

**The Circuit of Culture:
A Useful Theoretical Model for Studying Social Media**

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Abstract

This theoretical examination illustrates the applicability of the Circuit of Culture to studying social media. Literature that uses the theory of self-presentation for understanding social media and its users abounds. While Goffman's (1959) presentation of self is an appropriate theoretical approach to the analysis of social media, it focuses primarily on the concept of identity and how users elicit or hide particular aspects of it depending on the self they want to project. Because online environments are multifaceted sites of meaning construction and exchange, examining them with a more diverse and encompassing model is critical. The Circuit of Culture is a five-part model that can be used to provide a rich understanding of a cultural phenomenon. This paper offers evidence for why the Circuit of Culture is a strong model to apply when investigating social media as well as offers suggestions for future research areas.

Keywords: circuit of culture; social media; production; consumption

Introduction

Social media environments are multifaceted domains in which meaning is constructed and exchanged. Examining the activities that take place in these spaces requires the use of a diverse and encompassing theoretical framework. In a given social media environment, there is more to understand than simply how a user engages in self-presentation. Erving Goffman's (1959) work concerning the presentation of self has been used abundantly to examine digital domains such as vlogs, YouTube, and other web spaces (see Griffith & Papacharissi, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Wesch, 2009). Additionally, Facebook and MySpace (Tufecki, 2008) as well as the production of a "cyberself" through participation in multi-user domains (MUDs) (Robinson, 2007) have also been examined by employing Goffman and Symbolic Interaction theory (SI). The aforementioned studies illustrate the wealth of literature that draws primarily on self-presentation and SI theory. The time has come to use a theory beyond the scope of self-presentation in digital media studies. The purpose of this theoretical examination is to showcase the Circuit of Culture and its applicability to studying social media phenomena.

The Circuit of Culture

The Circuit of Culture was used by du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) in their study of the Sony Walkman. They explored the Walkman by examining the five moments included in the model: identity, production, consumption, representation and regulation. The Circuit has been used predominately in cultural and media studies (see Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Han & Zhang, 2009; Keats, 2012; Scherer & Jackson, 2008; Soar, 2000; Taylor, Demont-Heinrich, Broadfoot, Dodge & Jian, 2002). A major goal of this model is to illustrate the interconnections between the moments to understand how they can be articulated simultaneously. Realizing that these distinct moments co-facilitate the construction and exchange of meaning is one of the main benefits to using this model to examine cultural phenomena. See **Figure 1** for a visual representation of the model.

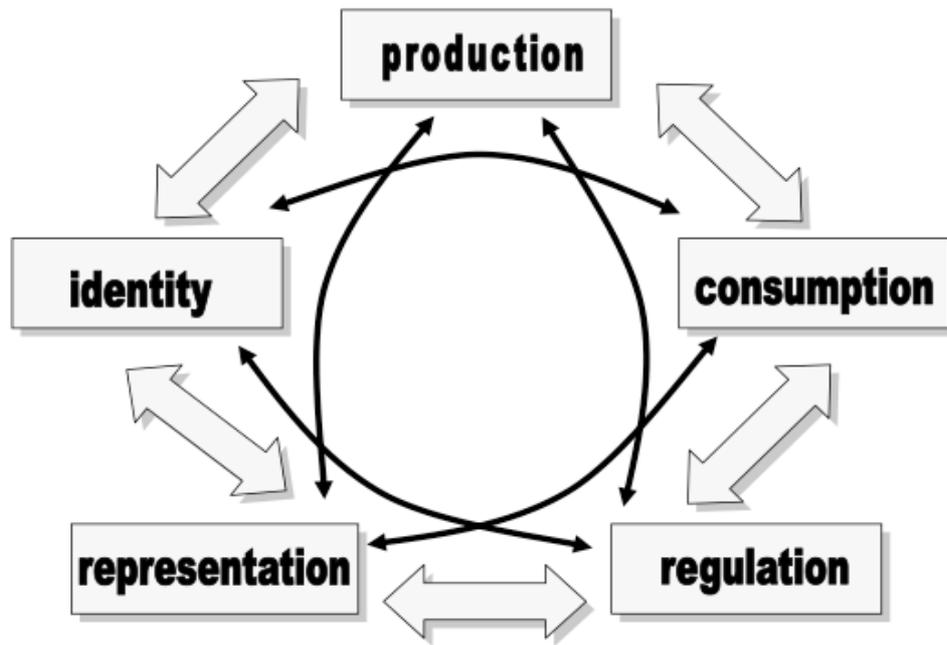


Figure 1. Circuit of Culture (du Gay et al., 1997).

Keats (2012) used the Circuit to examine haul videos on YouTube. Briefly, a haul video is a short video in which the producer showcases his or her (often the producers are young girls or women) purchases from a recent shopping trip to the mall or favorite retailer. Taylor et al. (2002) used the Circuit to investigate issues regarding the Napster legal case (an online music-sharing site), while Han and Zhang (2009) used it to understand the influence a celebrity blogger had in mitigating a national cultural clash that involved Starbucks. The aforementioned studies successfully present a full picture of the phenomenon under study because the Circuit of Culture necessitates the understanding of more than a singular concept or construct and how they overlap when in play. “The model focuses on how the value and meaning of cultural phenomena are created, maintained, and transformed throughout various sites, moments and practices” (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 608).

Social media environments have illustrated the interconnections between production and consumption given that consumers can now produce content to be consumed by other participants in the environment. The freedom and flexibility afforded in such locales identifies a need to more closely examine the roles of consumer and producer and the Circuit provides a strong theoretical framework for doing so.

Producers as Consumers / Consumers as Producers

Within the haul video trend, it is argued that corporate producers first imbue their products with an intended meaning and/or use; this product is then purchased by a hauler because it may represent one or more aspects of the identity he or she has and/or are striving to present. Next, the hauler moves from his or her status as a consumer to that of a producer by creating and posting a video that showcases recent purchases. Finally, the video is consumed by YouTube viewers and likely commented on which generates a digital discussion about a host of topics, many of which are related to presentation of self, appearance, body image, and consumption habits (Keats, 2012). What emerges here is a cyclical pattern that is more easily understood by employing the Circuit of Culture to understand how given moments are interrelated – specifically the overlap of the consumer and producer roles.

Taylor et al. (2002) note the need to reconfigure the model in a way that accounts for the converging roles of producers and consumers. Within Napster, users (i.e., those who consumed the music for free) also produced it by “ripping” material from CDs and providing it to others (Taylor et al., 2002, p. 620). Further, because users did not have to pay for the content, the power dynamics between consumers and producers shifted. Producers once held the power of distributing music, but a site like Napster put a lot more power in the hands of the consumer.

While producers at the corporate level were once solely in charge of creating messages for mass consumption, consumers who engage in social media environments now have a great deal of power in how such messages are received and reproduced. Social media provide a platform for participants to reproduce content they deem meaningful. Power is taken away from the original producer in the sense that this act of reproduction may create a new form of meaning or use very different from what was originally intended. The Circuit of Culture helps to make these distinctions apparent.

The examples from Keats (2012) and Taylor et al. (2002) provide two solid studies that illustrate the importance of carefully considering the roles of producers and consumers in new media environments. Both authors specifically addressed social media and highlighted the ways in which consumers and producers can hold both positions simultaneously. Moreover, these studies demonstrate that while some adaption may be needed, the Circuit of Culture continues to prove useful for studying social media.

Conclusion

When studying any social phenomenon or occurrence, one could argue that the overarching goal of the researcher is to present the most thorough and accurate picture possible. The Circuit of Culture is an excellent tool to employ when trying to reach such a goal. Although the Circuit may come across as a complex and slightly intimidating theoretical model, its use can allow a researcher to make powerful observations and claims.

The goal of this paper is to illustrate the applicability of the Circuit to studying social media. Trends such as YouTube haul videos, pin boards on Pinterest, photographs on Instagram or political tweets on Twitter, encompass the assemblage of production and consumption as well as meaning creation and exchange—all of which can be thoroughly explored by using the Circuit. As has been discussed by Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel (2002), Champ (2008), and Keats (2012), the Circuit of Culture is a strong framework to apply when the goal is to generate a rich understanding of meaning construction, exchange, and reproduction. The interconnectedness of the moments that comprise this model allow for more broad and sophisticated analyses.

Topics for future research using the Circuit of Culture include examining social interaction and the social networks of people that are at play in online environments. Further, websites such as Pinterest and YouTube haul videos illustrate the need to further explore copyright, authorship, production and consumption as these areas continue to blur in digital domains.

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