Glocalizing identities: grounded theory of networked scholar

Judita Kasperiuniene¹,², Vilma Zydziunaite³, Andrea Salvini³

¹Institute of Education, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania. judita.kasperiuniene@vdu.lt; vilma.zydziunaite@vdu.lt.
²Faculty of Informatics, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania. judita.kasperiuniene@vdu.lt.
³Department of Political Sciences, University of Pisa, Italy. andrea.salvini@unipi.it.

Abstract. Grounded theory explained university professor and researcher identity construction in social media. Interviews were conducted with full and associate professors and researchers from universities in Lithuania and Italy. Professors and researchers were engaged in social sciences, humanities and technologies. They were active social media users. A core category Glocalizing identities showed the process of professional self-presentation of university teachers in social media environments. Two opposite paths of identity construction were researched. The first showed direction to a person’s self-regulated learning in social media. The second path pointed to social media skepticism. The first Glocalizing identities direction was constructed from subcategory Accepting with dimensions Flowing and Learning. The second direction was constructed from subcategory Hiding with dimensions Disassociating and Ignoring. These findings contributed to understanding how active networked university professors and researchers in non-English speaking European countries – Lithuania (post-Soviet country facing rapid university transitions) and Italy (having old scholar traditions, transforming scientific knowledge for productive purposes) – constructed their professional identities in social media.

Keywords: glocalizing identities, grounded theory, professional identity construction, social media, university professor

1 Introduction

Lithuania is often called the country of transitions because of its rapid economic growth during the last twenty years. Besides the changes in political economies, all the former Soviet Union countries faced social transformation, as well as managerial and curricular changes in universities. The identity of the scholar community has been extremely difficult to sustain at a time when universities were actively expanding (Bridges, Juceviene, Jucevicius, Mclaughlin & Stankeviciute, 2006). Over the last few years the reorganization of university network began in Lithuania. Now two or three universities having the same or similar study programs are merging. University professors, researchers and teachers are very responsive to all these transitional processes. All the processes, situations, and consequences are widely covered in social media. University lecturers commented and actively expressed their opinions.

The Italian context is slightly different: many universities have old traditions; academic staff feel safer and can devote their time to university teaching and research activities.

The Glocalization concept we borrowed from Robertson (1995), noting simultaneously occurrence and amalgamation of universal (global) and particularizing (local) tendencies in contemporary professional life. Glocalization of university education (called internationalization by other authors) in both countries was growing broader and deeper (Lepori, Seeber & Bonaccorsi, 2015; Bulajeva & Hogan-Brun, 2014). In European academia, in countries where English is not an official language, English is gradually becoming the main language of scientific communication (Rostan, 2015).

In our research of university professor and researcher professional identity construction in social media we followed identity theory (Nagy & Koles, 2014; Stets & Burke, 2000), which states that the
identity of an adult person is formed through the process of self-categorization and identification. Also, we were inspired by Rambe’s (2013) empirical research of converged social media for identity management. Our research question was: how university professors and researchers from different countries construct their professional identities in social media?

2 Methodology

Sampling. Six interviews in Lithuania and six interviews in Italy were conducted. Interview participants were public university full and associate professors and researchers having social sciences, humanities and technology backgrounds. All the participants were active social media users. Interviews were individual, semi-structured and made at participants’ work-places (university premises).

Methods. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used for data collection and analysis. Data collection and analysis was done simultaneously. Visual memos were mapped after every new interview collection (Lempert, 2007). Five interviews were done in English, one in Italian with synchronous translation to English language and six in Lithuanian. Interviews were recorded and literally transcribed. Interviews lasted from 38 minutes (shortest) to 135 minutes (longest). Data collection was done by the first author. Data analysis was done manually, without qualitative data analysis software. Initial coding was done event by event. Initial coding was done in two languages – Lithuanian and English. Later all the codes were translated to Lithuanian and focused coding was done in Lithuanian. Physical peer-briefing sessions during initial and focus coding was performed between the first and second author to discuss and interpret preliminary findings. Recursively, virtual peer-briefing sessions were done between the first and third authors to discuss constructed grounded theory categories, sub-categories and their interconnections. Research credibility and trustworthiness was secured using purposive sampling in peer-discussions, mapping memos during all the research process and going back and forward with data, following all the constructivist grounded theory procedures and staying open during data collection and analysis (Cope, 2014).

Tools. During semi-structured interviews the first author asked interview participants to describe their professional and virtual activities. We clustered questions to two parts: i) Professional journey: Please present yourself and your profession. How did you choose your professional path? What professional changes you have had? Please tell me about your occupational roles. Provide the situations in which your professional roles emerged. ii) Relationship to social media: Please describe how you use social media at your work. How do you present yourself in social media?

Specialized computer software was not used in gathering, coding and categorizing qualitative data. While sorting and integrating categories, authors were encouraged to use RQDA. This turn to the software unexpectedly opened new viewing angles to the grounded theory under construction. With RQDA authors plotted grounded theory categories, subcategories and dimensions as igraph nodes, neighbors, labels and clusters. Although software usage is considered controversial in qualitative research community, these computer visualizations helped authors to reflect on the grounded theory construction process.

Ethics. Research participants were informed about the anonymity of data they might provide during the interviews. Confidentiality was respected, conflicts of interests avoided, and privacy maintained (Brinkmann, 2014). Before the interview only the research topic was provided. Interview questions were not known in advance. The research participants knew that data would be recorded, and nobody objected. Interview participants were asked not to mention names or personal characteristics of their colleagues or other people. During two interviews research participants asked to switch off the microphone for few minutes and provided some information that was stored only in memos. One
interview was done with synchronous translation. The translation was done by the third author. This participant knew sufficient English to control the quality of the translation.

3 Findings

The process of *Glocalizing identities* explained how university teachers and scholars continuously constructed their professional identities in social media. *Glocalizing identities* showed the duality of local and global: i) the willingness of the networked scholar to present his or her local and national studies to an international scientific audience and to publish in high-cited journals; ii) not having time to learn foreign languages and preference for using translator services. Findings showed that this process could develop in two directions. The first pointed to the person’s self-regulated learning in social media. The second directed to social media skepticism (Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. The visualization of grounded theory on networked scholar](image)

The core category *Glocalizing identities* had two subcategories *Hiding* and *Accepting*. *Accepting* showed that a university professor or researcher has the tangible or intangible benefit of social media. The benefits that a person receives depended directly on the time the research participant devoted to virtual self-presentation in social media. The benefits for the research participants mean national and international networking with other scholars, surfing scholarly papers and reading network colleagues’ posts.

*I think this is really very important – ResearchGate. I think this is a very good platform, social media, I mean. For showing my activities. I know (I have a virtual contact with professors, researchers in other countries) most of them, before answering me, they check in social media who I am, what is my research interest. Then, OK … This is his CV, it is good or not. This, I think, shows my professional identity in terms of research. For other parts of my professional life, identities – there is the platform of my university, that shows me, shows my CV, my publications, my activities – for sure, in my national language (MB)*
Flowing showed the choices in the process, then scholar started continuously participating in social media activities, had fun and the same time update and re-new scholar knowledge. This led to Self-regulated-learning:

In social media, you can find virtual groups. And in these groups people share and learn from each other. And yes, I also do – share and learn! For example, you can find ZB (a contemporary philosopher) everywhere, also on Facebook. His articles, and the reviews of articles. People discuss his ideas. There are too many pages about this... So interesting! It catches me. I am interested. Yes, yes, I read this, also comment (CL)

By contrast, Hiding showed people’s reluctance to engage in social media activities and unwillingness to provide virtual information in his or her professional profile. In many cases these people explained having not enough time or psychological strength to show professional information and self-present online:

<…> I have an account in social media. I could even speak “with them”, but what? I cannot post my photo. Because I think, what? People are not interested in me or what I do. <…> This is my opinion about social media. But I think that social media is our life. I have in Facebook my life and I must remind to myself to not be. I respect social media. But I am not able to participate. I have no intimacy with social media. My social construction was on this side. Not show (myself)... The social media is "a sort of show" – iconic show. But for me it is a sort of problem (GR)

The Hiding subcategory had the Disassociating and Ignoring dimensions. Disassociating pointed to a research participant’s need to disassociate professional and personal life. Such people separated their social media accounts for personal and professional usage. Some of them created and managed organizational social media accounts.

I’m not active. I know that other scholars continuously show themselves and their research activities. I don’t know why they do this. My personal and professional social media accounts are separated. I check my professional account only at work and my home account only at home (AV)

The Ignoring dimension stands for those people who have experience in social media but use it less and less.

I do not need to introduce myself. I do not want to show myself online. Once, I was forced to sign up for ResearchGate. Now someone sent me a message and asked for my article. I do not like that. Where did that person got my personal data? Someone will evaluate my two articles. But nobody knows that I have not uploaded five articles yet. How did they see me? Perhaps I am not seen the way I want (RP)

Two directions of identity construction were revealed. One direction of Glocalizing identities was constructed from the subcategory Accepting with Flowing and Learning dimensions. Another direction was constructed from the subcategory Hiding with dimensions of Disassociating and Ignoring. Although university contexts were different, no significant differences were found between research participants from Lithuania and Italy.

4 Discussion

The core category Glocalizing identities was related to the identity construction regarding self-regulation and self-regulated learning, and to the self and the personal autonomy (Oyserman et al., 2017). This metaphor reflected the goal of research participants (university professors and scholars)
who seek to build professional identity in a constantly changing and challenging world of social media. For Robertson (1995, p. 28) the Glocalization is “telescoping global and local to make a blend” in micro-marketing context. The grounded theory allowed authors of this study to freely interpret metaphors used in other contexts. The authors themselves were part of this study: they work in academia, are members of academic communities of observed countries. The grounded theory provided to authors of this study the analytical tools, methodological strategies and allowed them to openly observe and perceive the subjective realities of research participants. Such realities would be limited in scope if a quantitative study would be carried out. To understand research participants and their living worlds, interactive communication, constant reflection and rethinking of personal experiences was a necessity.

Findings revealed that self-regulated learning in social media was important to university professors and researchers as autonomous learners and to their professional identity construction. This was related to research participants’ autonomy as self-regulated learning and autonomy emphasize learner control and metacognition. Results of our research showed that university professors and researchers applied social media for information sharing outside of the classroom and, more often, for teaching within the class and personal self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning was related to decision-making regarding publishing the specific content in social media, consolidating the personal scientific reputation and increasing the personal popularity. Such learners are open to new experiences and willing to learn from it as they accept the changes in their variety of identities (Nagy & Koles, 2014).

Therefore, some research participants feel unsafe to be a part of the network (no matter what kind of), because they were not sure somebody could share their texts or information about them. These participants choose reticence which leads to ignoring social media. Such skepticism regarding social media revealed person’s defensive attitudes and the aversion to new experiential learning, which is an important part of constructing the identities in social media (Oyserman et al., 2017). These research participants assumed that their professional identity was already formed, and their professional competences were sufficient. Expertise-based scientific power was an essential component, whose external factors, including social media, had or should not have effect or influence on identity change. Such a provision reflects the desire to maintain the constant scientific power in their hands, and thus the reticence to continuous learning using state-of-the-art technologies and social media (Stets & Burke, 2000). Such attitude was close to the “traditional” academic culture, which is based on university laws, rules and regulations. In the social media with the disappearance of professional roles it is difficult to maintain hierarchical academic structures. Then for our research participants it was not easy to be open to autonomous self-regulated learning possibilities, which are provided in social media regarding identity construction (Rambe, 2013).

5 Conclusions and Limitations

Glocalizing identities revealed the process of how the Lithuanian and Italian university professors and researchers construct their identities in social media. Two directions of glocalization were contrasting with each other. Accepting with Flowing-Learning of a scholar using social media showed how adult persons construct their professional identities regarding self-regulated learning and autonomy. The Hiding with Disassociating-Ignoring explained the identity of a university professor and researcher who was skeptical about social media and relied on assumption that his or her identity is constant, and the expertise-based power is under development of personal activity and application of intellectual skills. Additional research is needed to understand what influences these misgivings.

The data were taken from participants from two countries, but they were not compared. Data was analyzed on a one-by-one basis. Such an analytical solution allowed the disclosure of dimensions, but
comparisons could reveal the moments of university cultures, which may also be important in further research on constructing professional identities in social media.

Acknowledgments. This research was funded by the European Social Fund according to the activity ‘Development of Competences of Scientists, other Researchers and Students through Practical Research Activities’ of Measure No. 09.3.3-LMT-K-712.

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