

Social media and constructing the digital identity of organizations: A bibliometric analysis

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The study aimed to map the stock of knowledge on organizational identity in a digital environment.

Research Design & Methods: We systematically reviewed the literature to map the current research landscape and identify gaps that need to be addressed to better understand how organizational identity is constructed in a digital environment. We used a bibliometric visual analysis to provide a comprehensive overview of the field. We ran a co-occurrence of words analysis to identify central and peripheral themes.

Findings: Organizational identity and digital organizational identity seem to be topics detached from mainstream research. Most of the literature has adopted the individual level of analysis and left other levels of analysis unattended, including the organizational level in particular. We see this gap as a major theoretical and empirical vacuum in the existing literature.

Implications & Recommendations: We identified a research gap regarding the lack of research on the construction of organizational identity in the digital environment at various levels of analysis. We also found that scholars did not devote attention to the micro level of analysis, i.e. individual interactions such as posts, tweets, etc. although it may be instrumental to the construction of an organization's digital identity.

Contribution & Value Added: The article contributes to research on organizational identity shaped in the digital world, especially from the perspective of social media. We show gaps in existing approaches and levels of analysis.

Article type: research article

Keywords: communication; digital communication; digital identity; social media; organizational identity

JEL codes: M15, M14, M19

Received: 31 March 2023

Revised: 24 April 2023

Accepted: 7 August 2023

Suggested citation:

Czakon, W., Jedynak, M., Kuźniarska, A., & Mania K. (2023). Social media and constructing the digital identity of organizations: A bibliometric analysis. *Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review*, 11(4), 43-56. <https://doi.org/10.15678/EBER.2023.110403>

INTRODUCTION

Firms' behaviour and conduct closely intertwine with constructs that capture the collective, distinctive, and enduring features of a given organization (Albert *et al.*, 1985). Organizational identity plays an important role as it is key to elucidating the interactions between the organization and its environment (He & Brown, 2013). The lens of interaction helped scholars develop a stakeholders perspective (Scott, Lane, 2000) in order to better understand how various constituencies construct identity and what are the ramifications of organizational identity for organizational actors (Ravasi & Canato, 2013).

In our study, we followed the fundamental assumption of the social constructionist perspective, which regards organizational identity as emerging from interactions defining the organization's essence (He & Brown, 2013). By doing so, we aimed to address the role of digitalized ways of interacting and the resulting digital impact on organizational identity. Indeed, organizational identity unfolds over time along with the processes of its construction (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). Therefore, focusing on the processes that lead to organizational identity rather than their outcome alone is useful (Ravasi *et*

al., 2019). Organizational identity reconstruction refers to the process of ‘articulating a new conceptualization of the organization that is understood and accepted by its members’ (Kjaergaard *et al.*, 2011). We expanded the scope of the original reconstruction definition from ‘organization’s members’ to stakeholders, consistently with the social constructivist approach adopted in our study.

The study aimed to map the stock of knowledge on organizational identity in a digital environment. It focused on social media as a widely used platform for various interactions between individuals, and between individuals and organizations. We systematically reviewed the literature to map the current research landscape and identify gaps that need to be addressed to better understand how organizational identity is constructed in the digital environment. We also provided visual presentations of key themes and outlined promising avenues for future research. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first systematic literature review focused on digital identity and social media.

The structure of the article includes an introduction followed by a literature review presenting the current state of knowledge in the analysed field of organizational identity in the digital environment. In the next part, we will describe the method selected to perform the study. Part of the results and discussion focused will focus on the presentation and contextualization of the research results. The article will close with conclusions and research recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The organizational identity construct appeared in the 1980s and consisted in identifying an organization’s distinctive elements (Albert *et al.*, 1985). Subsequently, researchers focused on examining related constructs, such as organizational image, culture, or reputation (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). This interest sparked the emergence of several more focused concepts such as corporate identity (Balmer, 1998), organizational personality (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998), organizational communication (Balmer & Gray, 2000), organization image (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997), corporate reputation (Turban *et al.*, 1998), or visual identity (Baker & Balmer, 1997). Starting from the 1990s, the prevailing way of looking at organizational identity became interdisciplinary and combined methods found in management, marketing, and psychology (Abratt, 1989; Barich & Kotler, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Thøger Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). With the accumulation of empirical evidence and theoretical advances, the concept definition evolved further. Initially (1980s and 1990s), the relationships and dependencies within the organization were crucial (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Next, scholars defined a set of characteristics that make up the identity in relation to the values and principles with which the organization’s members identify. Moreover, scholars also defined organizational identity as a phenomenon involving dependencies occurring only among an organization’s members, distinguishing it from the concept of the image focused on external constituencies (Davies *et al.*, 2001). In turn, other definitions emphasize the role and importance of external stakeholders in the process of identity formation (Gioia *et al.*, 2000; Markwick & Fill, 1997). Another approach considered the relationship of organizational identity with communication, reputation and image, which in turn resulted in the creation of the so-called organizational identity mix (Balmer, 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2000; Balmer & Soenen, 1998).

Scholars developed a shared understanding of the key importance of several areas for the creation and relevance of organizational identity. These include organizational culture, strategy, structure, communication, history, type of business, and market area in which the organization operates (Abratt, 1989; Balmer, 1998, 2001; Balmer & Soenen, 1999; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). Founders and leaders shape an organization’s identity with their actions (Balmer, 2008) and through organizational attributes such as core values (Balmer & Soenen, 1998), production methods, products and services, and brand (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Suvatjis & de Chernatony, 2005). Elements of visual identification are also an important component. These include name, logo, or company colours (Melewar, 2003; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; Melewar & Karaosmanoglu, 2006; Suvatjis & de Chernatony, 2005), as well as mission, vision, image, and behaviour (Robertson & Arachchige, 2015). Figure 1 shows the organizational identity components.

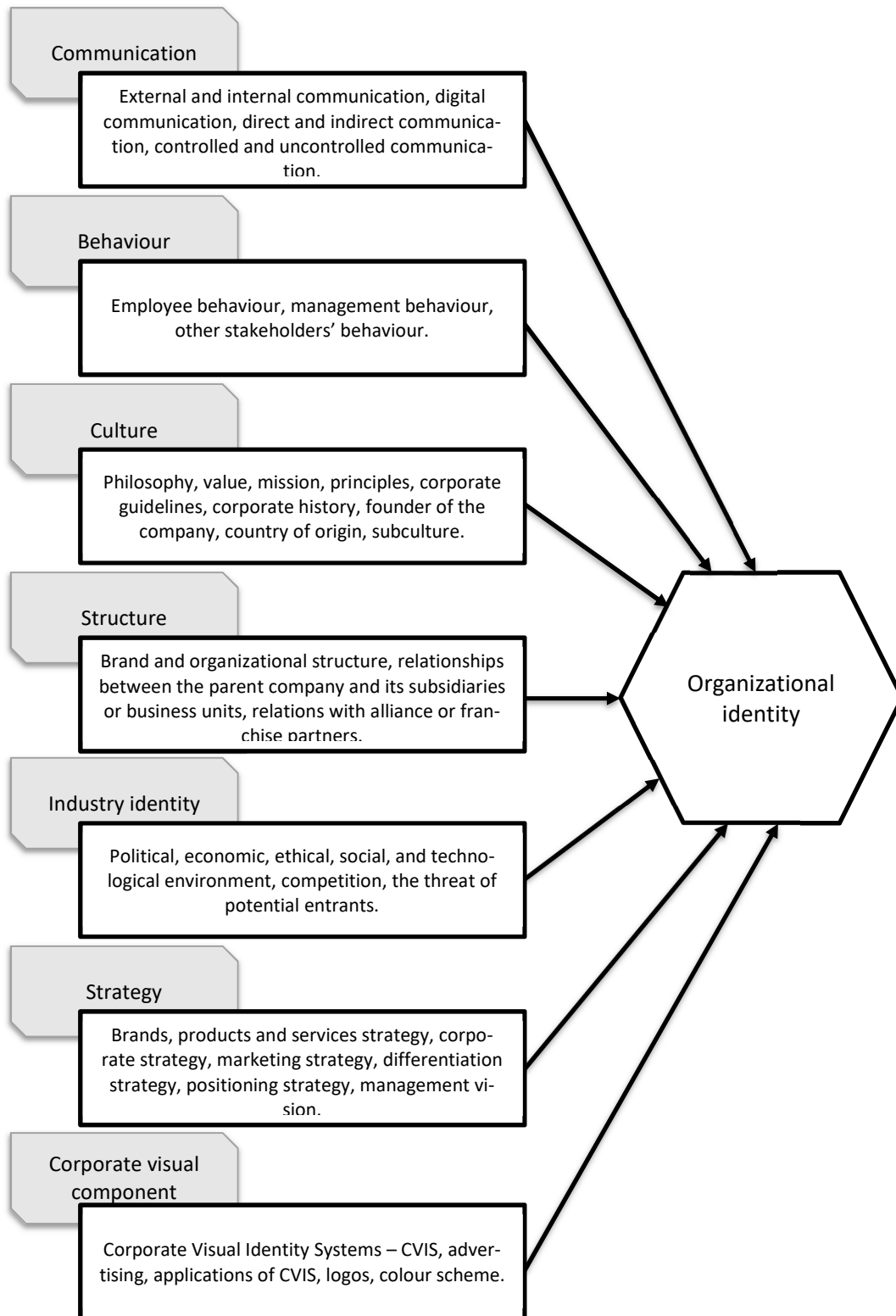


Figure 1. Components and dimensions of organizational identity

Source: own elaboration based on Balmer (2002); Bozkurt and Keefer (2018); Bozkurt and Tu (2016); Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, and Corley (2013).

One of the main components of an organization’s identity is communication (Aust, 2004), which consists of primary communication related to products/services and the organization’s behaviour, secondary communication involving the activities initiated by the organization to connect with stakehold-

ers, and of third-order communication, which includes messages about the organization sent by other external stakeholders (Balmer, 2001). While organizations can partly control primary and secondary communication, third-order communication is beyond their control. Communication also plays a vital role in creating organizations' identity as they use it to create a clear and coherent image consistently communicated to stakeholders through symbolism, planned dialogue, and behaviour (Cornelissen & Elving, 2003). The influence of digital media on an organization's communication with stakeholders is growing significantly (Andersson & Wikström, 2017). Thus, digital communication plays a significant role in shaping an organization's identity within the digital environment (Napal Fraile *et al.*, 2018).

Digital communication has given a new dimension to communication processes and highlighted the importance of interactive platforms for creating online images (Devereux *et al.*, 2017). Apart from being a source of information, social platforms have become an area of promotion, commerce, image building, branding, and community building by implementing strategies to engage all stakeholders (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011). Thus, digital organizational identity is inherently connected with technology and the opportunities it offers (Fieseler *et al.*, 2015). Digital communication platforms allow organizations to shape their digital identity using new channels, among which social media play a dominant role (Dawson, 2018; Gündüz, 2017). Social media is typically associated with the digital technologies that allow users to generate content and interact, but a more precise definition views social media as 'Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content' (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

Initially, scholars saw digital organizational identity as a distinctive genuineness in a digitalized environment (Ellison *et al.*, 2012). However, scholars increasingly recognize that digital transformation is substantially more than transferring practices from analogue to digital technology (Jedynak *et al.*, 2021). Instead, it leads to a socio-economic change that is distinct from prior ways of structuring and operating organizations at multiple levels of analysis (Dąbrowska *et al.*, 2022). For instance, at group level digital, scholars define identity as 'collective self-concept(s) of an in-group towards the creation, application, development, and emergence of digital technology built on a sense of community, enthusiasm, being part of something special and common values and norms' (Bouncken & Barwinski, 2019). Interestingly, research on the distinctive features of digital organizational identity has not yet provided a comprehensive definition of this construct. Therefore, scholars call for an in-depth scrutiny of this phenomenon (Dąbrowska *et al.*, 2022). In our study, we map extant literature to identify gaps that may offer promising avenues for further scrutiny.

Organizations may construct their digital identity on several levels through activities involving internal and external stakeholders, investors, or potential future employees (Belasen & Belasen, 2019). Therefore, the usage of social media by organizations must be diverse enough to address all its stakeholders. The organization's activities focused on organization's members build a sense of commitment and confirm the mission and values declared by the organization (Brezoiu, 2014). Actions aimed at acquiring new employees – conducted by HR – using digital organizational identity for recruitment processes are likely to substantially differ (Happonen *et al.*, 2022).

Another aspect is the construction of digital organizational identity through communication activities aimed at investors or potentially interested parties (Stoller, 2013). In each of these cases, online communication serves completely different purposes, although organizations use the same channels – social media – are used to achieve them (Çöteli, 2019). Therefore, when examining the digital organizational identity shaped by organizations in the digital environment, we should focus on micro-interactions on social media, which aggregated can lead to a better understanding of the macro-level phenomenon of digital organizational identity (Schroeder, 2016). In particular, such focus allows us to identify the differences in the ways organizations engage with stakeholders on social media (Devereux *et al.*, 2017; Wang & Yang, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An essential element of research advancement is the systematic analysis and presentation of existing research (Kumar, 2021). Systematic literature reviews are particularly suitable and established to

this end (Kraus *et al.*, 2020). Essentially, it serves as an auditable and rigorous presentation of the existing literature and allows us to identify relevant research gaps and thus to set out further research directions (Paul & Criado, 2020).

We complemented our systematic literature review with visualizations that allow for advanced meta-analyses and bibliometrics (Jadil *et al.*, 2021). Bibliometrics is an analytical approach to analysing related documents by topic or source to review a research domain (Nicholas & Ritchie, 1978). Visual results are useful to clearly show the relationships between various key features of articles, such as authors, dates, and keywords (Kumar *et al.*, 2022; Rousseau *et al.*, 2008).

Within the scope of a given theme, we based the analysis on the repository of scientific publications related to the role of communication in shaping the digital identity of organizations collected in the Scopus bibliographic database. While recent studies recommend the use of Scopus and/or Web of Science (Kraus *et al.*, 2020a), scholars often use one of them and adopt either WoS when a more selective approach is preferred (Kraus *et al.*, 2020b) or Scopus when a broader selection is needed as this database offers a way more comprehensive coverage (Bhimani *et al.*, 2019). The database is an organized digital collection of published scientific literature, including journal articles, conference proceedings, patents, books, etc. It contains subject descriptions in the form of keywords, authors, subject classification terms, and abstracts (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

We developed the database search keywords based on prior systematic literature reviews on digital transformation, which offer key themes addressed in the existing body of knowledge (Jedynak *et al.*, 2021; Jedynak *et al.*, 2022). For the Scopus search, the original query was:

(TITLE ('DIGITAL' OR 'VIRTUAL' OR 'ONLINE' OR 'SOCIAL MEDIA' OR 'INTERNET' OR 'ELECTRONIC' OR 'TECHNOLOGY' OR 'WEB BASED') AND TITLE ('IDENTITY') AND TITLE ('COMMUNICATION'))

The information for the documents that meet the requirements contained year of publication, language, journal, title, author, affiliation, keywords, document type, abstract, and counts of citations which we exported into CSV format. We retrieved the data on 12th January 2023.

By incorporating specific keywords and manually reviewing all abstracts, the research team created a database of 116 documents. This process aimed to exclude materials not centred on organizational identity as a core subject and those extending beyond the management studies realm. Figure 2 shows numbers for scientific books, book chapters, journal articles, and conference papers by year.

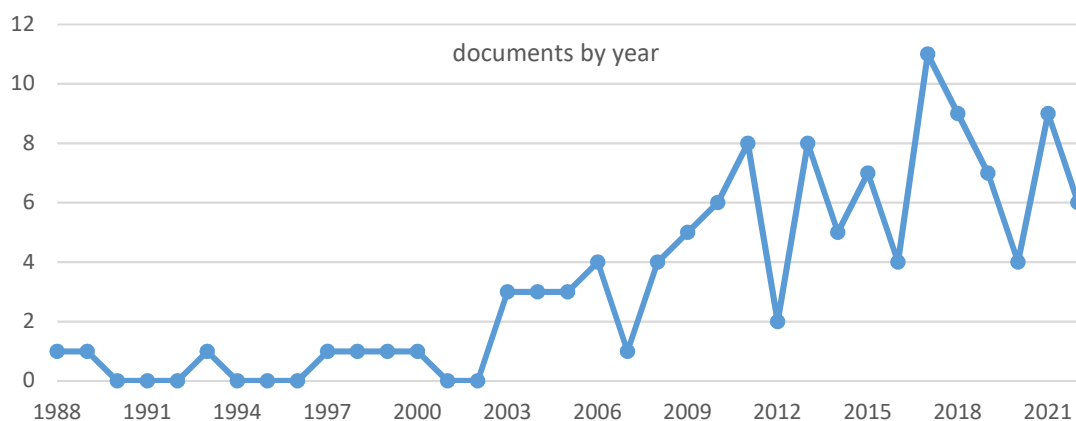


Figure 2. The number of publications in Scopus each year

Source: own elaboration in VOSviewer (version 1.6.18).

Because of the possibilities offered by bibliometric analyses, we opted for VOSviewer (version 1.6.18) (Baker *et al.*, 2020; Bu *et al.*, 2021; van Eck & Waltman, 2010; 2017). VOSviewer allows researchers to define the research gaps covered by published articles and indicate the directions of scientific development (Zema & Sulich, 2022). We opted for a co-occurrence analysis to identify the body

of knowledge related to organizational identity construction in the digital realm. We will present the results on bibliometric maps later in the article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the first stage of our research work, we selected a file in the VOSviewer program, which we prepared based on the queries conducted in the Scopus databases. Firstly, we determined a minimum number of one co-occurrence of keywords for each bibliometric map. We run our analysis on full data obtained from 587 keywords. Figure 3 shows a bibliometric map of co-occurrences of keywords. Figure 3 presents the bibliometric map of keyword co-occurrences with a minimum number of thresholds equaling one. The uniqueness of this map comes from the vast number of clusters and their combinations. Few clusters were interconnected, some of these were connected by a minimum of two keywords or were so far apart that the keywords did not strictly form clusters, as there was one keyword in the cluster defined by VOSviewer. Thanks to that, we could identify a research gap visible on the map as a field with no thematic connection in the area: digital identity-organizational identity-digital transformation. Results showed that substantial keywords are related to 'communication,' which occurred 190 times, and 'identity' which occurred 127 times. Other significant keywords included: 'social media' (77), 'information' (56), 'virtual reality' (50), and 'internet' (32).

In the next step, for a more complete analysis, we determined a minimum number of five co-occurrences of keywords for the bibliometric map. In the 587 keywords collection, only six exceeded the required threshold. In the next stage, we excluded another two unrelated words and removed duplicate keywords. Figure 4 presents the bibliometric map of keyword co-occurrences with a minimum number of thresholds equalling five. With this limitation, the digital theme disappeared completely.

In the last step, we verified the periods in which publications with searched keywords appeared. Figures 5 and 6 show this step. Figures 5 and 6 show which keywords have been introduced over time and which have only recently come into use. Years are represented by different colour ranges. Darker colours mark the older publications, while light colours represent the newest publications.

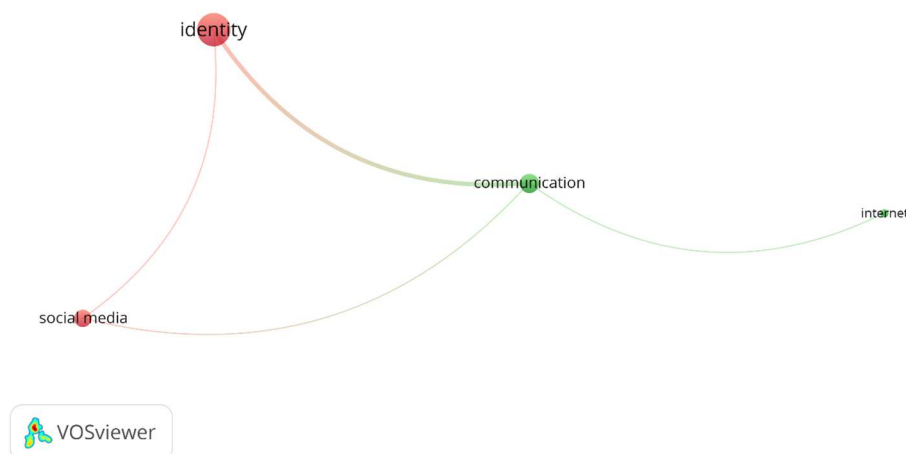


Figure 4. Bibliometric map of keywords in the overlay visualization context, co-occurrences (minimum 5) results

Source: own elaboration in VOSviewer (version 1.6.18).

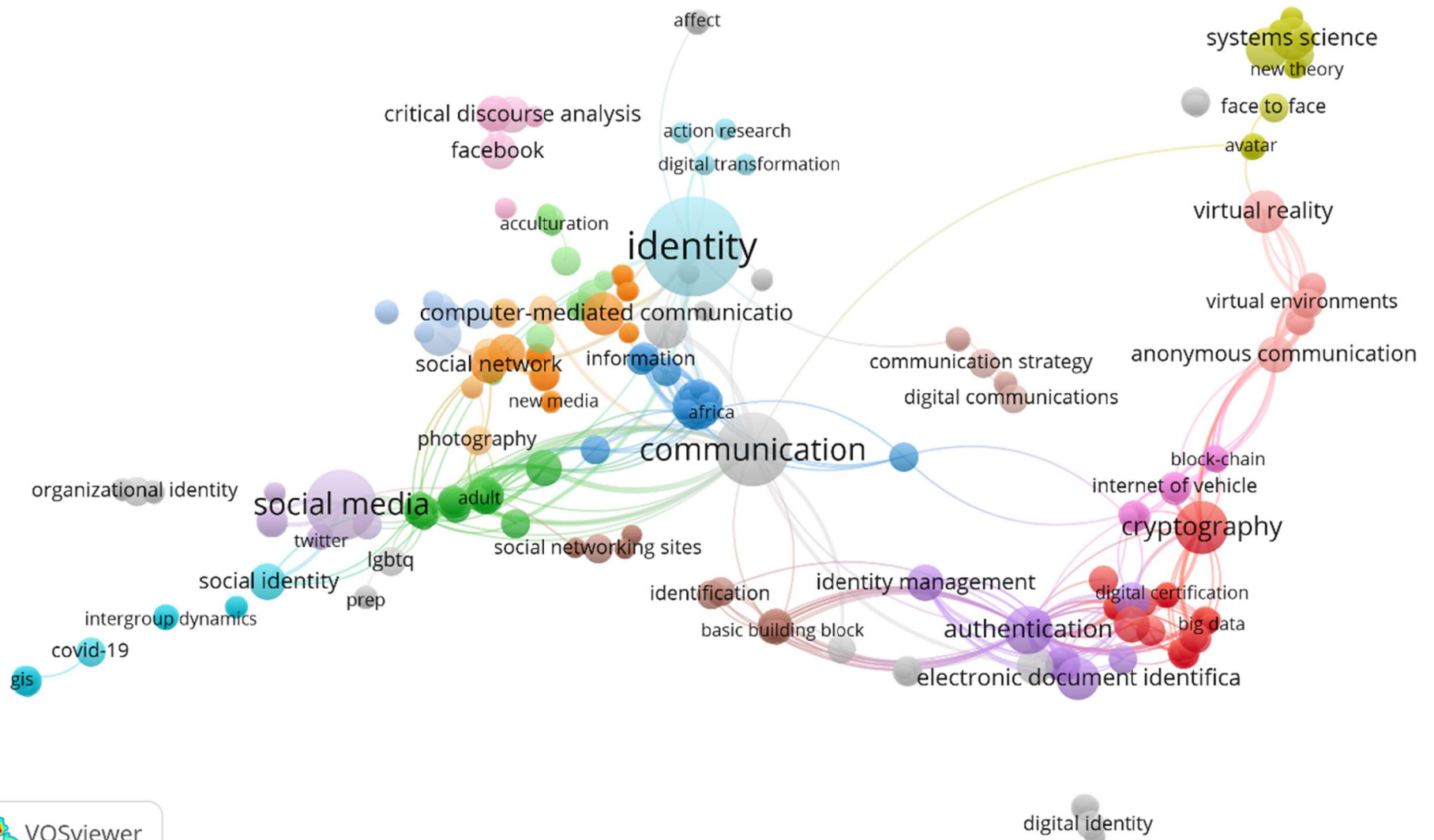


Figure 3. Bibliometric map of keywords in the overlay visualization context, co-occurrences (minimum 1) results

Source: own elaboration in VOSviewer (version 1.6.18).

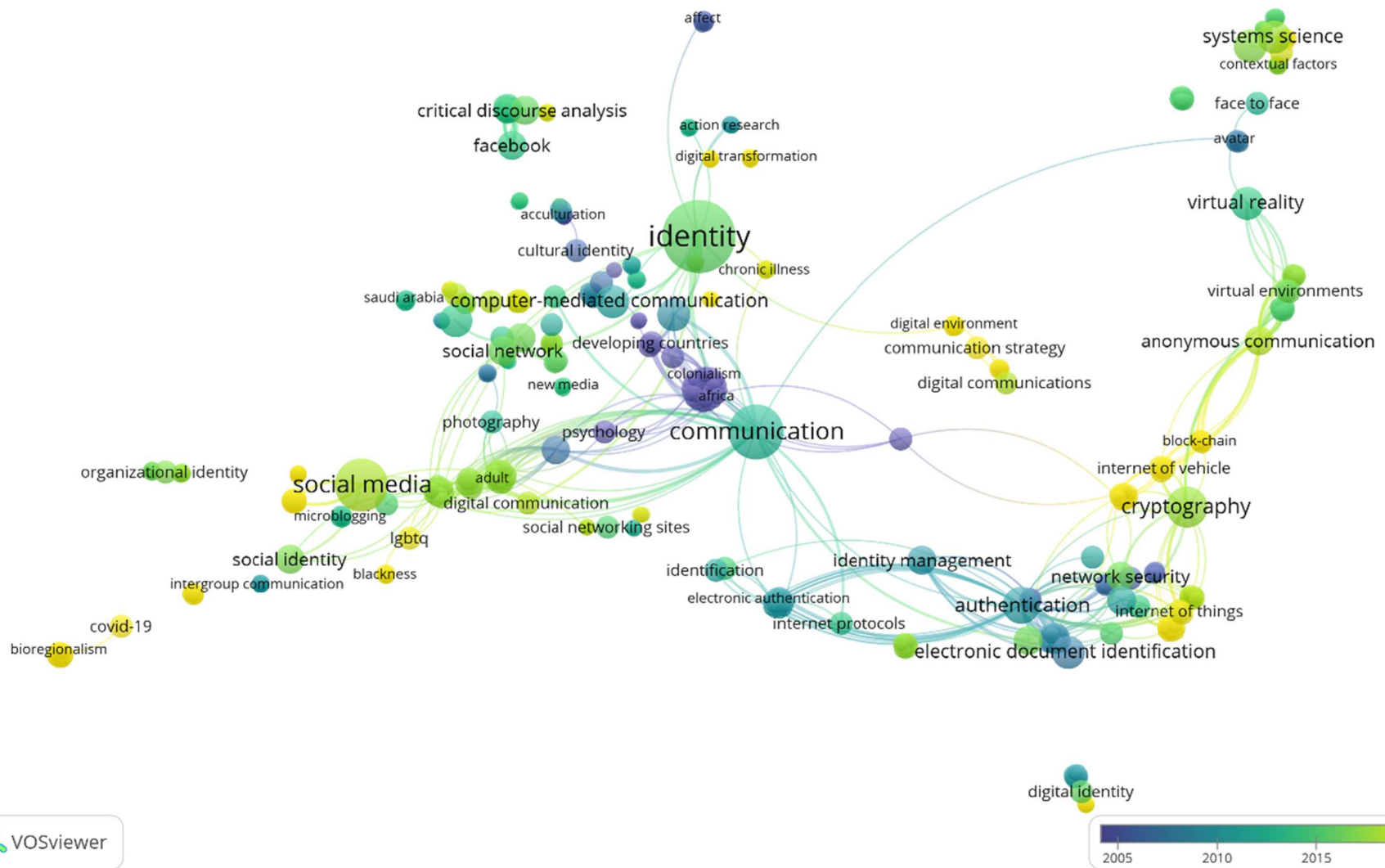


Figure 5. Periodic evolution of keywords
 Source: own elaboration in VOSviewer (version 1.6.18).



Figure 6. Periodic evolution of keywords

Source: own elaboration in VOSviewer (version 1.6.18).

CONCLUSIONS

Figure 3 depicts the key finding of our literature review. Indeed, organizational identity and digital identity appear as themes disconnected from mainstream research. This is striking because all other topics are more or less connected, with identity followed by communication and social media being prominent topics. This suggests that the bulk of the literature focused on the individual level of analysis and left other levels unattended.

We identified that some initial views on digital identity have been developed at individual and group level (Bouncken & Barwinski, 2019). At the same time, we concur with Dąbrowska *et al.* (2022) that the organizational level of analysis has been left unattended. This is surprising because the widespread use of social platforms incites organizations ranging from political parties, through sports clubs to firms, to engage with individual social media users. We perceive this gap as a major theoretical and empirical vacuum in the literature. Hence, so far, scholars have not empirically examined such important concepts as organizational identity or even conceptualized them in the context of digital transformation. We encourage adopting the organizational level of analysis for the study of digital transformation, especially in the case of communication processes and related constructs.

Symmetrically, we find that the micro-level of analysis has also been left unattended. By micro-level, we mean single interactions such as posts, tweets etc. followed by their streams that may contribute to constructing the organizational identity of organizations in the digital realm. We believe that interactions as such are important in developing such organizational phenomena as routines, culture, citizenship behaviours, and identity. Communication also relates the organization to its external audiences. Social media offer the unique opportunity of tracking those interactions. At the same time, while analogue interactions take place and time, those on social media are indeed micro, *i.e.* short, fragmented, and often discontinued. Further research into the impact of micro-interactions on relevant organizational-level phenomena appears as a promising avenue.

We are aware of several limitations of our study, which stem from both our research design and the current state of research on the focal topic. Regarding our design choices, we focused on one academic database, which has the merit of being more comprehensive than Web of Science. However, it does not capture all books, professional journals, and business press articles. For emerging fields of research, such grey literature might be useful in mapping current debates and practices. As a result, the number of articles in our final sample was relatively low. We encourage research into this topic. Secondly, the state of the field is nascent. Scholars have published relevant conceptual and research agenda articles only recently (Dąbrowska *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the map that emerged from our study indicates some orientation points and the confines of the field, but for the most part, it identifies

empty spaces corresponding to unattended topics. We strongly recommend filling in the gaps relative to digital organizational identity and its relationship with the currently prevailing social media interactions with relevant stakeholders.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

The article came into being within the project no. 2020/37/B/HS4/00360 entitled 'Digital identity - organizational stakeholders engagement multilevel analysis' financed by National Science Centre in the years 2021-2025. The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland



Ministry of Education and Science
Republic of Poland

The journal is co-financed in the years 2022-2024 by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Poland in the framework of the ministerial programme "Development of Scientific Journals" (RCN) on the basis of contract no. RCN/SP/0583/2021/1 concluded on 13 October 2022 and being in force until 13 October 2024.