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Regulating professional identities in the epoch of social media: Exploring the process of identity creation for IT workers in India.

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Regulating professional identities in the epoch of social media: Exploring the process of identity creation for IT workers in India.

Purpose

The paper aims to explore the process of identity regulation and identity creation on social media for employees in the IT sector of India and how this process is different for men and women.

Design Approach/Methodology

The study is based on the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews of 31 IT professionals.

Findings

We find that identity regulation and identity creation is a complex process when it is mediated on social media as cues and guidelines for professionals are ambiguous. Enriching Ibarra's model of identity creation, we find that this process consists of five steps (i) motivation to build a desirable self (ii) experimenting with identity boundaries (iii) failed identity experiences (iv) active self-regulation (v) enacting inauthentic selves. We further find that this self-regulation for men is driven by the pressure to conform to the identity of an ideal 'corporate man' whereas for women it is driven by the need to conform to societal and cultural expectations.

Originality/ Value

The paper provides an enriched version of Ibarra's (1999) model on identity creation and regulation and highlights the role of gender in the process. The paper is practically relevant as it provides a window into how employees can feel the need to manifest inauthentic selves which is cognitively demanding.

Practical Implications

Since identity regulation is a cognitively demanding process that affects both the productivity and well-being of employees, organisations can proactively help employees manage their social media presence through training and mentorship programmes.

Keywords: Identity work, identity creation, identity regulation, social media, India, gender

Introduction

Identity work explores the physical and practical process that employees go through in negotiating their identity in relation to the various collectives to which they belong (Brown,

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2015; Jenkins, 2008). Identity literature within management and HRM studies has focussed primarily on the organization as the primary arbiter and guide to experimenting and creating one's identity through socialization processes like communication, orientation, appraisal and training (Bardon et al., 2017). Notably less attention has been paid on identity work that takes places on social media (Laitinen and Sivunen, 2020; Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Considering that a large part of an employee's life is spent on interactions on either publicly available social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) or on company run social media channels, it is no surprise that these interactions would be closely linked to employees' identity projects (Bardon et al., 2017; Yao et al., 2019). Activities on these platforms can range from messaging to creating profiles and sharing thoughts, ideas, articles, pictures, videos and sharing locations (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Vgena et al., 2019).

Social media research has burgeoned only in the last decade with considerable attention being paid on recruitment and employee profiling, expressions of dissent and to some extent employee voice (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017; Martin et al., 2015). However, less attention has been paid on how social media can shape the process of identity creation (Whitely et al., 2014; Yao et al., 2019).

To fill this gap, the main aim of this paper is to examine how the identity creation process plays out on social media. To explore this process, we draw on Ibarra's (1999) framework on creating provisional identities. This is a seminal piece of work that examines how employees socialize, experiment, and create provisional selves in light of the cues provided to employees about the profile of an 'ideal' worker. Ibarra's model lends itself to this investigation as this model has a level of flexibility and adaptability to enable the study of identity in various contexts. Ibarra's ideas have been used to study identity creation in different stages of one's professional life as well diverse country contexts (for example Dobrow and Higgins, 2005; Kapova et al. 2007). Furthermore, it acknowledges the importance of the collective or peer pressure in identity projects through social networks on which most social media architecture is based (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007; Lahlou, 2008). Finally, to the best of our knowledge, this or derivatives of this model have not been used to study identity online.

We feel that this is an important question to explore, as there is considerable amount of difference in identity work in traditional workplaces and identity work in ambiguous environments such as social media where individuals have to negotiate the often harmful world

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of online interactions (Cook and Hasmath, 2014). This in turn puts pressure on individuals to regulate their identities more consciously (Yao et al., 2019).

We further aim to examine whether this identity work is different for men and women. Research suggests that identity work and thus identity regulation can be a function of gender expectations of a particular culture. Although management literature has highlighted gender as a strong determinant of identity work less have been said about the intersection of identity, gender and social media (Adya, 2008; Guta and Karolak, 2015).

The research is based on in-depth interviews of 31 professionals from the IT sector in India. India's IT sector is one of the fastest growing industries of the country with revenue estimated at US$ 45 billion and export revenue estimated at US$ 150 billion in FY21 (IBEF, 2021). Indian IT workers are particularly interesting due to the differing social contexts in their personal-professional life. While in their personal lives, they are moving away from tradition and pursuing newer forms of personal identity (Titus, 2018), in their professional lives they yield to hierarchy and autonomy by accepting indirect control as a norm at the workplace. Moreover, they are strongly embedded within the social context in their personal-professional lives, where gendered interactions have moral implications. Thus, scholars have been particularly interested in how individuals negotiate these contexts routinely (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

Our findings suggest that identity work is based on five stages that workers go through (i) motivation to build desirable selves (ii) experimenting with identity boundaries (iii) learning from failed experiments (iv) active self-regulation (v) and enacting inauthentic selves. We further find that the active self-regulation and consequently enacting authentic selves are more pronounced for women compared to men.

We contribute to the identity literature by systemically looking at identity work from the lens of social media and help to expand on Ibarra's (1999) classic model. Identity literature is premised on the idea that identity work is governed by direct cues from the organizations (Alvesson and Wilmot, 2002; Bardon, 2017). While this may have been true for traditional organizational settings, it is not necessarily true for identity projects which are negotiated online where the codes of conduct and expectation of behaviour may be far more ambiguous and where double standards exist for women (Cook and Hasmath, 2014; Guta and Karolak, 2015). The paper also contributes to the information systems (IS) literature that attempts to understand the role of information technology and social media in identity projects (Whitely et

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al., 2018; Yao et al., 2018). We feel that this enriched version of Ibarra's model is an important step in this direction.

We argue that this research is important as despite the debates around the importance of identity in social sciences, it cannot be denied that identity matters as it is a basic mechanism (used by humans) to sort out themselves and their fellows' (Jenkins, 2008). In other words, it is way for individuals to assert and distinguish themselves and thus determine the social behaviours they display (Jenkins, 2008), which is not only relevant for individual well-being but also how the individual fits in the broader social unit of the firm (Brown, 2015).

The remainder of this paper consists of four sections. First, we discuss the extant literature on identity work, social media, and its intersection with gender studies. Next, we present our methodology. Analysis of findings and discussion is presented next. Finally, we conclude with managerial implications and future research direction.

Literature Review

Identity work and regulation

Identity refers to the idea that individuals conceive and enact versions of their selves with reference to the collective they belong (Brown, 2015). It is not merely a label attached to an individual but a fundamental mechanism of classifying oneself and the collective which is intrinsically linked to the meanings people attach to their purpose in life (Jenkins, 2008). This collective can be the family unit, an organization, or an entire nation. Increasingly scholars accept that identity is not a static construct and individuals embark on the active process of modifying, changing and holding their identities based on the situation or the collective, of which they are a part. In other words, individuals employ active strategies to manage their identities (Brown, 2015, Koppman et al., 2016). This purposeful curating of one's identity is referred to as identity work, although other terms such as identity quests and identity construction has been used in this context (Brown, 2017).

According to Alvesson and Wilmott (2002), identity work, identity regulation and creation of identity is a discursive as well as a self-enforcing process. Identity work is the process of transforming one's sense of self through engaging with and their contextual realities. This interpretation of one's identity informed by organizational or societal dynamics leads to regulation of identity which is a conscious and agentic process in order to 'fit in' with the collective (Bardon et al., 2017). Both identity regulation and identity work help to develop an

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individual's identity but this identity is 'precarious and mutable' based on the situation. For example, social identity has been shown to be variously influenced by considerations of self-esteem and organisational commitment which in turn is a function of the desire to belong to the 'in group' (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). This means that professionals may carry multiple identities and these identities are motivated by external pressures and expectations (Guta and Karolak, 2015; Ibarra, 1999). Identity regulation has been studied as a mechanism of organizational control. Indeed, the extant literature on identity work has focussed strongly on the organizational culture and control systems as a primary mechanism for shaping identity (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Brown, 2017). However, less have been said about this identity work and identity creation at the intersection of societal and organizational influences (Slay and Smith 2011).

The logical outcome of the identity work is that employees are in pursuit of shaping a professional identity which leads them to be accepted members of the collective. Although there have been several conceptualizations of this process, we draw from Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves to answer our research question about how social media influences effects the identity construction and regulation process. This model is consistent with other similar models (for example, Wilmott and Alvesson, 2002) but provides a more sequential process that professionals tend to follow in their identity projects. Furthermore, the model is flexible enough to lend itself to various contexts and settings (Dobrow and Higgins, 2005). This conceptualization is important for our work as it acknowledges that identities are 'works in process' especially for young professionals who draw from various sources in the environment so socialize themselves into the acceptable template of an identity (Ibarra, 1999; Slay and Smith, 2010). Ibarra describes the identity creation process as a three-stage process that begins with observing role models to build their identities. These role models in the traditional work environments are colleagues or supervisors. The process then continues with experimentation with provisional identities and culminates in evaluation of the reception of these identities. We aim to enrich this model by exploring the process of identity creation and regulation in the virtual environment. This is important on three counts (i) we expect that in the virtual arena, the identity regulation process to be more pronounced (ii) the provisional selves to be more precarious and mutable and (iii) the process to be different for men and women as we explain next.

Social media and identity

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The ubiquitous nature of the kind of connectivity we enjoy in the 21st century has raised important questions of safety, privacy and identity assertion on social media (Lahlou, 2008). Although identity regulation through identity work is not a new phenomenon in literature, identity work that transcends into the world of social media is a relatively understudied area of research (Laitenen and Sivunen, 2020: Whitley et al., 2014). Since the advent for Web 2.0 Technologies, there has been a plethora of commercially available social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In addition to that, many organizations have internal mechanisms to facilitate interactions such as internal chat services, company social media spaces (Leonardi and Vaast, 2017). Social media is very relevant to identity work as unlike emails and messaging technologies, users actually create the content, which can be a reflection of their real or regulated identities. Social media technology has been thought to 'exist as mediums, determinants and consequences of identity' (Yao et al., 2019: pp. 555). Studies suggest that the social media influences, though profound, could be ambiguous, leading to uncertain outcomes of identity work (Laitinen and Sivunen 2020; Yao et al., 2019). Furthermore, scholars have argued that despite the concerns about privacy and guarding one's identity, remaining invisible is not socially desirable in the wired world and thus individuals are forced to present some version of themselves (Lahlou, 2008).

For example, Laitinen and Sivunen's (2020) highlights the fact that social media increases the accountability of professionals and at times leads them to restrict information they share. This argument can be extrapolated for identity work where employees are more likely to regulate their identity in settings like India where there is considerable concern about restrictions on self-expression (Titus, 2018). There is also evidence that the current generation may be more adept at this regulation process, for example Tomer and Mishar (2015) in their study of software engineering students used the lens of professional identity to show that students were adept at 'morphing' their identity based on the professional influences such as interactions with alumni or during their internships. Similarly, Tsai and Bagozzi (2014) found that interaction in virtual communities (where identity work most saliently takes place) is a function less of subjective norms and more due to the perceived level of friendships within the community. Vgena et al., (2019) even argue that the geo location function (feature to share where one is such a city or place) can also help to assert identity. We extend this argument by suggesting that these societal level influences play an important role in the identity regulation process and not just organizational influences as explicated by Ibarra (1999) and Alvesson and Wilmott (2002) because of social costs (ostracization) and gains (meaningful relationships).

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As identity is expressed more through pictures and words on social media there is more scope for identity being misinterpreted (Yao et al., 2020). Moreover, the communication in social media has an 'imagined audience' in the sense that what the user chooses to share may not be directed towards only their intended audiences but that the room for interpretation is left with the users (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). We contend that IT professionals in India must negotiate this 'online' identity based on the complex interplay of the expectations of this globalized industry and that women have a more restricted sphere to express their identity because of the patriarchal nature of society (Adya, 2008; Shakthi, 2020).

Identity culture and gender

South Asia in general and India in particular has seen patriarchal values of gender norms endure (Titus, 2018). This has also been seen in the IT industry in India despite its tremendous growth in the last twenty years (Shakthi, 2020). Notwithstanding the progress with many female voices emerging in the past two decades, India has seen a shift back to traditional values since the nationalist BJP government has come into power (Ashraf, 2018). Like other traditional eastern societies, women are required to behave in a manner which is consistent with archetypical female identities with emotions governed by social expectations (Bagozzi et al., 1999). There is evidence that women do tend to 'rebel against or circumvent these identities' but the traditional and patriarchal influences regulate their actions and identities more than they do for men (Essers et al., 2013). Modernity, to some extent, has allowed females in traditional societies to assert their identities and independence. However, this remains circumscribed under the influence of familial and societal expectations, even for educated women in advanced industries like IT (Shakthi, 2020).

Identity literature has focussed on how professional imperatives guide identity work (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002 2015; Brown, 2015). For example, Bardon et al., (2017) in their study of Disney managers found that the 'effective' manager template provided by the organization was instrumental in shaping identity of managers where managers align themselves with 'official identity work'. Although this process might be followed by both genders, women are more likely to face pressure of identity regulation that is directed by not only professional imperatives but societal expectations as well (Shakthi, 2020). For instance, this identity regulation or identity shifting behaviour might be motivated by the desire to conform to the group or avoid being 'hyper visible'. Likewise, Dickens et al., (2019) in the context of Black

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women's experiences at work suggest that the identity shifting may take the form of altering one's mannerism, dialects as well as language use.

This identity regulation in this context may manifest in different ways. The primary method is restricting the use of these media or regulating it based on the organizational requirements. Second, it could be regulating or restricting posts and third, could be creating alternative identities that perform to confirm to required expectations which is likely to be more pronounced for women. Despite the proliferation of literature on identity and social media, relative scant attention has been paid to settings like India where there is an intersection of social media led modernity and traditional social expectations that govern identity work (Shakthi, 2020; Adya, 2008).

This paper attempts to go beyond micro level organizational influences on identity to examine the holistic process of identity creation and regulation and the influence of gender and culture on these factors and connect it to identity theory. Specifically, informed by Ibarra's work, *(i) we aim to examine how social media affordances affect the process of identity creation and regulation (ii) how far do cultural and gender expectations moderate these expectations.* We ask the question of how and why this process practically manifests itself and whether this process is different for men and women professionals.

Methodology

We take a social constructivist viewpoint, which highlights the relationship between individual action and social action (Burr, 1995). By taking this viewpoint, the emphasis is on the role of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this study (McMohan, 1997). As researchers, we looked for "recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experience, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question" (King and Horrocks, 2010, pp.182).

This paper is part of a larger study that examines various aspects of social media interaction and identity. This study draws on 31 semi-structured interviews with Indian IT professionals who hold a graduate degree or above. The research setting of Indian IT professionals was chosen primarily because they represent a microcosm of societal values in India (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006). As such, Indian IT professionals navigate a variety of contradictory values routinely across work-life including, 'being middle class and feeling cosmopolitan' (Murphy, 2011), and are 'immersed in global cultures yet retain traditional middle-class identity'

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(D'Mello and Sahay, 2007). Additionally, we explored how respondents engaged on social media within the broader socio-political interference on social media in the Indian context. Given the global and technological context of the Indian IT industry, we expected them to navigate these challenges in creative and advanced ways. Initially, we conducted preliminary interviews with six Indian IT professionals to gauge their level of engagement with social media. We then used snowball sampling techniques to encourage recommendations from participants (Saunders, 2012). Parallel to this, we used purposive sampling techniques to identify respondents via Facebook (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We included respondents from both multinational companies (MNC) and Indian IT companies. Our interviewees consisted of 18 men and 13 women. Although the interviewees were from diverse organisations, there are many commonalities of culture in firms in the Indian IT sector. First, the sector attracts high quality talent. Second, these professionals work under intensely competitive environments where not only do they have to keep up with their project deadlines but also with the changing nature of technology. Moreover, they usually have both internal and external clients. All this together leads to anxiety and self-esteem issues at 'an existentialist level' (D'mello and Sahai, 2007, p 6). In other words, there is a typical work culture in the IT sector which regardless of the size, hierarchy and location is quite uniform lending itself for examining patterns in sociological behaviour (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006).

Roughly, each interview lasted an hour and was conducted in English. The interview questions were broadly focused on respondents' experiences of using social media including the purposes for using social media, any challenges they experienced and how they navigated those challenges both offline and online. Respondents engaged at length on these topics and elaborated on how the process of their identity being influenced by these interactions unfolded. These narratives were in reference to their family, colleagues, friends, ex-managers, current managers, potential partners, potential employers, society at large. In other words, they did not restrict their accounts to social media activities as only relating to their work. In particular, they spoke about the implications of engaging on social media within the larger socio-political context. The need to use social media to curate a professional identity was an overarching theme, which further exacerbated their anxiety on social media interactions.

For data analysis, we developed an initial template after carrying out preliminary coding and clustering on five of the transcripts. For example, the quote, "It's a way of building an influence.." was identified under the lower-order theme of 'curating and managing one's own identity' and the higher-order theme, 'motivation to build a desired self' (Step 1). Similarly,

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the quote, "Acceptance of women is much less, right. So whatever we do is [open to judgement]" was categorised under the lower order theme 'attempts to avoid labelling on social media' and the higher order theme of 'self-regulation and gender' (Step 4b). In this way, we identified the lower-order themes in the first instance and then the higher-order themes for the data. As King and Horrocks (2010) suggest, if the interview focus was narrow, an initial template based on three-to-five interviews is sufficient to develop confidence in emerging codes. In general, our process was consistent with Ibarra's (1999) method of coding the data through an iterative process, where we noted any discrepancies that emerged and modified the template to present the final step-wise process.

We continued modifying the template until all sections of our data relevant to the research question were coded to it and the final template was clear and well-organised enough to facilitate our final interpretation and write-up of the data (King, 2012). The final lower and higher order codes organized into the step-wise themes in shown in Table I.

Table I: Coding structure about Here

Through the above processes of data collection and data analysis, we arrived at theoretical saturation; that is, no additional themes emerged with additional data (Rowlands et al., 2016). Together, these concepts enabled us to arrive at theoretical explanations for the step-wise professional identity creation on social media consistent with the hierarchical coding technique of template analysis (King, 2012).

Findings[1]

As discussed above, in the coding process we were interested in exploring the process that would help to explain how the identity regulation process unfolds. Specifically, we were interested in the 'actions' that professionals were taking in creating and regulating their identities. Thus, our analysis was based on abduction rather than pure induction as we used Ibarra's categories as our starting point. This is consistent with the prescription of template analysis (King, 2012). In addition, we were also interested in our a priori expectation of

[1] Please note that some quotes have been paraphrased either for greater clarity or to provide an added layer of anonymity

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differences in gender. We report the findings as part of a five-step process of professionals trying to create a desirable professional identity using social media.

Step 1: Motivation to build a desirable self

The process begins with professionals motivated by the promise of developing a desirable self. Unlike the traditional process of identity creation as noted by extant literature (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Ibarra, 1999), social media provides a bigger opportunity to curate and manage one's identity. This gives agency to professionals who can determine which facets of their identity to put forward. Unlike Ibarra's first stage of the provisional identity development which is dependent on one's actual conduct at work, there is more influence of the image created in the hands of the professional via social media. We see many quotes based on this theme. For example, Respondent 5 (male) highlights the idea that social media provides a more long-lasting proof of one's identity:

> It [social media] gives you an opportunity to tell people what you are at the same time it gives you an opportunity to show your talents that you cannot show on a regular basis.

Similarly, Respondent 2 (female) maintained,

> It's a way of building an influence; letting people know who I am and what I do. and generating a sort of persona in my circle of influence.

Respondent 9 (male) reflected on the more extensive reasons for why identity work has so much potential and promise for managing one's identity:

> Social media helps me to develop my ingenuity, it tickles my brains. Because I can use my creative thinking to address concerns and issues which are really outside my purview of things. It gives me a chance to explore the world outside what it is defined for me by the company – getting into other people's shoes and thinking for them. It helps me build a network really.

Respondent 27 (female) reflected on the limitations of the formal systems of establishing one's identity, such as the appraisals

> You want to be seen. You want to be acknowledged. We all need that acknowledgement in life. Whether it's from our spouse, our parents, our teachers, it is there at the workplace. From our boss, that's what the appraisal system is supposed to be about.

Thus, we see that professionals start out with the belief and motivation that identity creation through social media is not just possible but acceptable.

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Step 2: Experiment with identity boundaries

The second step is consistent with Ibarra's (1999) experimental stage. The major difference is that there is a vast variation in the signals and messaging about what is acceptable to post on one's social media platforms. In other words, IT professionals do not seem to have role modelling behaviour (Bardon et al., 2017).

This uncertainty leads to understandable over cautiousness as shown by the account of Respondent 1 (male):

> I would be very careful about becoming a member of a punk rock group or a death metal group, about sharing political affiliations, I'm neutral in terms of being political, I'm neutral in terms of being religious.

Then there is tension about blurring boundaries. IT professionals at times have to make an awkward choice about whom to extend an invitation to their personal realm as Respondent 17 (female) recounted:

> I'm very close to the team that I work with and it's easy for the lines to blur. But at the end of the day my boss is my boss and my colleague is still somebody that I have to go to work with. I maybe too cautious. I haven't had a bad experience or anything, but I prefer to make sure the personal and professional lines don't gel.

Enacting one's authentic self on social media is increasingly governed by the sentiment in the country rather than explicit corporate directive. In recent times there has been a crackdown on dissenting voices in India (Titus, 2018) and IT professionals seem to be projecting that fear of retaliation in the corporate realm as well as Respondent 21 (female) maintains:

> Even if you don't have your boss on your [friends] list that doesn't mean he or she cannot see it at some point because through some source you can always see it which is not right. It is dangerous for your own professional career. Making a public statement against a political party or for a cause...everything because you never know what happens…so today you make a derogatory remark about someone that person might just bring a (legal) case against you

We have surprisingly fewer accounts like the following by Respondent 30 (female) where the identity regulation process was being governed by the organization as we focussed on public social media use. This finding runs somewhat contrary to established models that argue the strong role of the organization in identity regulation.

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> There's some sort of policing on social media about what you can and cannot post online and a warning is sent out if someone posts something that is inappropriate. It could be religiously or politically inappropriate. Sometimes it could get nasty or personal, so then we get a message that says, "Stop this thread right here". So, I think it's very fair policing for everyone & I think that's necessary as well.

However even the above account does not seem to provide an objective guideline for all social media interactions, leading to experimenting what is acceptable.

Step 3: Failed identity experiences

As we saw in Step 2, identity work is based on some level of uncertainty about what is expected, especially in the face of rules and norms, which are not clear cut in the realm of social media. IT professionals who are trying to push the boundaries do take advantage of social media, despite the uncertainty and the process reflected in Step 3, in most cases 'go back into their shell'-so to speak because of failed identity experiences. We define this as actions which have invited some level of backlash. Respondent 16's (male) observation encapsulates it perfectly:

> In the work environment, it's not about being in the good books. It's about not offending someone so much that they harm your personal career. It has happened. I have lot of friends on social media. I do my work but my manager never liked it. There were [performance] rating issues and I had to bear it

Respondent 14's (female) account speaks of more dire consequences of these failed experiments:

> It's better to keep work life offline and away from social media. People start becoming familiar and the information goes to the higher levels. Yes, you get frustrated, and you vent it out (so social media) but invariably it has a lot of negative impact than a positive one. I've seen it in two or three situations where it has had an impact on someone's career with people on the verge of losing their jobs. So, you soon learn to keep your work life away from social media.

In this way we see that either through personal accounts or through hearsay, IT professionals in our study learn from these failed experiments that despite the promise of social media as a place to express one's true identity, there are only certain 'acceptable identities'. This process does not really tell the IT professionals what these identities or related behaviours should be

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rather they get cues about what that should not be which leads to the next step of active self-regulation.

Step 4a: Active self-regulation

The flow of information about acceptable behaviour from the actions of senior management and the environmental cues in pre social media days provided relatively stable cues for creating identities (Brown, 2017). Ibarra's (1999) model alludes to self-regulation and identities being informed by experiments and picking cues far beyond emulating senior management. We argue that this self-regulation is more pronounced in the wake of uncertain cues, role models, and negative consequences. We found several accounts of this active self- regulation as related by Respondent 19 (Female):

> I'm very careful about adding my colleagues to my list and I am very very careful about talking about my workplace. You have to be careful. considering companies are associating a brand of you from what you are actually sharing but on Facebook. You have to use privacy settings. On Twitter, I only share news related stuff. But on social media I'm careful. There are certain things about my life that are personal and I ensure that it stays that way.

Respondent 8 (Female) highlights the issues of negotiating one's identity on a weekly basis if the members of the workplaces are privy to one's social media.

> The reason [why I would feel uncomfortable sharing my social media] is you wouldn't like people who work with you, who report to you to know what you did on a Saturday night. That really messes up with what you're going to tell them on Monday morning, right. It'll probably affect how seriously they'll take you. Ideally it shouldn't, but it does. So you want to keep these separate.

This self-regulation in some cases take an almost Orwellian turn as we see evidence of not just managing what is being shared on social media but also actively restricting what one does and says with the fear of the behaviour ending up on social media, as Respondent 28 (male) warns:

> Actually my idea is you should not be doing anything which you will regret for future because you never know [how the information is] used for what purpose and all of that so I keep it very, very separate.

4b. Self-regulation and the role of gender

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So far in the process we have not distinguished between the experiences of men and women. However, we see a distinction in the kind and intensity of self-regulation in men vs women which helps us to address our second research question about gender roles. In India the norms of morality and acceptable behaviour are different for men and women, helps to explain this divergence (Shakthi, 2020). This theme was noted by both men and women in our study as Respondent 1 (male) points out:

> For women, yeah, if they were to put out photographs of them drinking or smoking or wearing something which is revealing or in the company of men and so on, those images can be misconstrued by others at work. Uh, maybe your professional reputation might be in jeopardy. So, I think it works on many levels.

This is evidenced by the fact that self-regulation for women is not just about maintaining professional identities but that it also has a deep impact on their personal lives as narrated by Respondent 3 (female):

> You see in our Indian culture the woman is always at fault. Anything that happens, they won't look at the man first. What did she do? You are always the first one to be targeted. Supposing I'm relying on my parents to arrange my marriage, or I meet somebody or somebody through parents. What will they do first? They will go and check any Facebook or LinkedIn profile. A photograph will say a lot.

And Respondent 11 (female):

> I am fiercely protective about what I do. Personal and professional. I know there are people out there who do the same things that I do, which is fine with me as long as the job gets done. Acceptance of women is much less, right. So, whatever we do is open [to judgement]

And although the instances of image consciousness and management acts are no different for men and women the purpose behind it are quite different. Men tend to do this to enhance their image while women do it more to protect their image as related by Respondent 7 (female):

> I think men don't care about it. Your relatives, manager, friends, and colleagues; everyone forms an opinion. They see something, opinions form. Even without you knowing. So you should be careful about who's commenting, who's putting up what picture and we don't [even] know who's seeing what so there is a lack of control over what people can see about you on Facebook. I don't think men care about it so much

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This process of self-regulation puts an incredible amount of cognitive load, but the final part of the process leads to professionals enacting inauthentic selves and unlike Ibarra's (1999) these are not provisional as social media forces people to maintain this identity at work.

Step five: Enacting inauthentic selves

As a consequence, we see a lot of evidence for IT professionals having a curated, inauthentic self as related by Respondent 12 (male):

> I wouldn't want to be known as hardworking or something like that.. not really, at least to my colleagues. When people think that you are really hardworking, it affects the way they act around you. They think I can't do anything else. People think that you are not very sociable & they won't come up to you and they might try to ignore you & could be like that.

The overcautious approach leads to people restricting sharing simple things about their identity as Respondent 25 (male) shared:

> I do not want [my boss] to know that I have a hobby which is more than a hobby now. He might think it will affect my productivity in the project, so I want him to know that I'm 100% committed to the work that I'm doing for him.

Respondent 30 [female] also had the same experience:

> On Facebook I have two pages, one is my actual [personal] page and one is my official page. On this official profile, people can search me & add me, & everything but my wall is blocked & my profile picture is of my back from 30 meters away so & you can't see any pictures or any posts.

Thus, we see that there is a considerable amount of work, which goes into regulating identity and creating inauthentic selves. The above quotes also reinforce our point that men seem to be curating their inauthentic selves based on the need to appear as a hardworking corporate citizen. In the discussion, we explore the possible implications of these findings.

Discussion

Online interactions are important social actions which help to determine how individuals engage with the world, which in turn determines how they are identified, indicating the crucial role of social media in identity projects (Bagozzi et al., 2007; Yao et al., 2019). Expanding on Ibarra's (1999) model, we present a five-step process of identity regulation as suggested by our data on IT professionals in India. The process begins with the employee's motivation to build a desirable self as there is premium for appearing to be the ideal employee in most workplaces.

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In Step two, IT professionals experiment with what is considered an 'acceptable' identity. Unlike Ibarra's work, which was based on identity regulation cues being derived from real work situations, this research suggests that identity work on social media is far more ambiguous with uncertain outcomes. Thus, in Step three professionals, especially young professionals, are more likely to see failed outcomes of the identity work. This in turn leads them to actively regulate their identity. This regulation for men is governed more by the image of the ideal corporate employee whereas women face an additional layer of regulation driven by the need to appear not only as a good employee but also as an 'ideal Indian woman'. Finally, for most professionals this leads to enacting inauthentic selves which have consequences as we discuss later. Through these findings our paper contributes to the literatures at the intersection of identity and social media

Our first contribution to the identity literature is that we help to enrich Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves in that we find the process informed by social media to be somewhat similar to the stages of observation of role models, experimenting provisional selves and evaluating experiments explicated in the original model. However, we posit that in the absence of role models or indeed clearly communicated expectations, actual consequences of a failed identity project may lead to self-regulation (Wilmott and Alvesson, 2002).

Secondly and relatedly, our analysis demonstrates that there is a complex process that plays out which begins with professionals discovering the opportunity to curate and regulate identity on social media and ending with enacting inauthentic selves. Our findings reveal that identity work, identity regulation and creating (provisional selves) is a far more complex process when social media is brought into the equation. Traditional identity creation models allude to the idea that identity regulation is primarily a function of the organization's need to control employees and identity regulation is largely governed by this (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Ibarra, 1999). We don't necessarily disagree with this assertion, but we find that in the universe of social media, the role models and cues that guide this process are far more ambiguous compared to these cues coming from the management and the workplace. Furthermore, we extend the argument that cultural identities including that of marginalized groups are strongly informed by the context and not just the organization (Slay & Smith, 2010). This is important to underscore as extant literature on identity work, in our view, overplays the role of organizations in this process as this is a far more nuanced process in the realm of social media (Alvesson and Wilmot, 2002; Bardon et al. 2017).

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Finally, we contribute to the identity literature by demonstrating that the identity regulation on social media is a gendered process. Men's regulation of identity is driven by more functional motivations of productivity and appearing as an ideal corporate citizen. On the other hand, women's identity work is more complex and pronounced in the sense they are concerned about the wider societal expectations, which could inform both their personal and professional lives (Essers et al., 2013). Thus, we demonstrate that Ibarra's process of identity creation and identity regulation manifests differently for men and women. This finding is interesting as the Indian IT sector attracts highly educated and urban women from presumably broad-minded families (Adya, 2008). But even women from this well-educated demographic seem to feel the pressure to regulate their identity and morph it according to cultural expectations. This could be because the consequences of social media missteps that inform one's perceived identity may last 'forever'. Considering the repercussion for both personal and professional lives (safety in many cases) for not towing the line of acceptable mainstream opinion (Subaramanium, 2017), or even sharing one's location (Vgena et al., 2019), it is no surprise that such conscious identity regulation takes place. As one of the interviews suggested, even a picture of a woman drinking on social media could have a considerable impact on her reputation-both professional and personal.

We have highlighted the professional costs of revealing one's true identity. However in South Asia, revealing one's true thoughts and ideas (which can be conflated with identity) could be downright dangerous. For example, a woman was recently sentenced to death in Pakistan for sharing alleged blasphemous messages on Whatsapp (Baloch and Peterson, 2022). In India far fewer women are accessing the internet, depriving themselves of the opportunity of social connections and opportunities because of threats of violence for voicing opinions. For instance, a 20-year student from Delhi was a victim of these attacks after her stance on persecuted minorities and anti-war sentiments was misconstrued as anti-state ideation (Subramanian, 2017).

Overall, we contribute to identity literature by providing a more enriched version of Ibarra's model for the age of social media (1999), informed by Alvesson and Wilmott's (2002) ideas around identity work. We acknowledge that this may only be an incremental contribution to theory and our findings indicate context specific theory rather than a general theory. Yet this is important as management scholarship is increasingly highlighting the importance of context or 'light' theorizing for underexplored settings (Bamberger, 2008; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019). Furthermore, we provide a nuanced understanding of identity work that leads to identity

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regulation at the intersection of social media and gender. This is also a relevant contribution for the IS literature that seeks to understand social media moderated identity work (Yao, 2019; Whitey, 2014). Regardless of how we conceptualize identity or how it comes about, 'identity matters' as Jenkins (2008) emphasizes since it presents a template for how we interact with the world and how it in-turn responds to us

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the identity regulation we examined is encouraged for efficiency purposes by organisations (Bardon et al., 2017). However, in the long run this could be counterproductive to efficiency as people will spend considerable cognitive energy to curate these identities and enact inauthentic selves (Raghuram, 2013).

Identity regulation suggests that one is not enacting one's authentic self. This is problematic as authenticity at work is linked both with satisfaction and well-being (Menard and Brunet, 2011). In workplaces where both men and women feel restricted, they are less likely to engage in social media so as to not 'give away' their identity. This could have a far-reaching impact on the well-being of both genders but particularly women as having a professional identity as a vessel for self-emancipation may be curbed (Sealy and Singh, 2010). This, among other things, is due to the fact that enacting alternative or inauthentic identities is a cognitively demanding and anxiety-driven process (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Apsler, 1975). So, it follows that individuals experience cognitive struggles in the process of enacting these inauthentic identities (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977).

The implication for our findings is important in the post COVID workplace as more identity work will be done on virtual spaces as even informal interactions are increasingly taking place online (Counch et al. 2021; Lahlou, 2008: Sayah, 2013). Since women are more likely to opt for remote work, the constraints we identified for employees living their authentic professional selves is more likely to be manifested for this demographic (Couch et al., 2021). Given that these identity projects have cognitive and emotional costs especially for women in traditional cultures (Bagozzi et al., 1999), it is important for organisations to recognize that employee well-being is linked to their identity regulation, which in turn has productivity implications as well (Ménard and Brunet, 2011).

Thus, organisations can take a proactive approach in helping their employees navigate their social media presence in various ways (Gonibeed and Saqib, 2022; Soens and Claeys, 2021). For example, they can coach their employees on managing social media interactions so they

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can build their professional identities in a meaningful manner. In this way, employees are empowered to manage their identity and organisations may have some control over managing their reputations. Organisations can consider providing technical support and/or workshops to navigate editing on different platforms to save employees' time and support them in managing their professional identities seamlessly across platforms. Furthermore, organisations may consider a mentoring pathway wherein employees on similar career trajectories may emulate senior employees' interactions online and form considered views and opinions that align with their identity and that of the organization. Moreover, organisations, to some extent, should allow employees to experiment with their authentic selves rather than just pigeon-holing employees to fit an 'ideal' corporate identity. Finally, organisations must acknowledge that social media blurs friendships and professional relationships which is more problematic for women, and as such, line and HR managers may need training in dealing with such conflicts when needed.

Conclusion and Limitations

To sum up, we find that in the IT industry in India, which is one of the most developed sectors in terms of management processes, identity work and consequently identity regulation and creation on social media is influenced by cultural norms that disproportionately impact women. Even though the design of the research did not allow for a line-of-sight connection between identity regulation and real outcomes, our analysis shows that this process is cognitively taxing (Raghuram, 2013) which is harmful for both the well-being and productivity of employees. This could indicate an issue for retention of women in the IT sector, which is a problem in both the West and South Asia (Adya, 2008). According to Adya's (2020) study, South Asian women are more likely to leave their jobs in the IT sector due to the desire to have a work life balance. Previous research has looked at this process from the lens of impression management (Richey at al., 2018). We contend that social media influences go beyond simply managing impressions and rather forces individuals to manage identities which is a more permanent state even though the nature of the identity itself may be in a flux.

A limitation of our research is that although it alluded to the impact and consequences of identity work it did not systematically examine it. It would be an interesting area of future research to study the impact of the cognitively demanding work of identity regulation and creation on social media. We have also found that this process is significantly different for women especially in the traditional Indian society. Researchers in future could extend this

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study to contexts where a similar pattern of identity regulation would be expected, such as in other South Asian countries. Similarly, it would be interesting to examine how this model will apply to participants from Western settings where gender expectations may be different. Furthermore, individuals have varying degrees of interaction and engagement online (Bagozzi et al., 2007) which may moderate the identity regulation process. Thus, we also encourage researchers to examine this model for individual effects and preferences.

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Table I: Coding Structure

Lower-order codes	Higher-order codes
Curating and managing one's identity Cues from the organisation and peers Expected outcomes and rewards	Motivation to build a desired self
Assessing the pros and cons of assuming differing identities Explore identity segmentation	Experiment with identity boundaries
Negative consequences of enacting authentic identities Loss of personal-professional image Cognitive dissonance of competing identity expectations	Failed identity boundaries
Careful construction Self-censoring Restricting social media profiles Restricting expanding network Distinguishing friends and colleagues Identifying the relevant audience on social media	Active self-regulation
Engaging in internal debates on morality Distinguishing between gender-based expectations on acceptable/unacceptable behaviour Attempts to avoid labelling on social media Casting oneself into the image of an 'ideal Indian woman' Casting oneself as an 'ideal Corporate man' Acute awareness of gender-based	Self-regulation and the role of gender

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discrimination in society	
Alter social media profiles to suit societal expectations Sharing culturally-acceptable posts Engaging only in politically- correct conversations Online-offline compartmentalising Restricting sharing of controversial opinions Dichotomy between real and social media identity Cognitive load of negotiating between authentic/inauthentic selves	Enacting inauthentic selves

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