

# The relevance of the enterprise digital identity in social network sites

## Proposed Model

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### Abstract

Social network sites are a major buzz actually, both for people and for organizations, but real benefits for business use of such sites are hard to quantify. One of the issues that organizations have to deal with is the way they manage their presence and their relations with the community in social network sites.

Although research has been growing significantly in very recent years, most of the existing literature focuses in factors other than the influence of the external relations of the organization regarding its presence in social network sites. Thus the relational capital theory grounds this study and the research objectives are to assess the most significant relational capital variables associated with the organization presence in social network sites, their specific meaning and the most influential relational factors.

The following research question is addressed in this project and is analyzed through the lens of relational capital:

What is the influence of the relational capital of the organization in the use of its social network site page?

The present study proposes a research model and a set of hypotheses derived from the existing literature and primary data for this testing will be collected via a survey.

The results of the study will allow setting a frame of guidelines towards the building and maintenance of the relational capital of the organization, in order to improve the firm's SNS page use, thus characterizing the digital identity of the organization, according to its relational capital strategy and participation in SNSs.

### 1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) are a major buzz actually, both for people and for organizations, but real benefits for business use of such sites are difficult to quantify. One of the issues that organizations have to deal with is the way they manage their presence and their relations with the community in SNSs.

Although research has been growing significantly in very recent years, most of the existing literature focuses in factors other than the influence of the external relations of the organization regarding its presence in SNSs. Thus the relational capital theory grounds this study and the research objectives are to assess the most significant relational capital variables

associated with the organization presence in social network sites – its specific organization page, their specific meaning and the most influential relational factors.

This research project is organized as follows. The literature review of the research of SNSs, intellectual capital and relational capital is presented followed by the research model and the hypotheses. And then, the research objectives and research question are presented followed by the research paradigm, strategy and design.

## **2. Theoretical references**

The literature review of the research of SNSs, intellectual capital and relational capital is discussed.

### **2.1. Social network sites**

The great technologic development of communications, associated to the widespread use of the internet made the importance of networks quite relevant in nowadays society. “Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture” [1]. Parrochia [2] goes to the extreme of claiming that network predominance is so overarching, that time will come when instead of asking someone about their name and place of birth, one will be asked his internet address and which networks does one belongs to.

There seems to be some consensus about the fact that it was Barnes [3] that first introduced the notion of social network, made of kinship ties, friendship and knowledge. A social network is composed by a set of actors – individuals, groups, organizations or societies (the “nodes”) and by the inherent relations (the “ties” or “edges”) between these actors [4].

Social network sites (SNSs) are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” [5] (p. 210). Being Web 2.0 types of applications, SNSs reveal a trend centered on users, for interaction, content generation and sharing, and building of online communities [6].

The main characteristic of SNSs is allowing users to articulate and make visible their social networks, thus maintaining relationships online with people with whom there is already an offline relation and not the capability of connecting to strangers [5]. Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield [7] research confirms that generically SNSs support pre-existing social relationships and suggests that Facebook members use it to maintain or consolidate online the existing offline relationships in opposition to meeting new people online.

Lenhart and Madden [8] research accounts that 91% of the teens in US use SNSs to connect to their friends and Choi [9] also concluded that the majority of users mention the maintenance and reinforcement of pre-existing relationships as the main reason for using the social network site (SNS) Cyworld in Korea.

A relationship within an SNS leads to a connection referenced as friend, contact, fan or follower. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site [5], nevertheless these terms do not have the same usual meaning as friends lists are filled with all sorts of friends — from best friends to virtual strangers [10].

SNSs benefit from the widespread use of the internet, from the technologies that support them and from the new access devices, namely cell phones and new mobile smart devices, thus earning a huge popularity among internet users, with the objective of establishing and maintaining social relations [11].

According to Boyd and Ellison [5] definition, the first SNS – SixDegrees.com, was created in 1997. Nowadays there is a myriad of SNSs with different functionalities available through distinct technologies and that attract millions of users worldwide on a regular basis. Among the most popular SNSs, Facebook (www.facebook.com), Twitter (twitter.com) and LinkedIn (linkedin.com) have hundreds of millions of users and Facebook is the number one most visited site worldwide in the web, according to traffic statistics site Alexa [12].

Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are considered the three highest impact SNSs for business nowadays and their use needs to be incorporated in all organizations [13]. This is valid not only for organizations but also for public administration, as recently reported by Human Capital Institute that found that 66% of government agencies also adopted social networking sites as a preferred channel [14].

## **2.2. Intellectual capital**

The information age technology, the media, and the communications [e.g. 15,16] along with the globalization of the economy and increased business competition [16], offered companies very large intangible contributions. Nowadays the main drivers of value in an organization are nonfinancial intangible assets viz. skills, knowledge, technological knowledge, relationships, processes, brands, reputation, innovation, customer loyalty, organization learning ability and research and development (R&D) [e.g. 17,16]. These concepts have been grouped under the umbrella of intellectual capital [18], which is among one of the most significant intangible contributions possible and considered one of the key reasons associated to the success and the competitive edge of organizations [19].

Bontis considers intellectual capital a very important subject, but he also states that it is very misunderstood, stating that “intellectual capital has been considered by many, defined by some, understood by a select few, and formally valued by practically no one” [20].

The importance and repercussion of those intangible contributions, such as intellectual capital, for the organizations, sustained the need of managers to value and quantify them, thus shifting from the traditional financial value paradigm [19] and originating an increasing amount of literature on the subject [21]. Since the late nineteen nineties years, plenty of models have been presented and developed to value IC, but with reduced practical use because generally, the models are little more than “description lists and inventory templates from several practitioners and organizations” [21] (p.1080).

The quantification and measurement of intellectual capital leads to reporting, which in turn assists organizations in the formulation of their strategies, helps in diversification and expansion decisions and also allows a clearer communication with external stakeholders, allowing them to understand and value the organization better [16].

Several authors recommend that organizations should voluntarily disclose information regarding their intellectual capital, not only for internal management purposes but also to deal with external stakeholders and with the capital markets [e.g. 22, 23, 16]. Lang and Lundholm [24] state that the organizations with more information disclosure have a larger number of analysts following them with less volatility in forecasts, and resulting benefits in increased investor following, reduced estimation risk and consequently lower effective interest costs.

Madhani [16] (p.21) considers that “the terms, intangible assets, knowledge assets and intellectual capital can be used interchangeably, based on the fact that they differ only in their discipline of origin. The term intangible asset is most widely used among the accountant community, while economists use the term knowledge assets, and management and lawyers use the term intellectual capital”.

Intangible assets have a higher return than tangible ones and they also can be used simultaneously in different places unlike physical assets that can be used only for one task in one specific location in time [16]. Madhani [16] (p.22) states that intangible assets “are

largely invisible in relation to standard business management tools and disclosures” and considers them “the hidden capabilities of an organization”.

Bontis [17] considers that intellectual capital, although evasive, can be found in the gap between the market prices of some companies and their book values, thus assigning it some value and recognition by the markets. Lev [25] considers that the value of intangible assets account for an amount of value equal to between one-half and two-thirds of corporate market values and Madhani [16] states that intangibles account for 62% of the world’s business, with technology leading as the most intangible sector (91%). Intellectual capital can also be seen as the stock of knowledge existent in an organization in a certain moment [e.g. 20,23,26].

Intellectual capital is an intangible asset and has an unquestionable strategic impact [20], providing a company with a competitive edge in the market [27], and contributing to its value creation [28]. The value and the intangible nature of intellectual capital allows for different definitions according to the level of analysis considered – individual/collective and temporal dimension chosen – current/future thus considering intellectual capital as an input into the value creation process, a value creation process in itself or a tangible output from the firm’s value creation processes [18]. But in spite of the several interpretations of different authors [e.g. 29,30,31], all the definitions are correct and right because they include all the factors that are nonfinancial and valuable for a company’s business [30] and some convergence exists among them [29].

This research work will focus on intellectual capital at the organizational level, although, with the development of the studies related to intellectual capital, many other works also consider the city, regional and nationwide levels [32].

In conceptual terms, the intellectual capital construct consists of three broad dimensions or primary components: human capital, structural capital and relational capital [e.g. 17,33]. Bontis [34] considers that all these three domains – human capital, structural capital and relational capital, represent namely the intelligence found in human beings, the organizational routines and the network relationships. This approach is also shared by Brooking [15], Edvinsson and Malone [27] and Sveiby [35], that consider that the whole of these dimensions are the essential knowledge of organizations.

Human capital is a primary component of intellectual capital [e.g. 17,20,34,19,27,36,35] and is “typically recognized as a firm’s most valuable asset as it underlies the organization’s capability to make decisions and allocate resources” [21] (p.1083). Human capital encompasses the knowledge, competences, talent and experience of the employees of an organization [37] (p.225), while Sveiby [35] (p.10) defines it as “the capacity to act in a wide variety of situations to create both tangible and intangible assets”.

Structural capital relates to the organization’s structures and according to Bontis and Fitz-enz [37] (p.225) “represents the codified knowledge bases that do not exist within the minds of employees (e.g . databases, filing cabinets, organizational routines)”. Structural capital embodies and supports human capital [27].

### **2.3. Relational capital**

Relational capital is the final primary component of intellectual capital and it is the most intangible one, besides the domains of human and structural capital, since it is the most external to the organization’s core [20]. According to Blatt [38] (p.534), relational capital “entails assets that are created and leveraged through relationships” and as such it is related to the organization's relationships and to its network of associates [17]. Relational capital refers also to the customer’s satisfaction with and loyalty to the company, thus representing for Bontis [17] (p.4) “how closely tied the organization is to its market network”.

The intangible asset relational capital lies in the networks and social relationships among individuals, communities and society [e.g. 39,40,41], and in fact it consists of internal and external social capital [21].

Although there is debate in the literature over the first use of the term social capital, most authors agree that it was first used by Hanifan [42] in his article about the local support for rural schools, where he discussed how neighbours could work together to oversee schools. Hanifan [42] (p.130) referred to social capital as “those tangible assets [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy, and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit”. The use of the concept was quite scarce until recent years when it began increasing in relevance. There has been exponential growth in references to social capital in academic literature as the number of journal articles referring social capital as a keyword went from a mere 20 prior to 1981, to more than 1000 in 1999 [43]. This growth in research and application to diverse areas represents an unprecedented acceptance, study and application of this single concept [44].

Both for Bourdieu [45] and for many other authors according to Swart [18], social capital has its key origin in the relations among individuals within a group. Coleman [46] states that it is created to achieve a unique function thus making it function-specific, which is also the case of an organisation where different types of relationships carry out different functions [18]. An holistic perspective of social capital leads to the acknowledgment of inter-relations between social, human and intellectual capital and in turn, social capital contributes to the creation and facilitation of the development of intellectual capital [47].

The internal social capital relates to relationships at several levels – the individual level [e.g. 39,46,48,49], the business unit level [50], and the organizational level [e.g. 47,50]. The external social capital encompasses the relationships with the clients at the customer network level [e.g. 20,51,52,53] and the relationships at society level [e.g. 46,54,49].

### **3. Research model and hypotheses**

Being a recent phenomenon – the first SNS was created in 1997 [5], there is a growing number of studies about SNSs, but in spite of being related to social relational interactions, the existing studies yielded little knowledge on how relational factors may influence user engagements [55].

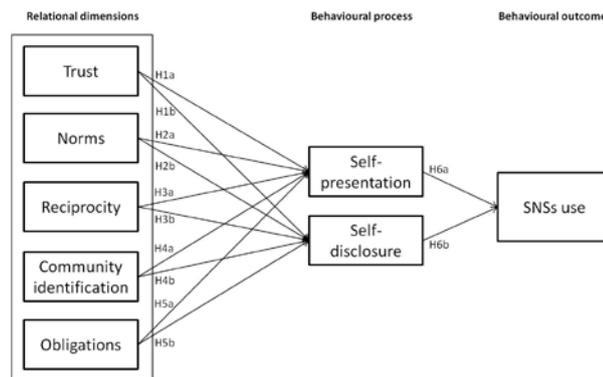
The research theoretical model and research hypotheses are proposed based upon theories of relational capital and of social processes. The research model presented in Figure 1 suggests that relational capital elements such as trust, norms, reciprocity, community identification and obligations directly affects self-presentation and self-disclosure, which in turn increase social networking use.

Some of the key assets in relational capital are trust, reciprocity, community identification [e.g. 56,57], norms [47] and obligations [38].

The concepts of self-presentation and self-disclosure derive from the theories of social processes [58]. In any type of social interaction self-presentation is about the desire people have to control the impressions that other people form of them (Goffman, 1959 cited in 30, p. 62). The objective is to positively influence others and also the wish to create an image that is consistent with one’s personal identity.

Self-disclosure is a critical step in the development of relationships, and refers to the conscious or unconscious divulgence of personal information such as identity, state, thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes or disposition into publicity [e.g. 55,58]. Most often self-presentation is done through self-disclosure and it is consistent with the image one would like to give.

Figure 1 – Research model



Relational factors such as trust influence the assessment of a given relationship [59]. Trust in the web, more specifically in the context of SNSs, is defined as a belief or expectation about the other party – other network participants, the SNS itself or as a willingness to depend or rely on that trusted party, coupled with a sense of vulnerability or risk if the trust is violated [60].

Trust is a necessary condition for individual online behaviour as trust contributes to the lowering of perceived risks [e.g. 61,62] and when they trust each other members of SNSs are willing to engage in and maintain social activities [63]. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: Trust will positively relate to self-presentation.

H1b: Trust will positively relate to self-disclosure.

A norm exists when the right to control an action is not held by the actor but by others socially defined [64]. Social norms govern people participation in society [65] and also play a role in SNSs motivating members to interact [66], and sharing knowledge [55]. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

H2a: Norms will positively relate to self-presentation.

H2b: Norms will positively relate to self-disclosure.

Reciprocity is related to a shared understanding on continuing relationships of exchange and it involves mutual expectations that a benefit given now will be returned down the road in the future [67]. According to Chen and Sharma [55] (p.31) “in the context of SNSs reciprocity leads one to firmly believe that the other members will appreciate their own engagement in a network site and in return join mutual interactions (e.g., comment on one’s posts), offer assistance (e.g., answer questions), and reveal themselves (e.g., supply full profiles)”. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H3a: Reciprocity will positively relate to self-presentation.

H3b: Reciprocity will positively relate to self-disclosure.

Community identification is defined as own conception of self with respect to the defining features of a self-inclusive social group [68]. Community identification influences member’s motivation to participate in communal activities and in SNSs terms when members perceive strong social unity and togetherness, they are more likely to be part of it and contribute with their interaction and their engagements [55] (p.30). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H4a: Community identification will positively relate to self-presentation.

H4b: Community identification will positively relate to self-disclosure.

Obligations are team members commitments to carry out specific activities [47] and they facilitate coordination by increasing predictability, since people know that others will follow through with their promises [38]. In SNSs people may feel an obligation to reciprocate

when they receive knowledge [69] which in turn is motivated by moral obligation [70]. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H5a: Obligations will positively relate to self-presentation.

H5b: Obligations will positively relate to self-disclosure.

Site use refers to routine access of a networking service to enjoy system functionalities such as profile browsing, commentary reading, and search function [55]. Site use and self-disclosure are two related but conceptually different behaviour choices [55]. These choices lead to the growth of social relationships, increased site traffic, customized services and an accumulation of user generated contents, hence they are imperative to the long-term success of SNSs [55]. Therefore we hypothesize:

H6a: Self-presentation will positively relate to SNSs use.

H6b: Self-disclosure will positively relate to SNSs use.

#### **4. Research objectives and research questions**

This study aims to provide a contribution to the understanding of how the relational capital of an organization influences the use of the organization page in a SNS. The relational capital theory will be used as a lens in this study and the research question is:

What is the influence of the relational capital of the organization in the use of the organization's SNS page?

The research objectives are to establish a frame of guidelines towards the building and maintenance of the relational capital of the organization, in order to improve the firm's SNS page use, thus characterizing the digital identity of the organization, according to its relational capital strategy and participation in SNSs.

The objectives presented will be based on the findings, namely the most significant relational capital variables associated with SNSs use, their specific meaning and the most influential relational factors.

#### **5. Research paradigm, strategy and design**

Paradigms can be interpreted as worldviews or a set of beliefs that underpin an individual's understanding of the world and their place and relationship within it. The research paradigm of this study adopts an objective ontology according to a positivist epistemology, assuming as crucial the independence of the researcher from the researched, as any interaction between them will question the validity of the research.

The actual study proposes a research model and a set of hypotheses derived from the literature review. Considering epistemological and ontological orientations expressed, the deductive research strategy will be used and the hypotheses proposed will be tested. Primary data for this testing will be collected via a survey.

The survey will be sent to the 1000 Largest Companies in Portugal and will target specifically selected managers, namely Marketing, Social Media, Communication, Public Relations and IT/IS. Taking into consideration the sophistication of the target population, allows the survey to be web-based and self-administrated, send to the respondents by email.

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