Towards a Better Understanding of the Role of Social Media in the Processes of Independent and Interdependent Identity Construction

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We explore the way customers of fashion and luxury goods use social media for identity construction, using a netnography on 30 weblogs and followed by 20 offline in-depth interviews. We offer a typology of users of weblogs and social networks through "characters" based on these different identity functions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

With more than 520 million daily-active Facebook users (April 2012), social media have now become part of many customers' life. Individuals use social media to obtain information, entertain themselves, and fulfil mood-management needs (Shao, 2009). We argue and show here that social media also fulfil more profound identity construction needs, and can be used to communicate with brands about symbolic aspects of consumption. Using the example of consumers running weblogs about fashion and luxury products – which represent one of the most common types of weblogs on the Internet (Rickman & Cosenza, 2007) – we address one of the paradoxes of social media: namely, that despite the social nature of these media, many customers use them *primarily* for managing personal and symbolic aspects of their identity construction and relations with brands. The present paper contributes to the literature on social media and consumer identities, by offering a way of framing the existing literature and findings, combining both traditional literatures on symbolic consumptions (Levy, 1959) and more recent approaches to independent and interdependent identities and self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

2. Methods

We carried out a netnography (Kozinets, 2010) from mid-2005 to end of 2011 on 30 popular fashion / luxury weblogs to research individual differences in self-construal and further corroborated our interpretations through in-depth interviews with 20 of these 30 bloggers.

3. Results & Discussion

Our findings – summarised in table 1 - suggest that fashion and luxury bloggers develop different types of independent and interdependent identities through personal branding, and carefully designed interaction strategies with others. The type of personal brand - or 'character'- construed differs on what we identified as the four dimensions of a blogger's identity: dominant mode of *self-construal*, type of '*others*' he/she interacts with, type of *relationship* he/she *aims a*t, and *dominant type of social media* used. Based on different combinations of these dimensions, consumers develop different characters, which they use to signal to others - and particularly to brands - the kind of communal activities bloggers would like to engage into and with what members.

Celebrity bloggers are bloggers who became very famous, regularly work for famous brands and designers, and post their work and stories on their weblog. Their primary motivation is to be recognized as a like of the people they admire (designers, photographers…), but not to belong to or interact with a community of bloggers. They thus hold a highly dominant independent *self-construal* - only making obvious bonds with the fashion and luxury people they have worked with - and low levels of interdependent self-construal. The '*others*' they interact with are mainly brands and brand representatives or fellow professionals. The '*type of relationship*' they aim at creating with brands is a worshipping one. Celebrity bloggers signal potential partner brands their willingness to work for them. Interestingly, we found that while these bloggers engage into active networking with

professionals they want to become like, they mostly do so offline. Celebrity bloggers gather most of their online social media content on their weblogs and make scarce use of other social networks like Facebook or Twitter.

Character bloggers are those who became famous among a very dedicated audience and web marketing agencies, being occasionally mentioned in women's magazines. They are rather independent, while entertaining very close relationships with a few peer- bloggers and web-marketing representatives with whom the have become friends. These types of bloggers have a high level of independent *self-construal*, and a moderate level of interdependent *self-construal*. The '*others*' made obvious in their weblogs are their blogger friends and brands promoted by their web marketing agencies' connections. The *relationship* they aim for is a 'clique' one: sharing scarce resources, with limited access for new entrants. The *dominant social media* used are weblogs, where most of the brand narrative happens. Facebook, Twitter, Lookbook or Flickr are used for a public account of activities, serve as a recruitment platform for other readers, and also as a location for extended self-construal and personal branding.

Spokesperson bloggers are bloggers that became famous and received media coverage, eventually turning their blogging activities into a job (journalism, acting…). Spokespersons usually use their influence to speak up about causes such as fighting for larger sizes in fashion. By embracing issues that federate other bloggers, they display a high level of interdependent self-construal. Their status also contributes to moderate levels of independent *self-construal*. The '*others*' they like to introduce on their weblogs are fellow bloggers, most of whom are simple readers, with whom they want to share opinions and co-produce debates and discussions. Brands are not always present in these discussions, except if relevant to the cause being defended. The *type of relationship* Spokesperson bloggers want to create is a highly interactive and communal one. Thus, discussions happen on every platform possible (e.g. commenting on their weblog, Facebook page, professional website, Twitter account…).

Finally, **Buddy** bloggers are those who are not famous but who are liked by a strong loyal community of readers / followers. Their motivation to weblog is most of all about sharing their passion and ideas about fashion and luxury consumption with other passionate people. Consequently, Buddy bloggers display high levels of interdependent *self-construal*, and low levels of independent self-construal. The '*others*' they interact with are firstly their readers, then fellow bloggers. Buddy bloggers are organized in 'bastions' or subgroups of similar bloggers, who adore each other within the subgroups and hate each other outside those subgroups. Brands are also very present in their narratives. Buddy bloggers mainly promote them directly in accordance with what they feel their audience will like. The *relationship* built with the audience is about recommending and trusting, and Buddy bloggers therefore always try and balance branded narratives with readers' expectations and comments. Because interactions and recommendations are at the heart of Buddy weblogs, discussions happens on all possible *loci*, whether in the weblogs comments or on various social networks.

Overall, our paper is the first to investigate the relation between the use of social media and the development of different types of independent and interdependent identities, via self-construal.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: The four characters of bloggers' identities

	Type of Self-Construal		Type of communal tools used	Type of relationship aimed at	Types of "Others" bloggers interact with
	Independent Self-Construal	Interdependent Self-Construal			
Celebrity	High	Low	Weblog	Brand worshipping Professional networking	Brands Brand representatives
Character	High	Medium	Weblog Textual social networks Visual social networks	Implicit brand promotion Networking with friends & agencies	Brands Friend- bloggers
Spokesperson	Medium	High	Weblog Textual social networks Professional web resources	Co-production High communal activities	Fellow Bloggers Readers
Buddy	Low	High	Weblog Textual social networks Responding to comments	Bastion High Communal activities Recommendation & Trust	Friend- bloggers Readers