

The Collapse of Little Narratives in Postmodern Consumerism

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By taking postmodernism as the central standpoint, this article argues that consumerism is influenced by and influences socio-political, economic and cultural regimes. Under influences of macro-level contexts, consumption seems to deform grand narratives on the one hand, and create little narratives on the other. Little narratives embedded in consumers' choice in concert with other consumers' choices form another grand narrative about consumerism shaped by the media. The influence of the media on consumerism puts forward the question of the role of the media: are they of or for the public?

Introduction

This article discusses consumerism in postmodern views, though it does not aim to engage deeply with literature on either consumerism or postmodernism. With the root from modernism as an intellectual mood and expression that focuses on logical empiricism enabled by scientific establishments, postmodernism principally questions the modernist mindset. It places an emphasis on interdependence and holism which negates modernist beliefs in the objective existence of knowledge and truth (McGregor, 2003, p. 5; Nguyen, 2010, p. 92). As each individual experiences reality in different ways, depending on their personal circumstances, there seem to be a multitude of realities.

As Hicks (2004, p. 6) has argued, postmodernism posits that individual identities are largely shaped by influences of social groups, which are again formed by influences of the broader socio-economic contexts. Through the view of influences of

science and technology on our everyday life, Lyotard (1984) thinks that postmodernism is a historical and cultural condition. It is also said to be an artistic and cultural response to a new configuration of capitalism and globalization (Cahoone, 2003; Jameson, 1985). Others (e.g. Klages, 2007; Nguyen, 2010) refer it to artistic and stylistic eclecticism, which further influences consumerism (Baudrillard, 1994; McGregor, 2003). Despite the slight differences in conceptualizing the term, most postmodernist authors have agreed that the key factor that drives postmodernist thoughts is globalization.

Driven by globalization, which is commonly defined as transcontinental and interregional flows of capital, ideas, goods, people, and technologies (Appadurai, 1996; Held, McGrew, Goldbalt, & Perraton, 1999), consumerism is largely influenced by how individual consumers situate themselves in socio-economic, political, and cultural global and national conditions. In the confluence of global forces within national and local landscapes, consumers tend to pursue consumption values that are widely recognized on the global scape and enable their social activities and emotions to be changed into pragmatic forms of commodification, acquisition, and ownership (McGregor, 2003, p. 15).

These pragmatic forms of consumption enable consumers to acquire security in terms of achieving social and emotional needs that are shaped by the materialization of the society. In this vein, each consumer is able to create their own consumption stories. Yet, the ways they consume are influenced by the ways the consumer society depicts. Therefore,

each individual story is a reflection of the larger story of a society and economy. The combination of individual narratives becomes the grand story of consumerism.

This article particularly extends the argument made by Ton That Nguyen Thiem (2008), who has argued that consumerism is influenced by and influences socio-political, economic and cultural regimes. Under such influences of macro-level contexts, consumption seems to deform grand narratives on the one hand, and create little narratives on the other. Little narratives with consumers' choice of products in concert with other consumers' choices form another grand narrative.

As a consumer himself, the author's belief shown in this article is a little narrative. Yet, he wishes to play a language game in discussing the nexus of grand and little narratives which are created by consumerism. This article does not reject, boycott, or criticize consumerism. In contrast, it insists that consumerism contributes to the economic and intellectual development of people. What is of most concern is that the role of little narratives, which are played out as self-interests dictated by mass producers as a social fad and trend, seems to constitute another economic and political grand narrative.

This article is structured as follows. It first attempts to present the collapse of grand narratives in postmodern consumerism, which allows space for little narratives to emerge. Little narratives, however, are shaped by the role of the media, which are created, sustained and controlled by corporate producers. The author concludes that the media produce social fads and trends, embedding in goods with

various values of consumerism, positioning consumption as an attainment of individual goods. Yet, this mass consumption creates another grand narrative through the producers' dictation of symbolic and virtual values in consumption.

The Emergence of Little Narratives Out of Existing Grand Narratives

According to Ton (2008), the 1960s and the period afterwards have seen a boom of multinational corporations and the proliferation of economic neo-liberalism which first begun in the US, Japan, Western Europe and then expanded to other countries. The proliferation of the global economy with flows of ideas, people, capital, and goods, bring out changes caused by changes in virtual spaces and the digitized world of multimedia communications. In this sense, our space is reorganized through the central social pursuits of leisure and consumption as one of the fundamental bases for social relationships (McGregor, 2003, p. 15). Consumption is then seen as individual pursuits of personal happiness and social status marker, which may influence national economic successes.

Our lives are invisibly those of digitalization and virtualization in which we can imbue into superordinary imaginary characters in the virtual world. Through our immersion in the virtual world, some of us can form new identities and play many roles in different guises. We tend to imagine about a brighter prospect partly through consumption. This imagination is formed by our "fantasies" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 34). We translate these "fantasies" into actual consumption by following what others do in society as an inauthentic way of conforming to social norms. The ways we follows these conventions, which are shaped by the broader global ideologies of consumption, can condition not only

our attempts to pursue personal happiness and social status, but also situate our ways of being in society. As a consequence, we seem to be dominated by an imagination about an ability to change our fates. According to Ton (2008), some seem to precariously live a half real, half ephemeral life. Or as in McGregor's (2003, p. 18) words, "consumerism is the myth of the consumer culture," and our identities are closely tied to our imagination of what consumption activities we want to carry out.

As I have argued elsewhere (see Mai, 2014) about our imagination of facing with and creating changes, we live in a world full of images in which we have the right to choose one which is suitable for us. This ability to live with change has enabled and brought a new historical background and condition to construct our new perceptions about reality. It should be noted here that the ways we retrieve our pasts, experiences, and traditions are not the same. Such a retrieval depends on how we attempt to make sense of our lives in interactions with the surrounding world.

In this sense, the living environment does not exist as a unique and single objective reality, but it becomes a collection of subjective spaces of myriad selves. Subjectivity among the multitude of selves may further lead to intersubjectivity. Each of us tends to negotiate how to construct our identities through interactions with others. These shared new identities collectively create an intersubjective world with constant change. Changes in individual groups become feasible, because each individual always has a potential to change, though we must acknowledge that this potential is not equally the same among us. With this potential to deal with and create change, we can lose some of our ingrained values and add in new values to suitably adjust in and mix with the totality, or just neutralize some of our qualities to form a new world image for ourselves. Grand narratives about a unique and uniformed reality seem to collapse.

Grand narratives are said to encompass general and universal

features that can be applied to a large group (Nguyen, 2010, p. 91). They have gradually lost credence, as they are just seen as a story amongst other stories. Concurring with Lyotard (1984), this essay attempts to reconfigure the obsolete faith in metanarratives with totalization and universalization theories. Each of us can edit our own stories in accordance with our own perception of the world. As mentioned earlier, we seem to have the potential to play different roles. As a consequence, life is like a kaleidoscope of many little stories through a language game. Within the digitized world, this language is manifest as an @ language game (an electronic language game) (Ton, 2008).

The author is also aware that, as emphasized previously, not all of us can share equal opportunities to realize and actualize potentials to change. Yet, our potential to confront and make change is largely influenced and concurrently influences the formation of the social and political aspects of the self. Each self presents a different story from others, based on our various retrievals of heritage, historicity in terms of personal biographies and familial backgrounds, as well as traditions. Little narratives emerge out of the grand narrative of our potential to tackle change in consumerism.

The Self in Postmodern Consumerism

Consumerism in postmodernism, according to Ton (2008), is embodied as our efforts to adjust in the community with norms and rules which we, as its members, are requested to follow. This article is also congruent with Ton's view on the way we follow public normativity. Yet, as following public norms as our immersion in the world with others, we take a stance on those thoughts and reflect them on our ways of living. We cannot become new persons by simply consuming as what others do, but we may produce new identities through mass consumption. We are

always responsible for our lives, as our being is always an issue for us (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 69 & 220). In this vein, the ways we take into account the influences of social, cultural, and political regimes are different. Similarly, the ways we choose to consume goods to reflect our perception of the world are too different. In this sense, the common belief in grand narratives about consumption may become mysterious.

Not only does consumption satisfy our physical demands, but it also socially governs some of our interactions with others in the world. Consumption is a type of discourse which dictates the ways we consume products under influences of the surrounding environment. Personal consumption styles are the embodiment of the discourse of modernization, although the notion of modernization is different from nation to nation. The media, particularly the Internet, which are products of technological modernization, reinforce personal consumption styles. This reinforcement of personal consumption enables to form a grand narrative for a certain group, in which each consumer shares similar styles with others. It should also be noted that despite differences in the ways we experience life, we always share the world with others as *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1962). In sharing the world with others, we conform to the ways a majority of people do with consumption. Yet, as we lead our lives in our own ways, we may tend to negotiate our ways to follow the crowd.

As such, we seem to confront a chaos and hybridity of little narratives. Grand narratives are not powerful enough to explain differences and heterogeneity. Personal consumption insight itself is not sufficient to represent a group's perspective either. Nevertheless, a collective of these various personal insights can create certain impacts on the socio-economic and political governance. Consumption *per se* does not remain as a neutral behavior, but it partly contributes its individual enforcement to this large mechanism through influences of mass

media (Ton, 2008).

Influences of Mass Consumption on Individuals – The Raise of another Grand Narrative

Consumption encourages dormant monies to participate in cash flows, sustaining and calling for foreign trade, and creating a national competitive advantage. As such, consumption is not totally a personal issue. Taking the political aspect of consumption one step further, governments tend to place a stronger emphasis on consumption forces for social groups than individuals, and mould consumption styles into grand narratives controlled by a host of manufacturers.

A thing or service is made a product only when it brings about a specific benefit to consumers with a potential to bring about a change or specific benefit which consumers crave for, expect of or even have never expected of. In terms of economics, products are the results of a manufacturing process under a company's careful consideration of market demands and potential profitability. They are produced after manufacturers have surveyed market demands, and considered their internal financial ability, as well as the sufficiency of other necessary assistances. In terms of consumers, before deciding to buy a product, they may have already known about the product via different media channels such as advertisements, mouth-to-mouth advertisements or even randomness. For example, when we decide to buy a motorbike, we have probably read many advertisements about that motorbike, or through a friend who has ridden one and recommends it to us because of its reasonable price, or because we are generously given this motorbike by that good friend.

It is presumably probable that we have already held some universal knowledge, albeit humble, about motorbikes, and had an ability to

control a motorbike prior to or after the motorbike purchase. In terms of Heidegger (1962), we are always already in the world before we can get some knowledge about something. However, the ability to use this product must lie within our ability and skills regarding both finance and technical skills to ride the motorbike under legal conditions in our local area. Another example is when we buy a tour, we enjoy services, foods, entertainment activities, tourist places and other accompanying services that are directly brought to us. We may enjoy and compare this service to another without any specific professional knowledge.

In other words, the knowledge and experience that comes from these products can occur before or after our consumption without essential ties to a hierarchy in our knowledge reception capacity. This knowledge and experience enables us to obtain our basic needs, making our lives more comfortable, convenient and modern. The practicality and knowledge from the use of a product help us achieve our expectations of the product, ultimately maximize our satisfaction of it, and achieve other pursuits relating to the use of this product.

On the one hand, if a product does not bring about a high satisfaction or is believed to cause harm, consumers will boycott that product, and even worse, they will boycott the whole manufacturer's brand. If this happens on a large scale, it will create a social tendency to boycott that manufacturer. If the manufacturer is a famous, influential corporation, it will create an advantage for rivals. The widespread boycott may pose a political threat not only to the producer, but also to the government's political status quo in which politicians may be supporting the operation of this producer, who is in turn supporting these politicians financially. To put it shortly, they are economic corporations and manufacturers who can orientate, form socio-political governance, and are simultaneously affected by individuals in that mechanism who place pressure on the government to stop, influence or

change these corporations. In this vein, consumers are not consciously neo-colonialized when following this political consumption style.

On the other hand, together with the growth and economic dominance of manufacturing corporations under the assistance of the media in these second and third globalization waves (Friedman, 2005), consumers are indirectly affected by advertisements in the form of great stories. These metanarratives can cause chain influences on individuals' lifestyles. Provided with an abundance of products with competitive prices, consumers are offered an increase of choices, as long as they are suitable with their pockets and expectations. However, with global/national cooperation in manufacture to mobilize economic capital, almost all markets are increasingly shared out equally, and in turn dominate the production modes. In this regard, consumers seem to have limited choices.

Consumers tend to choose products of well-known brands covered by a multitude of advertisements, whose words are said to entail socially meaningful weight being published on the media. Yet, through the media language, we seem to be engaged in the working of simulacra, in which "the image of reality bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 170). The ways we use language and are affected by language can define our perception of realities. The media can be seen as a member in our community, who has the authority to publish their voices and construct channels of information. They tend to treat the whole populace of consumers as a single unit of consumption. In this vein, the media gradually lose responsibility for providing information to the populace without distinguishing its receptors. Instead, they are believed to give a command to consumers. The role of the media is distorted.

Yet, as consumers, we may choose not to be filled with legendary stories about consumerism. Our agency in consumption brings about a new

consumption insight: a reflexiveness in the modern society being wrapped in the insight of the consumption self (Mai, 2014; McGregor, 2003; Ton, 2008). Perhaps, the new consumption insight does not cause any devastating harm to consumers. A majority of manufacturers, fortunately, are not deceitful people! Consumers just lose money when they sometimes startlingly wonder why they have decided to buy a bottle of shampoo, while they have still had two left at home! In contrast, who enjoys the benefit? The manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, and marketing agencies.

Towards this end, the socially reflexive consumption insight, which includes personal values, positively promotes consumption in an economy. Nevertheless, in terms of ethics, why are consumers, on the one hand, informed of the many choices in the informational society (and in reality they are being offered and fed with an army of trivial information on products), but on the other hand, they are dependent upon such an industrial consumption style directed by the legendary political grand stories?

Therefore, we can question whether there exists a model of media for or of the public. The perception of the post industrial consumption insight may carry a neo-colonial dominance with its halo lights filling with personal consumption values and emptying consumers' pockets! But consumerism helps individual consumers construct their new identities in this social consumption trend.

The new identities will both influence the formation of this trend and help consumers go with the flow. They can form new selves under the influence of the new political governance of consumption being controlled and dominated by the boom of the media. A paradox exists in the sense that that consumers feel happy and safe with their new selves possessing technological products.

Technological products bring about an emancipation, minimize unnecessary drudgery, and maximize comfort in modern life. However, these products always cause a slavery dependence to consumers, most of whom, oddly

enough, find it normal and comfortably accept this dependence. They tend to consider that this civilized world would not exist without the appearance of these products and such a dependence. For instance, when we decide to buy a motorbike, we must know how to ride it, must sit for a riding test, buy a helmet, pay for petrol, maintenance and premiums, and even potentially get worried about an accident or a rare robbery. Such a list of "must" seem to be endless!

No one can guarantee that accidents would never happen, and if walking on foot or staying at home were the best preventive method from accidents and other annoyances, the purchase of the motorbike would become meaningless. Even when deciding to buy the motorbike, we tend to overconsider many other related aspects such as personal conditions, the brand, and the most important one: current vogue!

The last point that is worth mentioning here is related to personal values in the new consumption style which disguise in the form of virtual satisfaction values that consumers may borrow from their consumption of goods. These values are partly brought from the influences of the media. These virtual values do not necessarily bring physical and material benefits to consumers. These extra values are added when we feel proud of being conscious consumers. We now have a wide range of choice for consumption, from very simple products such as food for breakfast to more extravagant ones like the purchase of a private jet or an outer-space tour. With the abundance of choice, some of us may choose to buy more than what we need to meet our own interests without serious considerations over communal and ecological impacts (McGregor, 2003, pp. 18-19). Many of us are told that – by both formal education and the media – our consumption is at the expense of other people's benefits in terms of resources which should actually remain as public goods and be expected to be shared out equally. Environmental issues, scarce resources, money spent, and public goods are mentioned, informed,

communicated and educated. Insightful consumers are those who are self-aware and socially, environmentally responsible for their choices. They tend to do so, because for one reason, they are told to do so, and for another, producers propagandize it.

Concluding Remarks

The scenario continues to happen in this way: manufacturers keep producing and we keep consuming for our own generation's benefit. The author does not reject consumerism, since as having said in the introduction of this article, the author is a consumer himself. Yet, are we putting on a new mask compared to the true nature of consumption itself? Consumption is known not only to satisfy personal demands, but also advance society with regard to economy. It is now embedded with virtual values. We admittedly learn that these virtual values directly bring about actual benefits to producers and the government in which consumers are living. In other words, consumers cannot actively play the role they want, but rather they are tasked with a certain role to play and tied up to this epistemology for economic and political purposes of producers. Another surprising issue is that many of us (including the author himself) find such a role acceptable. Is this phenomenon, in fact, a collapse of little narratives in postmodern consumerism and a throne for another grand narrative in political consumerism?

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