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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Live From Shopping Malls: Blogs and Chinese Consumer Desire**

Xin Zhao, University of Hawaii, USA

Russell W. Belk, University of Utah, USA

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# Live From Shopping Malls: Blogs and Chinese Consumer Desire

Xin Zhao, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA

Russell W. Belk, University of Utah, USA

## ABSTRACT

In this exploratory study, we examine a particular type of blog [web log] on which young Chinese consumers passionately write about their daily lives and consumption experiences, such as trips to shopping malls, dining experiences at restaurants, holiday travels, and clothing purchases. We seek to understand how such blogs function to spread consumer culture in cyberspace and among Chinese consumers who read and write consumption-oriented blogs.

## INTRODUCTION

Started as a list of annotated links to other web sites, blogs [web logs] are gaining momentum in recent years (Serfaty 2004). They are different from other online resources such as BBS, online discussion groups, and personal web pages examined in prior research (Kozinets 2002; Shau and Gilly 2003). The blog is a form of online diary accompanied by up-to-date photos and music. Our focus on China and Chinese blogs is justified by the rapid growth of incomes and consumer culture in urban China (e.g., Davis 2000). After English, Chinese is now the most common language of the Internet. The same is true of blogs which have become a very popular collective forum among Chinese people around the globe. Consumption-oriented blogs are online diaries dedicated to the bloggers' everyday consumption activities, such as a trip to the shopping mall or an enjoyable dinner at a fancy restaurant. For example, "Jessie" updates the world on her blog about new additions to her private closet, and discusses her favorite possessions ranging from a pair of Converse shoes to Abercrombie shirts. She writes about what she already has and laments what she could not afford to have. Blogs like this spread knowledge about the latest fashion trends and the hottest products and brands. They not only record the blogger's everyday consumption, but also provide introspective accounts of how the products are connected to their lives. Consumption-oriented blogs thus provide a unique context in which to examine global consumer culture and the cultivation of consumer desire in the cyberspace. In this exploratory study, we take a discovery-oriented approach (Wells 1993) and seek to understand why consumers read, write, and post their private shopping experiences in blogs.

## THE LITERATURE: CONSUMERISM

Consumerism is the value system in which consumption is naturalized as the source of meaning and happiness in life, and material goods are avidly desired for their extra-utilitarian values, such as hedonic value, envy provocative, and status-seeking (Belk 1998; Stearns 2001). Consumerism has been celebrated by some for its potential stimulation of cultural rebellion and social democracy, for its role in constructing meaningful life experiences, and for being conducive to social well being (e.g., Miller 1987; Wilk 1993). More often, consumerism is subject to criticism and held responsible for reproducing and establishing social stratification through consumption, precipitating epidemics of depression, and leading to anomie, commodity fetishism, exploitation of women, and the commercialization of culture (e.g., Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; Bourdieu 1984). The rise of consumerism around the globe has attracted multidisciplinary interest (e.g., Brewer and Porter 1993; Campbell 1987; Stearns 2001). However, most research is focused on traditional institutions of consumerism such as department

stores (e.g., Leach 1983) and advertising (e.g., Lears 1994; Marchand 1985). Comparatively little attention is given to the spread of consumer culture and cultivation of consumer desire in the cyberspace (e.g., Kozinets 1999; Giesler forthcoming). Consumption-oriented blogs provide such a context to examine such important issues.

## METHODS

Netnography is an interpretive method for examining consumers and the culture of consumption present on the Internet (Kozinets 1998, 2002). It is a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer-mediated, Internet-based communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology and market-oriented ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Kozinets 1998). Netnography adapts ethnographic research techniques to virtual communities (Kozinets 2002, p.62). It allows researchers to observe consumers in a naturally occurring environment in a way that is less intrusive than traditional market-oriented ethnography (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Our data collection follows the instructions of Kozinets (1998, 2002) and included two sources. First, consumption-oriented blogs were directly copied from blog web sites such as Blogcn, Blogbus, MSN Blog and Blog City, and then saved for analysis. Initial blogs were identified through the index pages on these website and other blogs were found through the links on the initial blogs. Secondly, our reflective fields notes based on observations of the bloggers communications [many blogs allow posting comments by readers] were recorded. Data collection continued until no new insights about our topic of interest were generated. Data interpretation was informed by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), Spiggle (1994), and Thompson (1997). Attention was given to various consumer identity constructions and representations by the bloggers.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Consumption-oriented blogs describe bloggers' everyday consumption experience. They provide rich retrospective accounts of the bloggers' trips to shopping malls, dining experience at restaurants, clothing purchases, and holiday travels. Bloggers also discuss the movies, TV programs, fashion shows, and magazines they enjoy watching and reading. Most blogs in our study are maintained by Chinese women in their twenties and thirties, not only within China but also overseas. Some blogs are dedicated to one type of consumption such as food, but more common are blogs covering several subjects. We structure our analysis by first describing different types of consumption blogs commonly seen in the blogosphere, and then proceeding to exemplify some common themes related to the construction of consumer identity across these different types of blogs. In our conclusion we provide an account of consumption meanings revealed by a single blog across time.

### Blogosphere and Food Consumption

The blogs on food consumption symbolically extend the sharing of food beyond the geographic immediacy of neighborhood. Remote audiences and the blogger are connected by the vivid images of food images on these sites. One type of food blog describes the blogger's trips to restaurants and their dining



**FIGURE 3**  
Versus Trip to Fashion Mall



**FIGURE 4**  
QiuQiu's Shoe Collection



**FIGURE 5**  
Ericyoung Spring Dream Fashion



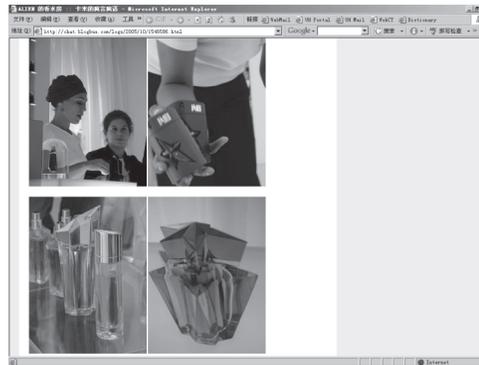
travel and many bloggers of this type are overseas Chinese students. A third type of travel blogger posts images of new discoveries in the familiar places where they live.

**Live from Mall: Consumers in the Blogosphere**

Consumption-oriented blogs construct various images of savvy consumers: the saving housewives who can always find sales products; the urban chic-seekers who know every detail about the latest fashion trends on the streets; the nostalgic dreamers whose purchases are often romanticized by connections to an idealized past era; the impulsive warriors who seem to never worry about the

financial consequences of impulsive buying; the photographer gourmands who are in constant search for the fanciest restaurant in town and always take tempting pictures of the foods before eating them; the cosmopolitan nomads who are always on the go and post photos of their trips; the energized party enthusiasts who are familiar with the most recently opened nightclubs; and the media gurus who regularly review the latest movies and TV shows in real time. Bloggers also reveal multiple identities when it comes to different items on their must-have lists. The above categorizations are meant to exemplify rather than providing a comprehensive list of all consumer types in the blogosphere. In the following section,

FIGURE 6  
Camille's Trip to Alien Boutique



we will demonstrate a few instances of these blogosphere consumer types.

For saving housewives, what matters is the money saved from regular prices, as seen in the following account from a blog maintained by an overseas female Chinese student in the U.S.:

“After buying the pot, we stopped by the liquor store. Wow, regular price \$39.99 and now it sells at only \$19.99, we can save \$15! For a person like me, how can I skip this? I grabbed two bottles of this type. There is another one that is also on sale, \$9.00 off the regular price. I took two of those too. When we checked out, the cashier said if there was 10% off if we bought 6 bottles in total. Wines won't go bad anyway, so I grabbed a champion and something else. It cost about \$80 in total. On our way home, I thought of this and found I saved more than \$70 this time!”

As Miller (1998) found in the UK, such shoppers focus on how much they save rather than how much they spend.

The urban chic-seekers not only describe their private collections, but also comment about the latest fashions they see in magazines, movies, and on the streets. The following excerpt is from a female blogger currently pursuing her PhD in the U.S.:

“I am not the girly girl, I like the gorgeous Armani evening dress, but I seldom buy long skirts, bohemian tops, heels etc. The best summer look means comfortable yet trendy for me. This year it is white shirt+cut off shorts or Bermuda shorts+chunky bead necklace. If anyone has the legs for the cut off shorts, it's those super models like Kate Moss, Gemma Ward...”

Clearly there is some self-fashioning going on here.

Food, fashions, movies, daily shopping trips, and nearly everything on the shopping blogs of nostalgic dreamers are represented as having mysterious connections with a romanticized past. “Wasa” is a female Chinese student in Paris. Her purchase of breakfast cookies results in an entry recalling her childhood experience of eating at a street-side eatery in China.:

“Eating cookies with cocoa powder is like eating the fried Tofu when we were kids. We all knew that you could not put a lot of sauce on the small piece of fried Tofu, but we always asked for more and more. In the end, even the wraps were infused with the source so we could put it on the wall. Usually the one

who was willing to give us more sauce to put on the fried Tofu was most popular shop, although they always told us not to waste. French people in Paris know the secret of eating, they always give you lots of sauces, much more than needed. They are never frugal on this, usually they have more dressing on a salad than the salad per se, which is good.”

There are shades of Proust and *Remembrance of Things Past* here.

Blogs also construct images of impulsive warriors who usually buy stuff as a result of swift decisions. “QiuQiu” in Shanghai records on her blog of March 3, 2006, that she bought one of her favorite pairs of shoes while waiting for her friend to go dinner; the account is accompanied by a picture of her wearing her favorite jeans and the new shoes. QiuQiu is a shoe lover and posts pictures of her shoe collection (Figure 4) on her blog.

“Friday. Tonight Joanne and I are going to have dinner together. I bought this pair of shoes while I was waiting for her. It is coffee brown and looks perfect for my jeans. The color, the style, and everything, it is just right. I don't know where these shoes will take me in the future, but all the memories they have brought me, good or bad, will be with me for ever.”

The shoes are considered to be a record of her cherished past, and are expected to bring her transcendental experiences in the future:

The energized party enthusiasts write about their clubbing experiences and comment on the hottest parties in town. In her blog, “Supermonica” described her weekend in Shanghai:

“There are all kinds of parties on weekends in Shanghai. This weekend the hottest one is definitely Sasha's party at VIP (a night club in Shanghai). People in Shanghai love parties. You can imagine that no one would skip this one. VIP is packed with people, and the admission is RMB250. The private room costs RMB3500, although they only charge RMB1500 in regular times. Before we came to VIP, we also went to Pub 36 at Shangri-La Hotel to have a lychee martini ...the night scene there is gorgeous, much better than the Cloud 9 at Hyatt. The music at Pub 36 is fabulous and even their restroom is full of surprises.”

So after being seen by the beautiful people at the club, Supermonica can be seen by others on her blog.

### If I was a Rich Girl: Insights from Jessica's Blog

"Jessica's" blog is named "If I was a rich girl". Under this slogan are her favorable brands, TV show, and dream car: True Religion Jeans, the East Hamptons, Marc Jacobs, San Francisco, Puma, Sex and the City, Cadillac Escalade. Jessica is a Chinese student currently living in the U.S. In her blog on MSN Space, she writes about her daily life and her shopping experiences. The blogs are packed with images of the latest fashions, both from her own closet and from fashion magazines and advertisements. Jessica differentiates herself from those whom she considers as pseudo fashion experts. She does this by writing blogs about what she considers as real fashion and fine taste and through criticizing others' blogs. The central theme that emerges from her blogs is the importance of up-to-date knowledge of and access to the latest and authentic fashion magazines, movies, advertisements, entertainment, travel, and foods. These are not readily available and have only become the target of emulation and discussion by Chinese bloggers recently. Being in U.S., Jessica seems more intrigued by European fashion but she also displays her knowledge of the fashion trend in the U.S. as seen in her Feb 18 entry of 2006:

"As usual, I went to read Elle UK Edition, Vogue, and In Style UK Edition on the weekend. They are the magazines that I like and enjoy reading. I also like Teen Vogue, and Elle Girl, though they are a bit naïve. I just don't feel interested in the fashion magazines for general American adults. Nylon is so-so but Vogue and Elle (American Edition) are not worthy of even mentioning."

Hollywood blockbusters and Chinese TV programs are other sources from which Jessica demonstrates her knowledge of what is "in." Jessica also evaluates movies based on the fashions in the films:

"I've seen Brokeback Mountain. The trailer is moving but watching the movie was a great pain. We got there late and could only find a seat in the very front row. They spoke English with a heavy Southern accent and I couldn't understand it much. Especially that Heath who always spoke in low voice and I couldn't understand him at all... The Producers are lousy and I don't like it. The next movie I saw recently is King Kong, although everybody liked it, I don't find it very interesting. They simply wasted too much time on the island and I even went out to grab a pretzel in between... For all the recent movies, I like Match Point very much. I like this type of film, as well as Closer. Scarlet Johansson looks great in the white gown... A few words about Casanova, I am not good at London accents either, but I really like Sienna Miller."

Jessica not only looks for fashion trends through reading magazines and watching movies, but also criticizes the readily available marketplace discourse of fashion. Although the use of counter-discourses has been considered as providing consumers with alternative means to negotiate the power relationship constructed by marketplace discourses (Thompson 2004), Jessica's critique of fashion is aimed toward both market communications and other people's fashion beliefs. This confirms her identity as a knowledgeable urban chic-seeker who has her own fashion preferences. The intent of criticizing marketplace discourses is thus not to oppose to or escape from the marketplace (Kozinets 2002), but to affirm consumerist values by presenting what Jessica considers as "real" fashion. Nevertheless, there exists a tension between a self-assured urban chic-seeker and risky digression from what the mainstream fashion demands. This can be seen from the following

excerpt in which Jessica fluctuates between using makeup promoted by the dominant marketplace discourses and her preference of not using cosmetics:

"I seldom put any makeup on my face because of my super sensitive skin. And actually I don't like gals with too much makeup; I think they are way too fake. But whenever I read those fashion magazines, I so love the model's look: the fresh skin, the very kissable lips, the peach cheek and the sexy eyes. The only thing I don't like is tan or fake tan, cause I will never do tan I guess :-). Anyway, I am still a girl and I could not help spending money in Sephora. I bought foundation from Prescriptive, lip gloss from Lancome, shimmering powder from MAC, pinch blush from Origins.....But now I'm gonna give it all up. I did not put anything on my face for a month since I'm back from Shanghai, and my skin never looked so perfect as now!!! Simple is the most important rule in skin care, well, or should I say those makeups, including Biotherm and Clinique will make my skin even worse."

Few Chinese would think of tanning, as clear light skin is the Asian ideal. Another strategy of constructing and maintaining the urban chic-seeker identity revealed by Jessica's blog is through commenting on fashions in China, most of which is considered as not "real fashion" by her, especially when it threatens her unique sense of self.

Jessica writes about her love of Abercrombie and Fitch in her blogs, and is apparently annoyed by the cheap knockoff products that other bloggers post in their blogs as seen from the following excerpts. In the first entry Jessie expresses her passion for Abercrombie and Fitch, while in the second one she comments on other bloggers' purchase of this brand. The difference is between the purchase in the mall as more authentic love for Abercrombie and Fitch, whereas to get the brand on the streets at cheaper price is fake:

*Excerpt 1:* "I definitely became a denim addict. I love all kinds of jeans, the flare, the destroyed, the boot, even the straight leg, though I know I am not skinny enough and I never wear heels. The only style I hate is super flare or wide leg. I tried one pair of wide leg from 7 For All Mankind. Very funny, I don't know how to walk with those jeans. Every time I step into the mall, I will go directly to Abercrombie and the Fitch. I dunno how much money I've spent on that store." *Excerpt 2:* "Recently Qipu District (a shopping area) is getting hot in Shanghai, especially the Wangjiang Mansion. It is said there are lots of excess products originally for export, such as the jeans and sweaters from Abercrombie and Fitch. I've seen pictures of some blogs, and found it so ridiculous. Any clothing, as long as they put a moose sign or print a sign of 1892, is called Abercrombie. And the price is so cheap. The \$79.50 original jean is only sold for less than RMB100 [less than \$20] or cheaper..."

However, to construct an identity of a tasteful urban-chic seeker around the latest fashions requires considerable financial support. This constitutes a moral paradox between the pleasure of being the urban-chic seeker and a sense of guilt due to excessive spending. The desire to remain consistent with the ideal self often overcomes the concerns of over-consumption. Nevertheless, writing blogs and expressing such conflicting feelings toward consumption enables Jessica to symbolically write off the sense of guilt and resolve the moral conflicts, as seen from her blog entry on Sep 7 in 2005. The motivation for purchase was evoked by reading fashion magazines:

"Today I bought probably the most expensive shirt I've ever had. I liked the style of bubble shirt so much. I would have looked much better if I was skimmer. I felt regret right after I bought this shirt. After all, it is too expensive. With this trend, many other

brands will have the same style soon. I know there is something similar in H&M and I like this type of skirt that is just above the knee. But I couldn't find it today. I happened to find this Marc by Marc Jacobs that I've seen in magazines at least three times. I just couldn't resist it... I also found two pairs of Marc by Marc Jacobs shoes: one is red patent leather, it will look great with skinny jeans; the other one is golden flat, it can dress up or down. But I can't afford it. Money is a wonderful thing, how wonderful it would be if I could print money myself."

Seen from the excerpts discussed here, Jessica incorporates various elements available in the marketplace in her blog to construct and maintain her blogosphere identity as an urban-chic seeker. Images of various consumer goods and discussions of her consumption experiences are used to define her evolving self-identity. Writing blogs thus confirms consumerist values supporting the late capitalism, and the blog is an important means through which consumerism is reproduced and internalized. Blogs also constitute a symbolic consumption space onto which the bloggers' dreams and idealized consumerist selves can be projected. Blogs also blur the boundary between private self and public self. Presenting a consumerist public self that is acceptable to the blogger's audience, reinforces and internalizes the blogger's identification with consumer culture. Blog writing also connects a blogger's past and future, which is essential in the construction of a person's identity (Belk 1991). The past recorded in pictures of consumption experiences constitutes a self defined in terms of consumption.

### DISCUSSION

Although these bloggers usually have an audience in mind while writing what they feel passionate about—shopping, consumption-oriented blogs are characterized by spontaneity and sudden bursts of creativity. Bloggers have worked blogs into their lifestyles, and thus what they record offers a unique opportunity to examine the personalized consumerist values of an emerging consumer society. Consumption-oriented blogs can be seen as a way of cultivating consumer desire and consumer culture through conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) in cyberspace. Such public displays of possessions and consumption experiences also contest the theory of envy-control through sharing or modesty (Douglas and Isherwood 1979). The blog invites the envy of its audience. Bloggers actively seek images and discourses to present their idealized selves (Schau and Gilly 2003). Similar to advertising that celebrates idealized images of consumers; consumption-oriented blogs construct various blogosphere consumer types, but through the endeavor of consumers rather than marketers. It is a self-fashioning in public.

Bloggers take pictures of what they already have, then post and passionately discuss them on their blogs. Writing blogs can be seen as a possession ritual through which the cultural meanings of products are transferred to the blogger (McCracken 1986). Writing blogs provides an opportunity for consumers to internalize the symbolic meanings embedded in products. On the other hand, posting possessions on blogs also constitutes a symbolic divestment ritual. To keep blogs updated, bloggers apparently need to go shopping more often and constantly post new acquisitions. The same clothing is rarely posted again and an item is symbolically abandoned in the blogosphere once it is made public. The blogger always sets out to find something new and the audience even leaves comments requesting updates. The bloggers are thus under pressure to symbolically divest the possessions and to search for novelty.

Consumption-oriented blogs also provide a context in which to examine the framework of extended self in the cyberspace. People are what they have and their material possessions constitute an extended part of the self (Belk 1988). Researchers have

investigated extended self experienced concretely through possessions in home settings (Belk 2001; Mehta and Belk 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) and in the workplace (Belk and Watson 1998; Tian and Belk 2005). Prior research on extended self is mostly focused on material possessions in real life. The Internet provides a new means of self-extension through posting images of the ideal self that the blogger aspires to identify with, thus going beyond the blogger's material and geographical constraints. By posting pictures of the goods that are too expensive to buy, the bloggers symbolically take possession of them and describe them in a way similar to the way they discuss their material possessions. Such symbolic possession through visual consumption in the cyberspace can potentially facilitate the extension of self. Our analysis here is descriptive and is restricted to the text of consumption-oriented blogs. Future research needs to take into consideration the bloggers' interpretations of their own blogs.

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