

Chapter 8

Mobile Devices and the Self: Developing the Concept of Mobile Phone Identity

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ABSTRACT

With increasing ubiquitousness of information technologies (IT), identity issues have begun to attract the attention of IS researchers. While some IS research has examined the interplay between IT and role and social identities, the potential role of IT in shaping personal identities has yet to be considered. To that end, this chapter develops the rationale for talking about IT as a source of identity that transcends the roles individuals perform and the groups they affiliate with. The chapter presents the findings of an exploratory study of 72 young adults' interactions with their mobile phones, which set out to discover whether individuals' interactions with IT are a source of personal identity construction. Based on the findings, the authors develop the new concept of mobile phone identity as a product of interacting with mobile phones, and a force affecting the way young adults interact with the world around them. Finally, the chapter suggests potential opportunities for future studies to advance research on IT and identity beyond the context of young adults and mobile phones.

INTRODUCTION

As information technologies (ITs) become ever more ubiquitous in individuals' work and social lives, identity issues have begun to attract the attention of IS researchers. Because identities are

constructed as people interact with the world—and ITs have become an essential component of this interaction—some argue that ITs are fundamental to how individuals see themselves, what they do, and how they do it: “The things we own, use, and display to others make statements about who we

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are. Our technological possessions and competencies are very much a part of identity, and so it is not surprising that social actors use ITs to construct identities” (Lamb & Kling 2003, p. 217).

Conceptualizing the relationship between IT and identity is important because, increasingly, people are choosing and becoming familiar with ITs in their personal lives, as well as in the workplace (Schaffner, 2010). Mobile phones and networked technologies, in particular, have helped to change the nature of interactions in which identities are constructed. These devices, which act as portals to other people and places, transcend geographic and cultural boundaries (Turkle, 2011), reduce social distances between adults and children (Cerulo, 1997), and link the workplace with the personal space (Gant & Kiesler, 2002; Masmanian, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2006). In a very real sense, the ways in which people define themselves—in the roles they perform, the groups they affiliate with, and as unique individuals—are increasingly mediated by their interactions with IT.

In light of IT’s infusion into daily life, this chapter develops the rationale for talking about IT as a source identity that transcends the roles individuals perform and the groups they affiliate with. Because few, if any, information technologies enjoy such wide spread popularity as mobile phones, we explore individuals’ interactions with these devices as one source of their self-concepts. Specifically, we draw on 72 college students’ narrative accounts to discover the meanings that they constructed as they observed and interpreted their own experiences with mobile phones. Based on our analysis, we developed a qualitative conceptualization of mobile phone identity as *the set of meanings an individual attaches to the self in relation to a mobile phone* arising from a history of interactions with the device. Mobile phone identity is similar to other personal identities (e.g., moral identity) in that it is a part of individuals’ self-concepts that guide their behavior across a wide variety of situations.

A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

Identity can be described as “a way of organizing information about the self” that defines what it means to be who one is (Clayton, 2003). People have multiple identities because they perform multiple roles (e.g. parent, student, database developer), affiliate with multiple groups (e.g. an organization, a political party, being English), and choose multiple personal characteristics (e.g. honest, creative, hardworking) (Burke and Stets, 2009). An important aspect of identities is that, whether they relate to roles, to groups, or to the person as a distinct entity, they act as “benchmarks” or standards that guide and shape individuals’ thinking and behaviors (Burke and Stets, 2009; Clayton, 2003; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Examining the Relationship between IT and Identity

There are two broad approaches to examining the relationship between IT and identity. The first, stemming from Goffman’s labelling theory (1963), emphasizes the *outward presentation* of the “categories to which individuals are socially recognized as belonging” (Owens, 2003, p. 224). This perspective emphasizes the role of IT as a tool or resource that people draw on, as an extension of the self, to support social interactions and to project their identities to others (e.g. Burke & Stets, 2009; Lamb & Kling, 2003). Media literature examining how mobile phones communicate information about the self—including group affiliation, social status, and expertise—illustrates this role (e.g. Campbell & Park, 2008; Fortunati, 2005; Katz & Sugiyama, 2006).

The second approach, underpinned by sociological identity theories (e.g. Burke & Reitzes, 1981; McCall & Simmons, 1978/1966; Stryker, 1980) and psychological social identity theory (Tajfal, 1981; Tajfal & Turner, 1986), focuses on the *internalized meanings* that individuals attach

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