Cognitive capitalism of wedding industry in the digital age: Case study of digital inequality on sustainability development goals

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Abstract. Wedding industry is one of industries that managed and expanded their businesses by keeping up with technology. As a form of one-stop shopping and marketplace of Indonesia’s wedding industry, Bridestory provides business strategies offered by the latest technology and offers convenience for brides, grooms, and wedding vendors. By providing platforms, websites, social media and mobile applications, it not only creates opportunities to support its sustainability in the wedding industry, but also serves the role of reducing economic inequalities by making wedding references accessible for everyone, not limited to the upper class-only. By constructing the ideology of ideal wedding throughout its digital communication channels, Bridestory is found to be operating their business strategy within the logic of cognitive capitalism. This study aims to dismantle the construction of the ideal wedding that has been revolving around in the industry by identifying four labor strategies in the logic of cognitive capitalism: free labor, immaterial labor, affective labor, and hope labor. This study managed to find the manifestation of value-network model that is related to digital inequality of sustainable development goals. The study found the exploitation of free labor and hope labor via their usage of social media application that contributed to products acquisition.

1 Introduction

1.1. Background

Digital inequality is essential issue that needs to solve and to close digital gap to attain sustainability development goals (SDGs) [1]. The digital inequality could be appeared in specific website such as wedding industry, Bridestory’s wedding. In 2017, Bridestory’s wedding report revealed that the average middle-class Indonesians are likely to spend around IDR 70-120 million for a standard wedding ceremony with 300 person capacity, and around IDR 300-700 million for a luxurious ceremony with the same capacity. Although it seemed to be challenging, why are the couples and their families still willing to spend such a hefty amount of money in exchange for a short, one-day occasion? With such growing demand in Indonesia’s wedding industry, Bridestory, an online marketplace for wedding vendors has been growing its customer base since its establishment in 2013. With one-stop-shopping system [2], Bridestory provides websites and mobile applications for vendors from various categories such as venues, catering, decoration, to documentation and honeymoon packages [3].
As a business owner, Bridestory is seen to be actively shaping and maintaining the ideology of dream wedding parties. As a marketplace, Bridestory serves as an aggregator that brings together brides and vendors, by creating the needs themselves via the construction of a pseudo reality of dream wedding through the activities of the users in it. Not only dictating the idea of dream wedding in one direction through website articles, social media, and mobile application, vendors who are members of Bridestory also conducts the practice of ratings and reviews [4]. As a result, through application and website users, Bridestory managed to gain popular positions and enter the ranks of recommended vendors. On social media, both brides and vendors are also actively tagging Bridestory, mentioning, or using the hashtag #bridestory in hopes of being featured in the next content. Bridestory website and application users are unaware that they have become free laborers in the company's production mode. This phenomenon is part of cognitive capitalism [5], which explains the way technology entrepreneurs (tech owners) consolidate communication, social cooperation, and creativity into a mode of production through the power of networks. The business model adopted by Bridestory is one example of how the latest technological advances and networking communities have shifted the mode of productive industry to cognitive industry [5].

In contrast to the productive industry that produces material goods, in cognitive industry entrepreneurs (owners) possess the information and ability to use the network as the main capital. With the web-based platform that they built, Bridestory can develop the business of the wedding party industry without having to produce a single, tangible unit - other than the information needed by its users. This study has an objective to deconstruct public awareness about consumerism in the Indonesian wedding industry, by identifying cognitive capitalism and constructing the ideology of “ideal wedding parties” in Bridestory Indonesia's communication media.

1.2. Literature review
Indonesian weddings are said to be held for the sake of social mobility and wealth security. Previous studies observed ideology construction within wedding photography [6], social motivation of building self-representation in wedding and wedding professionals’ promotion strategy [7]. In general, weddings have always held a specific role in society as a part of social reproduction strategy. In order to survive within a society, individuals enact social reproduction which aims to acquire and preserve its own capital. Such capital is divided into four main types, namely: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital [8]. Furthermore, the possession of such capital will determine one’s position and prestige within his/her social environment. Marriage ceremony could be viewed as a stage. The conception of dream wedding, in this context, is accepted as a form of truth even though it is merely a pseudo-reality [8]. When the public is lulled by a false sense of consciousness, then they will become passive and subconsciously washed away to consumerism [9]. With the presence of mass-self communication such as social media, individuals will probably enjoy momentary pleasure and instant gratification [10] and thus will lead to an ideal that social recognition is of paramount importance, even more than the needs to ensure financial planning for the future. In the present-day digital era, social orders experience two major changes, namely; shifting towards individualism and collectivism at the same time [11]. With the presence of mass-self communication channels like social media, humans are becoming more focused on matters that can accommodate their individualistic desire, such as self-image and personal achievement.

With the present-day combination between social media and web technology, the users are being facilitated to be a prosumer - a combination between producer and consumer [12]. On one side, they utilize social media to gain information and connect to other users (as a consumer), but on the other hand, they are also facilitated to be the producer of content and belong to a certain community (as a producer) [13]. The term cognitive capitalism is one of a popular concept being discussed in several studies concerning prosumption in the context of social media [5]. In cognitive capitalism, all fundamental differences such as production versus consumption, manufacturers versus services, and economy versus culture disappear and blend into one. Nam utilizes the concept of cognitive capitalism
as a general term to explain four roles of labor that helps to define a new ode in capital accumulation through social media, namely; free labor, immaterial labor, affective labor, and hope labor [14].

2. Method
This study utilizes two methods: namely critical discourse analysis (CDA) and digital ethnography. CDA is used to identify and analyze the construction of the dream wedding concept inside the Bridestory website, while Digital Ethnography is used to understand how the concept of cognitive capitalism operates in end-user and vendor’s interaction inside Bridestory application and website. The CDA method adopted in this research refers to Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis, with several analytical steps [15]. To deconstruct ideology in the article, analysis is conducted by seeing several critical elements: context, text outlines, rhetoric, contents and ideological statements, other specificity from articles, and discourse position and main message of an article. As to identify how the process of cognitive capitalism works within Bridestory website and application, digital ethnography [16] is used where the writer has been committed as a member of the website and social media follower for the last five years.

Analysis is conducted by seeing the four types of labors defined by their access, interaction to Bridestory, namely; (1) free labors (identified by contribution to web traffic), (2) immaterial labors (identified by informational and cultural content in Bridestory, (3) affective labors (identified by recyclable user’s data), and (4) hope labors identified by user’s motivation and expectations towards Bridestory content consumption. To analyze the ideological construction inside Bridestory Website, this study referred to design (user interface) [13] and content (user experience) as a unit of analysis [10]. It is mentioned that a norm of ideology in a website can be observed from technological artefact and interfaces, such as symbol, texts, and pictures. To maintain goodness criteria of the research, the study applied some criteria consisting of usage of accessible and comprehensive raw data, conducting self-reflexivity, and linkage to existing relevant studies on the topic. Triangulation of theory [17] is used to confirm the data found from digital ethnography (popular keywords and hashtags used for Bridestory) with critical analysis obtained by CDA (Bridestory website’s outline, wordings).

3. Results and discussion
3.1 Results
The observation towards Bridestory website demonstrates that the construction of the meaning of dream wedding is apparent in several aspects, namely; (1) homepage; (2) page title; (3) page order; (4) vendor categorization; and (5) vendor recommendations. In terms of homepage, it has an essential significance since it is the first page that the visitor will see upon its visit. In Bridestory.com’s website, it can be observed that the first eye-catching thing is the Bridestory pay banner that is located at the top of the page. Aside from having a bright-colored, a banner also uses carousel-style formatting, which enables them to continue moving and eye-catching. By placing the Bridestory pay banner on the homepage, Bridestory also conveys its message to the consumer not to worry about the expenses arising from the wedding ceremony, because Bridestory is always there to help. By this statement alone, the end-user is steered towards believing that even though a wedding ceremony is something that spends a lot of money.

Another observation concerning the element is how generally the homepage’s layout is designed to be easily operated with the existence of vendor categorization and has a smooth coloring (white, peach, pink). Symmetrical layout and a lot of clear spaces within the page, an absence of advertisement banners within the page also adds up to the page’s aesthetics. In relation to the form of manipulation, the end-user is expected to be manipulated to spend their time searching for ideas and inspiration for their respective ceremony.

Aside from the aesthetic layouts of the website as mentioned in the preceding paragraph, manipulation is also apparent on several aspects such as symmetrical layout, minimalistic (showing only five vendors), easily operable page navigation, and the placement of cursor in each section.
Figure 1. Bridestory Pay Banner Located at the top of the Website.

In term of tagline, the use of slogan or tagline is a form of Bridestory’s strategy to construct the meaning of dream wedding. The title of Bridestory’s Blog itself is clearly reflecting its mission, that is a wedding blog for ideas & inspiration of dream wedding. By this statement, Bridestory does not only position itself as the provider of inspirational content but also as an enabler of a dream wedding. When the meaning of dream is something that is subjective and might differ from other people, and could not be standardized into any specific forms, including in the form of inspiration.

Figure 2. The tagline embedded in the page name of the Bridestory blog section on its website.

In case of page order, the agenda constructed by Bridestory through the website becomes apparent. Five top sections on the website are arranged with the following sequence: Venue, videography, hair, and makeups, bridal, and catering. By placing videography on the top after venue, Bridestory constructs a meaning that video should be prioritized in a wedding ceremony, more than catering and clothing. This becomes parallel and supports the high demand within the market to document each moment in a wedding ceremony in a form of video. It is this kind of demand that Bridestory utilizes to sell its associated vendors to the end-user.

In terms of vendor categorization, Bridestory website provides the opportunity for the end-user to customize the vendor’s categorization that they wish to see. However, standards-wise, end-user has been given six vendor categories with identically same section sequences on the website. This categorization is assumed to be done by Bridestory because of two possibilities: First, because the six categories of vendors are the vendors most frequently sought by users. Second, because all six are the sectors that bring the most revenue to Bridestory.

Figure 3. Default Vendor Categorization by Bridestory.

In terms of vendor recommendation, the construction of dream wedding is also apparent from the arrangement of vendors recommended by Bridestory. It is observed that a peculiar use of rating as that
basis of the arrangement of recommended vendors in Bridestory website. From the outset, the best vendor has an average rating of 4. However, the number of people who give these ratings is not significant enough to consider the vendor as recommended. In this case, Bridestory looks shrewdly exploiting the mimesis tendencies of its end-users. With this recommendation system, Bridestory creates the illusion that these vendors are popular vendors that other people often use, and therefore become vendors that they must also partner with to organize their dream wedding parties.

This study found the value-network model states that under the logic of cognitive capitalism, every user can produce without having to go through the laborious process of value-chain. In the context of Bridestory, value-network model is represented in two main points. Firstly, every user (the prospective couples or vendors) was facilitated by platforms and features that drive them to take part in a production process. Secondly, the production as mentioned above is a process of giving information and feedback to other users within the Bridestory platform.

The other finding was affective labor on Bridestory. The finding on end-user Bridestory’s behavior data showed four types of tools. First, traffic overview which shows the number of visits in the website, how much time spent by the end-user within the site, and the source of traffic which brings the user to the website (e.g.: social media, messaging app, or direct search. Second, search keywords, which shows the most popular keywords used by end-user to obtain information concerning Bridestory. Third, audience overview which shows the demographic profile of the end-user accessing the website to their preferences over the internet. Finally, competitor and similar sites which shows other websites visited by the end-user after they visit Bridestory website. The last finding of this study in cognitive capitalism is hope labor. This study found that Bridestory strategically utilizes this motivation with the logic of cognitive capitalism, which periodically chooses lucky posts to be reviewed in one of the feature rubrics on its social media. The higher the volume of posts using the #TheBrideStory hashtag, the greater the number of exposures received by Bridestory. The individuals (in that article, is specified as women) use Pinterest based on two fundamental motivation: future-oriented yearning and self-surveillance [18].

3.2 Discussion
In addition to cognitive capitalism, Bridestory’s digital-driven business practice could also be analyzed and discussed further using the concept of long tail economy [19]. As a culture unfiltered by economic scarcity, the long tail age refers to a cultural and economy condition that increasingly shifts away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits and moving toward a huge number of niches. There are three basic types of participants in the long tail economics: consumers, aggregators, and producers [19]. Bridestory falls into the second type (aggregator) as they serve as a platform that brings together demands from potential users (in this case, brides and grooms-to-be), and wedding vendors. As an aggregator, Bridestory provides a massive database of vendors with niche services in the wedding industry. Bridestory belongs to pure digital model of aggregator where each of their products is stored in the form of database entry, thus costing nearly nothing aside to server and web maintenance. Bridestory is a perfect example for long tail economics, as it is driven by three driving forces of long tail: (1) democratization of production tools, (2) democratization of distribution, (3) supply and demand connection.

One of the challenges in markets of hits (popular products) is distribution. The distribution is making sure the products reach the customers and grab their attention. In the long tail economy, this is never the case. With Internet, all producers can also be distributors of their own products. With multiple channels such as website, mobile application, and social media accounts, Bridestory serves as a platform that distributes their vendors’ information to their customer base, ensuring the customers to be well-informed about the vendors portfolio, quality, and reputation.

The last and most significant force of long tail economy is its ability to connect supply and demand effectively [19]. After introducing customers to newly available products, the next most important task is to make the demand meet the right kind of audience. In the long tail age, this connection is done by using filters. The filters were described as a mechanism that could tap the distributed intelligence of millions of consumers to match users with the products that suit them the best. In the case of Bridestory,
the filter is present in some touch points, from recommended vendors list in website and mobile apps, social media targeted ads, mobile app push notifications, to banner placement in Bridestory website and mobile app. In addition to that, Bridestory also consistently publishes numerous wedding inspirations and featured weddings in their social media accounts.

Previous long tail studies have revealed that when customers are given wide array of choices while being placed under high uncertainty, they will disproportionally choose the small number of highly reputable producer and products [20]. This means, users are likely to select only a few that fits their demand and tend to stick with them instead of continuing to explore all other niches. Bridestory seems to acknowledge this behavior, and thus comes up with two strategic tactics of distribution. The first tactic is through rating & review. In long tail economics, consumers are the new taste makers. Aside to celebrities’ endorsement, the crowd behavior is the biggest force of all as a form of distributed intelligence [19]. Users might not even realize that they are giving out recommendations to others, but their ratings and reviews on vendors are contributive in determining other users’ purchase decision [21]. The second tactic is done through social media endorsement. Bridestory has been actively leveraging social media features to optimize its distribution, such as by using multiple wedding-related popular hashtags, collaborating and tagging public figures and celebrities, as well as hosting thematic challenges for followers to be featured in their Instagram and blog.

4. Conclusion

The advancement of technology, information, and digital communications has brought human civilization to the direction of prosumption where the consumers at the same time act as the producer. The phenomenon is utilized by the owner of the industries to accumulate capital continuously. Subconsciously, the user is deemed to have spoiled with various benefits of communication which are offered freely but, in exchange, it is their data that becomes the cost paid by the user from the prosumption activity. Bridestory runs the wedding industry capitalism in Indonesia by the virtue of systematic prosumption. The first step is done by constructing the ideas of a wedding ceremony on the top of the user’s mind. The construction is done in a subtle and manipulative way through its website, articles, and social media. By depicting themselves as a source of ideas and inspirations of dream wedding, Bridestory seemed to present themselves as solution for the prospective couples. It also appears as a friend, not as a businessman that offers product blatantly. The second step is done by committing cognitive capitalism, which is by enacting four strategies of free labor on the website user and Bridestory’s social media, encouraging self-production with value-network, and utilizing putting-out system mechanism. The end-user (prospective couples and vendors) will subconsciously be exploited as a part of digital labor by Bridestory. This is because the end-user looks as if it depends on the information provided by Bridestory, without acknowledging that they have provided a number of data that will be used by Bridestory and their clients for their business sustainability.

It is, however, also realized that the research has some weaknesses. In this research, active involvement of the end-user towards construction provided by Bridestory has not been involved. The study tends to position the end-user as an individual that accepts the construction of a dream wedding as such, without having to involve critical processes surrounding it. This is done since the stance of the paper is to solely focus on Bridestory as the dominant party, not to the attitude of society as the dominated party. It is hoped that the future research could be utilized for further constructivist research concerning public reception over ideological construction by business entities in the future.

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