

the  
wakeman  
agency

White Paper  
Identity and Culture  
Communications  
for Nonprofits

The Wakeman Agency  
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# Table Of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Defining Our Terms.....	5
What the Social Psychologists Have to Say.....	6
How Identity & Culture Are Different Today.....	7
Discrete Identities.....	8
The Bicycle Spokes Approach to Connecting with Audiences.....	9
Consider the Ethics.....	10
Take Aways.....	11



## Introduction

**I**dentify and culture should be a key area of focus for nonprofit communications in the current climate. In this white paper, we draw on our observation of trends in the social change space over the last two decades to highlight the value of this approach in this moment. The right has tapped into identity and culture to form valuable connections with prospective audiences, scapegoating people who are *not like us*, and fostering fear based on an invented threat to *our way of life*.

We are collectively witnessing the terrible effectiveness of these types of communications. But we can actually use this same dynamic to garner support for the protection of communities, increased equity and solutions to long-term injustices that nonprofits are fighting for. In this white paper, we show why culture and identity are at the heart of it, and lay out the steps for how to use this powerful combination to your advantage for systems change.

## Executive Summary

- Appeals to identity and culture are an emerging component of effective communications in the current climate that nonprofits must take into account and learn to use effectively and ethically.
- Identity and culture—relationships to social groups—have been noted by researchers as key components that motivate collective action, specifically when they encompass the trifecta of social positioning, perceived injustice and efficacy. This produces what has been called “the collective action frame” that can effectively mobilize action.
- However, because of massive sociotechnological and systemic politicoeconomic changes over the past few decades, the formation of identity is occurring differently today for most audience members, and many of the social structures that previously provided anchoring or orienting functions for identity formation are no longer reliable.
- This has resulted in identification for many audience members based around increasingly discrete categories, more narrowly defined than the traditional demographics that communications professionals have often thought about (race, gender, religion, region, political party, etc.).
- For organizations seeking to advance real forms of equity, redress and healing of long-term structural injustices across society, this trend in identification can be seen as a net positive.
- Nonprofit communicators can capitalize on this new dynamic in ways of identifying by employing what we call the *bicycle spoke method*—connecting their main theme or message to a wide range of key identity or culture categories, which can help stitch lines of solidarity across audience members who may have previously seen themselves as unconnected to the cause.

## Defining Our Terms

**W**hen it comes to tapping into identity and culture in order to speak in more compelling ways to prospective allies and partners in your audience, three factors are important to define:

### Social identity:

The socially shared understanding of what it means to be a group member. This can also take the form of a *politicized* identity, meaning when people understand their identity in relation to a group experiencing structural injustice or disadvantage, which prompts a sense of obligation for the individual to take action to right that wrong. Social identity and politicized identities play an important role in strategic communications for nonprofits.

### Perceived injustice:

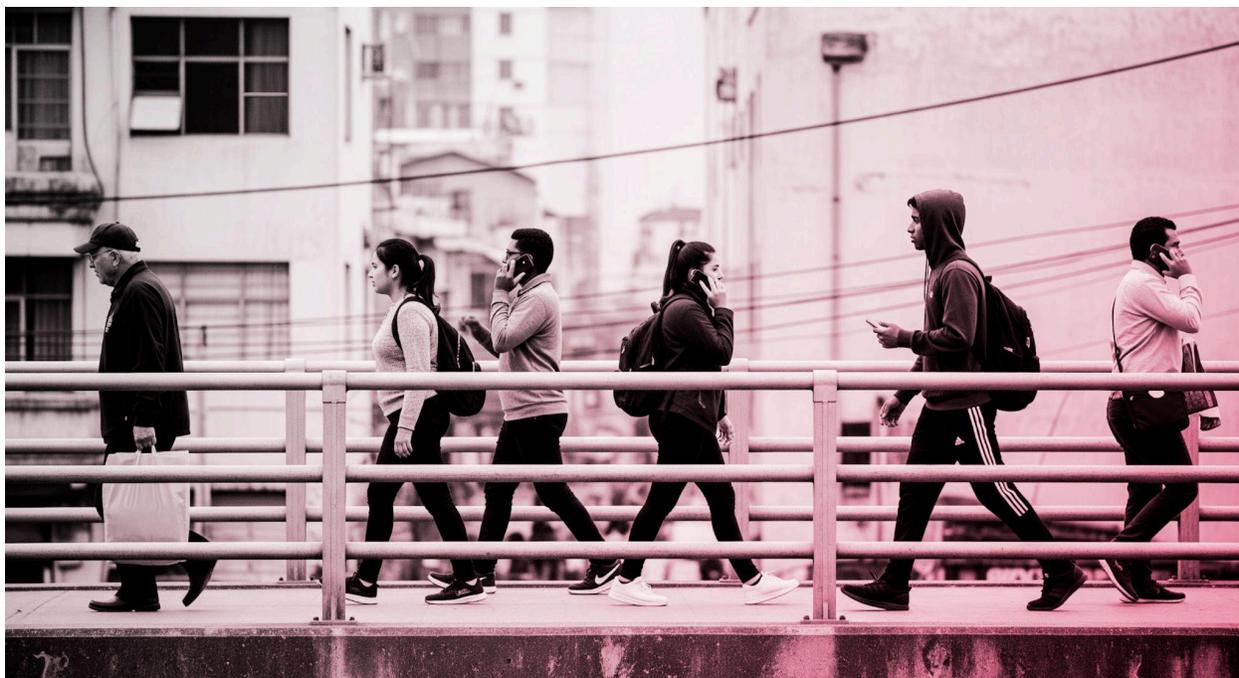
Related to these social identities is the importance of individuals being aware of the injustice. It's not enough for there to be an injustice—in order to take action on something, an individual must recognize it, and that it implicates, or disadvantages a group that they identify with (either in terms of a social or politicized identity).

### Sense of efficacy:

The final piece that must be present for participation in collective action is efficacy or a sense of agency—and specifically, group efficacy, or the shared belief that it is possible to resolve the grievances of one's group through collective efforts.

Researchers have pointed to the [role of identity in motivating collective action](#)—such as protesting, but also voting, and contributing to philanthropic campaigns. These studies have focused on three key elements for understanding how identity and culture play into how we take action: perceived injustice, perceived efficacy and sense of social identity. It has been shown that attitudes, intention to participate in, and actual participation in collective action can all be predicted by these three elements. In this white paper, we dig into what exactly that means for nonprofit communicators seeking to use communications strategically, in a climate of widespread attacks on Black and brown communities and the very foundations that allow for a well-functioning democracy.

Now that we have explained what we mean by perceived injustice, perceived efficacy and a sense of social identity, the next section of this white paper shares some of the context for why these factors are key. Then, we turn to some of our own observations on how identity functions differently today compared to the past. Finally, we recommend a framework for adopting an approach to identity and culture in your nonprofit organization's communications, which can generate authentic and compelling connections with your audiences, and thereby contribute to, in the words of [Achilles Mbembe](#), Cameroonian historian and political theorist, the "production of social horizons of [hope](#)."



## What the Social Psychologists Have to Say

**Z**omeran, Postmes and Spears (2008) looked at these three components by surveying the field of social psychology research to understand exactly how these three components function. What they found is that identity, and specifically social identity, works as a bridge to help us understand why perceptions of, or awareness of injustice, and a sense of group efficacy, are important to explaining participation in collective action.

Other scholars have discussed these insights as a strategic approach, known as the “collective action frame,” to strategically employ communications to key audiences, by linking identity, injustice and efficacy,

funneling their combined energy toward a specific call to action for social change (Gamson 1992). None of this is very surprising—it actually depicts what many of us observe and see in effective social action that has played out in our society over time, and can also provide explanations for why some incredible collective action projects have stalled.

Knowing the power of the collective action frame, we must consider how to apply this in our given climate. And that is more complex than may appear up to this point in the discussion because the way that we, as a society, understand identity has changed significantly in the recent past.

# How Identity & Culture Are Different Today

Over the last few decades, American society and societies at large have changed dramatically on multiple fronts. For example, in terms of:

- Technology that impacts the way we socialize, how we spend our downtime, the sources and methods through which we get our news, and how we determine what information is legitimate.
- The population's trust in broad institutions such as the nonprofit sector, the media, higher education, the government, and large businesses.
- Our collective belief that our major political parties—or even our governing system—can address the problems we are facing, or are meant to address them at all.

Each of these observed shifts has often pushed society to be more insular, leaving us increasingly dependent on individual solitary engagement in activities that used to be, more often than not, shared across families, neighborhoods, community get-togethers or social associations. Although [these types of relations](#) are not extinct, as [Global South scholars](#) of the social impacts of political-economic changes in the last four decades have observed, across societies, there has been a massive disintegration of the “social structures that offered security and orientation to life” in previous generations. Our identities have become more individualized, less socially dependent and also more commercialized as we depend

on an increasing number of areas of social life that have been or are being privatized.

In addition to this, we see increasing instances of and support for illiberalism, which leans heavily on solutions that are majoritarian (at the expense of minority rights), emboldens the power of the state often at the expense of people and communities, and favors traditional hierarchies and the homogenization of culture, which is prized over politics as a form of identification ([Laruelle 2022](#)). Working in the same direction, we have seen the increasing use of populism as a strategy, discourse or rhetoric that evokes grievances and “appeals to emotions provoked by them” to achieve political ends, and more and more alt-right populism which designates Black and brown communities as to blame for those grievances ([Juan-Torres González 2024](#)).

Each of these simultaneously unfolding dynamics could make the use of identity for communications feel increasingly risky. Why lean into identity when we know that it is being used so effectively by the right to divide and scapegoat? We believe that it is *essential* for nonprofits and others in the social change sector to take up the use of identity and culture to further tailor their communications in the search for additional audiences of solidarity and action. The key is to take into account the ways that opportunities for social identification have actually multiplied because of these dynamics.

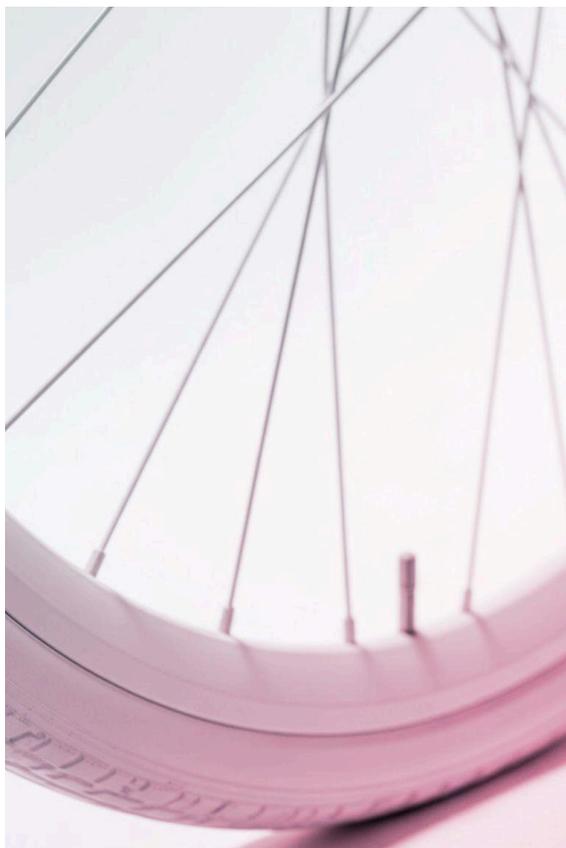
## Discrete Identities

One of the consequences of these changes has been the individualization of identities, or the increasing salience of additional identity categories for audience members. For example, your audience members may see themselves as health-focused, or DIYers, small business owners, young parents or pet parents.

This is not to say that people are no longer identifying themselves in relation to historic group categories like gender, race, ethnicity, religion or political party, but simply to say that other ways of identifying are becoming more salient for a wide range of people. This is likely also fed by an increase in polarization around those more historic group categories. This phenomenon has been recognized by [political strategists](#) on both [sides of the aisle](#) who are working to connect to voters through these new cultural and identity markers more intensively than ever before. The dynamic is perhaps also magnified given that among the US adult population, social media (and its minutely personalized algorithms) is now the dominant source for getting news—[surpassing TV news for the first time ever](#) and streaming video platforms [outpaced traditional TV in May of 2025](#). Your audience's experience of getting practical information is now constantly mixed with identity and culturally oriented insights, trends and affirmations that create a sense of connection between their individual experiences and preferences and brands.

For organizations seeking to advance real forms of equity, redress and healing of long-term structural injustices across society, this trend in identification can be seen as a net positive. Many members of the population seem to hold an inherent skepticism, or at least a critically analytic view of the previously dominant categorizations that oriented society and social action. We might think of the rise of [religious “nones” in the US](#) (people who identify as spiritual or religious but outside of a particular dominant religious framework) as one specific manifestation of this theme. For communicators, this means that although we cannot fully rely on the previous understandings of demographic categories to orient compelling calls to action, it nonetheless means we have more detailed categories to work with when considering how to identify personas of prospective donors, supporters, allies and co-conspirators in our most pressing work.

# The Bicycle Spokes Approach to Connecting with Audiences



**I**n the context of PR this has been called personalization and has been identified as [one of the leading themes influencing PR work of this era](#), as well as an essential component of cutting-edge brand marketing. Deloitte [found that in 2024](#), brands that incorporate personalization are 71% more likely to report improved customer loyalty and 48% more likely to have exceeded their revenue goals. Nonprofits can use personalization to their advantage to create solidarity for their cause across new audience categories. The way to

do this is to think of your issue area as the center of a bicycle wheel—the central driving message or story—which you can connect out to a wide(r) range of identity or cultural markers associated with people with whom you want to create or deepen a connection. There are a wide range of examples of this in contemporary society. Alt-right actors are aggressively deploying attempts to engage people from all possible entry points and bring them into contact with content that shares White nationalist values or themes—for example, their appearance in the [wellness industry](#). This dynamic should also be familiar to anyone who has experienced Meta’s practice of ad targeting. Like when you’ve been searching for a new pair of sunglasses, and you suddenly start seeing advertisements for everything from vacation deals to deck furniture.

We have also seen this play out impressively with the recent campaign for the Democratic nomination to the NYC mayoral race. The Mamdani campaign expertly took their central message—city affordability—and [connected it](#) to a wide range of people through personalization, to show that the campaign’s message is *their* message. For example, Mamdani and his team saw their audience’s many identity possibilities, as [subway riders](#), [small business owners and halal food cart patrons](#), the dessert lover and [Hindi](#) and [Bangla-speaking](#) politically curious, and more.

The campaign zeroed in on specific social identities, making the case that they too are

part of the “we” that can make a difference (sense of efficacy) in relation to the universally recognized injustice of the exorbitant cost of living. Whether you are a Mamdani supporter or not, we can all appreciate the astute nature of that communications strategy employing the key elements that social psychological research has shown to effectively motivate collective action.

So, how can nonprofits put this into practice to create more bonds of solidarity with new audience members and thereby build a movement for their cause out of this moment?

1. Do some research. Learn about how your prospective and current audience members see themselves, through surveys, interviews and observation of trends.

2. Identify connection points that move beyond the traditional demographics.
3. Plan for communications that take into account the top connection points/social identities that can help foster a sense of connection with your work and objectives.
4. Stay curious and open. Remember that traditional demographics remain important for understanding audiences' experiences and connection points, like recent insight on [gender](#) or [Hispanic identity](#), while also focusing in on new social identity categories that are specific to your key audiences of interest.

## Consider the Ethics

**W**hen adopting this type of approach, it is, as always, essential to think through the ethical dynamics that could be raised by targeting audience members through appeals to identity and culture. We have previously shared insights that are meant to guide nonprofits and those in the philanthropic sector to avoid some of the most egregious pitfalls when speaking about identities and culture, like [simplification or essentialization of identities](#),

[amplifying narratives of victimization](#) and generally how to ensure that your communications are always [stemming from the foundation of your organization's central philosophy](#). In addition to that, our [Narrative Justice approach](#) provides five useful steps (Awareness, Engagement, Confrontation, Incorporation and Sharing) for a straightforward process to navigate the ethical complexities of representation and communications about identities and culture.

## Take Aways

**S**ocial psychology research demonstrates important insights for nonprofit communicators to take into account when planning to use identity and culture in their strategies to increase audiences of solidarity and action. Although many components of how we have oriented toward identity and collective culture in the past are changing rapidly, people still feel strongly aligned with those organizations that can effectively connect to their perceived identities, especially as they change. Personalization combined with collective action frames—those emphasizing social identity, perceived injustice and efficacy—are a key combination to effective communications today. Nonprofits also have the opportunity to really amplify their organizations as *the* effective way to take

action on an issue that audience members feel connected to and perceive as an ongoing injustice. By presenting your call to action in ways that bolster your audiences' sense of their ability to take real, meaningful action, you are completing the trifecta of an effective collective action frame.

Although these techniques are being used widely to create division and justify authoritarian attacks, we see the intentional use of culture and identity as an opportunity for nonprofit communications to advance their vision of a shared future. A future where equity is understood as a foundational pillar of how things are done, and redress for historic and contemporary injustices is widely embraced as an essential form of strengthening the bonds of society.

If you are interested in integrating identity and culture into your communications channels to cultivate and strengthen connections with your audiences, contact us at [info@thewakemanagency.com](mailto:info@thewakemanagency.com) to schedule a consultation.



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