

# Understandings of Identity in the LIS Literature: A Conceptual Analysis (Poster)

**Abstract:** This study uses a conceptual analysis approach to explore how identity has been conceptualized by Library and Information Science (LIS) researchers. Understanding how identity has been conceptualized will illuminate the connections between people's personal and social identities and their information practices and suggest future areas for LIS research.

## 1. Introduction

This study contributes to the information practice research by illuminating how Library and Information Science (LIS) researchers have explored the connection between people's personal and social identities and their information practices. Despite current cultural preoccupations with issues concerning identity, such as identity politics, little is known about the interaction between identity, both personal and social, and information practices; however, as Cox (2013) argues, there is a connection between information practices and identity for "our identities are negotiated in relation to practices" (p. 67). In other words, our information practices can inform who we are and our understandings of ourselves can inform our information practices. The study of identity in relation to information practices is important because identity provides a way to explore individuals' and groups' understanding, assumptions and implicit theories of information and how this relates to their information practices (Talja, Keso, & Pietiläinen, 1999).

In the LIS literature, there is some examination of how identity has influenced LIS research. Bates (2010), in a history of information behavior research, highlighted the connection between the emergence of social identity as a focus of societal interest in the 1960s and 1970s and a shift in information behavior research towards studying specific population groups. Although the influence of social identity on information behaviour was not the focus of these studies, social identity acted as a way to identify target populations. Other scholars have argued in favor of particular approaches to information research and their ability to illuminate the connections between identity and information practices (Cox, 2012; 2013). However, there have been no comprehensive studies of identity in LIS research to date. Understanding how LIS researchers have conceptualized identity will not only illuminate the connections between people's personal and social identities and their information practices, but it will also suggest areas for future research. Therefore, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How have researchers conceptualized identity in LIS research?

RQ2: In what ways have LIS researchers characterized the effect of identity on people's information practices?

## **2. Methodology**

This study uses a conceptual analysis approach originally described by Furner (2004). The intent of this approach is to define the meaning of a given concept by “identifying and specifying the *conditions* under which any entity or phenomenon is (or could be) classified under the concept in question” (Furner, 2004, p. 233, emphasis in original). This approach holds two main assumptions. First, that researchers using the concept can agree about the use of a concept. Second, that exploring these agreements can lead to the development of useful or interesting knowledge about the field. In other words, the goal of a conceptual analysis is to clarify how a particular concept is used by researchers and to suggest productive lines of work for future research.

For this ongoing study, data was collected by searching LISA: Library and Information Science Abstract, LISTA: Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts, and LISS: Library & Information Science Source using the keywords identity, selfhood, information behaviour, and information practices. Studies were included in the data set if concepts of personal or social identity were explicitly used to frame the context of the study, as a theoretical construct, or if identity was part of the findings, discussion, or both. Following Savolainen (2009, 2014, 2015), data analysis will consist of a close reading of all studies included in the data set. Passages that describe identity will be read several times to identify how identity has been characterized or defined. These passages will be subject to open coding to identify the main conceptual categories, such as personal identity, social identity, or selfhood. Coding will allow the various characterizations and definitions of identity present in the data to be compared and contrasted with each other. Lastly, the connection between the conceptualizations of identity and information practices will be explored.

## **3. Concluding Thoughts**

The study of identity provides a way for LIS researchers to examine the meanings and values that people attach to their information practices. Through its examination, attention can be brought to how people use information to shape their identities and in turn how their identities shape their interactions with information. Past studies have used conceptual analysis to explore core concepts and theoretical frameworks in LIS (Budd, 2005; Savolainen, 2009; Talja, Tuominen, and Savolainen, 2005). By extending this methodological approach to the identity, an emerging area of study in the field, this study will illuminate areas for future study.

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