



Cocktail identities

The need to differentiate between real and virtual disappears: who you are ceases to be a singular identity as we each have a multiple 'cocktail identity' portfolio.

As the world becomes increasingly 'always on' and 'always connected' a growing number of us manage our time by developing 'multiple identities' which are variously used across our work and social lives. It is quite common today for one individual to have several e-mail addresses – one for work, another for home and another tied into one or more social networks; we could also have a couple of phone numbers and several profiles on Twitter, Facebook and the like. Looking forward, as the number of forms of who we are and groups we may belong to increases, we can expect things to get even more complex. While some see a single universal persona existing across multiple platforms and social interactions, others see a far more fragmented approach being taken. Whatever the case, the growing challenge lies in understanding which or who is the real you.

As Professor Mike Hardy of the British Council highlighted in his initial view on the future of identity:

“The ‘dealing-with-multiple-identities’ challenge is likely to become more complex and more significant. As our world becomes smaller through migration and mobility, both virtual and real, it may be that people and groups will express themselves more insistently through multiple rather than single identity lenses. So it will be the particular ingredients of the ‘cocktail identity’

(the combination of personas and their consequences) which will be the more significant. How will we protect and respect apparently contradictory and multiple identities? Will it be through identity personas that we define or will it be from an integrated set of values?”

In one workshop, the comment was made that 'Facebook and similar social networks allow people to customise multiple online identities around themselves – it is becoming the norm'. In another this was brought to life by a 14-year-old girl who had twenty-seven Facebook profiles, and this was seen to be typical in her peer group: one was the profile that her parents and teachers could see and the one that in four years' time would be visible to the universities she hoped to attend; another was specifically for interacting with her school friends and yet another was how she kept her relations back in Pakistan updated. While these three all provided different takes on the same person and were clearly designed to share different aspects of her life to target audiences, her other twenty-four profiles were all made up and ranged from a 14-year-old boy to a 25-year-old woman. Essentially these are social experiments in which, for instance, she is pretending to be a 16-year-old in San Francisco, a 20-year-old in Paris or just someone else she has dreamt up who lives in her street. The girl in question is quite clear which is the real her and which is make-believe, but

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how can anyone in the outside world see who she actually is? If a company wanted to market products to her, then which of her multiple identities would they focus on? As she and similar people go to university and enter the workplace, will they have more or fewer identities? Will managing so many fake identities become too exhausting? Will they all merge into one cocktail or will they be kept separate as multiple parallel faces to the world?

If this is not complicated enough, then we also have an underpinning shift occurring in some areas as a consequence of rising migration: as Mike Hardy also suggested, 'as the diaspora space grows, it provides a link between identity, history and now. ... Identity in a diaspora space or location develops as an ongoing process that can change with situations and experiences'. As people move from one country to another, they retain their homeland identity but also merge it with their new home – and so become Italian-American or London-Irish. Sometimes this shift happens quickly but not always. One comment from the programme pointed out that 'identity across borders is the true need'. Another highlighted this well in that 'in France we have a broad influx of North African migrants that gradually assume a Moroccan-French, Tunisian-French or similar identity. But this typically takes three or four generations to develop. Yes, we may become Parisian more quickly than that, but, at a fundamental level, I see that

national identity is something we hold on to for as long as possible. Children may be comfortable with being foremost Parisian, but they will still talk more about their grandparent's heritage two or three generations after moving to France.' Going forward, as people from different nations move around and settle a long way from their homeland, the diaspora mix will increase and with it the associated influence on our self-identity.

We also have to consider the impact of increasingly global common interest groups with which people align their priorities. Whether cause-related (eg, Greenpeace), belief based (eg, Christian, Islamic) sports oriented (eg, Boston Red Sox) or lifestyle driven (eg, spiritual, organic food or gay), the growth of the internet has enabled people all over the world to connect and become a community. Many of the connections between the new tribes and clans are increasingly cross-border in nature and influence and so are adding another dimension to the growing identity smorgasbord that we can assemble.

Looking at the decade ahead, people have had alternative views of how this could all play out. At one extreme, some see that we will have the option to inhabit a world where multiple faces to external communities are presented as a coherent mix: in the 'youniverse', everything that can be is centred around the individual. Networks, information, identities and

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relationships are all presented and seen solely through the lens of personal proximity and influence. As was suggested in an LA workshop, 'developments such as Facebook Connect and Opengraft will aggregate your "likes" and make your identity more portable'. At the other end of the spectrum, some see further fragmentation of identity on the horizon to a point where we manage our relationships, interests and

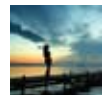
hence our multiple identities in isolation of each other. The coherence is less visible to others, and even to ourselves, but, at heart, still represents an amalgam of who we are.

Cocktail identities are here today and highly likely to increase in the future in both nature and scope. Alongside the identities we create and manage, whether in the real world or online, additional layers based on what others think and say about who we are, what we think and what we do will increasingly be publicly available: professional and amateur critiques on top of and around the real you.

And so we are left with a two-part question. Will we continue to be happy with this cocktail of information about who we are? Or, would it be easier and make us happier to simply consolidate each of our multiple identities back into one and so rediscover the 'real me'?



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