

## **Who to be? Generations X and Y in civil society online**

Hilary Yerbury  
School of Management,  
University of Technology, Sydney

### **Abstract**

Who to be? is one of the key questions of contemporary times. This ethnographic study of members of Generations X and Y from Sydney engaged in civil society explored their perspectives on the creation and understanding of identity. Among its key findings are that young people have a strong sense of self, valuing authenticity in themselves and others while recognising that it is possible to create multiple identities and that they recognise that information and communication technologies both support and threaten their sense of self. The study concludes that the creation of identity is a complex process. In answer to the question of who to be, the participants in this study show that they approach the answer to the question in many ways and that the process of creating one's identity is not straightforward. Rather, each approach shows tensions between the freedom to create one's own identity and the desire for authenticity, between the need for a sense of security and recognition of the possibility of experimenting with something challenging or different.

Hilary.Yerbury@uts.edu.au

Mailing address:  
Hilary Yerbury  
Information Studies,  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
University of Technology, Sydney,  
PO Box 123,  
Broadway, NSW 2007

### **Biographical statement**

Hilary Yerbury has a longstanding interest in the ways people use information to make decisions about their everyday lives and in the role of information in civil society. Between 2000 and 2005 she was involved with the Oxfam International Youth Parliament, in particular its skills centre, and this experience encouraged her to focus her research on young people and the ways they create community in civil society, particularly online. She is currently with the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney.

## **Who to be? Generations X and Y in civil society online**

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Questions of identity and identity formation are particularly relevant to young people in their later teens and early twenties who might be seen to be developing a sense of themselves and establishing on-going social relations. The purpose of this paper is to explore how a small group of young people create answers to the question of “who to be?” in civil society online. This paper begins from a conceptualisation of youth within a sociological framework of generation, where generation is more than a series of birth cohorts and is influenced by its social, economic and political context (Wyn and Woodman 2006, p. 501).

The young people who took part in this study are identified as members of Generations X and Y. These labels are commonly used in popular culture, along with the terms Baby Boomer, as a way of encapsulating a certain set of characteristics found in people born at a certain period. They evoke meaning, a sense of shared experiences which set these young people apart from others. There is no agreement on exactly when members of these generations were born (Wyn and Woodman 2006, p. 501, McCrindle 2008) and the recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Report, *Picture of a Nation*, has brought together Generation X and Generation Y as those born between 1966 and 1986 (ABS 2009). In this study, Generation Y will be assumed to include people born after 1982, the date used by Howe and Strauss (2000) and (Huntley 2006) to signal the start of Generation Y.

Contemporary young people are described as having been born into an age where they are unable to rely on anything (Beck 2001), yet they have incorporated this uncertainty into their lives, with members of Generation Y exuding an optimism and sense of confidence not often found in members of Generation X. They are likely to be well travelled and to use information and communication technologies without a second thought about the implications of this for the shrinking of distance and the compression of time. They are also less concerned with permanence in the workplace or in where they live. They exhibit a range of contradictory impulses, on the one hand valuing the opportunity to take the initiative and try radical, new ventures and on the other hand, to seek conformity and security (Huntley 2006, McCrindle 2008). They tend to espouse a set of values which affect all aspects of their lives, choosing to make decisions about everyday life from a perspective of self-actualisation (Giddens 1991, p. 214).

### **Identity and Identity Formation**

According to Anthony Giddens, key questions for everyone living in contemporary times are “What to do? How to act? Who to be?” (Giddens 1991, p. 70) and these very questions suggest that one has a choice in one’s identity. Identity therefore is something to be worked at, to be created. It does not emerge in a phase of normative transitions or stages (Wyn and Woodman 2006, p. 498) from school towards a pre-determined set of characteristics of adulthood, such as career, sexual activity, marriage, independent living and so on (Shanahan 2000, Roberts 2007) as the pervasive psychosocial approach developed by Erickson proposes. Hall argues that the process of creating identity is never complete (Hall 1996). Giddens emphasises the importance of social relations in the creation of a sense of identity and asserts that the reaction of others may be important in creating a sense of identity (1991, p. 54).

Giddens notes that self-identity has to be worked at and part of the process of creating self-identity is self-actualisation, which includes the moral requirement of being able to act in a way that is “true to oneself” (1991, pp. 77-79). Those fully engaged in self-actualisation are aware that their actions today can influence outcomes in the future (1991, p. 129). He proposes that in the contemporary context of global interdependence, a generational change has occurred and that concerns with justice, equality and participation have shifted towards the development of “ethics concerning the issue ‘how should we live?’” (1991, p. 215). As young people take on the challenge of living authentically in the world, they are confronted by what Giddens refers to as dilemmas (1991, pp. 196-200), choices between extremes, each of which is undesirable. He identifies four dilemmas. The first is the opposition between a single unified view of the world, as found in previous times where roles and expectations were clearly defined, and the fragmentation which arises from adapting endlessly to the demands of context. The second is finding a balance between a sense of powerlessness in a world where external pressures appear to control the actions of the individual and lead to a sense of being overwhelmed and a fantasy of omnipotence where security is achieved through acting as though one were in control of actions and their consequences. The third dilemma is how to manage the conflicting realities which emerge when there is no one source of authority, avoiding both paralysis from all-encompassing doubt and slavish adherence to a single authority figure. The fourth dilemma requires the development of a self-identity where individuality and personalised experience survive the standardising influences of consumer culture.

### ***Research question and methodology***

The purpose of this study is to better understand how young people answer the question of “who to be” through their activities in civil society online. It is part of a larger study of how young people engaged in civil society online create community and take social action. The larger study was an ethnographic study, which took a grounded approach to the theorisation of the data. It involved 24 members of Generations X and Y, active in civil society online, recruited using the snowball technique.

Participants were interviewed at a time and location of their choice. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions sent to the participants to be checked. Where participants indicated that they were active in public online forums or websites, data related to their interactions in these forums was also gathered. Data collection was carried out in accordance with the UTS Human Research Ethics Guidelines. Although participants gave permission for their own names to be used, some pseudonyms have been adopted here. The transcripts and posts in online forums were analysed using pattern coding through the NVIVO software (QSR 2006).

### ***Introducing the participants***

At the time of the data collection in 2007, sixteen participants were working full time in organisations in civil society, and eight participants were full time students at universities in Sydney, studying in a variety of undergraduate and honours programs, including arts, commerce, computing science, media studies, philosophy, politics and sociology. Fifteen participants were male and nine female; fifteen participants were born before 1982 and thus over 25 and nine were born after 1982 (with six of these born in 1985 or 1986), making them members of Huntley’s Generation Y. Twenty three participants considered themselves Australian, with Therese lamenting that as a migrant without citizenship she has not yet “*had the right to vote ... and that’s very dis-empowering*”. Although data on ethnicity or culture

was not collected, physical or social characteristics indicated that eleven of the twenty four were not of Anglo-Celtic origin.

The participants have all volunteered for organisations or projects in civil society. Seventeen of them have been engaged in paid or unpaid work in significant organisations in the third sector. All of them were also engaged in civil society online, as participants in discussion forums, as moderators of discussion forums and as active citizens, engaged in such activities as finding out about social issues, signing petitions or registering for events. Here, civil society includes more than organisations in the so-called third sector. It is more closely aligned with notions of civic engagement, following Beck's notion that civil society can be established through the action of individuals working together as active citizens (Beck 2001).

### *Creating identity*

Participants give the impression that they know who they are and what is important to them. They recognise the importance of taking an active role in creating their own identity and of making decisions which will have an impact on the world they live in. They acknowledge that they have a role in creating answers to the question of "who to be". Rachel, a journalist, and Nick, a technology strategist, both describe how they have used writing, the media and their public activities to create this identity. Rachel has established two blogs where she presents herself as "*journalist, writer and editor*". Nick lists a number of public activities he has engaged in and adds: "*if you want to find out more ... you can google my name*", an offer which leads to blogs, speeches, interviews and other publicly available sources of information about him. Ben, a web designer, believes that "*telling ... stories is a major kind of way that people are part of a larger social fabric*". However, Marianne, a web developer, shows how notions of self can inhibit the creation of identity. She is reluctant to post in discussion forums because "*well, I see myself as having to be an expert before I respond*", a comment echoed by David T., employed part time in two NGOs, who remarks that other participants in a discussion forum are "*all quite important and smart*". Jonathan is aware of the argument that one creates identity through writing and other media but believes that identity comes from embodied commitment to action. He is sceptical about what he refers to disparagingly as "*just conversation*". Tom, on the other hand, believes it is important to create opportunities for people to express their ideas because "*anything you do to place an opinion out there in the public domain which has the potential to affect someone is politics*" and because any opportunity to express an opinion also "*creates opportunities for people to listen*".

Others believe they should create their identity through what they do. This is why Anna N., a 24 year-old Honours student with a background in sociology and politics, goes to rallies and meetings – to present herself as an activist, interested in particular issues. Katherine, who wants to take an informed and responsible approach to decisions in life, has been reading the newspaper so that she will have shown that she has "*participated responsibly*" in the forthcoming election. Aimé similarly goes beyond the process of creating identity through writing and similar forms of expression and reflects on a process of self-actualisation. He believes that in order to contribute to effective positive social change, he must constantly be aware of "*my stages of growth, what I need to stay informed and stay active*" and how these needs can be met through online websites, such as Amnesty International. Some participants seem to go beyond actions relating only to self-actualisation, to those which create what they see as an ethical world. Nick's vision "*is to be able to help different organisations and movements and issues gain traction and see more support and help the people themselves to be empowered to make a difference*". Kelly wants to be able to "*help young people to think and question*". Alastair, a web developer with a media and communications background,

comments: “*As grandiose as it seems, I’d like to be part of seeing a regime change in this country.*” Brett, emphasising the notion of choice in social change, comments: “*I’ve chosen civil society as the place to achieve social change as opposed to choosing other [avenues] and within civil society I’ve also chosen particular non-government organisations ... that are able as well to be flexible and questioning and challenging*”.

Participants see identity as a constant, as authentic, as encapsulating something of themselves that is unique. They expect to find authenticity in others whether online or offline and would disagree with Hall that there is no true self (Hall 1996). Anna J., a 21 year-old media studies student, identified “*a frankness and an openness about one’s own situation, which encouraged the same in other people*” as a significant factor in establishing trust in a website for the siblings of children with disabilities. Sunil is active in the online environment because he does not feel limited by the reactions of others to his ethnicity, but “*can meet and engage with people with similar interests and viewpoints as [him]self*”, being himself in a way he believes is denied to his embodied self.

Most participants are tolerant of ambiguity in the identity of others although like the participants in Larsen’s study, they do expect sincerity from those they interact with (2007) and believe that it is important to be able to trust in the authenticity of others. Joshua, a 21 year-old philosophy student goes further in this acceptance of ambiguity than others, noting that, although it may be easy to take on a persona quite removed from the characteristics of oneself for a short time in a discussion forum, it is difficult to maintain a persona over an extended period of time, so that people who do sustain a persona online over a considerable length of time probably have something of that persona about them. This seeming lack of concern contrasts with the perspective expressed by Jones (1997) and Rheingold (2000).

At the same time as acknowledging that people may experiment with representations of their identity, some participants are concerned with the potential consequences of experimenting with their own identity. They indicate that as young people growing towards maturity, they do not want to be held to the actions and beliefs recorded online while they are creating their self identity. Andy, a 21 year-old media studies student, and Damian, a 23 year-old fifth year arts/commerce student, acknowledge they are immature, still developing their sense of self, still working out their values and how to present them. Each talks at length about the importance of being an active citizen. Andy engages in political discussion online but “*very rarely use [his] own name*”, because he does not want to be “*tied to a particular political party*”. Damian, on the other hand, is concerned that actions in the real world may become part of the online world and therefore beyond his control. He says:

*I know I can do things online, because I’m a number, so I will sign petitions online, forward emails, stuff like that, but as soon as I can be photographed, identified, that’s where I draw the line ... if [activities where I can be photographed] jeopardise my future, I don’t know how valuable they are right now.*

Both Damian and Andy are aware that, in the future, those online reminders of a self existing in another time and space remain, positioned as undeniable ‘fact’, searchable and removed from the context in which they were first expressed. Boyd (2008) comments that the persistence of these traces of experimentation online creates a dilemma for young people wishing to experiment with ideas and actions, because they last long after the flesh-and-blood person has disowned them.

### ***Valuing Social relationships***

Social relationships are important to participants in creating a sense of self. As Annette (working in a government funded agency) notes, they give one “*a sense of recognition*”. Therese, who had arrived as a migrant, stressed the importance of social relationships in constructing a sense of identity, explaining “*I’m kind of lacking a connection*” and has used her professional identity as an IT developer to begin to establish herself, which is “*probably something people do in the big metropolitan centres*”. David G., who works in a development organisation, shows the importance of the social in creating identity when he reflected on his identity as an activist. He said: “*I’m probably not part of civil society because I’m not part of a formal organisation.*” In descriptions of his relationships with friends and family overseas, Damian observed that information technologies like mobile phones and social networking software were important in a social context where his physical location may bear no relationship to the strength of the social connection (Wellman et al. 2005).

However, social relationships can only flourish when one has the values, knowledge and skills to establish them. Ben noted that he was unable to be recognised as a participant in a significant discussion about a community development issue because “*I didn’t have a vocabulary to speak back to them with*”. Joshua noted that he had used online forums to “*develop my intellectual side a bit*” and to hone his skills of argumentation because he is “*kind of shy in the real world*”. He also acts as a moderator where he can practise ways to communicate and enforce norms and standards of behaviour.

### ***Confronting dilemmas***

There is evidence that participants have confronted the dilemmas identified by Giddens (1991). Peter has grappled with the first of Giddens’s dilemmas, the conflict between a single, established view of the world and the fragmentation of being all things to all people. A 20 year old student of computing science, Peter is concerned with what it means to be a man. He confesses that this is something he cannot discuss with his family or close friends and that he has valued the anonymity and distance afforded by a discussion forum. He has struggled to come to terms with his own masculinity, the role of men in society and their relationships with women, and in the discussion forums he adopts what others perceive as a rigid traditionalism. In the context of a discussion of characters in online gaming, he poses the question of whether having feelings makes a man a ‘wuss’, ie weak, ineffectual or unmanly. He provokes a flood of responses with an entry that reads

*“How does having feelings NOT make you a wuss? Man, I’m really hoping ur a girl since a guy won’t say stuff like that. Unless you are one of those metro guys where it’s cool to be like that. A man must hold everything in, and weather all storms. Displaying emotions is also like displaying your weaknesses. It is not to be done.”*

On the third day of the discussion, having received some very pointed criticism about being insecure and not being in touch with his emotions, he writes:

*“[I’m] perfectly secure, knowing that my world will not crumble around me. I would say that I am not insecure about my masculinity, It’s just that I don’t see myself as man-enough, due to my strong beliefs.”*

He believes that it is a consequence of this that he does not have a girlfriend and exclaims “Bachelorhood here I come for like 50 yrs!” Peter’s struggle to avoid the breakdown of the role of the man which could come about if he accepted the values and behaviours of the metrosexual, encapsulates the first of Giddens’ dilemmas, the opposition between the single, unified view of the past, here a traditional view of masculinity, and a fragmented view which gives the capacity to mix elements from a traditional view with newer interpretations of the role (Giddens 1991).

Giddens’s second dilemma, where individuals experience a sense of powerlessness in the face of pressures and events in the world around them, seems to be illustrated by Susan’s approach to developing and presenting the skills necessary for her future career. Susan, who is in the final year of her media studies degree, hopes to become a journalist. She acknowledges that if she is to be recognised as a journalist, she will probably have to start acting as one while she is still a student. This could involve establishing a blog because blogs give one the opportunity “*just to practise writing ... but also ... allow people to visit your site and see who you are and give yourself some credibility*”. However, in reality, she has not established a blog nor does she use her social networking site to present herself as a journalist. Her need for recognition as a professional seems to be over-ridden by her sense of self-protection. She says that she is “*very careful about what information I put out there on the internet about myself*”, sensing that she could become the target of unwanted attention. In the same way that Susan could construct her own identity, making and remaking it with new writings and new images, so she is aware that others can take words of participants, their ideas and their images and construct another version of their identity (Ferraris 2006).

On the other hand, Nick and Anna N. project a sense of omnipotence, knowing what the appropriate action to take is and not being concerned with what others think, because they are sure they will be successful in what they propose. Nick described the organisation he co-founded as being “*beyond any existing frame of reference, a new youth-based organisation, global and internet-based which we hadn’t seen anyone else do*”. Anna N. describes how she volunteered to be involved in a campaign related to the forthcoming election, but decided on her own course of action rather than follow the instructions given because she “*thought it was going to be an effective action ... a positive action to do.*”

None of the participants appears to face Giddens’s third dilemma of authority versus uncertainty. Perhaps because they are well educated and thoughtful young people, they seem neither to take refuge in mindlessly making decision through applying sets of rules, nor do they appear paralysed and unable to take action.

Katherine appears to be aware of Giddens’ fourth dilemma, that of personalised versus commodified experience, as she can be seen to value individuality and an authentic sense of self, which does not appear contrived or packaged. She is sceptical about the usefulness of websites, blogs and discussion forums in developing responsible citizens. In her view, these websites focus on the information itself rather than on the person who proposes the activity or who holds the idea. She notes that she withdrew from a social networking site because she did not want to feel she was being “*collected*” as a “*friend*”. She continues this concern with being turned into an object when she likens the interaction on a discussion board to:

*an interaction on a noticeboard at university. I’ll post my room for let flyer and someone might deface it or they might respond to it or someone will stick their bed for sale flyer over mine ... but ... [you*

*can] actually see the person that tacked their flyer over someone else's flyer ... And then you could say 'Oh, it's that girl with the red hair I wonder what she does' rather than 'Oh, it's a piece of paper saying bed for sale'.*

In her view, the computer-mediated communication is impersonal or even non-human (Knorr Cetina 1997). You may never get to know “the true person”, being left instead with the written word on a piece of paper.

### ***Conclusion***

In answer to the question of who to be, the participants in this study show that they approach the answer to the question in many ways and that the process of creating one's identity is not straightforward. Rather, each shows tensions between the freedom to create one's own identity and the desire for authenticity, between the need for a sense of security and recognition of the possibility of experimenting with something challenging or different.

The participants in this study acknowledge that they approach the question of who to be with a sense of freedom and while some strive for authenticity, others embrace experimentation, taking responsibility for making themselves what they want to be either way. They make opportunities to practise skills they want to develop. They take the initiative to establish projects or organisations when the opportunities to be the kind of person they want to be do not exist. They are willing to display their thoughts, behaviours and actions to bolster their sense of self, and to leave traces of themselves in times and spaces where their embodied selves do not exist. In their discussions of trust and authenticity, they acknowledge that they interpret the characteristics of the other person in order to grant trust or recognise authenticity. By the same token, they are aware that others will interpret their actions and expressions to create another's view of their identity. Thus, sometimes they seek to safeguard their future by being careful about the traces they leave online and to maintain the safety of their offline selves by not divulging the kind of information which would make them vulnerable to unwanted attention from strangers.

In civil society online, they find opportunities to try out ways of being, whether that involves being a man, expressing political opinions, learning how to demonstrate professional skills or how to manage and maintain a code of behaviour. They express their “passion” for causes and social problems. They relish the freedom to act or not to act, to take only part of an organisations agenda. They put their mark on actions they take, whether modifying the plans of others to suit their own perspective or taking the initiative to establish a project or organisation to make a difference in the wider world. They (mostly) take for granted the information and communications technologies which link them to civil society. Organisations in civil society using websites and other ICTs in their campaigning strategies can expect to gain attention from young people already committed to action for social change, but it will be important to recognise that to a large extent, young people are using these opportunities for their own purposes, creating what Beck (2001, p.162) calls ‘altruistic individualism’.

The construction of identity for these young people is thus a complex process. It is future-oriented, involving both psychological and social processes. The psychological processes of transformation interact with the social processes in ever-changing ways. The interactions are further complicated by the influences of particular aspects of life in the twenty-first century that impinge on the development of the sense of self which participants consider their



identity, notably for these participants their interactions with information and communication technologies.

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