Commodify Thyself: Neither Myspace® Nor Your Space But a Space For Mass-Objectification of Subjects

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ABSTRACT

The blogosphere that promotes objectified and commodified identities is contested by individual bloggers and the blogger body as a whole. In the blogosphere, the discourse of power haunts not only between a blogger and the blogger body, but also between the blogger and the blogosphere as a market system providing identity project services. Netnographical data reveal a triadic power relationship in the online market system that facilitates the traffic of identity resources. Notwithstanding the ever more complex power structure, the market still serves its function as expected. The unparalleled magnetism of the viral marketing tranquilizes the observed tension among the three parties and lubricates the market system.

INTRODUCTION

Online self-portrayal has drawn much attention from consumer research because its theoretical importance as to identity projects of consumers today and the ubiquitous interests in personal websites represented mostly by blogs (e.g., Arnould and Thompson 2005; Schau and Gilly 2003). A number of websites in U.S., such as MySpace, Facebook, and Blogger successfully attract more subscribers. Blogging in China has also been widespread and reported as disseminators of consumer culture, including but not limited to fashion, food, and travel (Zhao and Belk 2007). A particular Korean blog (Cyworld®) has accomplished a tremendous success as more than 20 million people, out of 48 million total population, have subscribed to the blog (e.g., Jung, Youn, and McClung 2007). European countries are no exception. This exponential growth of the blogosphere can be attributed to the identity-laden nature of contemporary consumer culture (e.g., Giddens 1991) and the commodification-facilitating nature of online consumption activities. A blogger may act as an iconic celebrity as s/he “sells” the identity through his/her blog, or spontaneously become popular when many others wish to appropriate his/her identity and the relevant images.

The blogosphere, as such, invites a substantial portion of consumers and provides commodified and commodifying self-expressive contrivances. It should be, nevertheless, noted that the identity projects of consumers executed on the blogosphere are distinct from those conducted in off-line contexts in that consumers choose to become objects as they disclose their identities online. The subject/object dichotomy (see Firat and Venkatesh 1995) is overtly defied as consumers objectify themselves in their blogs and make their identities transparent. Despite this theoretical significance of blog as a new agent for identity projects, studies on online consumer self-presentation are centered only on the consumptions of signs, symbols, cultures, experiences, and materials (e.g., Peñaloza 2000, 2001). Those consumption activities and experiences as elements of one’s identity become widely available, as they are posted online, and exchangeable for the same kinds of consumptions with different cultural substances created and distributed by other online consumers. The blogosphere has become another type of market in which embodied, audio-visualized, and embellished cultural materials differerent types of consumptive actions are put up for sale. Commodification of the cultural materials is evident because consumers seek more and varied materials in the market at the expense of their own materials available for other consumers (c.f., Benjamin 1973).

The commodification of the objects that belong to a subject will, however, erode the subjectivity. Celebrities are neither subjects nor objects. They become objects on the day they make their debut on TV. Correspondingly, the demarcation between subjects and objects blurs in online settings. Subjectivity can be maintained intact only until the blogger posts his/her identity-relevant cultural products and/or artifacts. The blogosphere is not only a completely commodified, commercialized, and marketized agent for identity projects, but also a commodifying and objectifying agent.

Given the theoretically intricate yet particularly significant online consumer culture, a few questions need to be addressed. What theoretical lenses can be utilized to explicate the selective commodification of identity? Do all bloggers want to commodify their identity? If not, why and how do they protect their identities from an over or unnecessary commodification? Hence, this study first seeks to provide theories that address voluntary commodification of identity and potential withdrawal of the commodified identity. Second, the present study identifies the preventive measures that bloggers employ to shield their identities from excessive or reprehensible commodifications. Third, the study also provides a discussion on the opposition of bloggers to the mass-culture on the blogosphere necessitating the commodification of subjectivity.

The second and third objectives are especially important because they evoke that the discourse of power must be embedded in online consumption activities. Insightfully, the discourse of power (see Foucault 1977, 1980) in an online context envisages a novel structure of power. Dissimilar to the dyadic discourse of power as to identity projects in the conventional market system (e.g., Thompson 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008), the power may possibly circulate in a triadic relationship among the market, a blogger, and other bloggers. The nature of the relationship is seen neither as a conflict between blogging consumers and the market, nor a friction between “me” and “others.” The relationship rather appears to compel each blogger to manage his or her appropriate power level in order to culturally benefit from each other, and the market may also be required to control the level of its influence and intervene between two or more bloggers.

The complex mechanism of identity protection in the blogosphere is a peculiar phenomenon of interest for two reasons. First, it seems a self-contradiction of bloggers because they are in opposition to the objectification of subjectivity even though they have chosen to objectify themselves online as they subscribe to the websites. Second, bloggers have to wrestle with two different entities: the market (blogosphere as a mainstream cultural area that obliges identity disclosure) and other bloggers (they require a constant and unlimited identity disclosure). In order to unearth the tangled power relationship in the blogosphere, a particular blogging website called Cyworld in Korea is selected as the site for the theorization. A literature review as to “commodified identity” will be followed by a netnography-aided grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kozinets 2002) that should stimulate a more profound discussion on the triadic power relationship in the blogosphere.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF COMMODIFIED IDENTITY

Reciprocity of Identity Disclosure in the Blogosphere

“Give and take” must be emphasized and necessitated in the blogosphere. The reciprocity seems the most prominent catalyst of commodified identity. The function of reciprocity of intimate disclosure of self is described as “[d]isclosure seems to beget disclosure, such that people who receive intimate disclosure feel obligated to respond with a personal disclosure of equal intimacy” (Moon 2000, p. 324). Whether or not identity is seen as a purely private or public concept, the description applies to the blogosphere quite fitly. If a blogger deems identity more public than private, disclosure does not require but assumes reciprocity. On the contrary, reciprocity will be imposed strictly on the blogging activity as an identity project when identity is conceived totally private. The quintessence of identity is, however, neither private nor public; rather, it is always balanced (e.g., Brewer 2003; Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Therefore, reciprocity of identity-disclosure confuses bloggers with respect to the selection between “exhibition and concealment” of identity.

Bloggers have to determine the appropriate level of identity-disclosure as they understand both requirements for identity. Nevertheless, there are two forces that bloggers should confront when they determine the level. First, the disclosure of identity will only be strengthened and deepened. Simply, everything and anything about a blogger’s identity is asked to be revealed as the disclosure interacts with other identities disclosed (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, and Margulis 1993). Second, the context online does promote face-to-face human-interaction-like social activities (e.g., Moon and Nass 1996). Bloggers might be unconsciously involved too much with identity-disclosure albeit the potential pitfall of identity-replication by other bloggers. The unconscious or unrealized involvement with “online identity showcase” is either due to the numbing nature of online environment (e.g., Hoffman and Novak 1996) or because of the bloggers’ daydream of a perfect reciprocity in the blogosphere.

Disclosure generally means a chance to be commodified and objectified just as we have seen in many cases of artistic products. The two aforementioned reasons for disclosure-required by others and stimulated by the market (blogging websites)-also concretize the newly proposed notion of the triadic relationship of power in the blogosphere. A management of only one relationship with either entity will not ameliorate the convolution of the extended discourse of power.

Appropriated Identity

Commodification of identity in the blogosphere operates as a process that enables bloggers to assimilate to other bloggers’ identity projects as constituents of the mass-culture of blogging. Bloggers, however, “deassimilate” themselves from the others so as to maintain unique identities in the blogosphere as an ultimate reservoir of identity. Baudrillard (1998) marks a noteworthy characteristic of commodification that idealizes a double-barreled praxis of commodified identity projects in blogs. Simultaneous homogenization and the differentiation of bloggers’ identity-presentation, which is possibly analogous to each other’s, beget a self-contradictory tension among bloggers. Echoing this notion of dual-meaning commodification, Rindfleish (2005) postulates, “once a self-identity is formed it is immediately appropriated, eventually consumed, and a different form of self-identity must be reconstructed” (358). Identity reconstruction has long been inculcated since postmodern thinkers and researchers defined identity as a consistent and uncontested concept (e.g., Featherstone 1995; Gergen 1991; Schouten 1991). Technology-enhanced identity projects accelerate the dissemination of popular identities, and thus the necessity to revise bloggers’ identities is intensified and detected earlier than before. Consequently, bloggers-intimidated by the speed and scale of identity simulation and emulation in the blogosphere-are required to protect their own identities and further culturally rebel against the “identity-theft” promoted by the market.

METHODOLOGY

A pool of narratives, excerpts, and notes is developed through a netnographical field study (see Kozinets 1998, 2002). The data collection method employed is to justify the interpretation procedure in a naturalistic setting. The textual discourses automatically transcribed online are culturally enriched “thick descriptions” (Clifford 1990). The descriptions are also expected to be identity-laden as the bloggers narrate their deep-hearted emotions, ideologies, and internal struggles. The data collection ceases when there seem no more insightful categories of interest and importance found. The methodology can be judged as a grounded-theory (see Glaser and Strauss 1967) because an induction will derive a theory explaining the individual bloggers’ power management strategies.

A keyword searching method is used due to the immense (over 20 million bloggers) resources of data in Cyworld, a blogging website in Korea. The choice of the research site is rationalized through three reasons. First, liberatory expressions of self in online settings are more prevalent in Korea across different age groups because the country has not fully adapted to modernism. A place where modernity did not prevail or at least sufficiently permeate tends to be more open to postmodern ideas (e.g., Firat and Dholakia 1998). Second, ironically, the fast acceptance of postmodern lifestyles and cultures in those places also appears to be contested more easily and earlier than elsewhere because of the “root-absent” nature of the culture. Lastly, the collectivistic cultural orientation of Korea may evidently entail the power relationship with other bloggers, which may not be manifest elsewhere yet.

The narratives and excerpts, translated from Korean to English, as well as the researcher’s observational fieldnotes compose the data set to be interpreted (Note that the names for direct quotes that appear in later sections are all initials). Disjunct and less meaningful textual data are sorted and bundled together for a codified schema of identity protection from external power sources (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Following Thompson (1997) and Spiggle (1994), a creative, playful, subjective, and yet substantially translative hermeneutics is expected to yield a meaningfully concentrated and culturally fertile model of the triadic power relationship in the blogosphere.

FINDINGS: A TRIADIC POWER RELATIONSHIP

Postings on the personal online diary (or repository) type of blogs in Cyworld, field observations, and the researcher’s personal (also familial) direct interactions with other blogger friends reveal the immanent and yet conspicuous management of the tensions with the market and other participants in the market (blogosphere). The ideological commotions of bloggers as consumers of identity project service in the blogosphere emanate the fever from the cycle of acceptance, commensalism, and repudiation. The relations of bloggers with two different power sources, wielding isomorphic influences over individual blogging service consumers, entail unique management strategies respective to each influence. Moreover, there accrues a schema of the triangulate power relationship in the blogosphere (see Figure 1), in which each entity operates to contribute to the sustainability and transformation of the marketplace.
**Carnivalesque in the Blogosphere**

Bloggers obtain various entertainments from the blogosphere that frees bloggers to enunciate conventionally unexposed aspects of their identities. The blogosphere seems an extremely enjoyable milieu (c.f., Kozinets et al. 2004) because of the widely accessible repertoires for identity projects, and owing to the learning experience as to different craftsmanship of identity projects by the blogger body. A blogger KY notes:

> I know I have to present my own color in my blog, but it is very hard to find one that fits me. Too much fun, too much to learn… For the time being, I’d rather get so much fun around without thinking anything serious. Having a fun identity in my blog is just great because I have been thinking that it should always be something serious. I think blogging will make me able to have some kind of orgy and an identity at the same time.

Enjoyment, craze, fetishization, and bizarreness in the blogosphere attract more users to the identity project service, and the degree to which the users reflexively indulge in the fiesta intensifies. This escalation of reflexivity, however, only produces bloggers’ anxiety for over-exposure and misuse of their identities, and the anxiety appears to exceed the perceived benefit and fun from blogging (c.f., Hong 2008). In association with the contradictory apprehension of bloggers, HS concedes:

> I hate somebody taking my postings and using them as if they are his own creations. I think it should be banned somehow, but I can blame only myself because I love to put my stuff up online. Once we started doing so, we can never stop but just confuse other bloggers with too much going on in our blogs. Then, they get bombarded or intimidated by the extreme presentations of our identities. You know what? I had a visitor to my blog that left a message, saying “you’re really something disgusting, pervert, and never acceptable.” That’s exactly what I wanted, so I got happy because they wouldn’t want to fake my stuff but just let them go. No worries anymore. 😊

Difficult to replicate but extremely ludic expressions of one’s identity are repeatedly witnessed guards from the overuse and exploitation of identity expression. Bloggers strive to be superordinate to others with regard to their identities’ cultural meaningfulness and profoundness while accentuating playfulness. The carnivalesque in the blogosphere increases the difficulty level to appropriate the identities available in blogs but constantly require better quality creativeness from the defensive bloggers. The “overly enriched” cultural manifestations, however, still serve as an apparatus for a blogger to retain a superior power over the other identity (re)creators.

**Masquerade in the Blogosphere**

Another way to handle the ever complex task of identity show-off and the subsequent shrink of the presenter to maintain a preferable power level in the blogosphere is to bewilder other presenters with a multitude of camouflages. It seems impossible to pinpoint the salient identity of a blogger because s/he introduces as many personas as possible; therefore, the mission of protection of the blogger’s focal identity among multiple identities is more likely to be accomplished (see Laverie, Kleine, and Kleine 2002 for identity salience). HM posts:

> I know who I am, but nobody seems to. Maybe, I have too many characters to show, but it doesn’t matter as long as I do not lose, nor am confused, with myself. I hope everybody feels the same…

Bloggers do not appear to want to explore a new and/or inimitable type of identity and declare a preoccupancy of the newly created identity; rather, they provide unnecessarily central identity artifacts. Perhaps, bloggers conceive that this is the only plausible way to commodify and exchange identity and the relevant resources with others. Accordingly, the maintenance of power level is continuously achieved, provided a blogger’s central identity is not “degraded” for others’ identities. The harder to figure one’s real façade, the less worry about unwanted objectification of identity.
The wishfully authentic identity, which the blogger distances from the objectification and the following commodification is still misinterpreted and misapplied in the worst case because of the other “cluttering” identities. In her monologue, SM confesses her identity presentations have unconsciously and unintentionally become a multiple-personality type of self-disclosure:

"Today, my friends told me I must be crazy or something and said I had to stop this thing. They said I was not supposed to claim myself to be a Christian if I regularly drinking and trashed in clubs so often. But I don’t care whatever they say because, as everyone knows, people have so many different phases of life that may or may not represent them. If others think all the things are my identities, that’s their choice. I just want to keep updating things about me whether or not they make me look really crazy. I want to let you judge…"

The masked or possibly distorted identities offered in the blogosphere are different from the carnivalesque of identities in that the former intoxicate and obfuscate other bloggers with irresistible but unrealistic amusement, and that the latter reduces the odds of losing the pivotal identity, not to be copied, by showing ostensibly unrelated and disjointed identities. An individual blogger and the blogger body as a whole enforce and defend the identity-commodification as they concurrently exchange their identity supplies and try to “demarketize” their identities. As a result, the power flow between the two entities is always egocentric, which thus can never be contributing to the market system unless the market commercially intermediates (e.g., viral marketing) between the two.

**Prosylette**

Bloggers’ management of power in relation to the market (blogosphere) is surprisingly simple and prompt. They simply explore and connect their identities to a new form of marketplace, such as the UCC (user created contents) in *YouTube®* that enables more in-depth and culture-rich expression of identity. DR feels a compulsion when he posts in his blog:

"I started it (blogging) as a hobby, but now it’s become a burden in my life. So sometimes I stretch myself all the way, but it doesn’t work at all. To convey myself only through writings and some pictures certainly has a limitation. I feel I am going to collapse pretty soon, which oppresses me harder.

The converts explain that they need a better “distribution system” of identities. The market (blogosphere) only promotes and implicitly obliges bloggers to supply the merchandises (identity and the relevant creativeness) without intermediaries for a better system. Consequently, they seek a more effective system that prevents the identities from being “sublimated” due to systematic incompleteness. These bloggers do not resist the idea of commodified identity but seem to contest the market system, which promotes the traffic of abstracted commodification of identities. The market may never suggest the sublimation of one’s identity presentation. Intriguingly, the proselytes, however, do not always move to a more liberal place. SE utters:

"There is much emotion, culture, information, and other things to learn and help me better express myself in traditional media, like papers, news, and books. Newspapers are 50 cents a day and ten dollars per month. My blog doesn’t deliver anything but some funny things about me so it is supposed to be about one cent. It should just be a hobby because it doesn’t help me nor others either.

Bloggers may choose traditional media through which they find the necessary “raw materials” for identity (re)construction and discontinue blogging because of the less meaningful contents found in the blogosphere. The bloggers admit the fact that they may not
meet the quality standard of the identity presentation in the market because of the “tacky” nature of the postings and that they also find fun but possibly low-class identities drifting in the blogosphere. This resistance to the commodification of identity denotes a self-critical withdrawal of self from the market. In sum, bloggers retire from the market if they detect the system to be inefficient for their fully descriptive expression of identity, and when they become self-reflective due to the inability to aid others in collecting quality resources for identity. In either case, bloggers abandon the commodifying proposal by the market as a counterproposal for the market system.

**Secession**

The other type of bloggers who vie with the market hegemony, requiring commodification of identity, abscond or leave the market temporarily or permanently. The temporary escape of bloggers from the market corroborates Kozinets’ (2002) account that indoctrinates the unfeasibility of complete aloofness from the market. They “submerge and surface (a direct translation of a Korean slang)” as they perceive the commodification of identity differently in terms of the level of exploitation, distortedness, sublimation, and showiness of the commodified identities in the blogosphere. The bloggers who leave the market temporarily are lukewarm identity creators and suppliers; they return to the system as they find it necessary. They may once again need some ingredients for their identity renovation, or want to be a popular identity supplier. TK writes:

I’m going to submerge for the time being or maybe forever. Please don’t ask me why because I know you feel like doing the same thing sometimes for some reasons. Doing this thing is just sick and tired and exhausts me. People talk whatever way they want… talk too much about my stuff, and the problem is that I keep doing this even though I hate them. Actually, I don’t hate the people, but I hate this thing existing for us. For us?? Well, for somebody else, not me…

Whether the submergence is an escape or just an impermanent lukewarmness depends on whether the blogger opts to come back to the commodifying space or vanishes from the market for identity projects service. Bloggers, however, tend to make a second or further launch of their identity showcases after an optimal length of cessation of work. A back-to-work blogger JW advertises in his blog:

Folks, I’m back here. I hope you haven’t missed me too much. I will post so enthusiastically from now on. I think I have found more things to amuse you guys. Well, I think I was wrong to think this is a totally crappy thing to do. I am happy to realize that I need this thing because it makes me alive. Unexposed existences are all dead.

Bloggers who actually disappear from the blogosphere are also observed. Nevertheless, it is also detected that many of them still opportunistically peep into the market as they visit blogs. They are still consumers of commodified identities but not producers of them. Their effort to manage the relationship in the blogosphere is partially successful, which, in turn, signifies that consumers may imperfectly escape the market by discarding one of the roles (consuming and producing) in the market. The discourse of power in the marketplace becomes nihilistic if both roles are disposed.

**Viruses**

Although the discussion of viral marketing may not be thorough in this study, the significance of the phenomenal marketing activity is exceptional because of its potential to be a new promotional device for voluntary commodification of identity. The market sustains its efficiency and domion over consumers in the blogosphere through the incorporation of more explicit marketization of identity symbols. Branding itself and the following instillation of brand images and meanings can be more effective and widespread as intended (c.f., Leskovec, Adamic, and Huberman 2007). The blogger body serves as a host of the viruses, even though they oppose the mass-objectification of subjectivity, insomuch as the market provides novel, acceptable, and utilisable identity materials: brands and the brand spirit. Figure 3 illustrates the use of a brand by the market in order to coordinate the power flow in the blogosphere. Moreover, the paradoxical tension between a blogger and the blogger body is diminished as they agree to transmit and share mutually beneficial brand images and cultures as identity resources. Consequently, the market always functions as an unavoidable power source that nullifies the superfluous struggle for power and encourages sustainable symbiosis (e.g., Schouten and McAlester 1995) in the online identity project service market.

**DISCUSSION**

The marketplace conflict stabilized and digested through the transmittance of viral branding strategies reorganizes the market system (e.g., Giesler 2008). Therefore, the commensal relationship between the market and consumers is again substantiated. The historically and theoretically irrefutable concept of co-optation in a close relation to the discourse of power is also to appear in the online marketplace (see Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007 for co-optation). That is, the theoretical twist found in this study is that the triadic power relationship possibly renders a new type of co-optation. In the power structure, the market appears to co-opt the ability of consumers to efficiently and immediately distribute the brands and the relevant ideas, instead of appropriating the consumers’ cultural competency that may well be marketized. This co-optation may generate less negative repercussions in the marketplace than the co-optation in the traditional viewpoint does because the consumers in search of identity resources can collaborate in obtaining and delivering brands as identity resources.

The viral brands can, nonetheless, regress to the historical model of branding that Holt (2002) presents. The pursuit of sovereignty of consumers again contradicts the viruses (brands) that may be transmitted too fast and too widely. After a certain point, the brands do not serve as the identity project service due to the possibility that consumers’ identities can no longer be individuated but manufactured. The marketplace turmoil may be just around the corner once again.

In response to this dialectical discussion on the evolutionary market, consumer culture research should embark upon two agendas. First, the discourse of power in the triadic power structure found in the study must be followed by a closer investigation of the “modest” power management of the market. The nature of the power management realized by the concept of viral marketing should differentiate it from the historical market hegemony, which may be more explicit, coercive, and homogenizing. It is certainly of interest and significance because the bloggers voluntarily participate in the “totalizing logic” (c.f., Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Second, the concept of co-optation also needs to be theoretically dissected due to the newly explored type of co-optation in the study. Consumers’ cultural creativeness and the capability of disseminating brand cultures may not be the all to be co-opted.
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