CHALLENGING ACADEMIC IDENTITY

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The author comes from a marketing practitioner background as a Chartered Marketer, specialising in strategic digital marketing. She brings this practitioner focus into her academic role as a Head of Department, with a specific interest in changing methods of communication in an increasingly digital environment. Observations of academic response to these new forms of digital communication leads to an interest in how changing consumer (student) behaviour, particularly in the context of digital conversations, impacts on academic identity within a HE environment that encourages digitalisation. An overarching research question is seen to be:

How does changing consumer behaviour impact upon academic identity?

The behaviour of students in HE has been explored across three dimensions; the identification of students as consumers, the mindset of students as a degree owner and the student demand for digital conversations, within an environment where the first two dimensions exist. These three dimensions are seen to contribute toward a significant overall change in student behaviour that impacts on academic identity. Early theorists identify "involvement with the world" as an influencer of identity development (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 1997 : 160 cited in Martsin, 2010 : 436). Academics involvement with the world could be seen to be changing, as student behaviours change, thus impacting upon their identity

STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS

Watjatrakul (2014) identifies an increasing focus on the student as a consumer. With student satisfaction being a core measure in HE league tables, academics are under increasing pressure to respond to the changing expectations of students. These changes can be broadly be perceived as:

- Students see themselves as a fee-paying customer
- As a customer, students demand to have their say, or the STUDENT VOICE (Naylor *et. al.*, 2014)
- As a customer, students demand an instant response

STUDENTS AS DEGREE OWNERS

The perceived marketisation of HE suggests that students seek to have a degree rather than be learners (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009).

If students do not seek to be learners, then their demands from an academic as part of the institution that provides them with a degree, may differ from those of a learner who aspires to gain from traditional academic interaction.

STUDENT DEMAND FOR DIGITAL

Bennett (2017) argues that student expectations of digital communications demands changes to pedagogic practices. Social Media is now an accepted form of communication for the majority of students entering HE (Thomas *et al.*, 2017). A question arises as to whether this acceptance has become a demand.

Academics thus face the challenges of managing an online identity. Manca & Ranieri (2016) go on to suggest that increasingly people share content via social media platforms, indicating that social media is seen to be driving internet use.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

What changing consumer behaviours do academics perceive to be impacting upon their identity?

Do academics need to adapt to satisfy the changing behaviour of students, and if so, in what ways?

How do academics feel that adaptions to their behaviour will impact upon their identity?

identity

IDENTITY TIME DIMENSIONS

Several authors refer to the time dimension associated with identity. Henkel (2005) states that identity is not fixed, that it changes **over time**. Hall (2004 : 3 cited in Barnett and Di Napoli, 2007 : 28) describes identity as a set of traits, beliefs and allegiances that **develop** to create a personality and Martsin (2010) describes identity as momentary and fluid. The inclusion of a **time dimension** suggests that identity is impacted by changes over periods of time, indeed Martsin (2010) questions how any sense of person can pervade when identity moves and changes so much. It could therefore be suggested that academics will inevitably adapt to changes in consumer behaviour within the digital landscape.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Henkel (2005) describes academic identity as *"a function of community membership, that is grounded in interactions between the individual and two key communities: the discipline and higher education as an institution."*
Gordon & Whitchurch (2010) also suggest that academics see themselves as sharing characteristics with other professionals, with *stability* in work values and core values

DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS AND IDENTITY

Van Winkel et al. (2018) suggest that academic identity is a specific social identity, consisting of Affect, Cognition (values, goals, beliefs), Abilities (knowledge & skills) and Stereotypic behaviour. Barcan, (2014) refers to academic fears of fraudulence in her THE feature "I shouldn't really be here". This fear is hypothetically exacerbated by changing student behaviour, where students can potentially be more digitally capable than academics. This further challenges academics in terms of the Authority element of their professional identity. Whilst academics may be confident of their abilities in relation to their knowledge and skills linked to their academic specialism, their ability in relation to digital conversations may be challenged within digital conversations if they choose not to engage with students online, for example via social media channels. Carrigan (2016) specifically explores the impact of social media interactions on academic identity, suggesting that academics feel a loss of **control** within the social media environment.

It could be argued that in all aspects of our identity we have some element of control over what information is visible to others, but this is retracted within the digital environment. Bennett (2017) suggests that visibility on social media could cause anxiety for academics, who feel that their authority (Affect?) and status (linked to Abilities?) is challenged.

Research will be undertaken to explore whether academics feel their identity is being impacted by changes in consumer behaviour. Perceived adaptions required to satisfy the changing behaviour of students will also be explored, focusing on how these adaptions may then impact on academic identity. It is recognised that not only is identity a moving dimension, but so too is consumer behaviour, particularly given the fast-paced nature of change within the digital environment. Therefore it is recommended that the research focuses on one specific aspect of changing consumer behaviour, being digital conversations between academics and students

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