

Our self-identities, that is, how we define and see ourselves as unique individuals, play a vital role in who we are and the direction that our lives take. The self-identity encompasses the totality of knowledge and understanding that we gain about ourselves as we develop including our personalities, aptitudes, and capabilities, intellectual and physical attributes, interests, and relationships. We gain our self-identities in two ways. First, as we develop self-awareness, we observe and evaluate our thoughts, feelings, and behavior based on past experience, current needs, and future goals. We also look outward to the world in which we live, for example, social, academic, and physical, for feedback that also shapes our self-identities. Because we are fundamentally social beings and an essential part of our development involves finding our place in the social and cultural context in which we live, feedback from that social world plays a significant role in the evolution of our self-identities. Because our social worlds have expanded dramatically in the last decade, from families, friends, neighborhoods, and schools to an almost-limitless universe of people due to the proliferation of the Internet and social media, it isn't difficult to see how external forces may now be gaining a disproportionate influence over our self-identities compared with previous generations. And these social influences, accelerated by the recent explosion of technology, may be shaping our self-identities in ways in which most of us aren't the least bit aware. One of the most powerful ways in which technology is altering self-identity is through the shift from being internally to externally driven. Yes, as I just described, social factors have always had an impact on the formation of self-identity, but they had been, up until recently, partners of sorts with our own internal contributors to self-identity. But now the sheer ubiquity and force of the latest technological advances have taken that influence and turned its volume up to a deafening roar. In previous generations, most of the social forces that influenced our self-identities were positive; parents, peers, schools, communities, extracurricular activities, even the media sent mostly healthy messages about who we were and how we should perceive ourselves. Yes, there were bad influences, but they were far outweighed by those that were beneficial. These forces acted mostly as a mirror reflecting back on us what we saw in ourselves, resulting in affirmation rather than a change in our self-identities. But now, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme in a social world where the profit motive rules and healthy influences are mostly drowned out by the cacophony of the latest technology. The self-identities of this generation of young people and, in fact, anyone who is deeply immersed in popular culture and media, are now shaped by external forces in two ways. First, popular culture, through both "old-school" and the latest media, no longer holds a mirror to reflect our self-identities. Nor does it provide feedback about how grounded our self-identities are in the reality of our lives. Instead, popular culture manufactures "portraits" of who it wants us to be. Tapping into our most basic needs to feel good about themselves, accepted, and attractive, popular culture tells us what we should believe about ourselves. The problem is that the self-identity that is shaped by popular culture serves its own best interests rather than what is best for us. Additionally, self-identity is no longer self-identity, meaning derived from the self, but rather is an identity projected onto us by popular culture and in no way an accurate reflection of who we really are. Second, social media has caused us to shift away from expressing our self-identities and toward constructing facades based on the answers to these questions: "How will others look at me?" and "How can I ensure that others view me positively?" The goal for many now in their use of social media

becomes how they can curry acceptance, popularity, status, and, by extension, self-esteem through their profiles and postings. Self-awareness and self-expression give way to impression management and self-promotion. As the writer Christine Rosen observed in her 2007 article in *The New Atlantis*, "Does this technology, with its constant demands to collect (friends and status), and perform (by marketing ourselves), in some ways undermine our ability to attain what it promises, a surer sense of who we are and where we belong? The Delphic oracle's guidance was: Know thyself. Today, in the world of online social networks, the oracle's advice might be: Show thyself." We come to see our identities as those we would like to have or that we want people to see rather than who we really are. We then feel compelled to promote and market these identities through social media. The line between person and persona, private and public self become blurred or erased completely and the so-called self-identity becomes a means of our acceptance and status. Paradoxically, in striving for approval by our social world writ large through technology and in seeking uniqueness that enables us to stand out in the densely populated cyber world, we unwittingly sacrifice our true self-identities and shape our identities to conform to what the digital world views as acceptable identity. And, in doing so, we relinquish the specialness that we hold so dear. Notes Christine Rosen, "Indeed, this is one of the characteristics of MySpace [obviously before Facebook took off]...it is an overwhelmingly dull sea of monotonous uniqueness, of conventional individuality, of distinctive sameness." There are two really sad things about this unintended consequence of the use of these emerging technologies. First, most people have no idea of the dramatic changes that are occurring slowly yet inexorably within them (just as a frog doesn't sense it is going to die if placed in water that is heated slowly). Second, this shift in identity, from internally derived to externally driven, can't be good for us as (formerly unique?) individuals nor for us as a (formerly vital?) society.