Forget Negotiation: the Non-Dialectical Model of Identity Project By Extreme Sports Participants

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Identity negotiation has enabled contemporary consumers to ingeniously circumvent the calcified symbolic associations, norms, and power relations in the market while still conforming to socio-culturally created and marketized meanings. Ethnographic data collected from the X Games venues, however, demonstrate that dialectical negotiation of identity contributes much less than postulated to the performance of consumer identity.

[to cite]:


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http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15980/volumes/v38/NA-38

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer culture theory views identity project as a process and a practice through and by which consumers’ cultural bricolage of the self is embodied and enacted in negotiation with the hegemonic market influences, such as globalization, brands, and gendered consumption environment (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Askegaard et al. 2005; Epp and Price 2008; Holt 2002; Kates 2002; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Oswald 1999; Üstüner and Holt 2010). Accordingly, negotiation, compromise, reconciliation, cooperation, and rapprochement have thus far been the preferred (in fact, almost required) methods to present idiosyncratic identities (Giesler 2008; Holt 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Thompson and Tian 2008).

The received view of identity negotiation, however, has overlooked other possibilities (forms) of consumer-market power relations (see Foucault 1980 for power relation) that are palpable and facilitate non-negotiated and thus dialectic-absent identity projects. Hence, this study first seeks to illuminate a context wherein consumers perform purely self-fulfilling identity projects with less concern about social consequences of such existential endeavor (cf., Marino 2004). Second, it is of importance to re-examine the current view of authentic self-identity vis-a-vis the continuously inculcated notion of fragmentation of self (cf. Ahuvia 2005), as identity negotiation becomes less germane to a certain context.

The annual X Games event is selected as the research context. The counter-mainstream ethos of extreme sports represents the sub-cultural or countercultural values that underpin the events (Quester, Beverland, and Farrelly 2006). The deliberate “distanceing” from mainstream culture, establishment, social structure, and hegemonic brands brings much attention and value to the extreme sports event, as a culturally and theoretically rich context for this study of non-negotiated identity project. The event is still a carnivalesque-like paradoxical consumption festival through which authenticity becomes commercialized; resistance to the market is intermingled with or even acclimated to the profit-driven practices; and consumers act multiple roles as they face subcultures/mainstream cultures, conformists/rebels, and co-option/countervailing forces.

Thirty phenomenological interviews, as the primary data source, were conducted (Thompson 1990). Observations were recorded using fieldnotes, videotapes, and photographs in order to easily utilize them for the following analyses and interpretations. Overall, 581 photographs were taken, and approximately 172 minutes of video recording was conducted. Following Thompson (1997), a creative, playful, subjective, and yet substantially transitive hermeneutics is expected to yield meaningfully interpreted and theoretically contributing themes of non-negotiated identity project, based on consumers’ transformatie ideologies and performances.

Consumers’ signification process for non-negotiated identity is represented mostly by creativity, reminiscence (memory or nostalgia), personalization, unusual experience, relationship orientation, experimentation, and, especially, being outdoors as the first priority for extreme sports participants. It is an observation that “being outdoors” is not only the inception, but also the quintessence of the signification process.

There were six convergent themes identified from the semiotic clustering. Each of the themes represents a distinct (non-negotiated) way in which consumers engage in the sense-making of their lives in relation to (at times in opposition to) social norms, enticing marketing influence, pseudo-authentic cultural materials, and conformity-ridden socio-cultural environment.

It is noteworthy that a new context can promote a theoretical divergence. In contrast to the Burning Man project that only guarantees temporary and geographically-bounded sanctions to such an anti-market endeavor, X Games unleash the consumers from cultural and normative dogma, which have constrained consumers to discontinue pursuing non-negotiated identities in other spaces (i.e., home and work) after the duration of such events. Evidently, some extreme sports participants continuously work on their authentic non-negotiated identity. Thus, research that specifically discusses some contexts in which consumers opt to be a true agent with no or little concern about inter-agential conflict will move the current theoretical outlook of consumer agency forward. Moreover, when more of such contexts are found to exist and become more common than before, the boundary conditions should be identified. In other words, it is of importance to study when the supposedly incessant pursuit of non-negotiated identity fostered in the context is ceased.

The “dialectical model of branding” (Holt 2002) can be revisited as well. When consumers practice non-negotiated identity project, the dialectics in the domain of branding become less explanatory. That is, consumers do not necessarily need to symbolically rely on or respond to the brands they constantly face in the market. Authenticity of the brands does not concern them as they can totally “dis-necessitate” brands for their identity narratives, which may be more coherent without any brand. There are some exemplary grassroots brands widespread in snowboards and outdoor equipment industry. A group of handful individual fanatics and supporters of snowboarding have launched their own brand in order not to negotiate with the brands identities and personalities developed by marketers and other consumers. Research should address this type of “no logo” praxes that are not as direct or perceptible as boycott, anti-consumption, consumer terrorism or “culture-jamming” (Lasn 2000) but still transforming the current consumer culture.

Perhaps all the simulations and emulations in the identity narratives by signifying consumers are not to contest or escape the market system but to revitalize the inertia in the market. The context of X Games and the participants appear to propose a new way to enjoy symbiosis between consumers and the market as the context promotes “hyper-authenticity” and individuals take advantage of it to survive, as contemporary consumers, without dialectics. It will be, however, of more interest to observe and theorize how marketers respond to the extreme presentations of self-identity without any trace of negotiation. Can (will) they still co-opt them?

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