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Unessay Draft: Commodification of Identity in the Information Age

**NOTE:**

*This is very much mainly just the content of the essay itself, and isn’t reflective of the actual formatting/medium of the piece. For my final version, I’ll be making a webpage that’s meant to resemble the way a Buzzfeed page looks and presenting this in that medium.*

Identity is a fraught topic at the best of times—it’s a quintessentially human experience to grapple with:

* who you are
* who someone else is
* what you’re both called
* what one is called and the other is not
* what neither of you are called

In the age of the internet, there’s more words than ever to define yourself by, more labels to slap on yourself like a sticker collage adorning a college student’s MacBook. In theory, this might work out just fine. More words and category options likely equate to a better grasp on the vocabulary you use to describe yourself, so hypothetically, this might lead to more understanding.

But no—this has led to more internal conflict of self than ever, especially among many young people coming of age on the internet: the culture wars are here, and they’re in your Twitter replies. The divisions sown between groups can be as small as a difference of opinion on a fictional relationship or span the racial divide, and every single one is preyed upon in order to market you more things.

It’s no coincidence that the emphasis on brand relatability, whether it's a social media account for a fast food chain or a Super Bowl ad for a feminine hygiene product, is higher than ever. The more data and ad preference information a company has on a specific user, the more niche they can make their marketing, making the customer feel seen and also like they have something made "just for them", or a "place to belong". As social media grows as a grounds for advertising opportunity ([especially on a platform like Twitter](https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/brand-twitter-jokes-history.html)), this sort of content gets more and more traction. The goal is for consumers to interact with these accounts just as they would with any other person's account, establishing a rapport and building a positive association with the brand in their mind so they'll want to consume the product being peddled to them.

The market collecting our preferences and selling them back to us in the form of content or ads or products or in some other monetized form is not without deep and long-lasting consequences: this can often lead to us tying our sense of identity to these products or media, identifying authenticity via the "images, fashions, and lifestyles available in the market...these in turn become the vehicles by which we perceive others and they us", [according to](https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-commodification-of-everything/articles/the-commodification-of-self) UVA professor of sociology Joseph E. Davis. From categories like "goth" and "cottagecore" to "gamer" and "fitness blogger", most contemporary identity labels, to some extent, are based in consumerism. All the listed categories require a certain subset of consumption habits to let them keep qualifying as that category. I say "letting them" with a specific intent that loops us back to the inter-identity conflict that is generated between people to the benefit of the market. Often, members of certain communities will gatekeep said community because of some perceived lack of qualification (maybe you haven't logged enough hours in a certain game, or maybe you have some seemingly slightly unconventional method to making a charcuterie board. Who knows.) The feature of the poll has been used extensively to this effect: having the "correct" opinion about seemingly arbitrary things is now seen as a thing that is completely possible and also expected. See also: this very specific brand of Buzzfeed quizzes.

A screenshot of "opinions" quizzes from Buzzfeed.


The example above is much tamer, but this kind of "testing" can have direct and often extremely negative effects, such as feelings of isolation, anxiety, alienation, worry, and a desire to change in order to conform, especially in younger people. Marketing creates or exacerbates these feelings and then positions the product/opinion/content as a solution to it. The creation of the category and the fierce ways in which people will defend their own perceived categorizations/self-categorizations is exactly what companies want: it drives further interest and consumption, especially if people start to notice the category and decide they would also like to be a part of it. One more dimension to sell products to.

Of course, this neat grouping of all users into categories doesn’t necessarily have to be rooted in producing conflict to be insidious. [Take the case](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/magazine/shopping-habits.html) of a young teen just outside Minneapolis whose father stormed into their local Target insisting on getting an answer for why they sent his daughter coupons for maternity items when she was so young, but then found out a few days later that she was in fact pregnant. An example of what the Target algorithm collects and the insights they garner from it.


The algorithm sorted her into the “pregnant” category, which completely changed the kinds of content and the amount of content she was being marketed. There’s no conflict between the “pregnant” and “not pregnant” identities, but the categorization further improves the ability of the corporation to advertise products the consumer will actually consider buying.

Most of us don’t even think twice about enabling cookies anymore, especially when it threatens to pose an active hindrance to our convenience of using the given site, but this is the kind of data collection websites are able to do with them. Despite their harmless-sounding name, cookies are actual files that sites leave on your computer, the equivalent of the location trackers the villains slap on the unwitting heroes in movies. Cookies remember your preferences, items you’ve looked at or placed in your cart, unique user-identifying information, high game scores, etc.

Here’s the thing, though—cookies are only the tip of the iceberg. Turning off cookies is a move meant to placate a user and feel like they aren’t being tracked, when in reality, device fingerprinting and other device identifiers threaten privacy even further. They can identify your device through your browser’s configuration, Google advertising IDs, and more; not a single cookie is actually required, though it is definitely helpful to them. This information isn’t hidden away somewhere, either: it’s right on the Federal Trade Commission’s section on consumer information.

And this doesn’t even account for purposeful self-commodification, ever more apparent in our culture. Celebrities have always filled this role, but the rapid rise of the “influencer” has been astronomical. They maintain their own brand, carefully cultivate the image they present, and often present their own merch/monetized content to fans, making themselves the product. Self-commodification isn’t just limited to these public figures; as a student searching for employment, if I had a dollar for every time I heard someone tell me about how to “market myself”, I wouldn’t need to have a job at all. Under the capitalistic system, we’ve managed to treat everything in sight like goods and services, including ourselves.

The very concept of "self" has been muddied by relentless and ever-present corporate marketing, which plays upon it in order to present their brand as the way toward happiness. As Davis puts it, "by purchasing the right workbook, following the right steps, or getting the right makeover, we can change the quality of our inner experience, enhance our psychological well-being, and finally achieve true self-fulfillment." Nirvana is just a click away.