

## CULTURAL IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to bring together various elements that portray the complex conceptuality of cultural identity within technological society. It engages in a theoretical inquiry into the questions of how the wide-ranging uses young people are now making of new information and communication technologies and global media may possess the potential to transform their cultural identity and how educational institutions should understand and respond to this evolving cultural reality. In discussing these questions, it refers to recent theories of cultural identity, especially as they relate to the increasing volume of global flows of ideas and ideologies, people, finance and cultural practices, and specific theories about the nature of technology in terms of explicating the relationship between society and technology. Finally, it concludes with implications for educational practices of technology use.

*“We now live...in an open space-time, in which there are no more identities, only transformations” (Zygmunt Bauman)*

### INTRODUCTION

In contemporary academia, it has become a commonplace to emphasize that our world is undergoing an identity crisis. Actually, questioning identity formation has been debated so far; nevertheless, the signs of this crisis particularly in social and cultural studies are abundantly increasing as we go through the global, postmodern and information era in which the concept of identity turns out to be more problematic and complex than ever before. Because of the rapid innovations in information and communication technology (ICT), it is important to examine how identity construction has become increasingly complicated. ICT have minimized geographic limitations and have enabled virtual relationships and new social identities through instantaneous global communications. The development of these relationships and identities radically increases the number of interfaces between people and provides increased opportunities for cultural, social and political exchanges between and among people on a global level regardless of geographic location and time zone. Appadurai (1996) and Castells (1996) propose that we look at the modern network society dynamically in terms of disjunctive, networks of flows of things, people, ideas and finance that get transformed and organized. It is in this sense that the question of how ICT is involved in the transformations of cultural identities in the era of changing patterns of global and local image and information spaces has become one of the emerging issues in these days. I argue that, in order to understand such an issue, one needs to analyze it in the time-space contexts and power relations that have shaped our global world. In order to solidify my argument, I shall first explore the notion of identity construction both historically and theoretically as defined from a number of sources. Next, I shall look at the potential consequences of the process of globalization and the wide-ranging uses of ICT. Finally, I will conclude with educational implications for how schools should respond to this evolving reality.

### WHAT IS IDENTITY AND HOW IS IT CONSTITUTED?

Within the historical evolution of the concept of the identity, there are two common, but opposite, approaches to the questions of what identity means and how it is constituted. In prevalent and traditional approach, especially before the industrial revolution, identity is defined as a constitution based on the recognition of familiar and shared derivations including but not limited to ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical, territorial, cultural and political attributes with other people, groups or ideal (Hall, 1994, 1996). The concepts of *familiarity* and *share* in this definition are also associated with the meanings of *sameness*, *belongingness* and *unity*. From this perspective, cultural identity is a “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves,’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (p. 394). As Grossberg (1996) contends, the problematic belief in this analysis is that there is some intrinsic and essential content to any identity which is characterized by either a common origin or a common structure of experience or both. One can be deemed to be born along with his or her identity that appears to act as the sign of an identical harmony. In this regard, identity is determined more likely as a naturalistic and static formation that could always be sustained. This conventional view sees individual as a unique, stable and whole entity.

On the other hand, the discursive approach, as Hall (1996) goes on, delineates identification as “a process never completed and logged in contingency” (p. 2) while not denying that identity has a past. It is always in the process

of *becoming* rather than *being*, accordingly, it is constantly changing and transforming within the historical, social and cultural developments and practices such as globalization, modernity, post-colonization, and new innovations in technology. It is not a something to have or to be, yet a resource to use and an action to do. According to this constructionists and discursive view, an individual is a socio-historical and socio-cultural product and identity is not biologically pre-given to a person, instead, he or she occupies it, and more importantly, this occupation may include different and multiple identities at different points of time and settings (Gergen, 1991; Hall, Held & McGrew, 1992).

Although both approaches are trying to explain the same concept, their conflicting point is the existence and sustainability of a true, stable, fixed or authentic identity. While the former view of identity is “fixed and transhistorical”, the latter one advocates the identity as being “fluid and contingent” (Woodward, 1997), not an essence but positioning. In social and cultural studies, this debate refers to a tension between essentialists (Descartes, Karl and Husserl) and constructionists/anti-essentialists (Hume, Nietzsche and Sartre) or in recent discussions, a transformation from the conception of modern identity to postmodern identity. This is how Bauman (1996) explains this transformation:

If the *modern* problem of identity was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the *postmodern* problem of identity is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open. In the case of identity, as in other cases, the catchword of modernity was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling. (p.18)

From a sociological perspective, on the other hand, Castells (1997) asserts that identity acts as a source of meaning and experience for people through self-construction and individuation particularly on the basis of cultural attributes in a context marked by power relationships. He identifies three forms and origins of identity building each of which leads to a different social association: a) *legitimizing identity* that is introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination over social actors, and it generates a civil society including organized and structured social actors, b) *resistance identity* that is produced by the actors who are in positions of being excluded by the logic of domination, and it leads to building of communities as a response to conditions of oppression, and reinforce the boundaries between the dominant institutions and new ones, and finally c) *project identity* that is a new identity produced by social actors to redefine their position in the society on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them. The example he provides for project identity is that of the feminist movement. When it first appeared it was in the form of resistance against the patriarchal society, but eventually developed to produce a different life for women, liberating them and allowing them to form a new independent identity.

Identities are usually produced within the play of power, representation and difference which can be either constructed negatively as the exclusion and marginalization or celebrated as a source of diversity, heterogeneity and hybridity (Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993; Hall, 1996; Bhabha 1996; Woodward, 1997; Gilroy, 1997), suggesting that they are relational to other identities. This involves the process of persistently distinguishing one identity from others by means of discourse as a symbolic and representative meaning tool which contributes to the identity formation. Gender, race, class and sexual identities can be given as examples of identity construction out of difference, exclusion and subordination. Said's (1978) work on “Orientalism” and its counterpart which Robertson (1991) describes as “Occidentalism”, also demonstrates the very same idea. The identity of Oriental culture is seen as a subaltern culture and constituted through its exclusion from the Western culture; therefore it is the West that has given identity to the Orient. As Sakai (cited in Morley & Robins, 1995) states, “if the West did not exist, the Orient would not exist either” (p. 155).

The notion of difference as a constitutive of identity is integral to an understanding of the cultural construction of identities and has been related to the language and representation including signifying practices and symbolic systems through which the production of identities and meanings take place. Hall (1997) and Woodward (1997) argue that language operates as a representational system and helps us represent to other people our concepts, feelings and ideas. It is in this sense that language as a signifying system that provides possible answers to the questions: who am I?; What group am I belong to?; What do I want to be? Language used here as signifier of identity refers to not only written and spoken language but also texts, advertisements, visual images produced both by hand and technological means, songs, games, clothes, foods and so on. For example, in the case study of a Walkman, Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) examine a wide range of artifacts involved in the advertisements of Sony Walkman in order to establish how it has been represented and who would use such a product. They assert that the identities associated with it are youth, mobile, active and so on. Further examples include Ang's (1985) study of “Dallas viewers”, Bennett and Woollacott's (1987) analysis on the figure of “James Bond”, Levi-Strauss's work on the cultural significance of “food” and its role in identity creation (cited

in Leach, 1974), Nixon's (1997) semiotic analysis of "advertising" and Gledhill's narrative of "soap opera" to examine gendered identities. What all these studies indicate that production of meaning through representation have an effect on the identity development.

There are two common theoretical approaches to understanding how representation conveys meanings and thus identities in this case. As already mentioned earlier, identity formation operates across the notion of "difference", therefore, the first one is based on Saussure's (cited in Hall, 1997) "linguistics and structuralist" approach to representation through which he argues that "binary oppositions", a kind of marking difference, are essential to the production of meaning. He maintains that language is a system of signs (signifier) to express or represent ideas and concepts (signified), and all signs are arbitrary; that is, there is no natural relationship between signs and its signified meaning and it is the "difference" between signs that signifies meaning (e.g. "West" does not mean anything without "East"). His theories have been deployed as a foundation for a general approach called "semiotics" that is commonly used in cultural studies. Similar to the linguistic model, the underlying assumption is that all cultural objects and practices treated as signs convey meaning through representation. This implies that, as Woodward (1997) notes, cultural identities are also constructed in relation to or difference from the "other" ones and this construction usually appears in binary oppositions ("us" and "them") or in Durkheim's notion of "classificatory systems" as described in linguistic and semiotics approaches. However, the recognition of difference in this scientific analysis of representation leads to static and unchanging meanings and identities. Hall (1990, 1997), echoing Derrida's (1981) notion of "différance", suggests that meaning, while being constructed through difference, is not fixed or complete, on the contrary, is always deferred. A signifier may no longer clearly points to thing that is signified. Consequently, he stresses the "fluidity of identity" and introduces the second theoretical framework "discursive" approach to the system of representation. It is obviously inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's poststructuralist critique of linguistic and Foucauldian concept of "discourse" which is more historically grounded than linguistic approach, and emphasize how discourse constructs and categorizes the ways through which people come to think about themselves. Discourse is concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge and how this relationship operates within what he calls discursive formations. Foucault argues that:

Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning...Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. (cited in Hall, 1997)

### **THE IMPACTS OF ICT AND GLOBALIZATION ON IDENTITY FORMATION**

Contemporary consideration of the status of identity has been greatly facilitated by the spread of information technologies (Castells 1997; Turkle, 1997; Poster, 2001). In some cases, the diffusion of a technology developed in an external society has dramatic consequences for our way of life and culture. When a new technology is introduced, we usually consider the artifact itself: its appearance, utility, popularity, aesthetic and cool features; because media compels us to do so. Not often do we think about its history, social shaping, or as Du Gay et al. suggest in their cultural study of the Walkman, how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use. Social changes and identities are influenced if not determined by technological innovations because technology is more than a machine and can very well convey information and embody social and cultural dimensions that shape society.

MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) remind us that the prevailing way of thinking about technology is still technological determinism that acknowledges a one-way relationship between technology and society in which technology causes social change and impacts on people. Moreover, substantive theory of technology argues that technology is not a good, bad, neutral or apolitical tool (Ellul, 1964; Heidegger, 1977), instead, it is embedded with values and ideologies shaping people's consciousness (Postman, 1993), and "constitutes a new type of cultural system that restructure the entire social world as an object of control" (Pacey, 1992: p. 7). Therefore, technology can bring substantial changes to culture along with it that manipulate the way people communicate both at the material and virtual level, and also how they see the world. As Castells argues:

The potential integration of text, images, and sounds in the same system, interacting from multiple points, in chosen time (real or delayed) along a global network, in conditions of open and affordable access, does fundamentally change the character of communication. And communication decisively shapes culture...through the powerful influence of the new communication system..., a new culture is emerging: the *culture of real virtuality*...in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe,

in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience. (p. 356-404)

Technology is also a driving force behind the process of internationalization and globalization of economy, science and culture; indeed, they have mutually reinforced each other. The decentralizing and liberating nature of information and computer technologies encourage individuals to participate in a “global village” (McLuhan, 1967) or “network society” (Castells, 1996); a condition characterized by the interconnectedness of economic, social, political and cultural activities as well as regions, cities and individuals. Such a condition is profound because it fundamentally challenges the diverse locality and traditional values, reduces the sense of social and cultural distance between communities, and affects our relationship to time and space, the fundamental coordinates of experiential reality (Giddens, 1994).

This conception of “shrinking world” inherent to the process of “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1989) carry insightful implications for the notion of identity. Spatial and temporal relations turn out to be so destabilized as a result of constant flux that these can provide little in the way of anchoring for social relations and formations. ICT and globalization decrease the space between different parts of the world, and in fact, “space of flows” (network-based society) replaced the traditional “space of places” (Castells, 1996). People in the different parts of the world can now get together and experience the same thing at the same time despite not physically but virtually. They can choose any community to interact with from a variety of choices available. People no longer have most of their interactions with people who share their territorial space, whether understood as a village or a continent (Scholte, 2000). Accordingly, there seems to be a fundamental transition in the origins of identity construction from the values of family, community, nation and physical geography to those of global media, technological networks and the asynchronous place of cyberspace and virtuality. As Morley and Robins (1995), referring to Baudrillard and Virilio’s writings on simulation, virtuality and hyperreality, put it:

What is being created is a new electronic cultural space, a “placeless” geography of image and simulation...a world in which space and time horizons have become collapsed...a world of instantaneous and depthless communication...that is profoundly transforming our apprehension of the world: it is provoking a new senses of placed and placeless identity and a challenge of elaborating a new self-interpretation. (p. 112-121)

Although globalization is often conceptualized as an international economic integration and business transactions among the nations since most of the power and momentum take place in these areas, it is a highly complex process with important consequences for social and cultural dissemination and transformation. Appadurai (1996) argues that globalization deals with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics. He suggests a framework for exploring such disjunctures by classifying global “cultural flows” into “scapes”: ethnoscapas (produced by the flows of people, tourists, immigrants, refugees and guest workers), mediascapas (the worldwide distribution of information and images by newspaper, magazine, television and film), technoscapas (the distribution of both mechanical and informational technologies), finascapases (global capital flows) and ideoscapases (the distribution of ideas, terms and images and political values related freedom, democracy, welfare and rights). The “disjunctures” between the “scapes” are the spaces for the creation of new global affiliations. It is in this sense that international mobility of capital, services and technology can well result in the mobility of ideas, social forms and ultimately cultural integration; therefore, boundaries between cultures and their ties to territory or place become transcended and difficult to determine or maintain. The underlying belief of such a condition is based on the notion of “deterritorialization”, a concept first introduced by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. Here, it concerns the relationship between location, culture and identity. According to Tomlinson (1999), “a central defining characteristic of deterritorialization is the weakening or dissolution of the connection between everyday lived culture and territorial location” (p. 128) and it is the most essential cultural outcome of globalization. In a similar vein, Clifford (1992) stresses the concept of “traveling cultures” in which identity is not rooted in a particular geographic location but in mobility. As richly evidenced in these arguments, identity can no longer be comprehended as stable or fixed formation since our sense of self as integrated subjects is increasingly undermined as we become decentered and dislocated.

In terms of the impact of media and communication technologies, Giddens (1991) defines globalization as “the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations ‘at a distance’ with local contextualities” (p. 21). Giddens’ definition offers an essential point for considering globalization in terms of identity formation because people’s relations with absent others can shape their experiences. Globalization consequences a sense of being disembedded from places, in other words, a weakening of affiliation to localities. As Bauman (1992) posits, “the urge for mobility, built into the structure of contemporary life, prevents the

arousal of strong affections for any of the places; places we occupy are no more than temporary stations” (p. 695). Then, through actions “at a distance” with the facilitation of information and computer technologies, individuals may go beyond their physical community and interface, and form multiple identities by means of interactions with diverse cultural beliefs and behaviors on a global scale.

Turkle (1997) suggests that engagement with the new technology “challenge what many people have traditionally called ‘identity’; a sense of self is recast in terms of multiple windows and parallel lives” (p. 73). The virtual interactive spaces mediated through the synchronous and asynchronous communication tools such as bulletin boards, chat rooms, instant messaging and mailing lists transforms traditional notions of identity (stable, fixed, sameness, etc.) into the notions of multiplicity, fluidity and difference. Turkle (1995) explain this by incorporating Gergen’s (1991) notion of the “saturated self” in which communication technologies allow people to “colonize each others brains” by continuous construction, reconstruction and negotiation of their identities with the ability to have relationships across the globe and the knowledge of other cultures.

Now one can argue that the rapid developments in ICT catalyzing and accelerating the dissemination of information, values, beliefs, and the spread of global culture have far-reaching effects on the development of identities and communities. Some of them may be positive whereas others may be negative. The reduction of time and energy for the information, and the increased communication between cultures of different geographical areas and ethnic backgrounds may be deemed positive and therefore desirable. However, the disruptive and disintegrative effects of global culture on the changing patterns of socio-cultural identities and institutions, such as youth, families, languages, educational settings and religions, may be considered negative and undesirable.

This important and controversial concern in globalization discourse is seen in the reciprocal interaction between global and local that is often interpreted as resulting in either cultural homogenization or heterogenization (Appadurai, 1996). The former one refers to the formation of global culture in the area of late capitalism and proceeded powerfully by such various aspect of life as fashion, film industries, language, media, and music, which are universally consumed. The global culture here means the cultural elements and apparatuses shaping the common lifestyle of humans through the process of globalization. Therefore, it is perceived as an expression of sweeping and overwhelming that undermines local cultures. The latter one, on the other hand, refers to variation and diversity of culture.

Through homogenization of culture, local beliefs and cultural values might become universalized besides demolishing the distinctiveness of local identity. This cultural invasion becomes threatening and causes serious problems for some conservative states by virtue of the fact that such openness to foreign content can erode the traditional values and indigenous cultural identity. In the name of preserving local and regional cultural heritage, social, governmental and religious institutions take various actions including quotas and regulations as bulwarks against global standardization. Castells (1996) regards this as a tension between the “Net” (global cultural flows) and the “Self” (local communal cultures). This tension demonstrates how “sameness” and “difference” in this context manifest themselves as constitutive parameters for the construction of identity as outlined at the beginning of the paper. Castells (1997) notes that such resistances against oppression may result in “resistance identity” formations which he characterizes as the “exclusion of excluders by the excluded” such as religious fundamentalism, territorial communities and nationalist self-affirmation.

Furthermore, some societies are struggling with a dilemma: on the one hand they worry about their traditional social and cultural values and their youth’s sense of cultural heritage and identity being negatively affected; on the other hand, they want youth generations to grow up being in contact with the rest of the world and become prepared for and adapt themselves to the economic challenges of affiliation with globalization, the information society and the knowledge and skills they demand. In other words, they are in the process of negotiation on how to find a proper combination of local and global. Again but different from the above, such a dilemma exemplifies the relationship between local and global, which results in neither homogenization nor heteronegization; however, a mixture or a middle way of both. Robertson (1992, 1995) describes this as “glocalization” characterized by the interpenetration between local and global rather than a situation of local being overridden with global. He suggests that both local and global have power to construct each other, and phrases the local-global encounter as both the “universalization of particularism” and “the particularization of universalism”. This argument leads to the idea that whereas globalization transforms the local identities, customs and values, inhabitants are also able to transform the global into their local establishments, suggesting that new identities not necessarily belonging to either local or global may be constructed. For example in the case of national identities, the question becomes “where are you between?” rather than “where are you from?” From a postcolonial perspective, Bhabha (1994, 1996) introduces the concept of “hybridity” in order to describe the

construction of such culture and identity, which challenges the authenticity of the essentialist view (binary oppositions). According to him, a new cultural hybrid identity emerges from the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances in-between the colonizer and colonized. His concept plays a central role in contemporary postcolonial, cultural and identity studies. As Hoogvelt (1997) states, it is “celebrated and privileged as a kind of superior cultural intelligence owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference” (p. 158).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

First of all, instead of a positivistic and optimistic approach to technology use in education, which looks for a technological fix to educational problems, the emphasis should be solving educational problems by not advocating computers or other technological tools for the sake of technology, instead, by questioning their proper role in educational settings and reflecting on how technology may cause both positive and unintended negative results in social environments. Since educational technology is a resource that encompasses political, cultural and social dimensions, it needs to be placed in the hands of teachers who are culturally aware of the non-neutral aspect of it. The ways in which children come to understand the world are learned through imagery. Images consume children’s daily experiences and are prevalent throughout educational media and computer software. Educators who understand the potential impact of cultural media on children can be influential in teaching students to read representational meanings of media artifacts.

With teens consuming the greatest number of hours watching television and playing video games, kids between the ages of 8-18 spend an equivalent of six hours each day or 40 hours a week using media (Roberts, 1999). Such amount of time that children devote to media exacerbates a growing concern that media sources like television and video games have the potential to distort children’s worldviews. This is an important concern for educators and parents because most of the time magazines, television, film, and computer video graphics are incorporated into the curriculum. When such media are associated with youth culture, they construct representations of the world and serve as socializing agents, providing young people with beliefs about the behaviors of the world (Considine & Haley, 1999).

It is also necessary to protect youth from being exposed to inappropriate materials available through the use of technology. Children should be taught through their school curriculum on how to effectively use technology. It is educators’ responsibility to teach them through the use of critical surfing to steer clear of the exposures to those that is not suitable to their cultural values and identities. Assuming that advances in technology are far more rapid than what most communities can cope with, positive steps can be taken to enable them to adapt to the change. One way of such an adaptation may be achieved through designing policies to protect the young from the abuse and misuse of information technologies. Schools need to promote a balance way of technology diffusion that youths can properly fit to their own way of life, traditions, customs and cultural heritage at the same time they can adapt themselves to the challenges and realities of the twenty-first century in order to find their own place in the world of globalization.

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