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THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM THEORY: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to explore the current trend of using symbolic interactionism as an underpinning theory by revealing the gaps in the elements of the theory, methodology, and suggesting the direction for future research. This communication theory is unique because of the elements; self, society, and the environment. Normally, symbolic interactionism theory (SIT) has been used in identity and healthcare studies. While studies using this theory in entrepreneurship are still lacking. It is shown that this study mostly focuses on the sociology perspective compared to the social-psychology perspective. Therefore, this paper was adopted with a thematic analysis of 116 articles using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical underpinning. The findings show previous research that utilised symbolic interactionism in entrepreneurship is still less. This study found that previous studies have focused more on "Looking-Glass-self" by Goffman compared to the overall perspective of self-society-environment and lack of studies focusing on the entrepreneurship field. This systematic review is expected to give understanding and knowledge to readers about SIT, theory gaps through the elements, and directions for future research to consider using symbolic interactionism as a theoretical underpinning in the entrepreneurial phenomenon.

Keywords:

Systematic Literature Review, Symbolic Interactionism, Methodology, Gaps

Introduction

Symbolic interactionism is a sociology theory (Marsh, 2002). Symbolic interactionism develops interaction perspectives on mind, society and environment based on the ideas (Mead & Mind, 1934; Cooley, 1902). The foundation of this theory is 'meanings' by the social actors in the phenomenon they live in (Aksan, Kisac, Aydin & Demirbuken, 2009). This theory is based on meanings that emerge from the interaction of people such as individuals in a social environment with other individuals by focusing on symbols and meanings (Cooley; 1864; Reck, 1863; Blumer; 1986; Goffman, 1922).

The source of data in this theory is the human interaction that focuses on individual perspective through the characters, signs of facial expression, body language, gestures, and human behaviour (Marsh, 2002). This theory highlights the masterpieces of individual values above the influence of the benefits that have existed so far (Siregar, 2016). This perspective assumes that every individual has the essence of culture, interacts in the social centre of his community, and produces the meaning of "ideas" as a group (Siregar, 2016).

The utilization of the theory can lead the way of thinking through the elements of 'self', 'society' and 'environment' (Reck, 1863; Blumer, 1986). Symbolic interaction emerges from human interaction with each other. They share the meaning for a certain period and for a specific action that can form a sense for human behaviour (Reck, 1863; Blumer, 1986).

Symbolic interaction theory means people live both in their phenomenon and the symbolic environment (Cooley, 1902; Mead & Mind, 1934; Blumer, 1986). "Interpretation of the action" is a process of symbolic interaction (Aksan, Kisac, Aydin & Demirbuken, 2009). Even Mead and Mind (1934) declared that a symbolic interaction has three concepts: 'mind', 'society' and 'environment' (see figure 1). However, Mead and Mind (1934) argued the individual creates and changes his or her 'self' as well as 'society' through the 'mind' and finally, the uniquely human ability to role take.
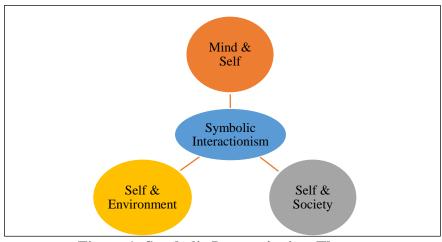

Figure 1: Symbolic Interactionism Theory
Illustrated by author based on the elements in symbolic interactionism theory
Sources: Cooley (1902); Mead & Mind, (1934); Blumer (1986)

Mind and Self

The interaction of mind and self is regarded as a meaning given to the self by the mind. The process of how-to explain the transition from subhuman interaction by gestures to symbolically

interaction in which the meaning can be reduced to more detail (Mead, 1934). It will bring out the standpoint of meaning theory as a logic of natural meanings (Mead, 1934). The mind is the sum of actions that the actor takes towards herself or another (Mead, 1934). The mind contains all the symbols learned by the actor, laid in the context of an internal conversation (Mead, 1934). Mind action is the most passionate when there is a problem needing solving (Mead,1934).

The fundamental entity for all interaction is the self, because the self carries a multitude of different interpretations (Sean, 1994). When self is consistent, it will derive a stable pattern, and stable patterns of action will be observed (Sean, 1994). Cooley (1902) defines self as the other exists in 'our imaginations of him' comes to life. Mead (1934) defined self as a social emergent and arises within the process of social experiences and activities. This process develops the individual as an outcome of the relationship with the process as a whole and other individuals within the process (Mead, 1934). By appeal, the self in interaction with others will create a mutual bond and the solid basics for future relationships (Sean, 1994). The mind and self are linked together and they allow people to negotiate reality through symbol manipulation and, at the same time, all mental processes are involved (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Sean, 1994).

It is shown that interaction among the individuals leads to self-reflection that can locate the self at the beginning, middle and end of the timeline (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Individuals are also able to view themselves through the 'looking glass' to view themselves from many perspectives and are able to represent themselves in different ways to many viewers (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). It is shown that a self is also able to view the individual as an outcome of the process (Mead, 1934). Therefore, the interaction of self and mind creates meanings that govern the actors' practices.

Self and Society
Self and society interaction is a process of socialisation from individual relationships with each other, where one individual can affect the others (Cooley, 1902; Marsh, 2002). Goffman (1959:1978) stated that individuals had to be placed in the context of the group and that they belong to and return. It is shown that the processes involved among individuals in a group can maintain a social life and their own identities (Goffman, 1959; Marsh, 2002). The interaction of individuals and the social formalities involved are a part of daily encounters (Goffman, 1959:1978). This assumption recognizes that social norms limit the behaviour of each individual, but ultimately, each individual determines the choices that exist in social society (Siregar, 2016). The focus of self and society is to explain the order and change in social processes (Blumer, 1969; Siregar, 2016).

The interaction of self and society assumes that people and community groups are influenced by cultural and social processes while the social structure is generated through social interaction (Blumer, 1969; Siregar, 2016). Strong (1983) indicates that the context of the group still belongs and returns, which is the existence of the signs and symbols of social interaction inside the context. The interaction of the individual self and society develops a particular meaning for a particular phenomenon. Therefore, the interaction between self and society creates meanings that govern the actors' practices.

Self and Environment

The environment can be divided into two categories. The first is the physical environment, and the second, the contextual environment (Smith and Bugni, 2006). Smith and Bugni, (2006) have revealed that symbolic interactionism is a primary theory that is able to explain essential connections between 'self and environment' through architecture and the environment, and human thought, emotions, and conduct. 'self and environment' reveals the three perspectives on architecture and environmental study for better understanding (Smith & Bugni, 2006; Mead, 1934). First, designed physical environments and the 'self and environment' are potentially able to influence and find expression in others. Second, 'self and environment' can inform us about how designed physical environments contain and communicate shared symbols and meanings. Thirdly, 'self and environment' reveals that a designed physical environment is not only a background for our behaviour because a few designed physical buildings, places, and objects act as representatives to shape thoughts and actions (Smith & Bugnu, 2006).

The contextual environment was created by Francis Aguilar in 1967 and is divided into seven concepts that are listed as a PESTLE that stands for political, economic, socio-cultural, technological, legal, and ethical influences (Akman, 2020). Earlier, only four core created ETPS (economy, tactical, political, and social) that stand for four sectors of the taxonomy of the environment (Akman, 2020). From the perspective of entrepreneurship, the PESTLE gives a bird's eye view of the context for planning and keeping track of the strategy, product, or services (Akman, 2020).

From the present time, symbolic interactionism has changed from not only the sociology perspective but also the social psychology perspective, which believes sociology is the study of society and social interactions to understand and search for empirical patterns in how they are shaped by people, groups, or organizational studies of human behaviour (Crossman, 2019; Weiss, 2015; Marsh, 2002). The Social-psychological is the study of another variant of sociology that is related to 'organization or social phenomena and aspects of social structures and processes to individual psychological attributes and behaviour' (House, 1977). Both sociology and socio-psychology perspectives provide traditional understandings of identity (Howard, 2000).

The concept of identity has been taken up more broadly, especially in particular identities based on ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, class, age, (dis)ability, geographic and virtual (Howard, 2000). It shows that there are three fractionations in socio-psychology termed: a) psychological social psychology, b) symbolic interactionism, and c) social structure and personality (House, 1977). This theory is important because it can reveal the findings from the perspective of psychology and sociology.

Therefore, this article aims to explore the current trend of using symbolic interaction as an underpinning theory and update the knowledge by revealing the gaps in the elements of the theory and methodology within the entrepreneurship field. This study has identified that symbolic interaction is rarely used by researchers in the entrepreneurship field of study. The need for a systematic review is critical to giving understanding and knowledge to readers. This article believes that research on this theory is still on-going.

Methodology

The review adopted four steps for methodological purposes:

i.   Identification
ii. Screening
iii. Eligibility
iv. Inclusion

Through the identification step, this study used an electronic database 'Scopus' to conduct a literature search using the "symbolic interaction" keyword to identify the relevant articles (Table 2). As a guideline, this study limited the criteria based on eligibility and exclusion (Table 1). This study finalized the selected articles published into a qualitative synthesis (Figure 2).

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Eligibility	Exclusion
Literature type	Articles	Systematic review journals, proceeding, chapter in the book, conference proceeding
Language	English	Non-English
Timeline	Between 2018-2020	<2017

Table 2: Keyword and Searching Information Strategy Example

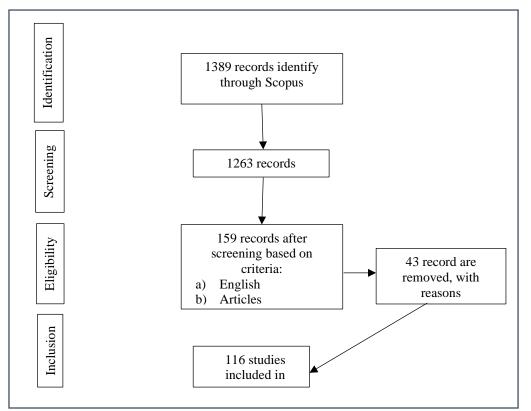| Databases	Keywords used
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("symbolic interaction")

Figure 2: Systematic Literature Review Flow Diagram Flow Diagram of Symbolic Interactionism Theory From 2018- 2020.

Result

A total of 1,381 journal articles were identified as part of the systematic review, with a final set of 116 studies being considered for qualitative synthesis. Table 3 summarises the findings of each study. The information is summarised in Table 4 (the title of the article, year, author, element, methodology, and journal). A narrative summary is provided to align the reader's understanding of the trends in current research with the theory. *Note: The full data set is available upon request from the author. This data examines 116 articles and outlines:

1. Title of article
2. Year
3. Author
4. Element
   a. Self
   b. Society
   c. Environment
5. Methodology
   a. Quantitative
   b. Qualitative
6. Volume/Issue
7. Journal

Table 4: Research Using Symbolic Interactionism Theory From 2018-2020

Year	No of research	Element			Combination of element				Methodology		
		Self	Society	Environment	*	**	***	****	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mix-method
2020	28	11	8	3	1	4	-	1	10	15	3
2019	50	26	12	5	5	-	2	-	16	34	-
2018	38	19	2	6	6	3	2	-	9	28	1
Total	116	56	22	14	12	7	4	1	35	77	4

Note:
*   Self & Society
**   Society & Environment
***   Self, Society & Environment
****   Self & Environment

Review Findings

Figure 3 shows the flow of SIT through a mix-method, quantitative and qualitative. The increasing number of quantitative and qualitative methods has become quite positive from the year 2018 to 2020. However, the mix-method is still lacking.
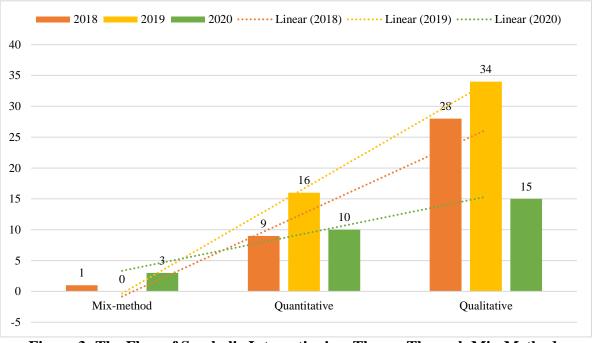
Figure 3: The Flow of Symbolic Interactionism Theory Through Mix-Method, Quantitative and Qualitative

Discussion

The findings of this paper are limited to research published in the last three years. The 116 articles were selected to identify the implementation of the symbolic interaction as an underpinning theory. The findings reveal the element used by the previous research and methodology gaps. This paper starts with outlining the keyword through identification and screening the records based on the criteria to produce relevant findings to achieve the objective in this paper. This paper highlights the significant findings, especially the element using this theory and methodology gaps.

Mostly, this study identified that a study from business and entrepreneurship field a lack of study using SIT as a theory underpinning. Especially study that focuses on small and medium enterprise (SMEs). This study believed that, by using SIT as an underpinning and focusing on SMEs will help research to come out with new directions and be able to add new knowledge. This study identifies from 116 studies, only nine studies focusing on SIT on business and entrepreneurship. Four studies from 2018, four studies in 2019 and only one study in 2020.

Based on the findings, most of the studies focusing on business and entrepreneurship focus on escorting clients, rental, manager identity, online marketing, fund management, human service, service counter, bonding in the workplace, and tourism (Jones & Hannem, 2018; Liang, 2018; Taylor et. al., 2018; Tian, 2018; Purwadinata et. al., 2019; Geiss, 2019; Esholdt, 2019; Wilson, 2019; Yang et. al, 2020). From the nine studies above, only one study by Liang (2018) focusing on three elements and one study by Jones & Hannem (2018) focusing on self and society elements in SIT. Another seven studies focused on one element of interaction.

SIT itself has an element that can focus on the self, society, and the environment. The combination of these elements is not only able to reveal through psychology perspective from

mind and self, but also able to reveal broadly through sociology perspective from society and the environment. Most of the previous research on the entrepreneurship field applied one or two elements from SIT, which are 'mind and self' and 'self and society'. The elements of mind and self' are able to reveal pleasant emotions in previous studies, such as escorting clients, rental, manager identity, online marketing, fund management, human service, service counter, bonding in the workplace and tourism. When dealing with human beings, pleasant emotions such as happiness, joy, excitement are essential to keep them faithful. By applying the SIT as a theory underpinning research, we are able to reveal the phenomenon through the process of exploring and understanding the interaction of actors in entrepreneurship fields.

This paper comes out with significant findings. Firstly, the previous three years of research using symbolic interaction as a theory underpinning were encouraging, especially in the year 2019. Unfortunately, most of the research focused on interpersonal and intrapersonal. Minimal studies focus on the three elements of symbolic interaction. Evidence shows that studies on the entrepreneurial phenomenon rarely use this theory. Most of the studies focus on the stigma and perceptions of society on the individual and vice versa due to the relationship between culture, gender, race, religion, intelligence, and health. While on the environmental element, evidence shows that a previous study focused on the background and heritage of historical placements. Future research should consider using these three elements, and implementation of this theory as an underpinning theory for entrepreneurial phenomenon was suggested.

Finally, the previous research mostly focuses on qualitative and quantitative compared to the mix-method. The need for the mix-method is essential. Future research should consider implementing the mix-method, qualitative and quantitative research to fulfil the gaps in methodology by implementing it into the relevant fields. To conclude, this study suggests that future research should consider the consumption of symbolic interaction theory as an underpinning theory in business and entrepreneurship or relevant fields. This study believes that symbolic interaction theory can give extraordinary findings to explain the entrepreneurial phenomenon or relevant fields through interactionism.

Acknowledgement

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