Production Through Consumption:
The Fusion of Identity and Consumerism in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*

If Sophie Kinsella’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is to be taken as a narrative self-help book, Rebecca Bloomwood’s chance discovery of the Flagstaff Life scandal and subsequent fame and employment it earns her is such an extraordinary conclusion that it alienates any readers who may have been looking for a more universal solution to her problems. Rather than demonstrating practical means of escaping rampant consumerism, Rebecca’s success is grounded within capitalism instead of outside of it. Her identity as a professional is not only created through her consumerism, by the novel’s end it is apparent that consumerism still remains essential to her identity. The reader is left with a bittersweet ending that effectively holds Rebecca’s identity prisoner to the excesses of capitalism. In this essay, I will argue that *Confessions of a Shopaholic* reinforces capitalist, neoliberal values by showcasing how rampant consumerism in the novel ultimately becomes recast as a manageable, healthy aspect of Rebecca’s life. The novel imparts to its readers the notion that career shortcomings are entirely at the fault of the worker and that embracing one’s role as a productive, cooperative member of the capitalist economy leads to financial success. I will begin my analysis with some brief definitions pertaining to the use of commodities in identity formation, followed by an examination of the protagonist’s conflated identities. Ultimately, it will be apparent that
Rebecca’s professional identity, due to its roots in her rampant consumption, has become dominant by the novel’s conclusion. This will lead into a discussion of the overall message of *Shopaholic* – neoliberal, consumerist practices are glorified and depicted as ideal forces for readers to shape their identities.

In order to recognize the identity creation strategies Rebecca Bloomwood employs throughout the novel, it is crucial to examine some key concepts surrounding the commodity, commodity fetishism, and use versus exchange value. The term “commodity” refers to more than just mere trade goods. As Bennett et al. explain, it also defines “a matrix of conditions of exchange…conditions of production…and conditions of consumption” (46). In this sense, the commodity is not simply the final product, but a broader signifier of capitalism from production to consumption. However, capitalism’s unconscious ability to reimagine the value of a commodity, “insofar as the commodity form both concentrates real social relations in itself and conceals them beneath its thing-like exterior,” gives rise to commodity fetishism (46). Commodity fetishism is therefore the result of an imagined value attributed to a commodity that ignores the human labour value that went into its production. Even within the capitalist market, human labour value is often alienated from a commodity – instead commodities are defined by either use or exchange value. Use value is essentially the ability of a commodity to provide something *useful*, such as warmth from a scarf or a pair of jeans. On the other hand, exchange value is determined by the monetary cost of a commodity in the capitalist market. In this sense, the value of a scarf or a pair of jeans is rooted only in their desirability by others. Taken together, as Featherstone notes, “the dominance of exchange value under capitalism has resulted in the commodity becoming a sign in the Saussurean sense” (85). In other words, the shift in focus from use to exchange value has added a semiotic aspect to commodities, which has shifted
consumption practices to “primarily…the consumption of signs” (85). This semiotic effect on commodities will make them central to identity formation through consumption.

Throughout the novel, Rebecca is often depicted assigning value to commodities based solely on their exchange value in the form of brand names, which are themselves linked to price. She admits, “I always look at the price tag first,” highlighting her focus on exchange value (Kinsella 22). If use value was important to her, the brand or cost of an item would be secondary. However, Rebecca’s focus on exchange value is so important to her that when she finds an item she deems fashionable were it not for the brand, she admits, “I cut out the label. So that if I’m ever stopped in the street, I can pretend I don’t know where it’s from” (13). At first it might seem that this example shows Rebecca’s focus on an item’s use value, but by removing the label of the “cheap” brand she is reaffirming her focus on exchange value. Rebecca will wear anything that looks fashionable, but is adamant in her presentation of a high cost associated with her clothing, demonstrating her obsession with exchange value. In addition, Rebecca’s infatuation with designer labels is indicative of an extreme form of commodity fetishism and even the commodification of human beings. Humans were once “privileged domain…withheld from market transactions,” but through the forces of capitalism, humans too have been reduced to mere commodities (Bennett et al. 47). Even Rebecca’s self-help book works to commodify its author: “David E. Barton says…” is a phrase Rebecca frequently uses to discuss the book’s money-saving techniques (Kinsella 58). These explicit references to Barton, instead of the mere book itself, work to commodify the author. Essentially, Barton becomes the financial equivalent of a fad diet. Yet another example occurs when Rebecca is shopping with her mother. She finds a wooden bowl for sale, and feeling bad for the salesman, she informs the reader, “if it’s a fiver I’ll buy it” (45). To her shock it was priced at £80, much higher than she thought. Upon discovering
that it was featured in the décor magazine *Elle Decoration*, Rebecca narrates, “I can’t believe it. I’m holding a piece of *Elle Decoration*. How cool is that?” (45). In a sudden change of heart, Rebecca fetishizes the bowl due to its celebrity status. She does not consider the true value of the bowl, which in the Marxist sense is the value directly related to the labour required for its production. The discovery of the bowl’s exchange value leads Rebecca to rethink her previous assessment of the price: “That’s nothing for a timeless piece of style like this” (46). These are but three examples of the many instances of Rebecca’s focus on exchange value that constitutes commodity fetishism in the novel.

One of the primary sources of contention in *Shopaholic* is grounded in Rebecca’s conflation of her overlapping identities. Kinsella sets up these identities by referring to the protagonist by a different name in different contexts. To her parents and childhood neighbours, Rebecca is referred to as “Becky.” While this nickname may seem unimportant, it complements her anti-work attitude conveyed often at the start of the novel. Becky explains while talking to her neighbours about her job, “It’s actually quite fun, *playing* a financial genius” (Kinsella 47, emphasis mine). Rebecca often admits that she is unqualified for her job, suggesting that she only retains her employment by fooling others into believing she is qualified. This disposition becomes problematic as she tries to develop a genuine professional identity, as she explains “I still know nothing of finance…I’ve been doing this job for three years now and I’m still expecting someone to catch me out” (10). The extent of Bloomwood’s professional deception is so profound that she admits, “I’m almost fooling myself” (18). This aspect of her identity demonstrates an unwillingness to actively participate in the capitalist economy as a productive member of society. Even Rebecca’s advice on the *Financial Times* as “by far the best accessory a girl can have” (12) marries both the semiotic aspect of commodity fetishism and her
professional delinquency. She explains, “With an FT under your arm … people think you’re a heavyweight intellectual with broader interests” (12). It is apparent that Rebecca believes herself to be an imposter. Her perceived incompetence can be seen as an act of dissent from capitalism – it is Rebecca who is exploiting her employer by underperforming in her job in what could be deemed an act of professional rebellion.

Unfortunately for Rebecca, as Thomas Frank has theorized, even resistance itself has been incorporated into capitalism in what he calls the commodification of dissent. Frank explains that capitalism “is no longer about enforcing Order, but destroying it” (322). Thus, Rebecca’s dissention, which is made apparent through her meager efforts at work, is in a sense part of the new order of capitalism. Frank notes, “[Contemporary] advertising teaches us not in the ways of puritanical self-denial…but in orgiastic, never-ending self-fulfillment” (319). In other words, capitalism no longer preaches an acceptance to the status quo but rather an attempt to go beyond it, so long as the ultimate goal remains part of capitalism. Rebecca’s dissatisfaction with her current job leads her into believing she deserves higher employment, which is entirely within the bounds of capitalism. Thus her dissention is allowed as she strives for higher employment in – and therefore participation within – the same capitalist system that initially oppresses her.

In addition to “Becky” and her rebellion towards her job, Bloomwood is often referred as “Bex” while in the company of her roommate Suze (Kinsella 32). Kinsella continues to use this dynamic nomenclature as a means of distinguishing identities as they start to collide. Bloomwood’s professional identity, which is ultimately dominant by the conclusion of the novel, is signified by the use of her full name, “Rebecca Bloomwood.” Her shift to this new identity is signaled to the audience during her television interview, “I have to do this. I have to be Rebecca Bloomwood, top financial expert” (283). Kinsella informs readers that “The new Rebecca is
much more levelheaded. So much more responsible,” (307) although moments later this passage finds Rebecca losing control to her urge to consume. It is important to note that despite her financial and personal successes by the end of *Shopaholic*, Rebecca is still maintaining her identity through her excessive consumption habits. As Jessica Van Slooten has noted, Rebecca’s “need to shop persists despite her relative personal and professional stability [by the end of the novel, suggesting that] true reformation has not occurred” (225). While Bloomwood may have been able to reconcile her professional identity for the time being, this ephemeral identity is still prisoner to capitalist modes of creation through consumption. When the bank manager arrives at the studio, Rebecca panics: “I’m left alone on the set, exposed and vulnerable. Rebecca Bloomwood, top financial expert, has vanished. All that’s left is me, Becky…trying to avoid Derek Smeath’s eye” (Kinsella 286). Here, Mr. Smeath represents the threat of her other subdued identities invading her professional status, which is made even more distinct by suggesting “Becky” has replaced “Rebecca.” While she manages to talk her way out of trouble yet again, the persistence of her consumption habits demonstrates her relentless dependence on commodities as signs that build and maintain identity. As Van Slooten notes, Rebecca’s “spending habits are motivated by deeper emotional concerns and issues,” (225) establishing that she is still suffering from concerns of identity. Such concerns are mitigated only by the consistency of her shopping habits apparent in the final chapter, where she buys sunglasses on impulse (Kinsella 308-9).

Not only has the author demonstrated a failure on Rebecca’s part to anchor her identity in something other than perpetual consumption, she has effectively normalized this modern phenomenon through Rebecca’s financial and personal successes, which all occur in spite of her consumption. As Ghosh explains, a failure to participate in consumer culture leads to social alienation, “In modern acquisitive society, sociability implies an eagerness to be devoted to the
logic of consumption, which means that a failure to relate through objects makes one anti-social” (380). Rebecca uses commodities as social beings to replace positive social interaction in the face of her real-life hardships, such as her relationship with Luke Brandon, her non-relationship with Tom, and her lack of professional progress. Kinsella effectively promotes Rebecca’s dependence on consumption as a surrogate for social interaction.

*Shopaholic’s* promotion of consumption as a means of escaping social alienation in modern capitalist society is complemented by the novel’s glorification of the unregulated neoliberal market. Neoliberalism, which replaced Keynesian (welfare state) economics in the late twentieth century, profiles the consumer as “excessive, extreme and unregulated. In other words [the consumer] is imagined as a composite of the neoliberal market itself” (Dean 62). In this sense, Kinsella effectively paints Rebecca as a spokeswoman for the neoliberal market, through her rampant but ultimately manageable consumerism. Dean notes that Rebecca fails whether she spends or not; either she risks bankruptcy maintaining her identity, or loses her identity by saving (65). Dean’s concerns are only reconciled through the extraordinary plot twist rather than a paradigmatic shift in Rebecca’s identity creation.

Kinsella even goes so far as to suggest an essential connection between culture and consumption. Cheryl Wilson postulates that this connection is apparent in the novel’s references to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Wilson notes, “Becky views the museum as a place where culture and materialism would be separate, [though] she herself has been attempting to purchase culture throughout the novel” (221). According to Wilson, Rebecca’s museum visit alludes to early representations of the Industrial Revolution, placing her in the context of Victorian consumerism (217). By drawing on the roots of industrialization and modern consumerism, Kinsella sets up capitalism as a positive aspect of the modern age, quite contrary to the Marxist
point of view. Ultimately, the author’s message to her audience is clear: excessive consumption is a linchpin of identity and social acceptance. Jennifer Scanlon observed the effects of this message in a study of Shopaholic readership. Her findings noted, “almost every respondent reports identifying with Becky…because of her shopping habits” (Scanlon, par. 19). The normalization of excessive consumption as vital to the creation of identity effectively sets up class divisions; it positions one’s financial situation and ability to participate in neoliberal consumption (i.e. affluence) as a key factor of identity. Thus, in a society that is growing critical of class barriers, Scanlon’s research demonstrates that the novel actually promotes classism.

In conclusion, Confessions of a Shopaholic manages to promote neoliberal consumption by portraying Rebecca’s rampant consumerism as a mere quirk of her character, one that is entirely manageable by the end of the novel. Kinsella recasts issues of social alienation and commodity fetishism as essential to the creation of the professional woman’s identity within modern society. The novel fails to present any means of escaping consumption-based identification. Instead, the focus on Rebecca’s initial dissention from her job shifts the blame of labour exploitation from capitalism on to the worker, casting the capitalist market as the victim. Is it excusable that Kinsella merely channels preexisting (yet still problematic) ideals of the modern female consumer into her novel? To answer that, readers will have to decide exactly what the purpose of the novel is to them. In its ability to act as a symbolic catharsis for readers to “spend” someone else’s money, the novel may be a healthy outlet. However, the perpetuation of hegemonic notions of identity as grounded within consumerism, along with the power we give to the inanimate through commodity fetishism, characterizes Confessions of a Shopaholic as merely another advertisement, with Rebecca Bloomwood as its empathetic spokeswoman.
Works Cited


