

The Social Identity Approach and Communication and Media Research

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to summarize and sort out existing research and to better understand the historical review, present research, and current trends of the theory of social identity and self-categorization. The main objectives are to discuss the core value of the approach in detail, and to highlight the application of communication and media research; to look for emerging trends and gaps in the literature by comparing strength with weakness.

Keywords: Social identity Approach; Media studies

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1. Introduction

Youngsters watch viral videos, while the old generation tune in for 'Yesterday Once More'. Forty-something women watch soap opera at 8pm, whereas men go crazy for sports. South Koreans, Mexicans and Germans share one thing in common that they have more preference toward home-made television content over international television programme (Waisbord, 2004). All examples mentioned above obviously indicate that consumers choose media consumption based on the social groups they belong to. Particularly, individuals prefer content that distinguish them from 'out-group' while accentuating similarities of their 'in-group' people. The sharp line between 'in-group' and 'out-group' accounts for the explanation of social identity, serving as a profound reference to one's daily lives; it directs how one should behave, evaluate personal worth, make predictions how one will be treated in the society (Hogg, 2018). The significance of affirming individuals' social identity as one certain group member is ubiquitous.

The social identity approach which incorporates social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT) is the most predominant theory articulating the social psychology of group processes, promoting further understanding in intergroup relations (Hornsey, 2008). Late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a heated academic debate about the psychology of intergroup relations. The approach which was introduced by Tajfel and further developed by Turner became known as social identity theory and self-categorization theory was born in the era.

The emergence of the approach has provided a valuable insight to social psychology field where the large body of the literature addressed, while communication and media studies, consumer studies, and education studies have also made huge contributions. The purpose of this essay is to sort out the literature of this approach, presenting a historical review, processes and current trends. Particularly, the core value of the approach is discussed. The application to media and communication research is outlined. In addition, the strength and imitation is elaborated.

2. Social Identity Theory: Principles and Main Concepts

The social identity theory, a theory grounded on group process and intergroup behaviour, arguing a person's self-concept is developed and enhanced by categorizing oneself into different social groups (Terry et al, 1999). According to social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979), a person's self concept of who they are derived from the group

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membership. In other words, one categorize himself/herself as belonging to various groups relied on the notion that they consider to be part of the group(in-groups) and groups(out-groups) they do not belong to. The membership, with positive value and recognition on it, is stated as the social identity. People have the desire to develop positive social identity in order to strengthen their self-esteem(Johnson, 2010).

The key principle of the social identity is formed through identifying oneself as in-group members while comparing with out-group. Accordingly, a distinction is maintained in which individuals feel belonged to and those to which they are not involved with. Thus, the group they identify with is 'us' in contrast with 'them', the group they do not identify with (Trepte and Loy, 2017). Moreover, the distinctiveness between 'us' and 'them' is not only the indicator, the desire and impulse of favoring in-group over out-group in judgments is reinforced. The minimal group paradigm shows individuals tend to favor assigned in-group over the out-group even without any interaction and allocate more resources to the same group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Three psychological processes are chronologically included in social identity theory(ibid). To begin with, social categorization, as the first and foremost step, in distinguishing one person between different groups, in this sense, the 'us' and 'them'.The accentuation effect in the process of categorization became salient, that is, individuals tend to strengthen the similarity between stimuli in the same category and the difference between stimuli in different category(ibid). To put it simply, one tend to exaggerate the differences with out-group and the similarities with the same group. An experiment conducted by Tajfel in 1963 suggests that when subjects were asked to judge the length from a changing set of four lines labeled A and four long lines labeled B, they tend to exaggerate the difference between A and B. Hogg& Abrams(1988) claimed that accentuation principle is the basic principle of social categorization, for social categories are highlighted and emphasized.

Second, once individuals categorize, they compare. Through social comparison, people make direct evaluation between in-groups and out-groups(Hinkle and Brown, 1990). The exaggeration of the differences in certain dimensions is significant while more positive comments to members within in-groups emerge. In this way, asymmetrical group evaluations and behaviors are generated and biased comparison emotion is reinforced.

Third, social comparison leads to positive distinctiveness. People are perceived as positive if the in-group is evaluated to be performing more positively than the out-group (Trepte and Loy, 2017). The motivation of evaluating better push individuals to perform better than other members in the relevant dimension of group comparison. Social identity theory purports that individuals are excessively keen on their own group and strive for positive self-concept, to a large extent, result in inter-group prejudice, conflicts and hostility.

3. Self-categorization Theory: Principles and Effects

Turner as the most prominent students of Tajfel strives to develop the cognitive element of the social identity theory after his teachers' death in 1982(Hornsey, 2008). He inherited most of the concepts and assumptions from social identity theory, but he shifted the intergroup focus to intragroup processes. Then he published his interpretation in the book *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory* (Turner et al., 1987). He contended the new theory as self-categorization theory (SCT). Most scholars acknowledged the similarities between the two theories, referring to the'social identity perspective'or the'social identity approach' to make reference to both SIT and SCT, but in recognition of the two traditions emphasize different propositions(Hornsey, 2008) .

Self-categorization theory which was defined by Turner was directly developed on the basis of social identity theory, shifting the cognitive element of intergroup process to intragroup process (Mastro et al). It proposed individuals classify themselves and others based on beliefs, behaviour, attitudes and other characteristics. The result of the self-categorization process is individuals are more similar to other members of the in-group and different from the out-group (Hornsey,2008). They perform in a way that are consistent with the categorization, accentuating the

similarities or differences (Treppe and Loy, 2017). In short, self-categorization is a cognitive process of transforming individuals into groups.

In self-categorization theory, Turner reconsidered the fundamental process of social identity theory: social categorization. It is argued that in the process of social categorization, the basic cognitive premise is self-categorization (Hoffner and Rehkoff, 2011). The result of this is one person is more similar to other members of the in-group and different from members of the out-group. Consequently, one perceives himself/herself as collections of people. Accordingly, he/she behaves in ways that are consistent with categorization. In short, self-categorization is the process of perceiving individuals into group terms (ibid).

Self-categorization process leads to a series of effects (Hornsey, 2008). The first and foremost is it affects one's self-definition. One is more willing to define himself/herself as a member of one group. Secondly, it affects how people see themselves. They tend to feel more like a member of a group. In addition, it makes a big difference to people's behaviors and they are more likely to act like a member of a group, such as imitating the way they dress, learning to talk like their group members or performing the same lifestyles of their group members.

The cornerstone of the cognitive process of self-categorization theory is depersonalization. Hornsey (2008:208) explains 'When a category becomes salient, people come to see themselves and other category members less as individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype'. Collective behaviors and cohesiveness is formalized when the process of depersonalization is triggered. One thing to note is depersonalization is not rigid, instead, it varies depending on different contexts and the dynamics. Depersonalization comprises two prerequisites: the formation of in-group and self-categorization. The salience and perception of a certain social identity occurs, individuals might magnify their similarities with other group members. The depersonalization of self-perception activates. Turner (1984:528) claimed this process 'the cognitive redefinition of the self'. That is to say the self-concept is cognitively redefined based on the needs of certain in-group, and this process leads to collective behaviour.

4. How Social Identity Approach has Shed Light on Communication and Media Research

In Communication and Media studies, the attempts to examine the group identification, membership and group comparison were rare before 1969, for scholars were more interested in discussing personal identity (Blumler, 1979; Von Feilitzen, 1976). Since the 1980s and 1990s, media has gradually permeated into every aspect of daily life and media has become a central force of group identification. Scholars have noticed the trend that listening to the same music, browsing the same web page and watching the same television shows created the shared membership and group preference, consequently, the emergence of social identity approach was applied to understand and shed light on communication and media studies (Harwood and Roy, 2005). Academic investigation on this subject flourished from that time onwards.

Social identity approach can help us to understand a wide array of communication and media studies phenomena. Sorting out the literature, the very common ground can be summarized as the following aspects. First, among the bulk of studies applying SCT and SIT in communication and media researches, studies focus vary from diverse social categories, behaviors, media uses (e.g., TV, radio, newspaper, web page and social network) to various media content. In addition, among the differing concepts and principles of social identity approach, group identification, self-categorization, depersonalization, in-group favoritism and self-esteem is the most frequent application and explanation to communication and media researches. Moreover, the majority of research were conducted in the United States (Mastro, 2010; Appiah and Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Kim and Kim, 2019;) and studies from other countries were also conducted, such as studies investigated in Israel (Shuv-Ami and Toder-Alon, 2020), in France (Zeugner-Roth et al, 2015) and in China (Yan, 2016). Most empirical research utilize an experimental approach to illuminate explanations on selective exposure to certain media content or media effects. In explanation,

social identity theory is referred more frequently than self-categorization theory. In the following part, some empirical research based on SIT and SCT in communication and media studies are to illustrate.

A large body of study set the vision on the effects of media exposure. For instance, based on social identity theory, Mastro(2003) examined the association between television exposure and social judgments. The study intended to evaluate White people's judgments of self and Latinos on exposure to criminality stereotypes of each race. The findings were consistent with the assumptions that social judgments were largely influenced by exposure to negative stereotypical media content. Similarly, Harwood and Roy (2005) argued that media exposure and selection of messages contributes to group identification, proactively promoting identity support. Group identity formalization rather than national identity was the consequence of increasingly growth of media exposure. Mastro et al (2005) used self-categorization-based processes to propose the social attractiveness of both ingroup and outgroup members was more likely to be increased with the exposure to the embodiment of the ingroup prototype . Specifically, participants' liking to a media celebrity was linked with the perception of his or her ingroup prototypicality which was activated by media exposure. This result was corresponding with Coover's (2001) work on media exposure and subsequent social judgments. Besides, two experimental design was conducted by Mckinley et al (2014) also indicated the same assumption. By showing videos of popular Latino musical celebrities, Latino consumers (in-group) are expected to evaluate their own group favorably. The results were consistent with the expectation that positive media portrayals of Latinos indeed enhanced Latino consumers(in-group) better evaluations. Positive self and self-esteem was the result of exposing to positive depictions of Latinos. Appiah and Knobloch-Westerwick (2013) were also interested in investigating whether Black or White readers' selection of media were the result of exposure to attributes and the race of character.

Another big proportion of communication and media research in application of social identity approach show their research interests on media effects. Rivenburgh (2000) used the social identity theory to explain three international news coverage. The results suggested that the national self was reflected favorably in all three newspapers. Reid (2012) applied a self-categorization theory to explain for the hostile media effect. The study addressed the HME in three experiments. The first experiment hypothesized that when certain identities were salient, the media effect would increase. The second experiment hypothesized that the strong partisanship of the participants , the more ingroup sourced information would be assimilated. The third experiment hypothesized that outgroup sourced attacks would be perceived as more biased than ingroup sourced attacks , and partisanship would be a factor of the extent of this effect. The results were consistent with the hypotheses and self-categorization offered an explanation. Similarly, Hartmann and Tanis (2013) argued the intergroup phenomenon has strong influence on HME. The study further provided complementary evidence to the past studies on HME (such as Dalton et al., 1998; Duck et al, 1998; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Matheson & Dursun, 2001). In addition to interest on HEM, the renewed attention associated with the theory have made progress in understanding the effect of social network media which was considered to be the a research gap before 2010. Chung et al (2012) contributed to understanding the motivational basis of Social Network Sites that influence information sharing. The results indicated that involvement in SNSs become the huge proportional effect on continuance motivation. Kim and Kim (2019) intensively study the effects of social media as communicational tools for college students, and promote understanding on group identity and collective self-esteem. The results concluded the higher level of group identity and collective self-esteem was highly contributed by frequent use of social media. This is especially true for students who have the high frequency of using social media to talk about sports were more likely to communicate with different people. Non-White students vis-a-vis White students tend to be enhanced with their college-group identity.

5. Social Identity Approach: Strengths ,Weaknesses and Current Trends

There are many reasons why social identity approach enjoyed its broad influence and was constantly applied

to empirical research in different disciplines. In the first place, it proved to be influential in understanding and presenting a new perspective on human behaviour. Take stereotyping as an example, self-categorization proponents argued that stereotyping will be in constant changes depending on the reference frame effect or comparative context instead of staying as fixed and rigid representations (Hornsey,2008). Moreover, it emphasized on the significant role of membership in intergroup behaviors. One person is blessed with membership, with positive value and recognition, after cognitively categorizing himself/herself as one group member. It was argued by social identity theorist, acquiring the membership is beneficial to people's mental satisfaction, even in the case of a temporary and nonofficial membership (Maggio,2020). For example, meeting someone from your hometown or place of birth will endow a connection or bond with a stranger simply because you categorize that person as your group member while surrounded by people who are not members of that group(ibid). Another strength of social identity approach is it expanded the intergroup relations and explained intergroup conflict in situations where there is no need for competition. Before Tajfel and Turner came up with SIT, social psychologists Caroline and Muzaffir Sharif had studied group interactions where they invented the theory of realistic conflict (kdkasi,2019). The theory of realistic conflict claims that the hostility between groups is generated by the conflict of goals and competition for limited resources. It also explains the prejudice and discrimination against out-groups. So SIT was developed later to explain intergroup conflict in situations where there is no need for competition and it was supported by hundreds of empirical studies.

While social identity approach have significant strengths and offer unprecedented accessibility to understanding various phenomena, there are weaknesses inherent in the application of the theory that criticism toward it fall into three aspects. The first criticism is most research applied the theory can describe or explain but fails to make prediction on human behaviour. The gap between the explanation and prediction is a major issue to be critiqued. Korte (2017:171-172) argued 'social identity theory makes coherent but dubious explanations of past individual behavior in social settings from which it is difficult to predict future behavior'. Numerous studies using social identity approach to explain various phenomena, but rarely few studies accurately predict future behavior. In addition, some scholars have argued that the complex relationship between high self-esteem and in-group bias was overlooked. For instance, Luhtanen and Crocker(1992) has proposed that in addition to personal self-esteem, social identity and group boundaries were moderated as collective self-esteem played an indispensable role. Social identity approach could only shed light on the personal self-esteem, while it ignores the fact that real situations are far more complex. Generally speaking, the experiment is held in a lab instead of a natural environment, it is hard to take every variable into consideration. Some other criticisms are the broadness of the theory make it fail to be falsifiable, for any experimental outcome can be easily interpreted within its theoretical framework (Hogg and Williams, 2000).

From the foreign and domestic scholars' research on social identity, it can be seen that the scope of applied social identity theory is gradually increasing, and the current research at present has the following characteristics. At first, scholars applied this approach to explain the hot issues. For example, (Lau et al, 2020) applied the social identity theory of leadership to evaluate the effect of social identities of the 2016 US Presidential Election. Additionally, scholars integrated social identity theory with other disciplines. For instance, some scholars proposed the defects of the social identity theory in terms of emotion, believing that the process of emotion and social identity is synchronous, and the social identity theory needs to be supplemented in this part. Furthermore, one research gap in the application of the approach is SCT and SIT are not considered as a whole(Trepte and Loy, 2017). Most scholars studied one singular process in isolation, even though the two theories inherently shared many similarities.

6. Conclusion

There are several trends in social identity theory that needed to be further studied. First, the further development of the concept of social identity approach should be extended. Then comparison strategy should be explained.

Additionally, research on social identity in multicultural context deserve to be expanded. Early research on social identity approach mainly explained group prejudice and conflict, while rare study has focused on eliminating bias and conflict using this approach. The future studies on this area will be tempting and hold many challenges as well.

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