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Sorry, kids, all the good usernames are gone



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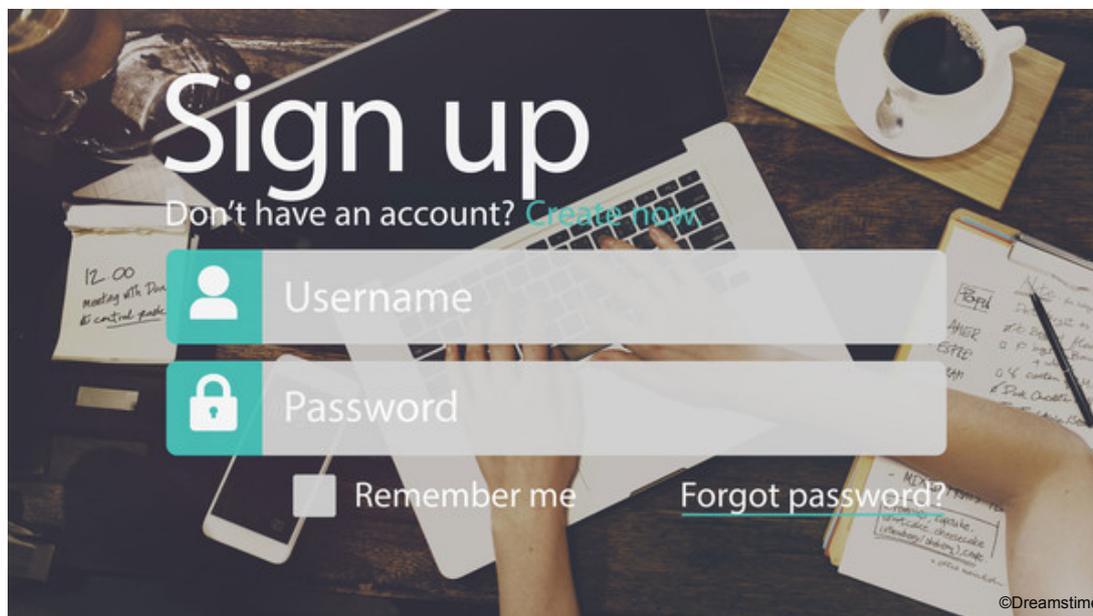


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Future generations face a shortage of memorable online identities



After five years of receiving emails not meant for me, I finally met my digital doppelgänger in December. I was on a business trip to New York, where she lives. She suggested afternoon tea at a chic hotel.

What brought us together is a notably contemporary problem of similar usernames. Her last name, “Pollock”, forms part of her Gmail address — like mine. Approximately once a month, someone who

is sending her an email looks at that last “o” in her name and summarily decides it must be an “a”. My inbox is then graced with an announcement about a shipment of skinny belts that has arrived in SoHo, an offer of Latin lessons for children taught by an enterprising Brooklyn teenager or an invite to Thea’s sixth birthday party.

I have thus become a voyeur afforded guilt-free glimpses of a parallel world of fashion, interior design and parenting posh children. It is distinctly less pleasant for my digital doppelgänger who, over inexplicably sweet mini cakes, huffs about people’s wrong-headed attempts at spellchecking her name.

Nonetheless, our online identity problem also demonstrates that we were alive during a golden age of online identity that is now over. We may not have defined benefit pension plans or centrally located homes in major metropolitan areas, but we do have relatively simple Gmail addresses that include our names. In a generation or two, this will make us look like dinosaurs. Google, after all, does not free usernames that have been taken before, even if an account becomes inactive. So if you have a combination of your first name and last name in your Gmail address and little else: congratulations, you have ruined it for everyone with the same name, or a similar one, who comes after you. Same with Twitter: you can go ahead and feel bad for future generations, if the platform survives that long.

It is a different story when it comes to Hotmail or Yahoo. Their terms of service specify that, after a period of inactivity, addresses may be recycled so that they can be used by others. Yahoo explains that this is “due to the limited number of names available”. On the one hand, it’s comforting to know that the digital detritus of my teenage Hotmail account has not cluttered the online world for those to come. On the other, the risks to the privacy of past owners are unnerving. There are disadvantages for the new owners, too. As one such user discovered, it is hard to enter your new Hotmail address into your current PayPal account if PayPal thinks that address already exists. So, if you do inadvertently pick up a recycled account, you had better hope that the person was as digitally dull as someone who shares motivational quotes on Facebook.

Many will shout that this is all the more reason to purchase a domain name — to allow, say, a family of Joneses to have email addresses along the lines of [firstname]@jones.com. But here, too, many of the best addresses — that is, those that are familiar, pronounceable and memorable — have been snapped up. Evidence of this is provided in a forthcoming paper in *The Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics*. Thies Lindenthal of the University of Cambridge finds that there could be up to 25 per cent more registered domain names if more user-friendly ones were available. New addresses are being released by expanding the universe of top-level domains — for example, to include .site and .online — but whether these are widely adopted is a different matter.

For those unable to find a web address to their liking, Lindenthal asks in a separate interview whether the growth of certain social media platforms will at some point slow down simply because users cannot find an attractive login name. “In the end,” he says, “who would like to be ‘Dave123456789’?”

One way to get around this might be to start early, ensuring as a parent that you give your child a name that is both unique and memorable. Then immediately buy an appropriate domain as an investment in their digital future (Google and others, by the way, have a minimum age requirement for accounts).

In the longer term though, we may have to develop smarter ways to recycling digital ashes for the

benefit of those to come.

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