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IT Use and Identity: A Review and a Research Agenda

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IT Use and Identity: A Review and a Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 40 years, IT use has become essential to how individuals interact with the world. From ordering meals to taking classes and even consulting a physician, so many aspects of daily life are bound up with IT that effective participation in the world demands IT use. The ubiquity of IT in work and personal lives has created a shift from IT as a tool to IT as a basis of identity formation and verification. In a genuine sense, IT use has become fundamental to how we see ourselves and act in the world.

The essential role of IT use in all aspects of daily life and social interactions has drawn IS researchers’ focus to identity issues. In this stream, IS scholars have examined relationships between IT use and social, role, and person identities and, more recently, IT use as identity (IT identity). Within IS, there is substantial research interest in understanding the complex and constantly changing relationship between

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people and IT. However, a theoretical review to organize
diverse perspectives on IT use and identity to facilitate new
theorizing has yet to be conducted.

To that end, this monograph reviews 90 conceptual and
empirical IS studies to identify major themes, examine their
theoretical foundations, and suggest an agenda for future
research on IT use and identity. In total, 24 of these collected
papers cited the concept of IT identity (Carter and Grover,
2015). We summarize the trends of the current IT identity
research in various fields.

**Keywords:** Identity; Theory: Models of cognition; Information
systems and individuals: IS acceptance and use; Information systems
society: Impact on society
Information technology (IT) use has become embedded in all aspects of individuals’ personal, professional, and social lives, influencing how individuals see themselves (i.e., their identities) and how they interact with the world (Carter and Grover, 2015; Floridi, 2010). The identities that people claim represent the shared meanings and expectations that they internalize for their behaviors (Stets and Biga, 2003). Therefore, conducting an updated review of research on IT and identity is vital for understanding how people engage with a constantly changing digital world.

Within IS, there is substantial interest in the complex and constantly changing relationship between individuals’ identities and the IT they use. To that end, existing approaches have often examined relationships between IT and social, role, and person identities from one of three perspectives: (1) IT implementation and use as a determinant of identity; (2) IT use as a medium for communicating and protecting identities; or (3) IT adoption and use as a consequent of identity (Carter et al., 2020a; Kim et al., 2012; Mishra et al., 2012; Sarker and Sahay, 2003).

Scholars have examined IT implementation and usage as a determinant of identity. Various articles have revealed that IT implementations
may negatively affect role and social identities by transforming procedures and places in which individuals work (e.g., Alvarez, 2008; Mishra et al., 2012). New IT can also present opportunities to improve existing identities or construct new ones (e.g., Boudreau et al., 2014; Lamb and Kling, 2003; Stein et al., 2013). IT usage as a medium for communicating and protecting identities has been investigated in the context of organizational virtual environments (Schultze, 2014), social networking (Bateman et al., 2011; Lin et al., 2021), e-commerce (Forman et al., 2008), and online communities (Kim et al., 2012; Vaast and Levina, 2015). Finally, some IS research has examined IT use as a consequent of identity. In this stream, research has shed light on how identities influence IT use, e.g., in online communities (Ren et al., 2012; Tsai and Bagozzi, 2014), technology adoption (Pethig and Kroenung, 2019), and how social identities provide a context for IT use (Walsh et al., 2010). Thus, IT as a determinant, medium, and consequent of identity has been part of IS research for some time.

In recent years, a fourth perspective – *IT use as identity* – has garnered interest within the IS literature (Carter and Grover, 2015). From this perspective, individuals’ IT use is motivated by positive self-identification with using information technologies they are familiar with (Carter and Grover, 2015). IT identity has been used as a theoretical foundation for behavioral research in various contexts, including health informatics (Esmaeilzadeh, 2020; Henkenjohann, 2021), social media (Li et al., 2019), enterprise systems (Hassandoust and Techatassanasoontorn, 2021), and IT for development (Gomez, 2016). Additionally, research has shown that individuals who strongly self-identify with technology are more likely to engage in feature and exploratory usage (i.e., richer IT usage) vis-a-vis those who do not identify with IT (Carter et al., 2020a,b).

In sum, the IS literature on identity is rich and varied. But these works suggest that research in this area holds even more promise for expanding understanding of human behavior. However, for this promise to be realized, a theoretical review to organize the diverse perspectives on IT use and identity is needed to facilitate new theorizing. To that end, we systematically review and analyze research on the relationship between identity and IT from 1995 to 2021 in the IS domain. In doing
so, we focus on five major research trends. Our review provides a foundational schema of IS research on identity and IT use and suggests future research directions to build accumulated knowledge in this area.

The review is organized as follows. After providing an overview of identity theories that serve as the theoretical foundation for our review, Section 3 describes our literature review process. In Section 4, we present our findings, including the major themes, theoretical foundations, and methods of the collected papers. Section 5 identifies research opportunities and suggests promising avenues for future research. The monograph ends with a brief conclusion.


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