulate their identities.

RESEARCHING KNOWLEDGE WORK PRACTICES WITH THE PERFORMATIVE LENS

The construction of identity in a performative view is analogous to a two-way street: Work practices shape identity just as identity will shape interactions within work environments. Hence, identity performance is more than ever inseparable from work practices. Work practices have become much more about engaging with colleagues which highlights the socially interwoven nature of work (Iedema et al. 2005). A body of literature in organisation studies has coined the term 'identity work' to signify the inseparability of work practices and identity performance as they are situated within their respective organisations (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

Identity work "refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Alvesson 2010, p.201). This approach to understanding identity processes in organisations has contributed to conceptualising individual identity as multiple and dynamic as well as insight into strategies used by individuals to cope with these multiple, possibly conflicting and ambiguous identities (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2010). The body of knowledge on identity work can be argued to be performative in nature as it, for the most part, attempts to "go beyond a view of individuals as unitary, coherent and autonomous and embrace a position somewhere in between a 'traditional' and a postmodernist or 'anti-essentialist' view" (Alvesson 2010, p.194). This body of work also focuses on identity work practices as they are situated within their organisational contexts. Identity work is the constitution of self and identity as it is articulated and enacted through work and organisational practices. Rather than representational analyses that predetermine the practices under study, a performative analysis addresses identity work and articulation as it continually evolves during work and organisational practices. This allows an understanding grounded in the way the actors, as they are situated, constitute themselves and their environments.

Identity work practices highlight the importance of developing an understanding of identity work and articulation in organisations. For example, characterizing management as identity work Clarke et al. (2009) find that managers identity narratives and constructions of self are the site of convergence for a variety of discourses, including those that are mutually antagonistic. It is through these processes of narrative construction that managers construct themselves as 'moral beings subject to organisationally based disciplinary practices' (p.324). Collin (2009) finds that workplace identity construction is crucial to learning by providing motivational impetus. Brown et al. (2012) find that designers create 'interactional identities' to add meaning to their group work and so form a potentially important component within creative collaborations.

At the same time, changes in organisational practices foreshadow changes in processes of identity formation in organisations where a more participatory role of knowledge work in organisational structuring is foreseen (Iedema et al. 2005), particularly with the introduction of highly participatory technologies like social media (McAfee 2006). In this environment we argue that pre-given distinctions and categories developed from representationalist assumptions may lead to a masking of understanding of personal and organisational identity work.

Identity work and articulation are argued to be significant practices within knowledge work, as they may contribute to knowledge sharing and expertise utilization. The uncertainly, ambiguity and constructed nature of knowledge highlights the significance of the persuasive nature of knowledge, which in turn emphasizes the centrality of identity work and practices (Alvesson 2001; Alvesson and Empson 2008). A critical line of research based on rhetorical analyses of knowledge work in organisations points to a shift in the way we can understand knowledge work as being ambiguous, constructed and rhetorical. This approach sees essentialist lenses as having led to 'black-boxing' of critical concepts in organisational and systems research (Alvesson 2011). This black-boxing has been argued to centrally contribute to the mystification of knowledge practices

within organisations as ‘tacit’ or ‘produced’ (Alvesson 1993; Alvesson 2011), it follows then that the same mystification is inherent in the understandings produced by representational or essentialist research programs in identity work in organisations.

To overcome black-boxing effects of a representationalist view we need to examine identity work and articulations as they are situated within their organisational contexts. This means attempting to observe and understand the decisions and boundaries that individuals create and recreate as they enact their identities during their work practices. For example do individuals separate themselves from their identity articulations and if they do, do they reintegrate them and how. This process is necessarily situated within the organisation as well as entangled with any encompassed organisational technologies, from routines, processes to systems. The entangled nature of the whole phenomenon of identity work means that it needs to be addressed from multiple perspectives. Neither the organisational perspective nor the individual can be privileged as this would reintroduce pre-given assumptions about loci of power, control and boundaries. Schultze and Orlikowski (2010) highlight some of the challenges of studying virtual environments using a performative perspective. Many of their observations apply to social media, particularly the challenge of “obtaining firsthand observations of the range of participant experiences” (p.819) and that participants are concurrently in multiple places, being online and offline. In some ways it can be seen that these difficulties may be more pronounced in the study of organisational environments as consequences of the interpretation of behaviour may feel more pronounced to participants and their organisations. It can also be seen that social media does not correspond completely with virtual world studies as many non-textual aspects of performance are removed though the conversational nature of the data provides a different perspective again.

The observational aspects of organisational social media (where traces of actions are captured as content on the medium) present an opportunity to examine identity articulation and construction as they are performed to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the sociomaterial entanglement of self-identity within organisations (Schultze 2011). As Schultze and Orlikowski (2010) suggest various ethnographic approaches present themselves as appropriate for both the study of social media and specifically when using a performative lens. In a sense social media allows a researcher to observe but does not require them to be present at the time or place of the conversation meaning that observation can happen without the participation. This raises potential issues for the interpretation of the conversation but does remove the researcher from the direct online scene. Other ethnographically orientated methods such as interview and offline participant observation will need to be included to gain necessary insight into experiences and firsthand accounts of participants (Murthy 2008). Further a hermeneutic research process provides a framework for the necessary movement between and across individual and organisational practices through multiple iterations (Cole and Avison 2007). Moving between multiple individual and organisational perspectives will require an analysis developed from multiple sources encompassing multiple perspectives from documents and interviews as well as incorporating observational data.

A performative lens allows re-examining identity without preconceived definitions and boundaries so we can begin to understand how identity, self and articulation, are enacted in practice. We argue that this will allow us to develop an understanding grounded in the way the actors, as they are situated, constitute themselves and their environments.

CONCLUSION

Self-presentation and identity in organisational social media have not been considered in a way that allows them to be understood as they are situated within organisational and individual practice. Organisational and public social media studies on self-presentation and identity have been shown to be founded on a representationalist lens that introduces pre-given distinctions and separations that have been argued to constrain understanding of both organisational knowledge work and individual identity work practices. Consequently, we have introduced a performative lens that will allow us to develop an understanding of knowledge and identity work practices without recourse to pre-given distinctions. A performative analysis will require the gathering of source data from multiple perspectives, including social media as a source of observational data which will allow us to see how individuals are enacting their identities throughout their work practices and will provide an informative balance to self-reporting data.

Investigation into the practices of iteratively co-constructing identities and the relationships involved will further inform theoretical understandings of the individual as they are situated within their organisation. Insights into the role of identity as it contributes to understanding of workplace knowledge generation may ultimately uncover potential areas of alignment between individual and organisational benefit and provide opportunities to further motivate engagement as an essential ingredient of knowledge work.

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