

# Constructing identity in the modern world essay sample

[Media](#)



Constructing identity in today's media saturated world is not an easy task. For with a simple flip of the television channel or a turn of a magazine page there at our disposal is a vast array of possible identity models. In modern society identity is perpetually unstable it must be chosen, created and constructed with reference to unavoidable surrounding media culture. Considering the frameworks surrounding the construction of identity by theorists including Louis Althusser and Anthony Giddens, this essay will argue that identity; is a social construction governed primarily by the contemporary media, it is created in relation to others and is fluid not fixed thus it is continually being altered in order to keep up with the changing society.

An individual's identity is shaped by society in which media plays a predominant role. There is a mutually interactive relationship between the subject; human agents, and the object; the conditions of their existence. Fiske distinguishes 'the subject' by claiming the individual is produced by nature but the subject by culture. Theories of the individual concentrate on differences between people and explain these differences as natural. According to Marxist theorists, individuals are 'constituted' as the possessors of positions through the effects of social relations. Alternatively theories of the subject concentrate on people's common experiences in society through watching television, reading the newspaper or surfing the internet. It is the most important way of distinguishing who we are. Thus subject identity is a social construction, not a natural one.

When we engage with the media, we act and are acted upon, use and are used by the system. French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser rejected the <https://assignbuster.com/constructing-identity-in-the-modern-world-essay-sample/>

idea of the ‘ Cartesian Self’ developed by Descartes, a notion of the individual as a self-conscious, autonomous being whose actions are explained in terms of the individual being in charge of one’s self. Instead Althusser introduced the concept of a mechanism of interpellation, where by subjects are constituted as the effects of pre-given structures. Ideology is not explicit, but implicit in these structures, images, and sign systems evident in the media which function to establish the individual’s as subjects. We have social identities conferred unto us, primarily through the mass media. For example, take the popular medium of magazines. This is important as not only are individuals able to choose which magazine they would prefer to read but they are also able to utilise it to construct their own identity. One of the most prominent images found in magazines is that of the thin and beautiful model, a great many females would look at these images as a source of inspiration as to what their bodies should resemble and would think that they were inadequate if they do not look like the models featured. For individuals:

“ Figuring out how to dress their bodies requires that they learn a subtle symbolic system, and then decide which of its components fit with, express and develop their identity.”

It is thus through the contemporary media apparatus that people gain a sense of identity.

There is no doubt that contemporary media is a culture obsessed with the ‘ self’. Via the mass media we are told about ways in which to improve the ‘ self’. We buy books, we watch lifestyle programs, and read articles in the newspaper, for example; the 8weekly lift-out in the Herald Sun entitled Mind,

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Body and Soul. The mass media provide us with the ability to transform, create, re-create and mass produce identity. Foucault's idea of the "technology of the self" illustrates that the media allows us to transform the very way we think of ourselves, for that reason it allows us to become and be seen the way we want to be. As demonstrated in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, a guide to improving one's self, the private self is the mere skeleton on which the public is layered onto. Franklin's text appears typical of most capitalist style technologies of the self. These technologies are not so much concerned with transforming a given private identity as constructing a public one.

A popular contemporary medium for transformation is found in the ability of an individual to construct a web page on the internet. It offers a unique opportunity to write one's self on a global stage and for the author to think about their identity. Creating such pages offers an unrivalled chance for self-presentations in relation to any dimension of social and personal identity to which one chooses to allude. We seek to be as simple as we present ourselves to the world. This technology is as much about viewing ourselves a certain way, as it is about having other people view us. By abstracting oneself unto a web page, one sets a goal to which one should stand true.

It is clear that due to the contemporary media with which we engage it is more likely that instead of experiencing, achieving and learning our identity, we are more likely to buy and consume our identity. Since 'personality' is largely a matter of outward appearance and behavior, individuals begin to use consumption as a means of creating a 'social self'. Thus identity

becomes constructed, rather than revealed and variable, rather than fixed. A fundamental aid in the construction of identity is fashion. The glitch with this type of construction is that by dressing a certain way, the fashion industry offers a 'new you'. In acquiring certain styles of fashion and particular brands, people consequently associate themselves with the meanings embedded in those goods. These adapted meanings thereby become part of the perceived 'self'. It creates a false ideology, a mask for one in which one can change who they are by means of altering the way they dress.

As consumers we become sophisticated senders and receivers of signals, making subtle adjustments for social context. As Anthony Giddens describes it, we are each to a greater or lesser extent involved in what he terms a "plurality of the life worlds"; meaning we are increasingly required to traverse a range of different social situations, each of which has its own norms and values. For example the way one acts at a university party is not the way one would act at home during dinner with their family. In addition, this complexity is added to by the mediated experience offered to us by the contemporary, mass media which increase the variety of "life worlds" presented to us.

Considering that every signifier receives its meaning from some other signifier, this philosophical assumption becomes translated into the case of society and identity and that they always arrive from an opposite position. Laclau and Mouffe, make a strict division between identification with the media and social structure and identity. Their central point is that identification never turns into identity. Society and mass media are

fundamentally split between different interests, desires, and engagements, and so is the subject. There is a vital lack between personal identity and identification with the mass media: a gap that prevents identification from ending up in a state of pure identity.

“ If agents were to have an always already defined location in the social structure, the problem of their identity, considered in a radical way, would not arise – or, at most, would be seen as a matter of people discovering or recognizing their own identity, not of constructing it.”

Thus, identity is a case of construction and articulation because as individuals we do not have a defined position in our social structure.

We construct identity in relation to those around us and much of the reason we feel like we are unsure of our identity is because the nature of society is continuously changing. The way in which other people see us and their opinions of us is of great importance. Hence as individual as we attempt to be, we all manage to conform to the ideas spread by the media. This is due to the fact that there is a need to feel part of a group, a want to feel as though one belongs, and to enhance one's identity in the eyes of others. In a study on consumption and consumer meanings, sociologist Steven Miles found that “ Communication enables young people to facilitate social participation and thereby construct a recognizable identity.” Contemporary society and mass media produces the end of the individual, and encourages conformity; where authentic culture once cultivated the individual, the mass production of the culture industries now eradicates the individual and produces mass society. The mass media are to blame for ‘ brainwashing’ the

people of the paradox; your identity is only individual when it is the same as everybody else.

According to the Hypodermic model of media influence, the media act as a syringe which injects ideas, attitudes and beliefs into the audience who as a powerless mass have little choice but to be influenced. As a result identities are constructed from the material generated by the media. On the other hand, Gibbins and Reimer strongly emphasize the possibilities of active choices and individual “ self-creation” when consuming media products:

“ The media function as a cultural forum. It is increasingly through the media that people get impulses about whom they want to be and whom they want to become. These media impulses are quite contradictory. The media do not tell anyone with an authoritative voice that this is the way he or she should behave. Rather, they constantly tell us different things and it is up to us to choose between these messages.”

In a sense, this may be the case as we are not forced to read ‘ The Age’ or watch ‘ Neighbours’. Yet the mass media institutions do have the power to set the agenda, to select, to frame, to classify and to define relevant issues. Consequently, media communication is a structured activity, which ‘ frames’ the social reality in accordance with the ‘ dominant ideology’. The meanings that are gathered from the media do not have to be final but are open to reshaping and refashioning. Ultimately we only get to choose from a selected few issues which reflect the interests of capitalists and large corporations. It is from these limited issues that an individual constructs their identity.

Certain values and ideologies are imposed unto us, with no opposing views

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to counteract their influence. Thus, we can only draw from the cultural repertoire available to us.

Evidently the contemporary media permeates everything that we encounter in our everyday existence. The messages we receive are diverse, diffuse and contradictory. It is through the television, magazines, news papers and the internet that, at its disposal, society has a great deal of resources available to them. Through the theoretical frameworks concerning identity construction it is clear that there is no such thing as a fixed identity; it is negotiable and continually being altered in order to keep up with the changing nature of society as identity is constructed in relation to others. The media provide us with tools, allowing us to become the person we want to be, and fit in with those around us.

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