Violence in the Production of Self:

A Mimetic Reading of Self-Brand Users in Digital Social Network Platform Contexts

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René Girard's mimetic theory demonstrates that humans non-consciously imitate the desire of the other (mimetic desire).[1] The imitation of the desire of the other results in mimetic rivalry or what Girard calls the process of doubling, where the rivals become more and more like the other in the back and forth model-obstacle relationship. The mimetic relationship of model-obstacle escalates conflict and result in a crisis. The crisis of doubles is solved when the model-obstacle is removed to obtain the object of desire.

In a communal setting, the escalation resulting from the model-obstacle infects the community and exacerbates other mimetic conflicts in the community. The potential of the escalating negative mimesis results in a scenario of all-against-all and is thwarted only by the community blaming a person(s) in the group for the collective conflict. Then, the group turns on and kills the victim(s). The hostility pointed towards one other is transferred to the victim, the scapegoat, the one to blame for the near destruction of the group. After the victim is murdered, the community experiences the victim's death as a catharsis and a unifying experience. The following paper will use the insights of Girard's mimetic theory to analyze the violence found in the contemporary production of a self-brand – "the creation of an identity as a commodity using brand management and advertising practices to be sold" – by users of digital social network platforms.[2]

In the middle of the last decade, digital social network platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, and YouTube, among others, emerged and with them a new digital global marketplace.[3] The new digital marketplace quickly became overcrowded as both social

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[1] René Girard, *The Girard Reader*. (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

[2] Stephanie Genz and Bejamin A. Brabon. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories.* (2nd Edition. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 1-86, 254-266.

[3] António Machuco Rosa. "Mimesis, network theory and digital social networks." *Xiphias Gladius: Revista interdisciplinar de Teoría Mimética* 1 (2018): 93-111

elites and ordinary people were afforded access due to its accessibility.[4] A third factor which

surfaced with social media platforms and the digital marketplace was brand culture. Brand

culture focuses on "making and selling immaterial things – feelings and affects; personalities and

values – rather than actual goods."[5] Brands, in the context of brand culture, are understood not

only in economic terms but also in terms of their "affective relational qualities."[6]

    The focus on the affective relational qualities of brands resulted in the rise of affective

economies which imbues "consumer products and services with social meaning which people

use for self-expression."[7] In the context of brand culture, people extend the corporate logic of

"brand management and marketing schemes to the very formation of subjectivity."[8] Using the

self-presentation technique called self-branding, people craft identities (self-brand) to be sold as

commodities to consumers. In the overlap of brand culture and social media networks, self-

branding teaches people that "the chief capital of a person resides within the self and needs to be

unearthed through persistent self-work and immaterial labor that encompasses affective elements

and produces socioeconomic added value."[9]

    In the overcrowded digital marketplace, the need to "present the self-as-capital is key to

economic survival."[10] To differentiate from others, 'authenticity' acts as an affective commodity

in the crowded, post-recessionary, digital social network market, reinforcing a well-established

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Stephanie Genz and Bejamin A. Brabon. *Postfeminism*, 19.

[6] Ibid., 256.

[7] Ibid., 53.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 257.

[10] Ibid.

corporate logic whereby consumers tend to "reject mass-produced and mass-marketed commodities in favor of products and services that can claim to be in some way authentic."[11] Authenticity in this case is not only understood and experienced as "the pure, inner self of the person, it is also a relationship between persons and commodity culture."[12] In the context of social media, the distance between the "profile" of a self-brand created by a person utilizing their self-narrative – intimate, thoughts, and emotions – and the person's own self-understanding as separate from the business "profile" becomes blurred and collapsed.

Authenticity entails that the person utilize their own life-narrative to create their social media self-brand. The authenticity of the self-brand is currency in the affective economy which is exchanged with other "profiles" for their attention. The way the exchange plays out on digital social network platforms is through the self-brand "posting" on a social media platform. The audience, in turn, "buys into" the self-brand's authenticity and validates it by "liking," "commenting," and/or "sharing" the self-brand's "post."[13]

In the affective economy, potential "followers" seek out profiles that are relatable i.e. based on affective relational qualities which the follower shares with the self-brand. Once a self-brand has a "following," the self-brand capitalizes on the clientele by exploiting them for capital or for a gain in influence. By selling products, the self-brand draws on the previous self-work of drawing the customers in through the affective economy and makes sells based off the relational connection people feel they have to the brand/person.[14] The self-brand can also capitalize on and

[11] Ibid., 19.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 18-19.

[14] Ibid., 256, 258.

utilize the influence of its audience and extend an invitation for the users to share their content in order for their content to reach a larger amount of profiles in the digital marketplace.

Here, mimetic theory sheds light on the violence done to the self in the context of self-branding and the use of digital social network platforms. The inner self of the person undergoes psychological and potential physical violence in the self-branding process in which the intimate, thoughts, emotions, and life-narrative is colonized by market rhetoric which crafts the self into a saleable commodity.[15] Utilizing the narrative history and self-understanding of the person, the 'affective' self reduces the 'true' self to an affective commodity to be leveraged and sold to social media users in exchange for capital in the form of currency, attention, and/or further influence.

The 'commodity' self does violence to the 'true' self as the two engender a rivalry over the desire to reside in the psychology of the person's own self-understanding/actualization. The 'commodity' self and the 'affective' self are furthermore collapsed in brand culture and form the self-brand of the person which scapegoats the 'true' self. The logic of self-branding is a violent logic in this case which instructs people to define themselves not only *through* brands but *as* brands themselves. The implications of undergoing self-branding process are manifold within the psychology of the person as the persons embarks on the self-branding process.

The violence which results from the scapegoating of the 'true' self by the 'affective' self and 'commodity' self is illustrated in the resultant psychological anxiety, tension, and uncertainty. The psychological anxiety, tension, and uncertainty are the result of: 1) post-recession economic hardships which render the crowded marketplace as both a potential source of economic survival and also a potential source of endless competition resulting in no economic

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[15] Ibid., 55.

return; 2) the consistent monitoring of feedback provided by others which in turn constitutes the self-brand's own authenticity and self-presentation; and, 3) a constant battle between the distinction between the 'true' self which arises in relationship to people in daily life and the self-brand's mimetic relationship constituting the self in the digital social space.

In sum, a mimetic analysis of the violence found in the contemporary production of a self-brand by users of digital social network platforms illustrates a psycho-social relationship which does violence to the self in its self-understanding, production, and maintenance. The self is colonized by foreign marketing and advertising schemes which reduce the self to and affective commodity and an object to be sold to others. Finally, the self engenders rivalries at the psychological level of the self against the claims on the self by the 'affective' self and the 'commodity' self.

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