Exploring the culture of an online brand community:

A study of a Korean Apple MacBook user community

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SUMMARY

Consumers have formed numerous brand-related and consumer communities in computer-mediated environments (CMEs). Members of these communities increasingly participate in brand-related communication. They have become more active than traditional consumers in the mass media environment and have built a culture in cyberspace.

This thesis aims to improve our understanding of Korean Apple MacBook consumer culture in an online brand community. Based on a consumer-centric approach, Goffman's dramaturgy framework is used to examine consumers' self-presentation performance and interactions within the community. Netnography, an ethnographical research method applicable to CMEs, is used for the study. The findings show that Korean Apple MacBook consumers present themselves, and interact with other members, by posting representative brand photos and stories about their everyday lives. In doing so, they fabricate brand meanings and create positive face. The members' brand meaning-making efforts construct symbolic meanings as aesthetic and distinctive objects. Furthermore, their interactions around the brand portrait photo construct an idealized brand consumption style. These consumers' brand-related interactive communication produces good taste as a form of cultural and social capital to influence members' standing within the community. In addition, they build community rituals – coordination, community terms, and restrictions – to preserve the community's identity through its members' communal interactions.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The rapid diffusion of the Internet has led to many dramatic changes in people's lives. One of the more important of these has been the proliferation of a variety of types of online communities. With the development of information and communication media technologies, consumers are also becoming a part of online communities, and have formed numerous brand-related and consumer communities online. Users increasingly participate in the creation of marketing and brand-related communication. As such, they have become active creators of communal and brand identities in computer-mediated environments (CMEs). The Internet has great potential for the creation of brand communities which are primarily defined by their participants. This gives consumers a great deal of power in forming brand meanings (Muniz & Shau, 2007).

A varied academic literature has emerged to study consumers' behavior in such online brand communities. Previous research suggests it can lead to supportive and creative brand consumption experiences online (Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Muniz & Shau, 2007; Avery, 2007; Huang, 2008). For instance, members of Apple brand communities have high brand loyalty: they have a cult-like culture and the brand almost comes to mean a form of religiosity to the consumers (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muniz & Shau, 2007). However, most academic studies of the Apple brand community have focused on US consumers, even though brand consumption styles vary across different social contexts. For example, a global brand such as Starbucks has localized meanings. In the Chinese local market, this iconic, global brand is transformed

through young urban consumers' enactment of personally meaningful experiences, roles, and identities in the settings of the coffee shops (Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008). Local consumers interpret and appropriate the meanings of global brands to their own culture (Ger & Belk, 1996). Accordingly, we might expect a global brand like Apple to be consumed in a different way by Koreans. However, there have been few attempts to examine Korean Apple users' experiences of online brand communities. Thus, this study uses a Korean MacBook user community to understand Korean Apple consumer culture and the meanings of the brand in the local context. Exploring members' self-presentation performance and their interactive communication enables an examination of the MacBook brand meanings being created in the Korean context. However, before examining this online community, it is first necessary to understand the Apple MacBook brand.

Study Context: The Apple MacBook Brand

In 2010, Wikipedia provided the following description of the MacBook brand:

The Macintosh, or Mac, is a series of lines of personal computers (PCs) designed, developed, and marketed by Apple Inc. The first Mac was introduced on January 24, 1984 and was the first commercially successful PC to feature a mouse and graphical user interface (GUI) rather than a command-line interface. Throughout the second half of the 1980s, the company built market share, only to see it dissipate in the 1990s as the PC market shifted towards IBM-PC compatible machines running MS-DOS and Microsoft Windows. Apple consolidated its

multiple consumer-level desktop models into the 1998 iMac all-in-one, which was a commercial success and revitalized the Mac brand. Current Mac systems are mainly targeted at the home, education, and creative professional markets. They comprise the iMac and the entry-level Mac mini desktop models; the workstation-level Mac Pro tower; the MacBook, MacBook Air, and MacBook Pro laptops; and the Xserve server. Apple embarked upon the Intel era in 2006. The MacBook is the first Mac notebook to use an Intel processor. The release of Intel-based Mac computers introduced the potential to run native Windows-based operating systems on Apple hardware without the need for emulation software such as Virtual PC. The MacBook uses an operating system (OS) called Boot Camp, which can convert Windows OS from Microsoft to work with Apple products. This is expected to attract a substantial number of notebook PC users to switch to Mac ("MacBook," 2010).

To popularize the MacBook, Apple Korea introduced it as a low-priced Mac notebook costing around 1.1 million won in June 2006. The inexpensive and Windows OS compatible MacBook is a competitive product which can go up against other notebooks and PCs (Kim, 2006).

As indicated above, Apple MacBook has the potential not only to increase the number of consumers but also to extend the meaning of the Mac brand. Historically, it has been considered a tool for a small group of professionals. However, the computer user environment in Korea has not been favorable to Mac users. Most Korean Internet Web sites are set up for PC users

only, and government and bank Web sites only service users of Internet Explorer. This study examines how Korean MacBook consumers experience the brand and create its meanings, by studying a Korean MacBook brand community.

Objectives of the Study

In theoretical terms, this research takes a consumer-centric perspective to examine the consumption experience and the meaning-making of possessions in everyday life. People are what they possess and live with. They continuously present themselves using their branded possessions. Through MacBook consumers' self-presentation acts and interpersonal communications with each other, brand meanings can be constructed. Under this assumption, this study uses Goffman's dramaturgy framework to examine consumer behavior and interaction in a particular brand community. Goffman (1959) suggests that individuals perform as actors in social interactions. His dramaturgical perspective is relevant to examining interpersonal communication in an online community. Using Goffman's framework, the self-presentation of a group of Korean MacBook users, and their interaction in an online brand community, will be explored. Furthermore, the Apple MacBook brand meanings thus fabricated will be revealed by detailing the consumers' interactions in the brand community setting. The thesis is designed to generate an understanding of Korean Apple MacBook consumer culture by pursuing three goals: 1) To understand consumer self-presentation behavior in the online brand community; 2) To understand consumer interaction in the community; and 3) To understand how Korean consumers make meaning

around the Apple MacBook brand.

This research will reveal Korean MacBook users' self-presentation strategies and their interactive performance in an online community and examine how they fabricate brand meanings. This will embed the global Apple brand meanings in a local market, Korea. Through this approach, a bridge will be built between communication research, based on Goffman's theory, and marketing literature on consumer and brand culture in CMEs.

Methodologically, this study employs the concept of netnography (Kozinetz, 2002), which can be described as the adaptation of ethnographic research techniques for the study of the culture of communities emerging through computer-mediated communication (CMC).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand community

A community is "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds" (Bender, 1978, p. 145). This concept is consistent with the social network perspective of community (Wellman, 1979), and the imagined community (Anderson, 1983). Anderson (1983) indicates that the imagined community is formed by one's feeling of belonging and how one imagines being a part of it. This symbolic scope emphasizes substance over form. Cohen (1985) states that a community is symbolically constructed as a conglomeration of normative codes and values that provides its members with a sense of identity.

Brand communities are a special form of community built around brands. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) define such a group as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a social relations among admirers of a brand." It is marked by a consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). A consciousness of kind is the feeling of "we-ness," bonding the members, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Shared rituals and traditions can be continued in the community's common history and culture, creating conventions for a harmonious community. Certain behavioral norms and values are regarded as traditions. A sense of moral responsibility denotes a sense of duty and obligation to the community. With these common features, brand communities form specific brand meanings and cultures through communal acts, and also function

actively to interpret and negotiate brand meaning in social contexts.

Consumer-centric research on brand communities is termed consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Here, it is asserted that "consumers build feelings of social solidarity, fragmentary, self-selected, and transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests" (Arnould &Thompson, 2005, p. 873).These social gatherings around a common consumption interest have been studied by numerous marketing researchers, who identify the consumer-centric consumption view as a subculture of consumption (Kates, 2002; Mark, Richard, & Sue, 1996; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), a consumption world (Holt, 1995), a consumption microculture (Thompson & Troester, 2002), or a culture of consumption (Kozinets, 2001)

Maffesoli's (1996) ideas on neotribalism provide a foundation for the genre of consumer culture theory. Maffesoli (1996) argues that

the forces of globalization and postindustrial socioeconomic transformation have significantly eroded the traditional bases of sociality. Moreover, globalization has also encouraged a central ethos of radical individualism, oriented around a ceaseless quest for personal distinctiveness and autonomy in lifestyle choices. The tribe is more than a lasting category in modern social life. Sports clubs, coffee circles, fan clubs, hobby societies, political parties at the local level, community policing and single issue pressure groups are all kinds of neo-tribes. Postmodern tribes are the main social fact of everyday life, indicative of the versatility of the masses (p. 75).

Neotribes are "characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings and

dispersal" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 76). People experience the aggregation of the hyper-individualist society in the form of heterogeneous fragments (Maffesoli, 1996). Postmodern consumers constantly shift identities, forming, dispersing, and reforming within the brand community (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Consumers forge more ephemeral collective identifications and participate in rituals of solidarity that are grounded in common lifestyle interests (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, brand communities which consist of consumers' aggregation and interaction around brands in the postmodern age can be regarded as neotribes.

Brand communities are complex entities with their own cultures, rituals, traditions, and codes of behavior. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) examine the brand communities of Ford Bronco trucks, Mac computers, and Saab automobiles. They show that members obtain an important part of their brand consumption experience from membership. Through participating in community practices, they form their self-identity and share their consumption experiences. Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) ethnographic study focuses on the subculture of consumption, describing the brand festivals of Harley Davidson enthusiasts derive an important part of their understanding of the brand from the sharing of connections with other members. This subculture can be marked by a shared ethos, acculturation patterns, and status hierarchies, similar to brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). This subculture of consumption varies according to the consumer group. Lesbian groups in the United Kingdom, for example, use and reframe the consumption meanings of IKEA, the Scandinavian furniture brand. Lesbian subculture has altered the symbolic meaning of IKEA, which is connected to that of "dyke"

(slang for lesbian), to create a group identity, and the altered symbol is

reframed by each individual member in creating her self-identity (Mark,

Richard, & Sue, 1996).

Online community and the online brand community

The rapid diffusion of the Internet has led to the proliferation of types of

online communities. Rheingold (1996) defines the terms virtual communities

or online communities as cultural aggregations using CMC technologies.

Fernback (1999) emphasizes the importance of the community's symbolic

dimension. People symbolically infuse their online communities with meaning

(Fernback, 1999). The issue in the study of a community is "whether its

members are able to infuse its culture with vitality and to construct a symbolic

community which provides meaning and identity" (Cohen, 1985, p. 9). Virtual

space is the conceptual space where people manifest their words and human

relationships, data, and their wealth and power. The "real" juxtaposed against

the "virtual" is less important in the symbolic form of community (Fernback,

1999). People's embodiment can be socially and psychologically constructed,

leaving their bodies behind to appear to fellow members through the screen

(Rheingold, 1996). People encode their identities and decode those of others in

CMC (Kanayama, 2003). These messages are delivered as identity meanings

in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1996). The community thus exists "in the

connection between what social constructs and the CMC-generated

representations of these constructs" (Fernback, 1999, p. 213).

The Internet provides venues for building relationships between people.

People with similar interests gather online beyond regional boundaries using

CMC technologies. Jones (1995) notes that CMC is not only a tool that people use to inhabit cyberspace, but also a medium through which they construct social relations there. In addition, CMC technologies can be used to restore and strengthen human interactions to create and sustain communities (Miller, 1996). An online community is a significant social construct, possessing its own culture, structure, and political and economic character (Fernback, 1999). Most online communities build a behavior code that people should follow while they practice as a member. Fox and Roberts (1999) note that people build community norms such as "netiquette" for sustaining online communities. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, an online community should be studied as an entity of symbolic meanings rather than structure (Fernback, 1999). This perspective is applicable to the study of consumer-generated brand communities focusing on the process of building an entity of brand meanings and developing consumers' identity through interactive communication practices.

The concept of linking to others in cyberspace also suggests the forming of brand-related communities and consumer communities of brands. Consequently, brand consumption-based aggregations are not limited to physically gathering in fan clubs, conventions, bike rallies, and the like, but are spread in virtual space and online communities (Kozinets, 2006). These are online brand communities. Consumers have formed numerous brand-related and consumer communities online. Using CMC technologies, consumers can actively contribute to the creation of marketing and brand-related communication online. In doing so, they are also becoming a part of the online environment, sharing and constructing their brand experiences and

meanings. As such, they have become active creators of communal and brand identities in CMEs. This gives them a great deal of power in forming brand meaning (Muniz & Shau, 2007). Some of the more enthusiastic consumers will create advertising for brands and spread it around cyberspace. On the other hand, some consumers' active practice leads to negative acts against brands. For instance, a Canon digital camera consumer online community based in Korea boycotted the Canon brand on the basis of the company's allegedly irresponsible service (Sohn, 2005).

A varied academic literature has emerged to study consumer behavior in online brand communities. Previous research has suggested they engage in supportive and creative behaviors and brand consumption experiences online (Baym, 1993; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Muniz & Shau, 2007; Avery, 2007). Kozinets (2001) examines how Star Trek fans construct fan culture and consumption meanings. Star Trek fans build their own meanings and contents, negotiating these from mass media images and objects. They distinguish themselves from mainstream viewers of Star Trek and form a subculture as a powerful utopian refuge. Furthermore, they heavily invest themselves in the text to legitimize their articulations of Star Trek as a religion or myth. These practices result in the Star Trek text being fabricated from a commercial to a sacred product. Kozinets (2001) argues that these active consumption practices construct a sense of self and what matters in life. Kozinets (2002) also examined how coffee consumers' culture is formed on the Usenet Newsgroup <alt,coffee>. The members of the newsgroup speak using terms that are unfamiliar to outgroup people: baristas, JavaJocks, cremas and roastmasters, tampers and superautomatics, livias and tiger flecks. The group members, who

are coffee lovers, use this specialized language to convey many of the subtleties of coffee taste and preparation. Understanding the consumers' language and its specific underlying social motivations is an essential aspect of understanding consumer culture (Kozinets, 2002).

In addition, research on one of image brands, Apple, presents that Apple brand consumers have high brand loyalty: they have cult like culture and the brand means religiosity to the consumers (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muniz & Shau, 2007). Belk and Tumbat (2005) suggest a sense of religiosity among Apple users in the "Cult of Macintosh." They introduce the notion of a brand cult in looking at the extreme devotion that consumers have toward certain brands. These groups of loyal followers form personal or virtually cult-like followings. They romantically ennoble their brand and build intimate brand relationships (Fournier, 1998). The concept of the brand cult offers a metaphor for understanding extreme beliefs. Another study of the Apple Newton brand suggests that its enthusiasts voluntarily practice marketing communication online (Muniz & Schau, 2007) and hence actively practice brand meaning creation. They create and disseminate documents and ads for the brands that they love. They act independently of marketers and advertisers. Though the brand was discontinued in 1998, the Newton community created commercially relevant contents to fill the void, leading to tensions with the marketers. The consumer's involvement in generating brand-related contents imbues it with powerful meaning.

Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and the online brand community

In CMEs, consumers can actively contribute to the creation of brand-related communication. Consumers are also becoming important communicators, sharing their brand experiences and creating brand messages. As such, they participate actively in the communal creation of brand messages. This gives them a great deal of power in the brand-meaning formation process (Muniz & Shau, 2007). This phenomenon of increasing interactive online communication by consumers can be explained in terms of the influence of eWOM communication (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as "an oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial regarding a brand, product, or service" (Arndt 1967, p. 66). Marketers and researchers recognize that WOM affects consumers' decision making (Brooks, 1957; Dichter, 1966). WOM has significant influence on the decision-making processes of consumers and plays a critical role in the adoption of new products and the diffusion of products (Brooks, 1957; Brown & Reingen, 1987). Positive WOM communication affects product adoption, and negative WOM influences consumers to switch product (Lam et al., 2009).

Consumers can share more information in CMEs than in face-to-face communication. This new form of WOM generated in the online environment has been named eWOM, which is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39).

Consumers actively and easily participate in eWOM communication regarding the products and services they are interested in. They have different motivations for engaging in providing and seeking eWOM communication. Several motivations for engaging in eWOM communication have been identified, such as identity seeking and the desire for social interaction and economic incentives (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kozinet et al., 2010; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). In eWOM communication, consumers write their own comments about products and services. In so doing, they start discussions threads on product and service related topics and build a sense of community by increasing their compassion for and familiarity with other consumers. As social networking activities, interactions in eWOM communication provide consumers with a space and the opportunity to post a personal profile related to their brand-related messages (Kozinet et al., 2010). Thus, by providing eWOM messages, consumers show their desire (a) to interact with others and (b) for self-enhancement.

Consumers distinguish between eWOM communications by consumers and corporate marketing messages about products and services. Consumers find eWOM information generated by other consumers more credible, relevant, and able to generate compassion than marketer-generated information (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). In addition, consumers who gather product information from online forums have a greater interest in the product than those who search for information from corporate Web sites (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Supportive and enthusiastic consumers of brands and products are less receptive to negative information about the brands and products and less likely to abandon them. They share additional information and their experiences

about products and services that go beyond the commercial messages. Thus, brand and product marketing messages can be changed and reproduced in the process of eWOM communication (Kozinet et al., 2010). Accordingly, product value and loyalty can be increased by consumers' eWOM activities (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

eWOM takes various forms: online reviews, discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, wikis, communities, prosumers, and open-source marketing (Duana et al., 2008; Kozinet et al., 2010). Coproduced eWOM communications by consumers appear in different forms according to the nature of the eWOM platform. On user review sites, consumers mainly communicate their experiences. These user reviews are a source of product and service information (Duana et al., 2008). In addition, online discussion forum sites mainly present consumer expectations of products and services (Liu, 2006). On blog sites, bloggers create eWOM communications as a form of ongoing personal storytelling (Kozinet et al., 2010). Thus, brand-related narratives cannot be foreseen; rather, brand messages and meanings created by marketers are reformed and recreated in individual consumers' life stories. The commercial marketing messages are embedded in the characters of the online communicators, such as in the ongoing narratives of bloggers (Kozinet et al., 2010). Marketing messages are changed by eWOM communicators adjusting to various individual and communal factors. Accordingly, online consumer group and online brand community sites are relevant spaces for investigating how consumers produce eWOM communications in a community setting. However, prior eWOM research offers little insight into the online brand community, which is one form of eWOM. Thus, this consumer-centric study

of an online brand community in the Korean context will provide new insights

into the eWOM communication process.

Symbolic interactions with the brand

People live their lives in the middle of things. The objects we possess

have meanings and our possessions are part of our selves. People continuously

form relationships with various brands. In other words, consumers come to be

identified by what they consume. McCracken (1988) notes that the meanings

of consumer goods and the associated meaning-creation processes are

important parts of the scaffolding of people's realities. In addition, Solomon

(1983) indicates that artifacts and goods can be capable of forming a

mechanism for self-reflection and self-identity. Special goods become part of

the extended self and assume important meanings to individuals in the

construction of their subjective selves (Belk, 1988). The meaningful objects

are named as evocative objects (Turkle, 2007), connected to daily life as well

as intellectual practice.

Consumers also use embedded identity meanings in possessions and

brands to present and fabricate their identity (Belk, 1988). This consumption

process is a communication of the self to others and results in the formation of

individual and communal identity (Arnould &Thompson, 2005). In addition,

Solomon (1983) suggests that brands set the stage for the multitude of social

roles people must play; they hold identity meanings, culturally shared stories,

and images. The consumer's identity and self are produced and reproduced

through social interactions where symbolic meanings, social codes, and

relationships are formed (Firat & Venkatesh 1993). Furthermore, symbolic

cultural capital can be obtained through this identity meaning as embedded in consumption behavior which involves distinctive tastes (Bourdieu, 1987). Possessions are also symbols, used to bestow social status on their owners (Levy, 1959). Hence, consumers attach value to the identity meanings of their possessions and embrace brands accordingly.

Brands can be a relationship partner in people's lives (Fournier, 1998). Just as in interpersonal relationships, people can also build strong relationships with certain brands, evoking feelings of love, commitment, and connection with the self. In all societies, the anthropomorphizing of inanimate objects has been identified as a universal activity (Brown, 1991). Animated, humanized, or personalized brands are ways to legitimize such a partner-like relationship (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) argues that the brand does not exist objectively, but only subjectively, as a set of perceptions in the minds of consumers.

Consumers' relationship with brands takes cultural and symbolic forms and meanings. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) describe the consumer community associated with Harley Davidson motorcycles, and the members' relationships to the brand. They suggest that consumers form brand relationships through interactions with each other as well as the brand. They argue that subcultures of consumption cause lifestyles and consumer identities to form around a given brand. This process leads to strong relationships between consumers and brands. These relationships are complex, evolving, and contextual; they exist at the level of lived experience (Fournier, 1998). Brands are valuable objects for consumers' self- presentation. People communicate who they are through conspicuous association with brands

(Fournier, 1998).

"Objects are social creations formed in and are raised out of the process of definition of people. Objects in the sense of their meaning must be seen as social creations - as being formed in and arising out of the process of definition of people. The meaning of anything and everything has to be formed, learned, and transmitted through a process of indication - a process that is necessarily a social process. Human group life on the level of symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people are forming, sustaining, and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meaning to objects. Objects have no fixed status except as their meaning is sustained through indications and definitions that people make of the objects. Objects in all categories can undergo change in their meaning" (Blumer, 1969, p. 11-12). Brands can convey symbolic meanings which consumers can use for identity formation (Levy, 1959; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2005). In particular, Harley Davidson, Nike, Budweiser, and Apple can be classified as identity and image brands. In other words, they derive value from what they symbolize and how they help consumers present their identities, rather than from what they actually do (Avery, 2007).

A symbolic gesture has meaning not only for the maker, but also for the social audience. Social acts should elicit the same responses in different people in order to be properly understood (Blumer, 1969). In this view, individuals' consumption of certain objects and brands can be considered as the performance of symbolic gestures. Thus, possessions and brands play roles as props and equipment for social interactions. Through this process, the brand's symbolic meanings are formulated by those interacting in a social

situation.

Brand meanings are fabricated by consumers' symbolic interaction, forming individual and communal identities in an online brand community. The interactions with branded possessions can be seen as symbolic gestures, helping to form expected identity meanings. These formulated meanings can be woven into the brands. The performance of consumers' interactions in an online community would be expected to have different features from offline performance. In addition, therefore, this perspective proposes to examine how consumers build relationships with brands and other consumers to form their identity meanings in an online community.

In particular, research on one of Apple's brands suggests that members of their communities have high brand loyalty: they have a cult-like culture and a sense of religiosity (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muniz & Shau, 2007). However, previous studies of Apple online brand communities have focused on the US context. According to Blumer (1966), different groups develop different cultures, which change as the objects that comprise them change their meaning. People act in terms of the meanings of their objects; the objects in a group represent a genuine sense of organization and culture. To identify and understand the life of a group, it is necessary to identify the meanings it places on the objects owned by members. People are not confined to preexisting meanings; they work out new lines of conduct and construct new meanings for them. This group activity can be an indigenous source of the means of transforming objects to fit the group's identity and culture. With this view of objects, a global brand such as Apple would be consumed in various ways by consumers in different social contexts. However, there have been few attempts

to examine how Asian people consume the Apple brand in the local context. Thus, this study chose Korea as an Asian context, and further narrowed the focus to a Korean MacBook user community to explore how it might extend the scope of Apple consumer culture.

Korean consumption culture

People live their lives in continuous consumption. As a way of life, consumption is based on a belief in the enduring power of material possessions to bring happiness and personal fulfillment (Campbell, 1987). In addition, consumption is a social practice based on cultural foundations (Ger & Belk, 1996). Consumption behavior represents the culture that consumers live in as well as an individual consumer's identity. In consuming goods and services, people continuously form relationships with various brands. In other words, the meanings of consumer goods and the associated meaning-creation processes are important parts of the understanding of consumer culture.

Consumption manifests itself in various forms: product purchase, wish lists, consumption dreaming, prepurchase dreaming, imaginary consumption, and so on (Fournier & Guiry, 1993). People expect to obtain goods on their wish lists, and they imagine an idealized life with these objects. Imaginary consumption could be related to browsing activity, which is a form of consumption without physical consumption (Bloch & Richins, 1983). Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) suggest that eBay is a space of virtual consumption focusing on the feature of imaginary consumption. These consumer imaginations reflect consumer tastes and practices and stimulate new wants and desires in the online consumer community. In CMEs, these

consumption activities represent the culture in which the consumers live. Thus, in CMEs, a global brand like Apple might be consumed in a different way by Koreans. Based on this cultural approach, it is necessary to review Korean consumer culture in order to examine Apple brand consumers' behavior in the Korean context.

Korean consumption culture is based on its political and economic transformation from a poor and repressed society to an affluent and democratic one (Kim, 2000). Money, fashion, and globalization emerged as Korean consumption trends after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 (Cho, 2008). Korean consumers have a strong desire to make a lot of money and to receive social respect (Cho, 2008). They present their social status by displaying their consumer products. Individual budgets are stretched to buy high-end brands in the belief that owning luxury goods will give the impression of wealth and lead to being honored by others. This conspicuous consumption and preference for fashionable luxury goods among Korean consumers reflects their sensitivity about social face (Jung & Kim, 2009). A number of Korean consumers fall into narcissism and believe that their social status is heightened by buying expensive designer brand items such as handbags and clothes (Cho, 2008). In addition, physical appearance and fashion are important to Koreans; they place priority on their appearance and are spending increasing amounts on cosmetics and beauty, regardless of their gender or age. On the other hand, Kim (2003) notes that the tendency of Korean consumers to be attentive to fashion is not just 'keeping up with the Joneses' behavior but also identity-seeking behavior. For example, in the mid-90s, Nix Jeans and Eastpak bags were symbolic icons for young Korean university students. Possession of these

two fashion items signified membership of the young generation.

The increasing forces of globalization and information communication technology (ICT) have given great impetus to Korean consumer culture. A number of consumers are enthusiastic and educated users of high-tech devices and services. In addition, Korean consumers are sophisticated and demanding; they identify product defects and problems and provide almost professional-level evaluations of IT products and services (Cho, 2008). Accordingly, Korean consumers actively share their own product stories online and these affect corporate marketing messages.

As Apple is a global brand, its products will be consumed in a certain way by Korean consumers in the Korean culture. Specific brand meanings may be created to fit the identity and culture of Korean Apple users. Little research has been conducted on consumer culture and consumers' communal desires in CMEs in the Korean context. Thus, it is necessary to study Korean consumer culture in an online brand community.

Goffman's dramaturgy framework

"Everyone lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In social interactions, information about the individuals defines the situation. Thus, the performers behave to fit the situation; people act in a way that will be way that will be considered suitable by others in any given set of circumstances. In other words, they act in order to call forth a desired response from others. Goffman conceptualizes this individualized self-presentation in everyday life as a continuing process of information management in social

settings (Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007). To analyze these social interactions, he suggests a dramaturgy framework (Goffman, 1959). He uses theatrical metaphors to define the ways in which individuals present themselves to others based on their cultural values, norms, and rituals.

Goffman's view of the self is based on its empirical manifestations in social encounters in everyday life. This suggests how people accomplish meanings in their lives by studying how people act, interact, and form relationships. In addition, his view presents how people construct their self-presentations and carry them off in front of others. In self-presentation performance, actors accomplish with an eye toward people's achieving the best impression of themselves in the view of others (Adler, Adler & Fontana, 1987).

Goffman's view of the self is based on its empirical manifestations in social encounters in everyday life. He shows how people accomplish meanings in their lives by studying how people act, interact, and form relationships. In addition, he shows how people construct their self-presentations and carry them off in front of others. In a self-presentation performance, actors perform with an eye toward making the best impression of themselves in the views of others (Adler, Adler, & Fontana, 1987).

Performance

Goffman (1959) defines performance as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 15). In other words, individuals mobilize their activities so as to express during interactions what they intend to convey

(Goffman, 1959). These interactions can be seen as dramatic realization. Individuals present themselves through performance just as an actor on a stage presents himself to the audience. Situations are defined by a performing consensus between actors and audiences in social interactions.

There are two regions for individual performances; the front and the back. According to Goffman (1959):

The front region refers to the place where the performance is presented and back region refers to the place where the performance of a routine is prepared. Access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from seeing backstage and to prevent outsiders from coming into a performance (p. 107).

Performance in the front region is acted in *line*, which is defined as "a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In social interaction, he assumes a social establishment surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity takes place. However, Goffman's works contain a lacuna in the process by which the social establishment is formed in various contexts. Especially now that we have CMC technologies, people can easily create, and participate in, various online communities. If an online community is assumed to be a social establishment, a study of social interaction in its formation will provide us with an understanding of the social interactions taking place in a certain context.

Face-work

In his book *On Face-Work*, Goffman (1967) describes how people negotiate face in everyday social interaction. The flow of social encounters produces face (Boyd, 2008). During social interactions, people attempt to establish and maintain face. Within the dramaturgy framework (Goffman, 1967), the concept of face denotes a mask that changes depending on the audience, the variety of social interactions, and the desired social image of the self as supported by others (Goffman, 1967). People try to maintain the face they have created in social situations. They are emotionally attached to these faces, so they feel good when they are maintained; conversely, loss of face results in emotional pain. Thus, in social interactions, people cooperate by using deference and demeanor to maintain face for each others.

Face requires social validation, and people maintain it by presenting themselves to their social audiences in ways designed to influence them to accept it; this is an ongoing process labeled impression management (Goffman, 1967). Impression management is

> a socialization process - the tendency for performers to offer observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways. Thus, when an individual presents himself before others, his performances will tend to exemplify the officially accredited values of the society in an idealized form (Goffman, 1959, p. 35).

In social interactions, people perform in a given social role, interpret the responses received, and manage the impression to be congruent with one's desires. These are related to our identities, which serve to define the social groups to which we do and do not belong (Avery, 2007). Rules of conduct

which bind both the actor and the recipient are the essential foundations of

society. Members of a social group experience a bond of reciprocal

dependence. Each member's actions contribute to the face of the other

members (Goffman, 1959). Hence, group members entrust their face to others

and gain (or lose) it by their association with their peers (Avery, 2007). People

will try to obtain proper equipment to embellish and illuminate their daily

performances with a favorable social style. The self can be seen as a

ceremonial thing, a sacred object which should be regarded with proper ritual

care, and which in turn should be presented in a proper light to others. As a

means through which this self is established, the individual acts according to

an appropriate demeanor while interacting with others, and is treated by them

with deference. People play this kind of sacred game in social rituals

(Goffman, 1967). The formation of face-to-face interaction explains how

interactional patterns are involved in everyday life. Individuals are not just the

subject matter of this, but also have a highly distinctive attitude and analytical

stance towards the social world (Goffman, 1967).

    According to Adler, Adler, and Fontana (1987), Goffman suggests an

analysis of

> the individual in society, which made the arena of interaction the locus
>
> of reality, of socialization, and of societal regeneration. Goffman's work
>
> speaks to both roles (the nature of the self) and rules (micro-social
>
> norms). Instead of role-taking for the purpose of cooperatively aligning
>
> their actions with others, Goffman's actors intentionally and
>
> manipulatively role-play for the purpose of managing others'
>
> impressions of them. This occurs through the interaction rituals of

everyday life-rituals that shape the individual's inner self by externally

imprinting their rules on him or her at the same time they ensure the

self-regulatory character of society (p. 220).

Goffman and CMC

Goffman's earlier works on social interaction are mainly concerned with

face-to-face interpersonal communication. However, researchers have begun

to apply his framework to the study of CMC. They have considered various

aspects of impression management that occur when individuals are in CMEs.

Self-presentation online refers to a specific kind of textual and image

performance. Within this, actors communicate specific messages through

textual and pictorial representations of themselves. Since identity construction

is strategic, actors systematically communicate identities by including or

excluding information in online environments. These strategic self-

presentations will appear diverse, according to the type of online site involved.

The creation and subsequent publication of personal Web sites is a form

of conspicuous self-presentation that assumes external social observation.

Kozinet (2002) regards personal Web sites as a consumption-oriented

phenomenon. People place themselves in relation to products and services on

their sites. They actively use the symbolic meanings of brands to present

themselves in their personal domains. In addition, people make the most of the

opportunities offered by a Weblog format personal homepage (such as

"cyworld mini home page") to manage their impression. Consequently, they

experience the unexpected consequences of establishing liking, rapport, and

bonds with other people with whom they connect online (Jung, Youn, &

McClung, 2007).

In blog sites, people present themselves through the diary form. This is not just a textual product but a process of identity production. Bloggers employ traditional impression management strategies, providing an insight into how the self is presented (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). So-called A-list bloggers present more information about themselves than others, and actively engage in impression management. They are significantly dependent on their audience and their need for social approval. They want the reader's opinions and call for interactive communication. It may be assumed that this strategic self-presentation is presented and manifested in a similar fashion in other types of online communication, such as Web pages and social networking sites.

Online social networking sites are increasingly popular places, where people present themselves and interact with others. Boyd (2008) notes that

the sites are based on *Profiles*, a form of individual (or, less frequently, group) home page, which offers a description of each member. The social network site profile also contains text, images, and video created by the member and comments from other members, and a public list of the people that one identifies as *Friends* within the network. Profiles are built by filling out forms on the site (p. 6).

This particular social networking site's profiles are designed for self-presentation (Boyd, 2008). The site embodies a level of trust among group members in terms of their self-presentation. Users manipulate and control the amount of information disclosed on their profiles to manage the interpretations of the audience (Leonardi, 2005). In this vein, Birnbaum (2008) explores how

college students present themselves in, and form impressions of others by looking at, Facebook profiles. Most users present themselves using photos, so the research focuses on this aspect. The study shows that students assume that other college students are the primary audience for their profiles. They also use six general fronts that will lead audience members to see them as (1) a party-goer; (2) social; (3) adventurous/a risk-taker; (4) humorous/funny/silly; (5) part of a larger community; and (6) unique. Students use props, settings, and gestures to provide their audience members with visual cues to help them form the desired impressions.

In the marketing research field, a recent study has explored self-presentation and impression management in an online Porsche brand community (Avery, 2007). Consumers strategically practice saving face in the event of brand extension in the online community. The possibility of such a brand extension provokes Porsche users to perceive this as an identity-threatening moment, so they actively create brand meanings to save face as authentic Porsche owners.

Goffman's dramaturgy framework can be used to examine how people construct their self-presentations and carry them off in front of others. This perspective proposes an analytical framework for the study of face-to-face social interactions. In addition, his work can guide researchers to uncover some critical aspects of mediated communication (Sugiyama, 2006; Rittie, 2009). His framework is also applicable to the analysis of online brand communities (Avery, 2007). It can therefore provide a theoretical foundation for the brand meaning-making process through analysis of consumers' self-presentation and interactive performances in online communities. Goffman

(1959) notes that people seldom find new fronts in social interactions. However, an online brand community is a new setting for individual participants, which may provide a space for performers with as yet unestablished social fronts. Participants will use the brand to define the situation of their successful performance. Moreover, situation-defining processes negotiate and form the rituals and norms for social gatherings. In this social process, brand meanings will be negotiated and fabricated through community members' interactions.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review presented above, the following research questions guide this thesis. In an online brand community,

RQ1. How do consumers present themselves?

RQ2. How do consumers interact with other users?

RQ3. How do consumers fabricate brand meanings?

To investigate the selected Korean online brand community culture in terms of these research questions, the study will extend Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy framework into CMC, to understand how consumers perform their identity to an audience and make brand meanings. Self-presentation has been a subject of increasing interest and scholarly research in communication research, in terms of online contexts such as Web pages (Kozinet 2002; Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007), blogs (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), social networking profiles (Boyd 2008; Leonardi 2005; Birnbaum 2008), and online brand communities (Avery, 2008). However, surprisingly little research has been directed toward understanding Korean consumers' self-presentation in an

online brand community. In addition, the iconic, global Apple brand and its associated consumer culture has mainly been studied in western contexts. Local consumers actively interpret and make the meanings of global brands to their own cultural foundation (Ger & Belk, 1996). Accordingly, the Apple brand is likely to be consumed in a different way by Korean consumers. However, there have been few attempts to examine Korean Apple users' experiences of online brand communities. This study therefore chose a Korean MacBook user community as a way to understand Korean Apple consumer culture and the brand meanings of Apple in Korea, a society where the computer user environment has traditionally not been favorable to Mac users. Unlike other Mac models, the MacBook is low-priced and Windows OS-compatible. These economic and technical features make it a product capable of competing with other notebooks and PCs. Thus the MacBook has the potential not only to expand its consumer reach but also to extend the brand meanings of the Mac, which has traditionally been considered by Koreans as a tool for a small group of professionals. Thus, based on Goffman's self-presentation framework, this study attempts to fill the gap by examining Korean Apple MacBook consumers' self-presentation and interactions in an online brand community. Through the investigation of members' interactive performance, the MacBook brand meaning in the Korean market context can be explored.

With CMC technologies, consumers create a place for brand communities and define the setting for their performance as related to the brand. On this stage, the actors, as brand users, present themselves and interact with each other according to social rituals. In this process, brand-related

communications will form specific brand meanings. Goffman's dramaturgy framework will be suitable to understanding Korean consumer culture in such a community in terms of the research questions. Specifically, the ways in which a group of Korean MacBook brand users present themselves and interact with other members will be explored. Moreover, how users fabricate and reshape Apple MacBook brand meanings will also be examined. Although community members represent only a percentage of the brand's overall consumer base, their collective actions nonetheless serve to create specific brand meanings.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Netnography

This study adopted the netnography method (as online ethnography is termed by Kozinets, 2002) in order to examine Korean consumer culture in an online brand community. Netnography is conducted using the following guidelines: enter with the research questions, identify the appropriate Web sites for the questions, gather and analyze data, and ensure trustworthy interpretation. In particular, Kozinet (2002) notes the following indications for the selection of a netnographic online community site:

> "(1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group; (2) higher traffic of postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question" (p. 63).

He also notes that the researcher should be familiar with the characteristics of the online community under study, such as group membership, market-oriented behaviors, interests, and language. Moreover, the important question of choosing which data to save and which to pursue is guided by the research questions and the available resources. In this process, online messages may be categorized through emerging themes. Netnography uses a grounded theory approach, which means generating a theory based on the "systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research, then one can be relatively sure that the theory will fit the work" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3). As Corbin and Strauss (1990) further observe, "the procedures of

grounded theory are designed to develop a well integrated set of concepts that provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena under study" (p. 5). The grounded approach can build up our understanding of the community.

The netnographic method is fundamentally based on observation. For qualitative researchers, observational work offers a means by which to understand the social meanings which are constitutive of, and reflected in, human behavior (Walcott, 1994). This is an unobtrusive and naturalistic method which is useful for revealing the rich symbolic world underlying consumers' needs, desires, meanings, and choice in cyberspace. It can also provide information on the consumption patterns of online consumer groups. From Goffman's dramaturgy perspective, this study is focused on empirical manifestation in an online brand community. According to Adler and Adler (1998), observation is an ethnographical method that is well suited to exploring the dramaturgical perspective on social interaction. It enables researchers to capture the range of acts performed by people in social interactions. Although Goffman established a precedent for being inattentive to methodology, this tradition has been carried on by other researchers following his interest in the dramaturgical construction of the interaction order (Adler & Adler, 1998). Thus, observation is relevant to research on consumers' social interaction in an online brand community. Observers see the familiar as strange, and may identify features of the environment or behavior that participants themselves may not be able to see; patterns and regularities in the environment may be observed and analyzed over time (Adler & Adler, 1998).

One of the defining characteristics of observation has traditionally been noninterventionism. Adler and Adler (1998) note that

> observers neither manipulate nor stimulate their subjects. They do not
> ask the subjects research questions, pose tasks for them, or deliberately
> create new provocations. Qualitative observation is fundamentally
> naturalistic in essence; it occurs in the natural context of occurrence,
> among the actors who would naturally be participating in the interaction,
> and follows the natural stream of everyday life (p. 87).

Observational data gathering continues until the researcher achieves theoretical saturation, which happens when the generic features of their new findings consistently replicate the earlier ones. The analysis of the data, from the earliest conceptualization onward, is related to existing models in relevant literature, depending on the observer's style of data analysis.

Following the technique of observational netnography, and accordingly acting as a participant observer, I observed consumers' practice and interaction in an online MacBook brand community.

Selection of the netnographic community

A Korean Apple MacBook user community, café.naver.com/inmacbook, was chosen as the study site. This online community is part of the most popular Korean portal site, www.naver.com. The tenets of netnographic community selection (Kozinets, 2002) were used to identify it.

The site was opened on June 28, 2006 by one Korean MacBook user after the product was launched in Korea and now numbers over 100,000 members. Anyone who is interested in the Apple MacBook can become a

member after posting messages.

The researcher's membership in the community was completed on February 16, 2008. Before commencing this study, the researcher had used an Apple MacBook since July 2006. Previous brand community studies (Kozinets, 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) suggest that a researcher's knowledge of the brand under study is critical to understanding the community culture.

The community is a brand community which exhibits the three markers outlined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), namely consciousness of kind experienced as a group identity; rituals and traditions which members share with each other; and a shared sense of moral responsibility toward fellow members and toward the community itself. All these features are illustrated in the community site's introduction.

As a participant observer, the researcher collected data from bulletin boards to describe, analyze, and interpret. Data covering June 2006 through September 2009 were collected over 6 months. To create the actual datasets, the posting archives were copied, pasted, and saved to a Word file for interpretive analysis. This process generated a considerable amount of data, totaling 8283 posts. Individual posts (n=8283) were analyzed using grounded theory to identify specific themes within the interactions between users and the community as a whole (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

As the first step, I coded as many categories as possible from the collected data. A category is defined as a "unit of information composed of events, happenings and instances (Cresswell, 1998, p.56). Categorization refers to the process of characterizing the meaning of a unit of data with

respect to certain generic properties (Lindlolf & Taylor, 2002). Following the categorization process, open coding, the initial and unrestricted coding of data (Strauss, 1987), was conducted. The collected data were explored to find relationships among the data and repetitive patterns from which to form categories. Several categories were recognized from the first data coding. By repeating this categorization process, it was identified that popular postings by members in the MacBook community present regular patterns and issues. Thus, the data collection and coding process was focused on the more popular postings with a considerable number of replies. In particular, the most interactive categories on the site were "My MacBook photo," where participants post their photos, and "Free talk," where members can discuss any subject freely. The data collected were tentatively thematized into main themes which corresponded to the research questions. The emerging themes were clarified by going back through the data repeatedly.

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CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

In this chapter, the ways Apple MacBook consumers perform self-presentation and interact in relation to brand meaning-making activities in the community will be discussed. The MacBook brand community can be characterized as a group of Koreans with a shared interest in the MacBook. Members actively post information about MacBook and Apple products on the bulletin boards. The average number of postings per day was 46. More than 70% of these were posted on the My MacBook photo and Free talk sections.

Self-portrait with the brand

The MacBook online community is introduced as one which shares information about MacBook and also offers members friendship. This introduction is a basic definition of the community's situation. Members participate in community activities and perform in ways which fit in with a Macbook brand community, as defined from the introduction

Face is a mask that changes depending on the audience and type of social interaction. The goal of the performance of the self is its acceptance by the audience (Goffman, 1959). Thus, the community members perform as MacBook users and present their information and experience of MacBook. In particular, they take photos with the MacBook in order to present themselves, and post them on the bulletin board. This plays a role as a self-portrait, a profile picture which is related to the MacBook and their other branded possessions. That is, posting their MacBook photo presents each consumer as an individual. They also post stories about their use of the MacBook and their

style of consumption. The members use their possessions as props and take pictures in order to provide them to the audience members.

In self-presentation using the photos, they try to represent their MacBook use style in an idealized setting. In other words, members perform with the pictures to create positive face. In doing so, they form the desired impressions and idealize images using the MacBook to the audience, who comprise other members of the community. Members use their possessions and their lifestyle in real life to engage in impression management. They try to manage the outcomes of their performance to fulfill their goal, which is creating positive face as a MacBook user. That is, brand consumers practice the presentation of brand portrait photos in order to be received as authentic and legitimized MacBook users.

Self-presentation online refers to a specific kind of textual and image performance (Leonardi, 2005). As actors strategically communicate identities by including or excluding information, so members communicate the intended message through textual and pictorial representations of themselves. MacBook consumers control the amount of information disclosed in their MacBook portrait photos to manage the interpretations of the audience. To achieve this, the members gather and set up their possessions to take portrait pictures which will present themselves as authentic MacBook users.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how the posters set up their possessions, including the MacBook on the desk, and take pictures so as to present themselves to the community. The possessions shown in the photos serve as props for the performance, and include social cues about the posters. The other members become the audience and interactants who observe and appreciate

the presenter's performance through the brand portrait photos. The poster's
identity and impression are evaluated by the audience's comments on the
photo. This evaluation practice is conversational, and is done not only by the
audience but also the original poster, who will actively engage in the
evaluating conversation in the form of replies to comments.

Figure 1. In my office.

Posted by monologue

Before cleaning my desk I took this picture. I need a cinema LED.

Apple Pie> I want to buy the white desk.

iWork> Is it your office room? It is so cool.

Loi> Are you working alone? I'm so curious about your job.

Chamchi> I like the oblique wall. I tried to get a place like that. The
office is in Korea?

iWork> In Korea, you can find Mintpass furniture - it's quite good.

O> I have ordered the desk for my new house.

Full bus> It looks cool only because of the MacBook though - the desk
is screwed up.

Peppermint> What company? I want to work there.

Violet> I guess the desk's IKEA brand. It is so pretty.

Dolphin> The office is New York style.

Jinny> Personally, I would like to live in that kind of house; I like the oblique wall and roof.

Apple man>The desk is cool. Could I know the shop to buy it?

monologue > You can check here

http://www.1200m.com/shop/goodsDetail.html?f_goodsno=200906160289

Apple Pie> The office has ganzi *[i.e., it is "cool"]*.

Figure 2. In my work room.

Posted by iWorld

Wanna buy MBA> What do you do? Are you rich?

iworld> I am not bourgeois. I received them as marriage presents.

Apple patient> I guess you are an Apple manager.

Huh> The stand is cool.

Apple Farm> The stand's brand is IKEA.

iphoniac> I name myself as a Mac advertiser

Coco> I envy so many Macs

As Figure 1 shows, the members' conversation indicates that the audience presents its feelings about the photo and asks questions about other things it wants to know about the poster and the objects in the picture. In addition, the viewers try to guess the poster's job and location using the image. The conversation is similar to a chat among friends. The poster answers the audience's questions and clarifies their assumptions. Some audiences also add information and answers to the questions of other members. Consequently, the accuracy of the audience's assumptions can be refined by the comments and answers of the original poster and other members. Thus, the members' MacBook photos play a role as a self-portrait profile using the MacBook and other possessions. By displaying this fragment of their life and consumption style, they disclose their real identity and social status. Furthermore, this self-presenting performance can also be accomplished through interactive communication among members. The repetitive self-presentation performances using the brand portrait pictures evoke attachment to the brand and form the emotional atmosphere of the community. The collaboration between the self-presentation performance, using the MacBook for their own work of creating face, forms the communal practice for the MacBook brand community identity.

Aesthetic and distinctive objects

Consumers participate in performance in order to present themselves as authentic brand users to the audience. Members of the community try to

manage face as unique MacBook users, crafting images using the brand and their other possessions. They show their own brand experience and meanings in presenting their life stories with the MacBook. It can be seen that self-presentation to other community members is a creative brand meaning-making process.

A significant number of members present themselves as having an aesthetic and distinctive lifestyle with the MacBook. Objects are fabricated as MacBook brand meanings through the interactive posting of text and imagery. If they presented themselves with the MacBook alone, however, they could not be appreciated by the other members; they use other, suitable items alongside it to enable their performance as an authentic MacBook user. Figure 1 shows one member's working space. Many members of the audience express feelings of envy. The audience is also curious about the space and the other objects such as the IKEA white desk and stand. One member describes the office as being New York-style. Another suggests a Korean interior furniture brand which is similar to the furniture in the photo. People have hopes of creating similar space for MacBook use, and imagine how they would realize this. They can imagine their lifestyle and workplace through viewing other members' idealized performances.

The consumption tastes and lifestyle presented by community members are legitimized by the audience's evaluation. In this interactive process notions of good taste, and of a legitimized MacBook consumption style, are formulated. Community members favor aesthetic and cool consumption styles that enable positive self-presentation. The preferred brand consumption style is fabricated as the dominant one in the community. Members try to legitimize

their tastes as a superior consumption style by creating aesthetic and distinctive symbols in their MacBook use. They voluntarily practice positive brand meaning-making, using aesthetic and distinctive symbols, even if they have experienced disadvantages in using the MacBook. MacBook consumers may expect to obtain benefits from the symbolic meanings.

The collaboration of the MacBook with other aesthetic and distinctive possessions and lifestyle connotations formulates a good and legitimized consumption style for the brand. In particular, a significant number of brand photos and conversations about the images develop the meaning of the MacBook brand as an urban fashion icon.

Figure 3. Spending calming weekdays in a café with my Mac.

Posted by Sweet night

I had worked as a fashion designer for a long time and I changed my work field to fashion visual director. Now, I am working with MBP13 drinking coffee on weekdays.

I am looking at my friend MBP with loving eyes. However, I felt helpless when I tried to set up computer programs on the MBP.

Apple patient> How are you and your pretty Mac?

Loi> Where is the café?

Sweet night > It is 'papergarden2 allo' located in the roadside tree lane
in Shinsa district.

Apple Pie> The café is quite cool and provides wireless service. Also
the food and drink is quite good. But the price is higher than other
cafés

Figure 4. My Rarebody in a vintage café.

Posted by Taeji

I was a lurker for a long time but I am posting my picture. This is my
Unibody of 13 MacBook. This is a terminated product. The place is a
vintage-feeling café near Hongik University.

Victory> I want to go there. Where is it?

Taeji> This is located near Sangsu subway station

Pine tree>This MacBook is a good guy except for the terribly
expensive price by exchange rate.

Taeji >I do not want to think again.

Apple patient> Wow, Rarebody! My rare friend. Nice to meet you.

Kong>I like the café mood.

Tasji>The place is located beside the FarEast broadcasting building.

I do not remember the café name. There is a vintage car on display.

White doggy> Wow, the café is so pretty, the MacBook is so

suitable for the café. I want to go there and play with my white doggy

Mac.

Figures 3 and 4 show the posters passing time with their MacBooks in attractive coffee shops. The members share information about the shop. MacBook users frequently match up their computer use with their coffee drinking. They usually find suitably cool coffee shops in which to use the laptop. The coffee shop has been identified as a cultural place that is representative of Korean daily life (Park & Kim, 2010). Figures 3 and 4 illustrate how MacBook consumers use the MacBook distinctively in this cultural space. The posters explain the character of the café in question in detail, and this may stimulate the desire of other members to spend time in the café using their MacBook. In Figure 4, a member expresses a preference for the vintage mood of the café in the photo. MacBook consumers idealize MacBook use in spaces such as cafés. In Figure 5, a member also expresses feelings of envy regarding the poster's beautiful room. These interactions with images present a certain favorable and idealized consumption style.

Consumers themselves emphasize the distinctiveness of consumption practices, apart from the cultural contents to which they are applied (Holt, 1995). Such practices can create the members as the "authentic" MacBook consumers. These distinctive performances suggest various settings for MacBook use. Users' good tastes and consumption styles are defined through

members' interactions. These idealized settings are built up through the process of self-presentation with photos of the brand and the resulting appreciative conversation about them. The most popular MacBook portrait photos, generating a significant number of replies, are formed as idealized settings and benchmarks for good taste in MacBook consumption. Figure 5 shows a MacBook positioned in one female member's room. She attempts to achieve distinctiveness through presenting her room as pretty. The other members represent the idealizing moment of the brand, strategically distinguishing themselves from other members by presenting their personal possessions and stories.

Figure 5. On a cool day, my room.

Posted by Island

These days I am playing with my MacBook in my room. In this community, I've got a feeling to buy a keyboard for my white doggy Mac. Finally I bought it. Here is my private place.

A plus> This is my style.

kyoko> The desk and the sofa looks cozy

Mr. Gho> There are many IKEA goods. I am also IKEA mad.

Island > I like IKEA for their reasonable price and unique design.

Apple farmer> The room environment is suitable for a white doggy

Mac. Soon> It looks like a picture book.

Dolphin> Could I get the information about the book shelf?

Boglebogle> I am a 17 year old girl. I want to know your blog address

or Weblog to see more of your pictures.

Island> Wow, You are so young. Sorry, I do not do blogging. I will

send a message about my Web log address.

GQ> Do you live alone?

Moon> Cool, I envy you. I want to have such room. Where did you

buy such a cute clock?

Island > The clock brand is table office. You can buy it in the first floor

shop in 'sangsang madding' near Hongik University. It is made of

hardboard paper. The price is 20,000 won.

I world> You do not need to go to coffee shop to work. Your room

mood is so good, beautiful.

Solomon (1997) notes that consumers choose a brand in order to present

a certain kind of lifestyle. The community members try to demonstrate a

superior and unique lifestyle as MacBook users. They formulate a unique

MacBook lifestyle as a symbolic consumption practice – in other words, they

practice the aesthetics of consumption (Chaney, 1996). Through revealing

their own space, decorated with the MacBook and other, related items, they

create their own brand stories to stimulate other members' fantasies of

possessing the brand and the lifestyle that goes with it.

Figure 6. After adopting my doggy Mac.

Posted by doll house keeper

First photo after Mac doggy adoption. I am working at dawn.

Here is my handmade dolls' workplace.

I am so happy just with my doggy Mac, I do not have a common

Apple computer, iMac27 inch and Mighty mouse though.

GoGo> It seems like young girl's desk. Kawai Kawai!!

iphoniac> It's paradise.

Nobody > Maybe you are a character designer. It is a cute working

environment.

Tifanism > The common iMac 27… I do not have either.

Sunny> It's like a fairytale world.

Figure 6 shows the poster's workplace, with a handmade doll's house revealing her job. In Figure 6, the poster presents her idealized work space for the Mac. The viewers of Figure 6 give appraisals of the room, such as "It's paradise" and It's like a fairytale world." This interaction between consumers shows MacBook use in reality and the pleasurable ways for consumers to

browse and daydream about idealized MacBook use in a fantasized space
(Bloch & Richins, 1983; Fournier & Guiry, 1993). In addition, Figure 2 shows
that the poster names himself as an "unofficial Mac advertiser," exhibiting as
he does many Apple products and other objects which are suitable for
positioning alongside the brand. This pattern of self- presentation can be seen
as a distinctive practice through which to obtain cultural capital within the
brand community.

This distinctive MacBook user consuming style requires skill and
creativity. Many owners demonstrate their consumption style by showing their
possessions and the creative skills to use them. Figure 7, for example, shows a
DIY MacBook stand. The poster of this image recounts his adventures in
matching a vintage box with the MacBook. Though the attempt is unfamiliar
to the MacBook consumers, other members appreciate the effort and evaluate
the beauty of the artifacts presented. Thus, the practice of making creative
artifacts leads each MacBook user to be considered as aesthetic and distinctive.

Figure 7. Box stand for Mac.

Posted by M

It's a Box stand for MacBook

I wanted to buy m-stand but it is too expensive for me.

So, I searched for a DIY MacBook stand

http://greenupgrader.com/7603/diy-cardboard-laptop-stand/

You can get a PDF drawing file to print out and cut it.

It's so easy - takes just ten minutes.

I made it of thin box so it is unstable.

You'd be better to use a thick box.

If you put a USB pan in the place under the stand it will be a perfect

cooling system.

AI> Thank you for your good information.

Apple farm> Wow, cool

FunFun> Beautiful.

Vin> Where do I get the drawing?

M> follow this link

http://greenupgrader.com/wpcontent/uploads/2009/05/laptopstandpatter

n.pdf

Buying Apple > The vintage feeling is suitable for a white doggy Mac.

Unexpectedly the cardboard matches your pretty Mac. Good job, eco-

friendly design.

Young Man> Bravo, I will make it.

Embracing windows

Apple users have traditionally been a minor group in the Korean

computer market. In fact, they have experienced inconvenience in Microsoft-

dominated computer use environments. However, the launch of the MacBook

has led to new meanings here, as it supplies both Mac OS and Windows OS. As mentioned earlier, brand community members voluntarily practice positive brand meaning-making, with aesthetic and distinctive symbols. MacBook consumers may expect to obtain cultural capital from the consumer-generating symbols. However, Apple enthusiasts (known in Korea as *Macppa*) have been stereotyped as obsessive, even addictive, brand consumers. MacBook users have tried to erase the preconception of Apple users as fanatical about the Mac and a minority in the computer market. The members try to escape from these negative categories and create a positive identity. The majority have tried to distance themselves from the negative meanings of the MacBook brand as aesthetic and distinctive. They present themselves as aesthetic consumers with good taste. Aesthetic and distinctive symbols are matched with the MacBook through interactive performance, sharing individual brand stories. Consequently, the MacBook is associated with aesthetic and distinctive symbols, mixed with the consumer's identity and consumption style.

Though the members of the community actively form MacBook brand meanings by focusing on appearance and consumption style, Mac versus Windows arguments also emerged after one member posted in the Free talk bulletin board: "why do you buy a MacBook if you use Windows OS?" This stirred up a dispute about the authentic way to use the MacBook. Some members criticized Windows users and suggested they were inferior to "genuine" Mac users. It can be seen that the previous intergroup conflict, namely Mac versus Microsoft, has flowed into this community. In terms of the authentic MacBook user arguments, a significant number of members assert that MacBook users should accept Windows use.

The initial posting described above generated 103 replies over 5 days,

emerging as the dominant discourse in the community. This debate on

MacBook meanings in relation to Windows worked to form active MacBook

identity-building acts. Some members argued that a "real" MacBook user must

use Mac OS. They suggested that a MacBook owner who only used Windows

OS was a poseur who had bought their Mac just for design reasons. In addition,

they worried that such people could easily be turned into anti-Apple

consumers as a result of the inconveniences of use and defects of the

MacBook.

　　Figure 8 shows members arguments about Windows use. The dominant

opinion is that MacBook users should embrace Windows. In other words, the

way of using the MacBook, by embracing Windows, is negotiated by members

through the debate. Members differentiate the fanatic Mac user who would

persist in using only Mac OS. The community members express a desire to

escape from the minor group in the Korean computer market. This desire is

reflected in the following quote, which shows one member's concern about

fanatical Mac users: "If they build a wall around Mac users, we will always be

just a minor part in the Korean computer market." A number of MacBook

consumers present their opinions in favor of embracing Windows and

discarding their hostile attitude toward it.

Figure 8. Mac vs. Windows arguments

　　　I am MBP> What is an authentic Mac user? Nobody can blame the

　　　MacBookway of use.

　　　Kyo> I cannot understand people who buy MacBook only for its

design. Maybe they cannot know the beauty of the Mac OS. I think, they'd be better to buy a mini notebook.

Mac World> No, I didn't know anything about Mac. Right, I bought it because I was attracted to the design. However, now I use Windows as well as Mac on my MacBook. We can use both, depending on the situation. You know, it is the reality, there are so many restrictions on using a Mac in Korea. We must install Bootcamp to use Internet banking.

Soya> I can't understand this continuous argument on the MacBook. I do anything with it. Who can blame me if I use it just for Internet games?

Soul man> I feel sometimes some Mac users regard themselves as privileged persons. If they build a wall among Mac users we will always be just a minor part in the Korean computer market.

Ritual building

Community terms

An online brand community is a special form of social entity. In each of these contacts, the individual tends to act out what is called a line – that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which people interact in social situations (Goffman, 1967). The members take a line using argots and expressions relating to the brand and consumption. Consumption-related jargon is frequently used by members, who have a repertoire of terms related to the use of the MacBook model. In other words, members voluntarily structure their unique argots in relation to their MacBook and its consumption.

The repertoire of terms; "white doggy," "black doggy," "Rarebody," "MBP,"

and "MBA" denote the various MacBook models. The white and black doggy

refers to the original polycarbonate model. These animated brands are ways to

create a partner relationship with the MacBook (Fournier, 1998): users

perceive the computer as like their dog, and the use of the terminology builds

a friend-like relationship with the model in the consumer's mind. In addition,

these shared argots create consumer-to-consumer relationships between those

who use the same model. Members also often use the acronyms MBA and

MBP. Only a member of the community would understand these terms; MBP

stands for MacBook Pro and MBA is MacBook Air. The term Rarebody was

given to the aluminum unibody model, which was discontinued in mid-2009.

Users of the Rarebody give it a meaning as a precious and rare thing even

though the model has several defects, such as the absence of FireWire ports, a

lack of vertical angle, and a particularly high price given that the US dollar

exchange rate was at its peak when it was launched. However, the owners give

the Rarebody model positive meanings. They blur its disadvantages, tolerating

the defects and emphasizing the distinctiveness and scarcity of the model. The

conversations shown in Figure 4 indicate that Rarebody owners' relationships

are based on noticing each other. The repertoire of MacBook model naming

overall shows that the consumers are trying to form relationships by using the

MacBook as a way of making attachments. In addition, they share group-

specific forms of expressions relating to the MacBook; communal use of these

expressions are codified and varied through each community member's

contributions. They generally use Internet jargon relating to consumption.

These communal use of argots form community linguistic rituals taking a line

in the community's shared knowledge and practices. Through these, they share the community's and the brand's identity.

As people have developed a new set of terms to describe virtual space such as lurking, spamming, posting, and flaming, Korean netizens have formed argots of consumption behavior. Linguistic expressions in the online brand community have been influenced by popular online terms expressing consumption behavior, which are used frequently by the MacBook community members. They use the terms to express their desire and feeling about brands. For instance, "I am obsessed with *Chirumshin* to purchase a white MacBook." *Chirumshin* is the god of commerce. A Korean netizen coined the term to mean the situation where someone has a strong desire to purchase something. They feel the powerful god, *Chirumshin*, descend on them. Another frequently used term is *ganzi,* which is a Japanese word meaning feeling but which in Korean slang terminology means "cool and new style." When the members appreciate a particular MacBook photo, numerous replies will say it is *ganzi.* If particularly expensive items are shown in the picture, replies will express envy and appreciate the goods as *ganzi*. In addition, when members are envious, they usually use the expression "envy is lose." This means that they must not feel envy but cannot help it. This repertoire of terms relating to consumption is used in collaboration with the argots representing brands, that is, white/black doggy, Rarebody, MBP, and MBA. The above-mentioned unique language relating to the MacBook has been formulated and expressed with the popular netizen terms relating to consumption behavior. By using these expressions repetitively, the community members form and practice community rituals.

The repertoire of brand-related expressions contributes to a shared knowledge and brand identity. Figure 9 shows one poster's expression of the desire to possess a MacBook Air as "your MBA makes *Chirumshin* descend to me." The viewer's envy and desire to possess the object is formed and expands within the conversation. These shared linguistic expressions serve as a line for community rituals fitting with the community theme, the MacBook.

Figure 9. Trying to put an MBA in a paper bag.

Posted by Apple patient

Purple rain> I envy you. Your MBA makes Chirumshin descend to me.

Doran > Please, comment on the feeling of using an MBA

JC> You are reading Nietzsche. Envy is lose, but I want to buy an MBA

Huhu> Wow, ganzi

Apple patient> It is so light and slim. I am just accustomed to my MBA.

I will comment about it later.

Coordination

Members of the community cooperate by using deference and demeanor to maintain each other's face in their interactions. In general, they are friendly

to each other. They frequently express admiration of the images posted in relation to the brand. Furthermore, community members help each other by sharing brand-related knowledge and resources. They have face-to-face regional offline meetings to share knowledge of MacBook use; several Mac OS experts will teach novices to be more familiar with the system. Generally, these meetings are held in cozy and spacious cafés and last around two or three hours. They are known in Korean as *pumasi,* which means mutual help through one person supplying a service to another. After the offline meetings the participants post reports, containing group photos and comments which reflect on the feeling of the gathering. These reports make other members consider the possibility of coming to future gatherings. These physical meetings play an essential role in facilitating emotional attachment and commitment, and developing and maintaining consumer-to-consumer relationships in the community.

Some members provide background on the history of the MacBook model and other model and other Apple computers. In addition, manuals and tips for MacBook use are documented by expert users. They share information about how to buy products with confidence, avoid defective products, and have them serviced so as to fix problems. This information is critical since the aftercare service delivered by Apple in Korea is inefficient.

One of the significant elements in these sharing traditions is the production and sharing of consumer-created products online as well as offline. The contents of the MacBook screen are created and shared with other members.

Figure 10. Consumers' creative works

Figure 10 shows a consumer-generated screen for the MacBook. This creative content is made with the Apple icon, in tune with the consumer's individual taste. In addition, MacBook-related items, such as pouches and bags, are made in DIY style and sold as tailored products. It seems that the practice of creating these products and sharing their contents with other members reinforces community values and a sense of belonging. Figure 11 shows the creative docking on the poster's screen. The poster shares the contents and exchanges information about the programs required to make them. The resource link is added in response to the other members' requests for icon sharing. In addition, one viewer assumes that he or she knows the place where the poster's MacBook screen image was taken, and his or her memory of the place creates a desire to go there again. Also, in response to members' requests, the poster shares the screen image. In addition, the poster links his or her blog address to allow others to download the software program for the MacBook icons. One visiting member expresses good feelings about the background music on the poster's blog. The cooperative interactions illustrated in Figure 11 show that community members provide services

requested by viewers, such as uploading and linking sources. The viewers appraise the posters' work and their tastes with regard to MacBook use. This communal practice extends to individual blog sites which members can easily link to. These extended interactions can facilitate emotional attachment and commitment and develop consumer-to-consumer relationships. Furthermore, as networked narratives, these consumer-to-consumer communications form influential eWOM adtivities (Kozinet et al., 2010).

Figure 11. This is my screenshot.

Posted by Banana milk

I uploaded my screenshot to practice the way to shoot. I am making icons of the girl group. I have tried to change the docking icons and the wallpapers. I guess simplicity is best.

Wonderer> Please share the icons

Banana milk >I uploaded them on the board of Mac resources

 http://cafe.naver.com/inmacbook/219994

Macbugy> It is simple. The icons look like the Adobe master collection.

Tong> It seems like Atocha station in Spain. You can go to a

beautiful place taking AVE here. I want to go there again.

MBA addicted> Could you send me the screen image?

White doggy>Please, send it here, e-mail address,

pascalement@naver.com

Banana milk > I uploaded it to http://cafe.naver.com/inmacbook/220019

Vicky>How did you change the icons?

Banana milk >I used the Candiva program.

You can download them here. http://mminnt.tistory.com/2

Vicky > Wow, I like the music you are listening to in your blog.

Restriction

The findings discussed above show that sharing brand information and experiences using images and common linguistic expressions form members' interactive communication patterns as a ritual in the community. They build imagined and emotional community and develop a warm atmosphere focusing on the MacBook. In other words, the members' repetitive and ritualized interactions build the community as a stable brand users' unity. Its members emotionally attach to each other by focusing on the MacBook.

However, this pattern can take a turn for the unexpected if external social influences prompt conflicts among members. In Spring 2008, a political dispute emerged over the issue of American beef imports in Korea. Some members posted their opinions in the Free talk bulletin board. These triggered flaming on the American beef issue. For several days most of the postings were arguments on this political question. Finally, one of the community managers decided to post a survey about discussing political issues in the bulletin board. He explained his reasons as follows:

This community is mainly about Mac or Mac-related things and makes fun with the brand. The community's Free talk bulletin board is open to any subject. However, these days there are conflicts among members with different political opinions. If you post about a political issue you should add a notice in the title of the posting, so that other members can recognize and screen out political issue postings. The political posts can be a valuable sharing of opinions in the Free talk bulletin board but the possibility of making conflict must be banned in this community. After this survey we will decide whether political opinion is banned or allowed. What is your opinion about the political issue postings?

    1. I do not want to see the political opinion postings.

    2. Any postings can be accepted here, it is free opinion board.

Flaming about political issues is unexpected in the online brand community. When these political arguments happened, some members argued that political issues are unsuitable for the MacBook community identity. Some posters were cautioned by the community manager for their use of abusive language. After the survey was completed, the manager announced the new rule that political issues and slanderous comments were not allowed in the community. In this new situation, the members defined discussion of sensitive political issues as something which spoiled the community identity and interfered with its basic theme, the MacBook. That is, numerous participants regarded arguments about political issues as creating the wrong sort of face in the community. Some had expressed threatening feelings about the political arguments by using abusive and aggressive words. Some may have felt bad when members were attacked by other members, because they rely on each

other to support their face. Thus, in this identity-threatening event for the community, members built a norm for how to behave in such a situation. It seems that the unexpected situation triggered the process of norm-building, which culminated in the prohibition of political issue postings in the community. In this embarrassing situation, the community members tried to recover the harmonious and warm atmosphere. They created a new community rule defining political opinion and abusive words as a negative ritual. To retain the brand community motif, MacBook, they made judgments about the different themes, such as political issues, which constituted a potential conflict and hence were to be prohibited. The community members negotiated the final outcome of the political issue. The resulting norms reflect their opinions and their wish for the community identity. The process drew on their underlying assumptions about members' relationships as well as the group's experiences, as seen in their interactive communications.

After outspoken political opinions were prohibited, members became careful about posting on political issues. Figure 12 shows that the poster does not express a political opinion on the death of the previous President of Korea. The MacBook skin image was made by the poster to share sad feelings with like-minded members. It is an example of an expression of sadness about the death of the former president, Roh. The poster presents himself with a MacBook bearing Roh's image. However, the conversation captured in Figure 12 shows dissent among the members about the meaning of the image. Though the poster presents only the sad feeling through the image, without adding an outspoken political opinion, some members expressed irritation. The rules about using abusive language and the prohibition on political issues

cannot be absolutely adhered to by all the members. Thus the community should tolerate and comprehend some forms of dispute within a certain boundary.

Although members gather to discuss a similar interest, the community still contains potential conflicts of opinion. Thus the members create certain restrictions to keep the basic theme focused on the Apple brand. The boundary is formed by their mutual consent. How they manage threats and unexpected events can be a critical element in the community's life and duration.

Figure 12. Missing Rho.

Posted by Tsboost

For MacBook users posting the former President Roh's photo on MacBook

I miss ex-President Roh.

Ciwawa >Why did you paste the photo?

Tsboost >Mind your own business. Do not make such a dispute.

Yanto > Calm down. He just expresses the feeling of missing Roh. We have the freedom to remember him.

Oracksil > How did you make the sticker? Could I get one?

Tsboost > I made the image with MacBook and printed it on a film sticker.

Syuckho > Good job. I also miss him. I am weeping.

Ciwawa >I really can't understand the sadness. Why do you post such a photo?

Jinho> Get out. If you do not want to see this image. Here, this community is a space with freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to improve our understanding of the culture of Korean Apple MacBook consumers as expressed in an online brand community. The findings show that the members actively presented their MacBook user identities using idealized brand portrait photos. This practice is a form of essential performance through which to present the consumer's identity and real-life social cues. The members actively interpret and fabricate MacBook brand meanings. They share their consumption experience and style online and offline. These interactions construct brand meanings as aesthetic and distinctive objects. In addition, the brand community is situated within a process of social interactions between members which constitute community rituals such as coordination, community terms, and restriction.

I will now discuss and elaborate on these findings and their implications for future research.

Self-representative brand photos

Members of the community are actors who take on the role of Apple MacBook users in the online brand community. They actively use their portrait photos as a creative platform for identity construction in CMC. These photos are perceived as self-representative by other members. Using the portrait profiles and their brand storytelling, members represent themselves as authentic and desired brand users, distinguishing themselves from their otherwise anonymous and static online presence. Goffman (1959) posits that individuals present themselves through performance as an actor on stage does

for the audience. The situations are defined by a performing consensus between actors and audiences in social interactions. The community members define the MacBook portrait photo as a form of brand profile as well as identity. They perform to fit the situation and strategically present their brand portrait photos, including possessions and lifestyle artifacts which represent themselves. In addition, the brand-related photos are used as an essential form of visual cue presenting members' real-life social identity. According to Goffman (1959), face requires social validation, and people maintain face by presenting themselves to their social audiences in ways designed to influence them to accept it. This is an ongoing process termed impression management. As Goffman proposes, the members' efforts to create positive face using the brand lead them to construct an idealizing brand consumption style in the portrait photos. They try to communicate brand-related messages, with the intention of being seen as authentic brand users and forming an attractive image with their possessions.

In addition, Goffman (1959) identifies the existence of front and back regions for performances; actors perform in the front and use the back to prepare the performance. Following this concept, the online brand community can be regarded as a front region where the member's performance as a brand user is presented; his or her real-life environment then becomes the back region, where the performance is prepared. Members can efficiently control the possessions they set out backstage to create an idealized consumption environment for subsequent online performance. They can show what they intend to present as an authentic brand user expecting a supportive response from the recipients. Also, posters strategically deposit social cues within the

brand portrait profile to affect observers' impressions. Thus, the photos including more attractive and unique goods facilitate greater interest among members, which manifests itself in the number of viewings of the post and of members' replies.

The consumers share brand resources and stories, with their portrait photos disclosing their personal information. Though the members have gathered around a similar interest, that is, the MacBook, they are not personally acquainted with each other. The brand portrait photos play a role in triggering self-disclosure, asking questions, and uncertainty reduction among members of the online community. These interactions present communication patterns of intimate uncertainty reduction behaviors by giving rise to conversation about the brand portrait photos posted. This leads to a significant gain in confidence over the course of a CMC-facilitated conversation among brand consumers.

The increasing interest from the audience leads to more self-disclosure through active and interactive communication among members. Audiences assume and reveal the poster's social identity and the possessions depicted in the images. In addition, the posters answer the audience's questions and clarify their assumptions. The consumer-generated stories and objects are morphed to align with the expectations of the online brand community.

Brand meaning-making and reshaping

The members' online self-presentation and interactions about their everyday consumption experiences fabricate MacBook brand meanings as aesthetic and distinctive symbols. Blumer (1969) proposes that objects are

socially created and formed by the process of people's definitions. The members' active sharing of acts of brand consumption through self-presentation supports Blumer's notion about symbolic objects. The MacBook consumers present various brand stories and consumption styles by using photos to create positive face. This leads them to traverse symbolic boundaries and fabricate brand meanings which have not yet formed. In doing so, the members create a meaning for the MacBook user identity as superior, which enables them to overcome the small proportion of users in the overall computer market. The MacBook consumers actively make brand meanings to signal their prestigious social status. Furthermore, their aesthetic consumption and attention to fashion might become an attractive consumption code, blurring the preconceptions of the extended social audience of Apple customers as a minority of fanatical computer users.

The community members voluntarily create positive brand meanings as aesthetic and distinctive symbols. MacBook consumers may expect to obtain cultural capital from consumer-generated symbols. They present themselves as aesthetic consumers with good taste. Aesthetic and distinctive symbols are instilled in the MacBook by interactive performance; the sharing of each individual consumer's brand story. Consequently, the MacBook is created as an aesthetic and distinctive symbol with the consumer's identity and consumption style.

The Apple MacBook has the potential not only to expand the number of consumers but also to extend the Mac brand meaning beyond the popular belief that it is a tool for a small group of professionals. Although the Korean computer user environment has not been favorable to Mac users, these

consumers have made an effort to extend the brand meaning by embracing Windows. As such, they erase the line between Mac and Windows in their MacBook use. These active consumption practices in the online brand community construct a sense of self and what matters in the members' lives as MacBook users.

Belk and Tumbat (2005) suggest Apple brand-loyal followers have an extreme devotion to the brand, similar to religiosity. Blumer (1966) notes that people are not confined to the original meanings of objects and their relationships with them: they can engage in "redefinition acts which convey a formative character to human interaction, giving rise at this or that point to new objects, new conceptions, new relations, and new types of behavior" (p. 538). The majority of members of the community criticize those who held extreme beliefs about the use of Mac and Mac alone. They suggest that MacBook users should be open minded. Korean MacBook users have tried to embrace other ideas and objects and collaborate with them adventurously to engage in distinctive and creative MacBook use. Thus they have redefined the Apple brand user as a flexible consumer who can embrace Windows. Thus these members' meaning reshaping efforts support Blumer's view of objects' redefinition. Community members are connected with each other through the use of their imagination when appreciating the brand postings and images. The sharing of members' consumption experience and life stories plays a role in the practice of MacBook use and creates a sort of archive of the brand resources and memories of the MacBook. In addition, these images provoke consumption desire. Members learn how to consume and live with the brand by sharing stories with each other. In doing so, MacBook brand meanings are

fabricated as a fashion item and certificate to show their prestige. They are

formulated in the process of the consumer's authentic consumption style.

Members make a collage of the brand with other suitable aesthetic objects and

so create their own unique place to use the MacBook for working, studying,

and playing. The combined and recombined objects work as evocative objects

(Turkle, 2007). As Turkle notes, the objects become subjective as their

consumption experience is shared through members' conversation. This could

be a form of supportive rite in the brand community. The individual members'

memorized and photographed moments relating the MacBook to other objects

are documented in the community. These moments are extended by sharing

the rite with other members. Thus, the brand portrait photos can be seen as

bricolage and the posters as bricoleurs (Turkle, 2007). The individual acts of

bricolage can expand through the members' interactions of response,

evaluation, and praise.

Members imagine the desired real place where they will use their

MacBook, along with other items, by looking at the brand images others have

posted. These brand imagery postings stimulate the consumer's hopes of

resembling the image. Community members emulate and vary other members'

consumption styles, and mimic them as a way to practice MacBook

consumption. The emulation and variation from the original performance

might result in a new consumption style or trend. Furthermore, the repetitive,

representative performances become the brand consumption ritual in the

online community. Thus, the MacBook consumption style (such as using it in

a cool café or making a collage with IKEA branded goods) can be spread to

other users. The idealized images used to perform this style would stimulate

desire among other potential consumers to own the Apple MacBook and demonstrate the same consumption style.

Cultural capital in the online brand community

The brand community is based on a sense of we-ness, as members have a shared interest in MacBook. Sharing brand resources, consumption stories, and lifestyle information, members share their commonalities with each other. The brand community can be regarded as a symbolic entity building influential brand meanings through consumers' interactive consumption practice, forming the brand as aesthetic and distinctive to create positive brand meanings and user identities. This interactive communication can be seen as a symbolic interaction to build *habitus*, the social and cultural capital formed by "the legacies of past struggles that are stored up in the relations between both things, in the forms of institutions, and persons in the form of the history incarnated in bodies, in the form of that system of enduring dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 190). Bourdieu (1987) argues that high-status groups are trained to have tastes that reify their commonalities while emphasizing their distinction from other, lower-status groups. Their high-culture taste, or cultural capital, is symbolized by their consumption behavior and tastes. The community members commonly express the visual advantages of the MacBook compared to other brands. They appreciate and praise each other for having the discerning eye to choose the MacBook, and emphasize its unique design. In addition, they share elements of their MacBook user lifestyle, such as spending time at a cool café.

On the other hand, online community members also try to gain power

and status. The commodities of power in cyberspace may be wit, persistence, and intelligence rather than strength, or economic or political power (Fernback, 1999). However, in the online brand community, members' power is related to having branded possessions and a consumption lifestyle. In other words, it is related to the ability to purchase and consume good branded products. Such good taste is formed as social and cultural capital in the community. The more influential members might achieve this status through their branded possessions and consumption tastes. Because postings are related to possessions and consumption style, they elicit other members' interest and appreciation. Numerous members appreciate the idealized and distinctive images and discuss their envy of the posters' brand consumption style. Thus, cultural barriers might form between the usual and idealized consumption styles; members may have a strong desire to possess the branded goods and enjoy the idealizing consumption style. These interactive communication patterns are also consistent with Goffman's self-presentation theory, that people manage information to give themselves a positive identity. They manage their cultural capital, such as possessions, and their aesthetic tastes can help them to gain an advantage in the community. In this light, community members might make distinctions between each other through domination and distinction practices. Goffman (1959) notes that

> in most societies there seems to be a major or general system of
> stratification and the most stratified societies there is an idealization of
> the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to
> move to higher ones. Commonly we find that upward mobility involves
> the presentation of proper performances and those efforts to move

upward and efforts to keep from moving downward are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of front. Once the proper sign-equipment has been obtained and familiarity gained in the management of it, then this equipment can be used to embellish and illuminate one's daily performances with a favorable social style (p. 36).

Within this view, the members' idealized patterns of performance with their possessions generate competitive practices to obtain a higher cultural status in the community. Membership can be obtained simply through application, and there is no apparent hierarchy in the community. However, the members do make distinctions between each other in the process of the brand idealization performance.

Consumers' symbolic interactions and community rituals

Online brand communities are domains in virtual space for consumers with similar interests. Thus, members are expected to underline their brand allegiance and consumption experiences. Cohen (1985) states that a community is symbolically constructed as a conglomeration of normative codes and values that provides its members with a sense of identity. It is a process which defines and reshapes the situation through members' symbolic interactions. The members share communication patterns using common terms related to the brand. Using the community argots and linguistic expressions, the members take a line in the online environment. In addition, these argots are formed into a code of behavior by community rituals. Consumer-to-consumer communication using common jargon may reinforce their consciousness of kind and create shared rituals and traditions within the

community. In addition, the repertoire of MacBook model naming such as white/black doggy Mac shows that consumers try to make the MacBook their friend and partner in everyday life. The repetitive use of expressions relating to the MacBook and the communal use of popular Internet linguistic expressions are codified and varied through the expression of each community member. The frequent use of Internet jargon related to consumption shows their communal desire to obtain goods and enjoy a particular consumption lifestyle. The repertoire of brand-related expressions contributes to a shared brand knowledge and brand identity. Furthermore, the communal use of argots forms community linguistic rituals and a boundary. The repetitive use of Korean netizen terms such as *Chirumshin*, *ganzi,* and Envy is lose shows that the Korean Internet environment and culture have permeated the community and influence the formation of its rituals. On the other hand, this flow can be reversed and the community substance could flow out and have influence beyond its boundary. This would also lead to the extension of the brand to potential MacBook consumers.

Goffman (1959) notes that people seldom find new fronts in social interaction. However, the online brand community is a new setting for its participants. This brand-related setting provides a space for performers with an unestablished social front. Members define the initial setting as a MacBook user group for information sharing and friendship. The community is not a fixed unity but an evolving one. Thus, the initial definition of the situation as a MacBook user community for sharing information and friendship is reified and redefined in the processes of negotiating and forming the rituals and norms of the social gathering. In this social process, the brand users' identities

and that of the community as a whole are negotiated and formed by members'
interactions. The members perform in a way which fits into the defined
situation. Their repetitive and interactive communication, such as brand
portrait performance and community term use, are ritualized and form a stable
community entity. However, the stable community still may have to confront
unexpected scenes. External social events can seep into it and influence the
dominant discourse, which does not fit in with the Apple brand theme. In this
scenario, the members renegotiate and redefine the community identity to
maintain their positive face.

No group of people can be free from problems. The participants redefine
each other's acts in adversarial relations. These acts of redefinition are
frequently seen in group discussion, and are an essential, intrinsic method of
dealing with problems. Blumer (1966) notes that

symbolic interaction involves interpretation, or ascertaining the meaning
of the actions or remarks of the other person, and definition, or
conveying indications to another person as to how he is to act. Human
association consists of a process of such interpretation and definition (p.
537).

In political issue flaming, members interpret situations and redefine
sensitive political subjects as not fitting with the brand community identity.
Although the members have gathered around a similar interest, the community
contains potential conflicts because the members have different social
backgrounds and values. Thus, they build norms to keep the basic theme
focused on the MacBook brand. This boundary is reformed by members'
consensus. How threats to the community's identity arising from unexpected

events is critical to its life and endurance. Members' interaction is a developing process of symbols and identity formation. When such interactions result in conflict, the situation generates redefinition and negotiation activities.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has focused on one Apple brand, the MacBook. However, a considerable number of consumers in the brand community possess other Apple products in which they are equally interested. Thus, these other products should be considered alongside the MacBook to understand the broader Apple brand meanings. Further study of the symbolic interactions involved in these other brands is necessary to understand how the global meaning of the Apple brand develops in the Korean context.

In addition, this study proposes further investigation of MacBook brand meanings as extended to other online and offline media channels through consumers' practice. It will be meaningful to study how global Apple brand consumers' creative marketing communications, and consumer-generated content in online communities, influences brand meanings and consumption styles in the local market context. The brand meanings fabricated through this process could positively influence discourse about the Apple brand in Korea. Further research could also explore how fabricated brand meanings expand and influence preexisting consumption styles. Consumers' participation in other communication channels could amplify brand meanings and consumption style to a larger social audience. This extension of the brand meaning would affect the broader cultural interpretation of its identity.

This study has methodological limitations. Netnography, an unobtrusive

and naturalistic method, is useful for revealing the rich symbolic world underlying consumers' needs, desires, meanings, and choices in cyberspace. However, this interpretive study could miss community members' actual perceptions. Further work might triangulate this observation with other methods such as interviews and surveys. In addition, unobtrusive observation has limitations in describing members' detailed profiles. Carrying out in-depth interviews with the more influential members of the community could enable a deeper understanding of their identity. Using other methods would have enabled the validation of the emergent themes in the online brand community.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to improve understanding of Korean Apple MacBook consumer culture in an online brand community. Using Goffman's dramaturgy framework, consumers' self-presentation performance and interactions in an online brand community were examined. Based on the consumer-centric approach, netnography, an ethnographical research method designed for use in CMEs, was employed. The findings show that Korean Apple MacBook consumers present themselves, and interact with, brand photos and brand stories which represent them in their everyday lives; they also fabricate brand meanings as aesthetic and distinctive objects for creating their positive face. In addition, they build community rituals – coordination, community terms, and restriction – to preserve the MacBook brand community identity through their interactions. The consumers' brand meaning-making efforts form an idealized brand consumption style and stimulate communal desire to possess it. These consumers' interactions

produce a version of good taste as a form of cultural and social capital to influence and dominate, leading to stratification within the community. Furthermore, the more influential consumption codes and brand meanings could extend beyond the community boundary. The process of consumer-to-consumer communication and brand meaning-making is intertwined with the evolving brand community.

This study has built a bridge between communication research based on Goffman's theories, and marketing literature on consumer and brand culture in CMEs. It suggests that Goffman's self-presentation theory can be extended to an online brand community setting. In addition, it implies that brand marketers can better understand Korean Apple consumers and their culture by observing their behavior in the online brand community. By examining interactions among consumers and how they communicate in online brand communities, marketers can obtain more insight into what their customers need.

The study should be extended to other Apple brands and media channels examining consumers' interactions and brand meanings' flow and variations. The understanding of cultural dynamics and consumers' relationships would expand knowledge of consumer communication in CMEs. Further study on online brand communities will surely provide a new avenue for future communications and marketing research.

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