Being “geek” in digital communication: The case of Chinese online customer reviews

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Abstract. In popular culture, the stereotypically iconized “geek” can be identified in different media narratives from mainstream television to magazines. Drawing upon insights from sociolinguistics and business communication studies, this paper attempts to identify the discursive constructs of “being geek” in Chinese digital business communication. By collecting the discourse data of online customer reviews from amazon.cn and analyzing the data based on the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, the study investigates how linguistic mechanisms operate in the shaping of geek culture and the construction of “being geek” in the participatory communication of business. The results revealed lexical variables and generic intertextuality are prominent in the discourse construction of “being geek”, to create a stimulus for a promotional culture in business communication.

Keywords: geek; digital communication; online customer reviews; generic intertextuality

1. Introduction

There is an increasing tendency in subculture scholarship to study “geek chic” as a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of experts in this field. “Geek” was originally a derogatory term deriving from the German word “geek”, meaning fool or freak (Konzack, 2014: 52). “Geek” is a term used to mean an insult to describe eccentric and non-mainstream people and “to degrade and belittle intelligent outcasts”. However, recently, its meaning has undergone a shift from being a derogatory insult (i.e., geek-as-sideshow-freak) to being a favorite term of endearment (i.e., geek-as-intelligent-expert) (McArthur, 2009: 61).

The definition of “geek” on the online Oxford English Dictionary refers to “a person who is extremely devoted to and knowledgeable about computers or related technology.” (“geek, n.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/77307. Accessed 27 February 2019.). The psychological attributes of “geeks” are generally associated with images of being “enthusiastic” and “expressing pride in their membership in a media and computer-based subculture” (McCain et al., 2015: 2). Stereotypically, the iconized “geek” in popular culture can be identified in different media narratives from mainstream television to magazines, or found within
specific groups and spaces, including “geekish” characters such as “Sheldon” in the TV series The Big Bang Theory, (Bednarek, 2012) cartoon characters in the comic books, or the eccentric fashion covers of lifestyle magazines. In the reality of everyday life, many trendy youngsters who wear glasses without lenses or cosplay make-up on various occasions, for example in subway stations, clubs, and metropolitan shopping malls, demonstrate geekish elements as well. Due to the specificities of “space” and “occasions”, geeks can be classified into diverse categories (such as “science geeks”, “game geeks”, “computer geeks”, and so on) with specific and prominent traits and qualities. Although the stereotypical features of a “geek” can be realized in various media and by young people, one of the important qualities of being a geek is a supposed expertise required in a certain field or on a certain topic. After all, on one hand, the participants in the geek culture are identified to be active rather than passive (Sugarbaker, 1998) and on the other hand, “a geek is one who becomes an expert on a topic by will and determination” (McArthur, 2009: 62). Thus, “to be geek is to be engaged, to be enthralled in a topic, and then to act on that engagement. Geeks come together based on common expertise on a certain topic” (McArthur, 2009: 62). Therefore, “geek” can be roughly characterized as actively belonging to a group of participants with a shared expertise in a communal discourse on a corresponding field or topic. In other words, the social currency between self-proclaimed geeks is formed through “demonstrating knowledge of or devotion to these interests” (McCain et al., 2015: 2) – such as sharing common themes; the use of magic or highly advanced technologies; elements from history or foreign cultures, etc. (p. 2).

The social construction of geekish identities can be realized either in an explicit or implicit way. Some groups of geeks, for example, in Chinese, are self-labeled to be “学霸” (learning geeks), “达人” (talented person) (健身达人jǎnshēn dárén (sports geeks) or “技术控” (technology geeks), and “电脑控” (computer geeks); At times, the identity of “being geek” is implicitly shaped through performance in interactional encounters. This is because identity is not a static but rather a dynamic concept, which is usually situated in types of discourses in social practice. Situated identities “are the attributions that are made about participants in a particular setting as a consequence of their actions” (Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977: 225). Thus, situated identities are usually associated with participating in social activities. In the context of online customer reviews, reviewers reveal varying amounts of personal information about themselves within the review text, whether they are conscious of it or not, or whether they do so deliberately or not. After all, identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981: 255).

Thus, stereotypical and social identities offer opportunities to geeks to share their purchase experiences from either the technical or practical points of view. Their commentaries not only provide a new way to show their personal views on certain products in digital media, but also enhance strategic discourse practices, such as the discursive construction of identity designed to persuade the members of e-commercial community into act of purchasing.

The study aims to explore how online customer reviewers discursively perform “being a geek” in relation to a particular purchased product in the participatory context of digital communication. The two research questions that guided the study are formulated as follows:

1) How is “being geek” discursively constructed in the discourse of online customer reviews?
2) How does the construction of discursive identity perform in a promotional culture?

2. Online reviews as genre: narrative or commentary?

Online customer reviews refer to “peer-generated product evaluations posted on company or third party websites” (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010: 186). These reviews are a “primarily text-based, asynchronous (and very often, anonymous) genre of computer-mediated communication” (Vásquez, 2014: 3). The discourse of online customer reviews in the e-commerce context has developed into a prominent topic of interest for scholars of business communication and discourse analysis.

Digital technologies provide opportunities for consumers to express their opinions about purchased products, services, and purchasing experiences (Evans et al., 2001). The traditional way of marketing or communicating in relation to business has changed due to the impact of Internet technology in people’s everyday lives. Instead of relying on merely WOM (word-of-mouth) marketing or traditional advertising, businesses now make use of more digitalized and networked communications between sellers and buyers. Seeking the online opinions of other consumers is increasingly becoming a part of purchasing behavior (Pitta and Fowler, 2008). The power of the content generated by consumers has become progressively stronger than the influence of “branding” the product in post-modern societies. Consumers should have the option to make better consumption choices by considering the information available on the network and having access to other consumers’ suggestions and opinions, thus reducing the power and control of brands (Zureik and Mowshowitz, 2005). In addition, online reviews have had a massive economic impact on the marketing of products (Piller, 1999; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), and even the number of reviews available affects the perceived informativeness of the review and the popularity of the product (Lee et al., 2008). Accordingly, companies such as eBay.com and Amazon.com have taken actions to effectively increase the benefits of using online reviews (Melnik and Alm, 2002).
Among the diverse forms of contents generated by consumers on the Internet, online reviews have been evolving into a communicative genre and are becoming a naturalized form in the discourse of online business communication. The discourse of online customer reviews has aroused the interest of scholars from both marketing and discourse studies. Marketing scholars are keen on the economic impact of online customer reviews, i.e., the relationship between the online review as a brand-new way of marketing and its massive influence in business practices (Cockrum, 2011; Ghose and Ipeirotis, 2011). Scholars of discourse and communication instead try to find the linguistic mechanisms of online customer reviews in relation to their communicative values and social meanings within business practices (Vásquez, 2014). One of these social meanings lies in the notion that the discourses of the online reviews serve to create and perform participants’ situated identities in online communities because reviewers’ identities are very much of interest and use to readers of online reviews (Sen and Lerman, 2007; Vermeulen and Seegers, 2009).

Moreover, the online review takes the form of digital discourse, as a genre, it is still ambiguously demarcated. For example, as noted above, Taboada (2011) attempted to apply the SFL approach to explore online movie reviews and identified their stages as descriptive stages with an obligatory evaluation stage. De Jong and Burgers (2013) conducted a genre analysis of online film reviews showing generic differences between the online film reviews written by consumer critics and those written by professional critics. They suggested that consumer critics mainly evaluated the movies from a personal perspective, whereas professional critics largely described the movie instead of evaluating it. From a different perspective and informed by sociolinguistic narrative (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Bamberg, 2004, 2007; Ochs and Capps, 2001), Vasques (2014) preferred to consider online reviews as digital narratives which tell/share personal experiences online, and even proposed a cline of narrativity as a framework to describe the continuum of accounts of personal experience-sharing online (Vásquez, 2014).

In order to respond to the research questions formulated for this case study, reviews of Kindle on the website of Amazon.cn (a Chinese online shopping website acquired by Amazon.com) are selected in order to study a Chinese case. Although online reviews have been widely explored as a genre in discourse analysis studies (Racine, 2002; Pollach, 2008; Taboada, 2011; Skalicky, 2013). Although adopting different perspectives, the previous studies tend to regard the discourse of online customer reviews as having generic qualities. Based on a corpus of data, Taboada (2011) identified the specific stages of online movie reviews as the Descriptive Stage and the Evaluation stage. Skalicky (2013) explored the social and rhetorical processes of the most “helpful” product reviews in the discourse of amazon.com. Moreover, the online product reviews of amazon.com have been found to be characterized as conveying a personal style of writing (Racine, 2002), and as sharing similar rhetorical strategies (Pollach, 2008). Mudambi and Schuff (2010) even suggested that product type could have an influence on the style of reviews to determine whether or not a review was “helpful”. There are quite a few studies on the online reviews of amazon.com in the Western context. However, there are few studies that are concerned with the discourse of online reviews in the Chinese context. Therefore, for the present study, the customer reviews of Kindle (Paperwhite) available at Amazon.cn are selected in order to study a Chinese case.

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3. Data and methodology

In order to respond to the research questions formulated for this case study, reviews of Kindle on the website of Amazon.cn were collected as data and sampled. The sampled data were analyzed within the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA).
3.1. Data sample

As the focus of the study was the discourse of amazon.cn (amazon.com@China), online customer reviews of the Kindle product were collected as data and sampled within an approximately one-month period in 2015 from February 18th to March 20th. The data sample consists of 446 Kindle comments with 33,739 Chinese characters in total. The online customer reviews were posted with diverse textual features as shown in Extract 1 (see the Appendix).

The examples in Extract 1 clearly show that there is a range of variation in text length. Examples 1-2 are concisely composed, while examples 3-4 seem to be lengthy and well organized. Examples 5-6 present both verbal and pictorial instructions. Generally, the online reviews collected for the case study demonstrate some kinds of evaluations. The short and concise reviews are evaluative, explicitly commenting on the purchases of the product, whereas the longer ones are reflective of personal experiences.

3.2. Methodology: CDA and textually-oriented discourse analysis

The analytical approach adopted in the present study is “textually-oriented discourse analysis” (hereafter TODA), informed by Fairclough (1992, 2003) framework for CDA, which is rooted in critical linguistics (Fowler et al., 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1993/1979) from the 1970s and developed into critical approaches to study the use of language in the social sciences. The essence of this approach is that it is interdisciplinary (van Dijk 1997, 1998). Differing from cognitive-social approach (van Dijk 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1998; Chilton, 1996, 2004) which centers on the discursive production or reproduction of social issues or domination (cognitively and socially informed) in society, and the discourse-historical approach (Wodak, 2001) where CDA is framed as interdisciplinary and problem-driven (Wodak, 2001: 69), TODA tends to provide a detailed analysis of the language in use (the textual analysis) in the discourse.

TODA (Fowler, 1991, 1996; Swales, 1990; Fairclough, 1992, 1995, 2003; Stubbs, 1996; Gee, 1999, 2014) is based on the belief that texts are the central parts of social events because “language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life” (Fairclough, 2003: 2). Indeed, Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework for CDA involves three thematic constructs, namely, the text (the study of texture); the discoursal practices (the concept of order of discourse), and the sociocultural practices (the concepts of culture). The three-dimensional framework aims to map the three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution, and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice. Therefore, this approach tends to combine the work inspired by social theory and work which focuses on the language of texts. However, Fairclough (2003) suggested that text analysis is an essential part of discourse analysis because “texts are the causal outcomes of the social agents in social actions, social events or social structures” (p. 8).

As Fairclough (2003) observed, texts are multifunctional and are associated with ways of acting, representing, and being. Thus, as part of social events, texts can be analyzed through performing two actions: one is “looking at them (these texts) in terms of three aspects of meaning, Action, Representation and Identification and how these are realized in the various features of texts (their vocabulary, their grammar, and so forth)” (p. 28). The other is “making a connection between the concrete social events and more abstract social practices by asking which genres, discourses, and styles are drawn upon here, and how are the different genres, discourses, and styles articulated together in the text” (p. 28). Fairclough argued that social and cultural phenomena “are realized in textual properties of texts in ways which make them extraordinarily sensitive indicators of sociocultural processes, relations, and change” (Fairclough, 1995: 4). In other words, social and cultural analyses can be enriched by textual evidence. After all, what is “in” the text and what is absent from the text can offer significant insights into sociocultural analysis.

Thus, Fairclough (1995) provides a framework to analyze discourse where the meanings are situated and captured from a bottom-up approach through examining the textual features linguistically, such as various grammatical relations to the meanings, or intertextually, such as the text types or genres represented or inscribed in the surface of the text (Fairclough, 1995: 4-5). TODA demands diversity of focus with respect to levels of analysis because it assumes that any level of organization may be relevant to critical and ideological analysis (p. 7). Therefore, the analysis “requires attention to textual form, structure, and organization at all levels (p. 7)”, including lower levels such as the phonological, grammatical, lexical levels, as well as higher levels such as patterns of argumentation or generic structures.

In contrast with other methods of CDA, TODA is concerned with the centrality of text analysis. However, as Fairclough (2003) clarified, “the text analysis is an essential part of discourse analysis, but discourse analysis is not merely the linguistic analysis of texts” (p. 3). Moreover, text analysis is not confined to mere linguistic analysis, but also includes interdiscursive analysis, which regards “texts in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together (Fairclough, 2003: 3)”.

Informed by Fairclough’s approach to discourse analysis, the present study aimed to uncover the identity of “being geek” in the discourse of online customer reviews. Through exploring the textual features and the linguistic mechanisms operating in this discourse, the identity of the “geek” can be discursively constructed within the promotional culture.
4. Data analysis

Informed by TODA, this section aims to apply textual analysis to map out how “being geek” is constructed through linguistic or discursive mechanisms in the discourse practices of online customer reviewers. The textual features manifested in the discourse which are conducive to the discursive construction of geekish identity include three variables: the use of lexis, lexical rhetoric, and generic intertextuality as discourse practice, as will be discussed in the following sub-sections, respectively.

4.1. “Being geek” as identified through the use of lexis

There are several dimensions used to define “geek” or “nerd” in geek culture. As noted in the previous section, being “geekish” is particularly associated with anyone characterized by fannish, technical, or subcultural interests and pursuits in studies related to entertainment, academic, and computer culture. Thus, the main feature of being geek is to recognize oneself as such, to express a sense of pride in having membership in a particular communal discourse, and to be socially misfit in digital communication. Thus, “being misfit” suggests that the self is identified to stand out or to belong to a particular membership. In the discourse of online customer reviews, the process of recognizing a common self in the communal discourse is realized both explicitly and implicitly.

Examples 7 and 8 from Extract 2 illustrate this case.

| (7) Username (04/03/2015) | As a bookworm (作为一个书虫 zuòwéi yígè shūchóng), after getting it, I can’t put it down. I feel it runs fast and looks very comfortable, and the operation is convenient. It just isn’t that energy saving. I have to download the e-books myself, or buy them. I have recommended friends to buy three, haha! |
| (8) Username (22/02/2015) | After thinking for a long time, I finally got started and I can throw away my mobile phone. Honestly, I didn’t see any evaluation. The page turning speed was slower than I thought, but the sense of use can make up. No folder is a bit of a hassle. I am a sorting control (我是分类控 wǒ shì fēnlèikòng), currently only use the favorites, a little troublesome. |

In these cases, reviewers 7 and 8 explicitly name themselves either as a “book worm” or as “a sorting control”. These references clearly assign a label that means they are especially skilled in a certain area and potentially “misfits” with respect to other people.

While explicit realization of identity is through naming, implicit realization occurs through the use of pronouns. Participants and their identities in digital communication are often linguistically marked by the use of personal pronouns. “Being geek” is an issue that deals with discursive construction of “identity” in discourse practice. Thus, we would like to explore how “self” is discursively constructed. The data from the case study show 288 instances of the pronouns “我 wǒ (I)” and “我们 wǒmen (we)” in the customer reviews. The use of “我 wǒ (I)” and “我们 wǒmen (we)” can be further classified into two types: the active use of “我 wǒ (I)” and the causative use of “我 wǒ (I)” as shown in Table 1 (see examples 9-12 in the Appendix).

**Table 1. The distribution of the different types of “I”**

| Type of “我 wǒ (I)” use | Number | Frequency |
|--------------------------|--------|-----------|
| Active use of “我 wǒ (I)” | 259    | 89.9%     |
| Causative use of “我 wǒ (I)” | 29     | 10.1%     |
| Total use of “我 wǒ (I)” | 288    | 100%      |

Examples 9-12 demonstrate that the active use of “I” usually takes the structure of “I do” (with Kindle) or “I think” (about Kindle), which indicates that Kindle users employ “I” to initiate activity in digital narratives that involves “my” own action. In addition, the causative uses of “I” are usually shaped with the structure of “(using/buying Kindle) makes me” (让我 ràng wǒ (make me), “对我 duì wǒ (for me)”, “于我 yú wǒ (to/for me)”, “使我 shǐ wǒ (make me)” and “---了我 le wǒ (--- to me)”. This suggests that the use of Kindle is associated with experiential evidence of “I/me being as a Kindle user”.

4.2. “Being geek” as identified through lexical rhetoric

The second discourse practice that contributes to the construction of “being geek” is lexical rhetoric, namely, the use of insider languages and “code-switching”. Insider languages can be identified as the marked language that serves to
construe the identity of self, which is then aligned to a speech community. For example, the insider language found out in the discourse of online customer reviews is exemplified as “499” and “899”, both of which mean that the two versions of Kindle are respectively sold at the price of RMB 499 (Kindle) and RMB 899 (Kindle Paperwhite). Similarly, lay people cannot quite understand technical references such as “续航能力强 (Battery life)”, “免费 mobi 资源 miǎnfèi mobi zīyuán (unprotected MOBI formatted contents)”, “云端 yuǎnduān (Cloud collections)” and trendy phrases such as “累觉不爱 lèijiàobùài (I feel too tired to be loving it)”, “满星推荐 mánxing tuījiàn (recommended with five stars)”.

4.3. “Being geek” as constructed through generic intertextuality

Generic intertextuality is another strategy used as discursive practice to construe the Kindle users as “geek”. “Generic intertextuality” (Briggs and Bauman, 1992) refers to the phenomenon of online reviews as a genre of commentary that is not rigidly confined to be customers’ evaluations for its own sake to the Kindles or their purchase of Kindle, but that opens up possibilities for other communicative purposes in the digital communication of business. A canonical commentary as a highly evaluative text is usually subject to “bending” (Bhatia, 1993) in order to be differentiated into different planes of discourse. These planes are summarized to be three types of generic intertextualities, including the divisions between “formal writing vs. informal writing”, “experiential discourse vs. inspirational discourse”, and “verbal discourse vs. pictorial discourse”.

4.3.1. Formal writing vs. informal writing

The genres specified in the discourse of online customer reviews are hybridized in terms of the distinction between formal writing and informal writing. Some online reviews are formal and technically oriented to provide a specific evaluation of the performance of the product or to explicate or illustrate step-by-step how to use Kindle. In contrast, informal reviews are non-technically-oriented and they are more concerned with the elements of personal narratives as well as general comments about the products and delivery services. Examples 13-19 (see Extract 4 in the Appendix) provide illustrations of formal writing vs. informal writing.

Examples 13-15 reflect informal writing and consist of remarks that are less technical remarks in terms of their content because the reviews are less informative and based on the reviewer’s general thoughts about the elements of shopping experience or the product. The reviews in formal writings (examples 16-19) are instead lengthy and informative stretches of discourse that elaborates of the performance of products. The discourse functions of these formal writings can be summarized as follows. First, the geekish identity can be cued through formal writing since these reviews show a command of technical expertise to some extent. The informative customer reviews seem to be well sorted out with highly technical comments on the performance of Kindle (the see the italics in example 16) and they are well structured with numerical headings and points (as shown in examples 17-19). Secondly, the customer reviews with formal writing seem to be thematically contractive, mainly focusing on the compositional qualities of Kindle and its usage. Therefore, the tenor of these reviews is more technically instructive for fresh users among the participatory community or among outsiders.

4.3.2. Experiential discourse vs. inspirational discourse

Geekish attributes seem to be identified through the discourse of sharing personal shopping experiences with other participatory users, in which inspirational discourses are embedded. Thus, the discourse of online customer reviews also features generic intertextuality demonstrated through their integration of experiential discourse and inspirational discourse. Examples of such instances are shown in Extract 5 (see the Appendix).

Apart from the division between formal writing and informal writing, the second type of generic intertextuality falls within a division between experiential discourse and inspirational discourse, which both seem to involve the personal narrative. However, experiential discourse deals with the discourses on the plane of recounting personal experiences, while inspirational discourse seems to involve the speech elements used in inspiring other Kindle users to call for an action. Experiential discourse can be marked with the key elements identified in oral narratives such as cause–effect relationships and happenings in the past (see the bold in the extracts), whereas inspirational discourse carries the evaluative elements to stimulate a response from the affiliated audience, such as offering a straight recommendation (bold + italicized) as shown in example 21 [是全新的 我觉的 还值 shìquánxīn de wǒjiàode háizhí (The replacement is brand new, and I feel It’s worth it)] and example 23 [PS：近视眼的人推荐，眼睛好的人，还有本钱折腾，就不强力推荐了 jǐnshìyǎnderén tuījiàn，yǎnjīnghǎoderén，háiyǒu běnqián zhēteng，jiùbù qiánchēnglǐtuījiàn (People with myopia are recommended, people with good eyes, and the cost of tossing, it is not strongly recommended.), or giving a direct suggestion as in example 20 [建议 jiànyì]以后直接通过“在线聊天”的方式联系亚马逊客服，这个比电话来的好更快的！ zhījì 899 ba，jiùdǐxuēhuíhuíhúdié (go direct for 899; and you won’t regret it)]. Such a binary distinction usually appears in a customer review and shows that experiential discourse usually claims an epistemic authority over the
evidential standings of the inspirational discourse. In other words, the evidential reliability of calling for a certain action is based on the first-person experiential talk. Thus, the custom reviewers are considered experienced users who are qualified to offer reliable knowledge, suggestions, or recommendations to other participants or outsiders. In this sense, the geekish identity of customer reviewers can be demonstrated through the workings of two different discourses. Overall, experiential discourse and inspirational discourse perform different functions; i.e., the experiential discourse tends to fulfill self-expression of personal experience or stories, while the inspirational discourse serves to position the participants to be potential Kindle users.

4.3.3. Textual/verbal discourse vs. pictorial discourse

Notably, the geekish characteristics can be captured through placement of the pictures or photos to the verbal messages in the discourse of customer reviews. Thus, the third generic hybridity can be spelled out by distinguishing textual/verbal discourse from pictorial discourse. Textual/verbal discourse refers to verbally oriented messages posted online, while pictorial discourse refers to the adoption of images that co-work with the verbal messages. Examples of this usage are shown in Extract 6 (see the Appendix).

In these examples, customer reviews are verbally based, which tends to make claims about the use of the product, while adopting images seems to co-work with the verbal message and provides a truer picture of using the products over the claims made. Example 24 shows a general positive comment about Kindle with an image to support the user’s comment as true. Similarly, in example 26, the expression of “首先，阅读体验是真的如书一般 shǒuxiān, yuédútǐyànshìzhēnderúshūyìbān” ([first of all, it reads like reading real books]), a metaphorical statement which associates “experience of reading on Kindle” with “experience of reading the real books”, appears with a picture of a Kindle book in a hand. The interaction between the image and the verbal message represents a dual track for communicating about the purchase of product. On one hand, verbal message compiles the Kindle user’s reactions and attitude to the product; on the other hand, the pictures are visualizing the verbal messages how the verbal works. The interplay between verbal and picture can be shown through the uses of the pronoun “它 (it)” in the example 24 and 26, in which the referent of “它 (it)” are directed to the picture of Kindle attached below the customer’s words. The pictures seem to provide some degree of truth and evidentiality to the claims made by users. No matter what roles the pictures will serve in the discourse of online customer reviews, the placing of the pictures shows technical presentation or involvement that Kindle users will be engaged with to show off potential attributes of being geekish.

In sum, the generic intertextuality discussed above serve to identify “being geekish”, which is classified into three planes. First, formal writing can be distinguished from informal writing in terms of technical discourse vs. non-technical discourse. Technical discourses embedded in the discourse of online customer reviews function to elaborate or explicate the performance of Kindle. This kind of generic intertextuality positions Kindle users as “sophisticated” users rather than lay users or even outsiders. Second, the experiential discourses converge with the inspirational discourses. Experiential discourse serves as a means for self-expression to claim an epistemic authority in relation to using Kindle, whereas inspirational discourse establishes an alignment with other Kindle users. Third, verbal information sometimes works together with pictorial information. Pictorial information serves to provide hard evidence for elaborating the use of Kindle.

5. Conclusion

This present case study has explored how the geekish identity is constructed through a range of discursive practices in e-business communication. It has identified the discourse mechanisms that underlie the formation of “being a geek” in a digital business context and has examined the functions that the discourse features may perform in a promotional culture.

Social scientists have suggested that people take on social identities in their social interactions and that there are many ways for people to construct their identities through discourse (Butler, 1990, 2004; Goffman, 1959; Zimmerman, 1998; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). For example, identity work can be distinguished as being transportable from situated identities and discourse identities (Zimmerman, 1998). Transportable identities refer to the individual’s latent or invoked attributes or characteristics that he or she carries across discourse contexts, whereas discourse and situated identities involve locally occasioned roles adopted in a speech situation (Page, 2012: 16-17). Therefore, identity can be understood as a dynamic concept, which is usually situated in social settings and is closely connected with language in use. The discursive view of identity can also be applicable to digital discourse, where online participants perform in order to exchange information in a situated community. The performance of these participants “gives” or “gives off” (Goffman, 1959) their situated identity through a sequence of interactions or articulations in digital communication. Echoing Page’s (2012) discursive view of identity, which “is ideally positioned to interpret the identity work that occurs in online contexts. Online interaction primarily takes place by means of discourse: text that is created by its participants” (p. 17), this study has attempted to provide insights into the discursive construction of geekish identity in digital communication.

In terms of textual practice, the features of “being geek” can be located through identifying Kindle users as geekish. This identification can be realized in either explicit or implicit ways. The identity of “being geekish” is verbally
constructed through the use of lexis and grammar, such as reflexive naming or labeling oneself to be (or in a pursuit of being) an expert or “geek”. However, some of the participants identified themselves in implicit ways by adopting lexical strategies to show or to display “a skill” in using Kindle. Some implicit ways of discursive realization involve the use of lexical rhetoric and generic hybridity. Code-switching and insider language are usually adopted to the textual practice. This suggests that such strategies or devices are available and presumably technically oriented to the insider participants of the digital business community. In this case study, generic intertextuality has been identified as a discourse practice that involves the discursive construction of being a geek. Genres are hybridized in digital communication to implicitly form an identity of being a fannish or technical person in relation to the Kindle product. In particular, the practices of generic hybridity were classified into three dimensions: formal vs. informal writing, experiential vs. inspirational discourse, and verbal discourse vs. pictorial discourse. Moreover, the discourse functions of these dimensional discourses were teased out to elaborate how they contribute to the formation of being a geek.

Indeed, both explicit and implicit ways of realizing the discursive identity of “a geek” reflect a process of self-identification in belonging to a communal membership, where the roles of the participants are contextually presupposed and the digitally communicated topics and values are shared. In the context of social media, the interactions among the users can also be bound with kind of shared identity. This seems to fit in with the concept of “ambient” fellowship noted by Zappavigna (2012) and this form of online fellowship is “ambient” due to participants’ indirect interaction with each other. Thus, the “ambient audiences” (Zappavigna, 2011, 2012, 2014) are affiliated to interact in the digital context and to perform their relational identity to do things through digital platforms (Zappavigna, 2014).

In conclusion, in the business communicative context, there appears to be a tension between communicative pathos and communicative ethos. The individual Kindle users can perform the “geek” identity to inform or interact with other ambient audiences by posting reviews online. Thus, a bond between the digital participants (customers) and other ambient audience (including the potential customers) is established. The online fellowship of customers enacts the geek identity to potentially align with other customers through various practices of digital interaction.

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Appendix: Data Extracts

### Extract 1

| Examples | Online Customer Reviews | Date     |
|----------|-------------------------|----------|
| (1) Username | 用着很舒服,很轻,喜欢。 | 3/20/2015 |
| (2) Username | 手感很好,看着挺舒服 | 3/19/2015 |
| (3) Username | Paperwhite很棒！手感比New Kindle要好很多 虽说数据只薄一毫米但是手感薄很多。另外后壳的质感也很棒。有背光方便很多 光线充足的时候调到最低也很舒服。晚上没光线的时候开一点背光也比较护眼。分辨率方面 比New kindle看上去还是要清晰一些。反应速度上倒是都是差不多。总之到手之后很满意—提醒大家要把Kindle放包包里带出去的话一定要带壳，不然正面很容易刮花，作为强迫症患者很不能忍。如果就手拿来的话逻辑手感还是很棒。 | 3/19/2015 |
| (4) Username | Kindle Paperwhite不仅仅是一个点子阅读器，她更提供了一个版权和消费者的交易平台，提供了出版行业可持续发展的一个渠道。那种鼓励盗版的阅读器，无论做的再高大上也是不可持续的。因为，读者和产品提供方都明白，图书是不可能永远免费提供的。关键是要提供给读者优质，低价的服务。 Kindle的系统化体现着从你购买一本书后，无论你在什么设备上看过这本书，kindle都会通过云计算方式记住这本书的位置。当你在另一个设备上用你的账号登陆同一本书时，一会就好到那一页。并且，如果你的Amazon账号中会永远记得你买过什么电子书，当你重复购买时，系统会给你发送提醒以免重复消费。公平的消费环境也是读者流连忘返的原因。目前，越来越多的图书出版商加入Kindle渠道，这里是图书的，阅读方式的未来。国内的企业应该好好学习一下，如何为用户提供有意义的服务和产品？是不是仅仅体现在拼硬件这种幼儿园级别的水平？ Kindle还提供各种增值服务比如图书笔记，标注，Xray，词典，针对英语图书还有单词解释功能。这些服务真正做到了让读者愿意用，留得住读者，让读者加倍地消费。希望这样完善的渠道越多越好，对读者和出版业都是利好！！！再次赞一下kindle paper white,专注阅读体，改变阅读人生。 | 3/17/2015 |
| (5) Username | 在没有买kindle之前，我只看纸质书，而且也只爱看纸质书，但是在很多人的推荐下，选择kindle的原因有三点：1，轻巧便于携带，很适合我这种时常走动的人；而且手感比我想象中更好，很满意。2，丰富的英文原版书籍资源并附带字典，利于提高英文水平。3，手感极佳超长待机无需过于呵护，墨水屏更护眼。买回来我还没有充过电，待机时长真的很赞！对于反应慢的说法，其实我觉得可以接受，尤其是习惯了，而且本来它就是拿来看书而已不必要太多功能，纯粹挺好的！还买了个好看的书套～ | 03/06/2015 |
| (6) Username | 用KINDLE看书就是不一样，PAD上也装了KINDLE软件，但一般看没多久眼睛就受不了一。KP上看着很舒服，买书什么的也很方便，基本一键下单。背光在光线不好的情况下还是很有用的。做工很好，反正我觉得值。 | 3/02/2015 |
作为一本书虫，拿到后爱不释手，反应快，看着也挺舒服，操作也方便，只是没有想象中那么省电，书得自己下，或者买，已推荐朋友买了三个，哈哈！

长草很久终于入手，可以扔掉手机啃书了。老实说没看什么评测，翻页速度比想象中慢，但使用感可以弥补。没有文件夹有点麻烦，我是分类控，目前只能使用收藏夹，略麻烦。

推荐，并一定要在官网买，我用过499，没有899好。Recommended, and you must buy it on the official website. I used 499, not better than 899.

先说闪屏问题确实有点严重……我是关闭了全局刷新的。给Kindle设置了密码，在开启的时候闪的有点夸张。而且我开的飞行模式，大概四天就没电了。开不起来的时候我还一度以为Kindle变砖了……没想到只是虚惊一场。不过质量很轻，遗憾的是有点偏大了，不过可以勉强塞进校服口袋。屏保么，大部分小伙伴都吐槽太丑，我倒觉得还好，但是来来回回就那么几张，我又不想刷多看系统……

很棒的产品，大家的评论很详细，我就不重复了，我的感受是，Kindle Paperwhite，你值得拥有!

悲剧了~~我前前后后总共买了3部kindle，为什么中国区的亚马逊要把kindle的固件弄成5.6，还不能强制降级，你让我这种想双系统的用户情何以堪？

t卖的书贵，而且不好，我自己想刷个多看不行么？?
总的来说很不错
第一，电量完全够用。我自己每天读书一个小时以上，充一次电能用两个月以上。
第二，清晰度上。看书的话完全够用，字体边缘都非常清晰了（但是本人有怪癖又贴了一层膜）。
第三，容量从来就没用完过。4G内存，本人小看豆里常年放着80-100本书，相比刚买的时候有一丁点变慢，但是能接受，还有几十本书放在云端。
第四，壳子本人买的是某宝上80-90价位的钢化玻璃翻盖壳子，非常好用（会有一点重）。
第五，背光设计我喜欢，本人是喜欢随时随地拿出来看两页的那种，睡觉之前看两页书的时候背光非常有必要。
第六，即时翻译对于我这种英语渣渣来说真是管用，看英语书从此成为可能。

总之，强烈期待支持手写输入笔记。

许多用户都反映过电子书过少，但我自己认为：在亚马逊找到的电子书不比在普通书店找到的书少，甚至不少偏冷门的比较专业的大块头都能在亚马逊找到。

我在2014年初才知晓Kindle电子书，记得当时纠结了好久。我以为那是一部功能不全的能看书的平板电脑，唯一的亮点就是不伤眼和内置字典，于是便犹豫了。899元的Kindle Paperwhite2（即官方所说的paperwhite），等了一段时间也不见降价，当时亚马逊说正在筹划出Kindle Paperwhite3，即现在的Kindle Voyage。在这段时间里，我看了看评论，得知Voyage至少要年底才出，而且功能没有太大变化，再说一般的平板电脑也不止这个价钱，后来下载了Kindle软件后觉得不咋样才决定购买。

事实上，PW完全改变了我的阅读方式，它的许多好处是先前完全没有想到的，之前的犹豫显然非常可笑！

一、屏幕（四星）
1. 独特电子墨水屏看起来就像真实的书籍一般，甚至在没开阅读灯的情况下有纸质的微黄，感觉非常棒！新买回来刚打开包装时，我还以为快递出猫腻，送了一部纸板做的假机过来。舒服不伤眼，唯一的不足就是，翻页很慢，而且整个屏幕会黑了一下（闪屏）。
2. 这款PW拥有可调节的阅读灯，适合在任何情况下阅读。有网友说打开阅读灯时可以看见屏幕底部漏出几点光，其实这个如果不认真看是很难发现的，基本可以忽略。
3. 屏幕的尺寸大约是12cm×9cm，大小适中，方便携带。
4. 高分辨率，字迹清晰，因为是黑白灰的，所以看图的效果不是太理想，但也是能够清楚看到的。
5. 屏幕由塑胶制成，经过细微磨砂，能够防止反光，太阳底下看书也不觉疲劳。质感良好，但接触有时不是太灵敏。

二、外壳（五星）
1. 黑色的机身，流畅的外形，略带绒面的外壳，无论是手感、还是外观，都完胜其它品牌的平板、手机，让人爱不释手。
2. 背面印有“amazon”的暗纹，正面则是“Kindle”的银色，时尚而典雅。倘若装在原装皮套里（之露出正面），无论用了多久都不会破损。
3. 重量非常轻，单手举很久也不觉累。非常薄。

三、电池（五星）
1. 很少需要充电，久而久之便没有了充电的意识了。

四、存储（五星）
1. 实际3.2G的存储容量根本就不用就，实在不行还有5G容量的云端供你免费存储。
2. 云端上的内容只要连接过无线网络就可以在Kindle上看了。

五、软件（五星）
无需详细介绍，Kindle软件的完美是毋庸置疑的。Kindle的阅读软件是在亚马逊官网免费下载的，一个用户可以下载在5个客户端里，包括手机、电脑、Kindle等。
软件可以调节字体，光版，附有查字典，记笔记，标注的功能，长按即查，一点就记。下载之后里面是自动携带使用指南的。

六、电子书（五星）
1. Kindle书籍非常便宜，大部分好书都是5元以下，平均来说，每本书纸书看来便宜20~30元甚至以上。
2. 电子书籍种类繁多，通俗的、专业的、砖头样的、杂志类的，等等。在使用Kindle的一年里，我读到的书籍数量远高于任何一年。在亚马逊上易于查找各种各样的书，所以这一年里视野突然广阔了许多，许多网友都反映过电子书过少，但我想特别说明一下：在亚马逊找到的电子书不比在普通书店找到的书少，甚至不少偏冷门的比较专业的大学书大部头都能在亚马逊找到。

七、售后服务（五星）
亚马逊的售后服务超级好，所以千万要切记：不要贪图便宜在京东、淘宝之类的地方买，那样既麻烦（譬如很难注册），质量又得不到保证，又缺少了亚马逊的招牌——售后服务。另外，如果你需要帮助，可以点击亚马逊官网底部的“帮助”——“需要其他帮助”——“联系我们”，那里提供了免费电话、邮件、在线客服等三种帮助。在线客服的服务态度非常好，电话咨询客服也能做成实事，别于淘宝。另我印象深刻的，就是售后服务的电子书仍会定期的勘误、更正，当你连接wifi之后亚马逊便会自动将新版本send给你。Kindle软件还会自动更新。

八、皮套
由于担心屏幕易破，我用的是¥288墨水蓝的亚马逊Kindle Paperwhite真皮保护套，价格十分贵，不过手工艺精美，颜色雅丽，真材实料。闭合时能够自动感应锁屏，底部用的也是质量上乘的胶。外观、手感、保护性能之好都毋庸置疑，唯一的不足就是装上皮套之后pw变得很重，不是夸张，因为这个皮套的重量=pw的重量。加上这个皮套，就等于拿着2部pw，所以单手看书就不太方便了。我平时只好把皮套脱下再看书，看完后再把皮套套上，这样也许就是最好的方案了。这种皮套很有韧性，连接前后的那块皮虽然用久了会产生皱褶，但却不会断裂。也许大家应该试试¥49的那种，哪怕烂了也不会那么心疼。毕竟288将近是49的6倍啊。

九、网络（三星）
Kindle系列采用的都是wifi连接，可以上网但网速很慢。一般来说，连接wifi都是为了下载、更新。

PS：上亚马逊的官网倒是快，而且方便，有直接的链接。

十、云端（五星）
每个亚马逊用户都配有一个个人的5G云端，类似于邮箱，在pw上也能看到云端。云端可以储存不常看的书籍，也能存储个人文档。具体可以询问在线客服。

十一、个人文档的传输（五星）
亚马逊支持客户传送诸如word之类的个人文档到pw。具体做法就是：点击“管理我的内容与设备”——“设置”，用已认可的发件人电子邮箱把文件发到“〖发送至Kindle〗电子邮箱”。只待你连接网络，个人文档便会自动转换成kindle的格式显示在桌面。"〖发送至Kindle〗电子邮箱“是一种后缀为@kindle.cn的邮箱，只能用作传输，不能打开。

十二、综合（五星）
非凡的体验，切实地改变了我的阅读方式，甚至生活方式。Paperwhite的性价比极高，倘若你喜爱读书，那么你就无需犹豫了，kindle诚然是你的首席之选，远胜纸书。至于499款kindle、本款899的paperwhite、1499的voyage，我个人主观认为本款仍是第一选择。

Extract 5

Experiential discourse vs. Inspirational discourse

(20) Username (27/02/2015)
去年12月<time marker>买了Kindle PaperWhite 2，在火车上摔了一下，触摸屏很多地方就不起作用了，屏下角还出现了微小的裂纹。在网上联系亚马逊客服。建议以后直接通过“在线聊天”的方式联系亚马逊客服。这个比电话来的快。在页面上选择“帮助”，选择“需要其他帮助”，再选择“联系我们”，就可选择在线聊天了。

(21) Username (26/02/2015)
纠结了一阵子了<time-marker>。手里有一堆的PAD, Andriod和IOS的。征询了很多人，有说既然有PAD还要Kindle做什么，有说e-ink看书确实舒服...最终下决心体验一下，又纠结是Kindle, Paperwhite还是Voyage.因为只有晚上看书的时间比较多<causal-effect>，所以暂时先上了KPW，看看效果如何。<causal-effect>

(22) Username (03/03/2015)
纠结499or899的别纠结了 我先前买499使用后发现没背光太不舒服了 退了买了899拿到体验就特棒 899吧 绝不会后悔的！

(23) Username (18/03/2015)
一直在纠结这个问题，我有大屏手机呀，为什么还要买个KWP呢，不是多余么。所以，在去年双11的时候，有个1000-300=700买套和KPW的机会，我放弃了。直到突然有一天想：Kindle是一本书呀，买本书和大屏手机不矛盾呀。当时，也在淘宝之类的地方看过，但最后还是在亚马逊花了900多元买了KPW和套子。

目前觉得，Kindle是我所买的最好数码产品。

PS：近视眼的人推荐，眼睛好的人，还有本钱折腾，就不强力推荐了。
### Extract 6

| Username | (13/03/2015) | I haven’t bought it before, can’t compare it, overall good |
|-----------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| (24)      |             |                                                          |

| Username | (11/03/2015) | 晚上也能看书了，很不错 |
|-----------|-------------|------------------------|
| (25)      |             |                        |

| Username | (07/03/2015) | 首先，阅读体验是真的如书一般 里面有内置的网页浏览器 我觉得很棒 简单 文档发送到kindle很方便 不过相关的电子书 很多书都没有 关于续航时间从拿到手（电未充满）我每天用约40分钟，用了6天大概还剩5分之一 |
|-----------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| (26)      |             |                                                          |