

Mobile Phone Identity: The Mobile Phone as Part of Me



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INTRODUCTION

As information technologies (ITs) become pervasive 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 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 (Ling, 2014), and link the workplace with the personal space (Mazmanian, 2012). 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 intertwined with IT.

In light of IT's infusion into daily life, this chapter explores the potential for IT to become an integral part of individuals' self-concepts that transcends specific roles they perform and groups they affiliate with. Because few, if any, information technologies enjoy such wide spread popularity as the mobile phone, we chose this device as the context for our study. Specifically, we draw on 72 college students' narrative accounts to uncover the meanings 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 meanings attached to the self in relation to mobile phones*. Mobile phone identity, which arises from a history of interacting with mobile phones, is a part of individuals' self-concepts that guides thinking and 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 & 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 & Stets, 2009; Clayton, 2003).

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 labeling 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 (Auter, 2007; Campbell & Park, 2008; Walsh & White, 2007).

The second approach, underpinned by sociological identity theories (e.g. Burke & Reitzes, 1981; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980) and structuration theory (Giddens, 1991), as well as social identity theory (Tajfal, 1981; Tajfal & Turner, 1986), focuses on the *internalized meanings* that individuals attach to the self. In the IS context, researchers have adopted sociological perspectives to examine how IT impacts role and social identities through changing the nature of the roles people perform within organizations (e.g. Barrett & Scott, 2004; D’Mello & Sahay, 2007; Mishra, Anderson, Angst, & Agarwal, 2012). Others have drawn on social identity theory to investigate role and social identities’ influence on IT use (e.g. Hillmer, 2009; Liu & Chan, 2010; Ren et al., 2012; Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014).

Elucidating the relationship between IT and role or social identities is clearly valuable. Still, IS researchers have, to a very large extent, overlooked that people may view and treat IT as part of identity that helps define who they are as unique individuals. Conceptualizing IT as identity is important because who someone is, independent of others, can be thought of as a more general view of the self, with the potential to pervade role and social identities (Deaux, 1992; Stets & Burke, 2000). To illustrate, through interacting with mobile phones, a person may claim being ‘available’ and ‘accessible’ as important personal characteristics. Depending on how important these characteristics are to the person, they can, in turn, help determine the meanings that s/he attributes to various social and role identities (e.g., the levels of availability/accessibility an individual is prepared to maintain as a member of an organization or in performing a parental role (Ling, 2014; Mazmanian, 2012). Thus, developing understanding of IT as identity may advance knowledge of individuals’ behaviors across the groups in which they participate and in the many roles they perform.

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