Language and Neoliberalism in the Online Cosmetic Sample Business

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a digital ethnographic study of amateur entrepreneurs who sell cosmetic samples primarily in an online marketplace in Hong Kong to illustrate how they use language to to create added value in their unconventional beauty product niche. It examines how these people cross over to an authoritative and professional brand persona by reappropriating product description of the original products to introduce their own beauty sample products to a wide audience, forming interdiscursive links between the original brand and their own business. These linguistic and semiotic resources afforded by the online platforms help create extra value in the normally not-so-expensive cosmetic sample products being (re)sold by ordinary, unauthorized people. The marketing decision and invested labor of these amateur entrepreneurs display their neoliberal selfhoods, illustrating the precarious nature of their online business. This study offers unique insight into current research about the authenticity and commodification of language.

Over the recent years, the global e-commerce market has been thriving, offering opportunities for deeper insight into the mediating role played by language in the marketplace. Meanwhile, the ever-increasing presence of mediated communication, especially since COVID-19, has caused contexts to collapse (Dou 2021): people who would otherwise only meet offline are now brought together to the same digital space; we should increasingly consider our daily actions as occurring in the online-offline nexus. Carousell, as the research site, provides an ideal example of this changed way of living.

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Founded in Singapore, Carousell is a web-based B2C (business-to-consumer) and C2C (consumer-to-consumer) platform for selling and exchanging new and secondhand goods. It entered the Hong Kong market in 2016, and now one in ten Hongkongers is a Carouseller. "Snap to sell, chat to buy for free" is one of their slogans. Registered users can list and sell their products for free to other users on this platform. The buyer makes an offer and chats directly with the seller on the app. As this app does not have a built-in third-party transaction system, users arrange the transactions between themselves, which usually take one of the two forms: (1) face-to-face trade, or (2) the buyer pays via a mobile payment service and receives the product through a local courier or by mail.

Carousellers sell all kinds of things, ranging from something as common as secondhand clothes to luxury goods and antiques. Notably, a few products listed on this platform are typically "not for sale," such as cosmetic samples and souvenirs distributed by certain brands to customers. The conditions and qualities of the listed goods vary also: some personal care products might have expired, and some might be counterfeit. As the company claims not to be profitable (CNBC 2020), regulation is minimal on this platform. Transactions could be risky. For instance, the seller or buyer could be stood up in the scheduled meet-up trades, or the buyer could never receive the product through mail after the payment is settled.

This study looks into the cosmetic sample business on Carousell. Typically marked as "Ne peut être vendu" (Not for sale) on the package, personal care product samples are, however, very common in the online market in Hong Kong. These samples usually come as complimentary gifts for a purchase, or are obtained from the brands as part of their O2O (online-to-offline) marketing strategies: people register using their phone numbers on the company's website to receive a link for redemption of the sample at the counter. Sometimes a company distributes a bundle, or a trial set with few days' worth of their product, to the customer. There are even numerous social media pages that compile and repost these promotional activities to their subscribers (e.g., Jetso Today 著數優惠折扣).[1] Though both men and women use Carousell for trades, the majority of the participating group in the cosmetic sample business are young and middle-aged women, including students, working professionals, and housewives. Buying and selling samples online has become a very common practice in Hong Kong in recent years, which is partly enabled by online classified platforms like Carousell

1. See https://zh-hk.facebook.com/JetsoToday. *Jetso* means discounts or special offers in Hong Kong English.

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and social media platforms like Facebook. From the buyer's perspective, cosmetic products are highly advertised nowadays, and a considerable part of the price customers pay actually goes to advertisers. Purchasing samples not only allows the buyer to find out which brands work best for herself but also creates an affordable way of always trying out new products and keeping up with the latest beauty trends. Therefore, both sellers and buyers of cosmetic samples have carefully measured the cost and benefit as *prosumers* (e.g., Ritzer 2015). Given the properties of cosmetic samples—for example, expirable and coming in small volumes—over time, Carousellers have developed ways to talk about these practicalities. These aspects are usually concerned with (*a*) brand of the sample, (*b*) volume of the sample, (*c*) production and expiry dates, (*d*) whether the sample is authentic/obtained from the store, and (*e*) how many packs are available from the seller. The rich linguistic practices in this business showcase Carousellers' agency, which is mediated by social and cultural means (Ahearn 2001, 2010).

In this article, I examine how Carousell's cosmetic sample sellers advertise their products through multimodal means. In particular, recontextualization and entextualization are identified as key strategies they employ. I explicate how the online marketplaces serve as an ideal site for studying language and commodification as well as the neoliberalization of the society across different dimensions and scales.

Commodification of Language and Authenticity

In recent years, there has been an increasing body of work by applied linguists on language and political economy that lays out the theoretical foundation in terms of the link between language, commodification, globalization (e.g., Park 2016; Cameron 2000), and ideology (e.g., Duchêne and Heller 2012; Holborow 2015). Investigations into the link between language and political economy have demonstrated the role of language in the legitimization and regulation of political economic spaces in the form of tropes, frames (Duchêne and Heller 2012), and metaphors (Holborow 2015)—different realizations of language ideologies. These investigations have collectively demonstrated how language is exploited by corporations to create additional cultural value for their products or utilized by individuals as a commodifiable skill to enter the globalized job market. Monica Heller (2010) points out that under the political economic conditions of late capitalism, the salience of language as a resource with exchange value has increased in the new globalized economy. Due to market expansion and its progressive saturation, language plays an increasingly vital role in managing the flows of good and

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resources, as well as in "providing symbolic added value to industrially produced resources" (103). Heller contends that "the commodification of language confronts monolingualism with multilingualism, standardization with variability, and prestige with authenticity" (107).

A key issue raised by this body of work is the role of language when it is commodified and recontextualized across contexts. Since language and signs are embedded in their social and material conditions, conflicts of meanings, or new meanings, will likely emerge when they are resemiotized (Iedema 2001, 2003) in the form of representational resources into new cultural contexts. Here the concept of entextualization also becomes relevant. Resemiotization is concerned with meaning that is translated across modes and modalities, while entextualization involves two processes: *decontextualization*, extracting semiotic or discourse material out of its context; and *recontextualization*, integrating and reworking it to fit in a new context (for purposes such as representation and circulation). The original semiotic or discourse material possesses meaning potential. Through its manipulation and entextualization, the product/service provider claims a certain degree of "social power" over the original material (Bauman and Briggs 1990), asserting their agency. Jones (2009, 2015) proposes the notion of "technologies of entextualization" to illuminate the potential of social media in reappropriating original linguistic and semiotic resources for the social agent's own use. The circulation of these resources on social media involves cycles of entextualization and resemiotization.

Neoliberalism, Late Capitalism, and Amateur Entrepreneurialism

The linguistic practices instantiated in Carousellers' cosmetic sample business can be taken as local manifestations of neoliberalism and enrich the ongoing agency-structure debate in social sciences research.[2] Over the past few decades, the neoliberal governance in capitalist countries has advocated a free market and reduced state responsibility in public issues, "enmesh[ing] individuals in the subject positions of being solely responsible for their well-being and development" (Chun 2016, 562–63). According to Chun, "neoliberal identities stem from the ideological construct that people are and can be viewed as solely comprising an 'entirety of skills that have been acquired as the result of "investments" in the corresponding stimuli,' be it of schooling, job training, or so-called self-improvement courses. Thus, 'the individual producer-consumer is in a novel sense not just an enterprise, but the entrepreneur of himself or herself'" (ibid., 565).

2. See, e.g., Giddens (1984, 1990); Sztompka (1994); Duranti (2004); Bucholtz and Hall (2005); Ahearn (2010); Sarangi (2010).

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In Carousell's cosmetic sample business, sellers utilize resources available to themselves, such as time, efforts and beauty sample redemption information circulating in social media pages, to make profits. This "part-time hobby" is to a certain extent empowering, as it becomes the source for these females to create both economic and symbolic value for themselves. The nature of work draws a parallel to Hofmann's study (2010) on sex workers at the US-Mexican border, in which she explores the convergence of informal economy and neoliberalism. Exploiting the opportunities provided by the legitimate status of the sex trade in the country, these "aspiring corporeal entrepreneurs" respond to neoliberal structural demands by utilizing their bodily capital, providing an example of entrepreneurial and self-responsible individuals who became dominant in late capitalism.

More importantly, the cosmetic sample business enables amateur entrepreneurs and buyers alike to construct and negotiate their own agency in the existing economic structures. On the one hand, Hofmann points out that "individuals in late capitalism are encouraged to become entrepreneurs who shape their lives through the choices they make from among the options available to them," and this process functions in a highly gendered way. For women involved in sex work, corporeal entrepreneurialism helps them counteract their socioeconomic marginalization and gain agency in a neoliberal context. Gershon (2011) states that a neoliberal agency presupposes a kind of self that is "a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business," one that is composed of "skills, traits, or marketable capacities" that the neoliberal agent brings to relationships. In the context of this study, cosmetic sample sellers get around the high cost of doing business, such as rents and purchasing cost, by making full use of easily accessible resources and means. On the other hand, buyers could also regain control as prosumers by selecting the most suitable from a wide range of expensive products with minimal costs when faced with a globalized, postindustrial economy in which almost everything becomes commodified. In other words, these females actively exploit what a neoliberal market in late capitalism has to offer rather than fall victim to it. As a seller advises in her beauty sample description (figs. 1, 2): "Try the sample first so you don't run the risk of wasting your money on the wrong product" (Try first 試左 sample 先, 免得浪費金錢買貨裝).

Scaling the Epistemology on Commodification of Language and Neoliberalism

In Cameron's (2000) view, workers are "prescribed" by their company a speech style to be mobilized when they are interacting with customers. The call center

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Figure 1. Screenshot of a seller's beauty sample post on Carousell, part 1. Translation: $20/piece. Hxxx [brand name] eau de pamplemousse rose EDT. Unisex perfume 2ML. No box.

workers whom she investigated experience a separation between the stylistic agent and the role of the speaker, as a result of being regulated by the company in terms of their linguistic choices. The workers are obliged to take on these speech features in order to cross over to certain personas, such as being subservient and feminine, to attend to the customer's needs. Since the worker's performance could be appraised based on the features invented by a select few, this practice potentially poses a critique toward the mechanisms of the globalized

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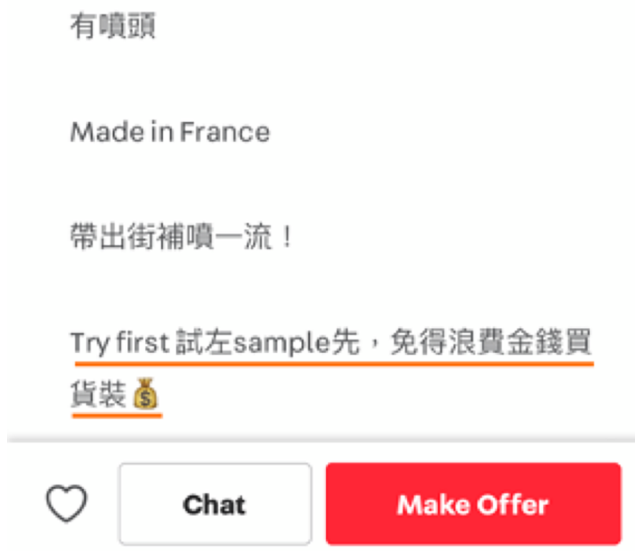


Figure 2. Screenshot of a seller's beauty sample post on Carousell, part 2. Translation: Comes with a vaporizer. Made in France. Ideal for being carried in a handbag! Try the sample first so you don't run the risk of wasting your money on the wrong product.

economy. When individuals, especially those who are not directly related to or hired by international enterprises, develop the capacity to appropriate the commodifiable linguistic and semiotic features utilized by the companies in their public materials, they could, however, become empowered in their own small-scale, online-based businesses. Rather than inventing their original promotional materials, they can simply paraphrase or even copy verbatim the text or images circulated by the company without violating copyrighted content. Similar to this practice is the way companies use key opinion leaders (KOLs) or online influencers nowadays to advertise their products. When the advertising materials are circulated online or in social media across platforms, their originality becomes questionable. The linguistic authenticity concedes to the material authenticity of the product; that is, no matter who is appropriating the advertising materials and in what ways, whether the product and its properties (e.g., ingredients, functions) are authentic becomes a more crucial matter.

The notion of scale also becomes relevant when we seek to understand the neoliberalized economy, especially when it is supported by online platforms.[3]

3. On the notion of scale see, e.g., Collins (2012); Blommaert et al. (2015); Blommaert (2021); Busch and Spitzmüller (2021).

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Blommaert points out that scale is a spatial metaphor for power-saturated sociolinguistic phenomena and processes: "Processes of distribution and flow are accompanied by processes of hierarchical ordering, in which different phenomena are not juxtaposed, but layered and distinguished as to the scale on which they operate and have value and validity" (2007, 1). In a living world that is polycentric and stratified, concepts such as "contextualization" and "entextualization" help us understand how texts and ideologies travel across vertical and horizontal spaces. Traditionally, hegemonic groups have access to material and semiotic resources that possess greater mobility, while powerless individuals do not. However, the age of the Internet troubles this kind of "intertextual asymmetry," enabling individuals to undertake scale-jumping practices via mobilization of resources indexical of power, causing them to transcend their current socioeconomic status. This process is similar to how world languages like English become localized. In this light, Carousell offers us an ideal example of how privileged registers and styles become translocal construct as well as an instrument for scale-jumping.

In this essay, I embrace a framework called *neoliberal authenticity*: neoliberalism is understood to be the prevalent market logic commodifying resources and skills, which is cross-referenced with a linguistic approach to authenticity and value in late capitalism in the sense of using language to produce additional value. Carousellers exploit the authenticity and value of their products in a late capitalist market via orchestrating a mix of linguistic and semiotic means and display their neoliberal selfhoods/agency afforded by the classified platform as well as consumerist discourses.

Data and Methodology

Digital ethnography (Garcia et al. 2009), a form of participant observation of online communities in which ethnographers are not physically copresent with the research subjects, is used to capture the product listings on the Carousell mobile app. As the researcher, I have been using Carousell's mobile app since September 2019. I have not only been an observer but also an active user of the Carousell app to sell and purchase products. I have been following the content posted on this app by other users, including the product listings and the discussion threads, on an almost daily basis. I have also been interacting with sellers and buyers in online and offline settings and participating in transactions and discussion threads myself. Apart from saving different types of content in the form of screenshots, I have been taking notes arising from my observations of Carousell users.

The data analyzed for this study comprise 500 screenshots of public posts created by different Carousell users who were advertising their cosmetic samples.

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Data were collected between March 2020 and April 2021. Since I browse cosmetic samples frequently on this app, relevant posts are recommended to me on a daily basis. If I am interested in a post, I click on the user's profile in hope of discovering more products listed by this person. In this sense, I adopted *snowball sampling* in my study, although the few accounts that I started from are random and tweeted by the algorithm of the app.

Since the product information is all publicly available and searchable, no consent needed to be sought before I collected the screenshots, although I have blurred usernames and brand names appearing in the screenshots included in this article. I embraced the Carousell screenshots as text, performing linguistic analysis on the data.

Impersonating the Brand: Authenticity and Personhood

While Carousellers deploy linguistic and semiotic tools to add additional value to their cosmetic sample products via recontextualization, they also craft a persona that is reliable, shrewd, authentic, and informative. The cosmetic sample entrepreneurs in my study are noted to have reappropriated the product description provided by the cosmetic brands from which they obtain the samples, as well as the general marketing strategies and promotional slogans adopted by retail shops in Hong Kong. They regard these types of information as valuable communicative resources to be creatively manipulated in their own business. By impersonating the brand or reproducing their marketing strategies, these individuals cross over to a retailer's or industry worker's persona as if they were professionally related to the brand. Meanwhile, general promotional strategies adopted by retail shops also become these individuals' favorite stylistic choices. These include marking the product as "on sale" or "the last one available" and devising terms and conditions to protect their own interest in transactions (e.g., nonreturnable or refundable). Therefore, I have identified three recurring strategies in Carousellers' linguistic practices in the online marketplace that not only contribute to the production of the authenticity of their products but also help maintain a sense of legitimacy of their cosmetic sample business per se, as selling beauty samples might still appear "unconventional" and even "illegitimate" in some people's eyes. It is worth noting that the concept of "authenticity" is somewhat interwoven with "legitimacy" in this particular study. Since cosmetic samples are usually obtained by ordinary people from the counter at physical stores and sold on the market by unauthorized individuals, it becomes vital for them to take a standpoint as the self-responsible seller to assert the legitimacy of their products through (re)describing their quality, such

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as being new, being obtained from the store rather than counterfeit, and the quantity available (as large quantities of samples may signify greater worth commensurate with the price of the original product). The assertion of these attributes, along with using appropriate promotional strategies and self-invented terms, conditions, and disclaimers, not only constructs a degree of legitimacy about their own products but also lends a sense of originality and authenticity of their own business that helps them attain recognition from potential buyers and stand out in the vast marketplace.

Recontextualizing Voices of Authority through Metonymy

Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 57) define *metonymy* as the process in which a name of referent is substituted by the name of another, which "semantically adjoins the referent of the replaced name." As unauthorized resellers of cosmetic samples, some individuals repurpose the product description on the relevant brand's website or the reviews from beauty blogs in labeling their own products. The link between the cosmetic samples and the original products is interdiscursively reconstructed: although the beauty samples are distributed by the company providing the original full-sized products, their qualities might differ due to various environmental factors, such as being stored by the individual for too long or under unfavorable conditions. When the cosmetic sample is not described or evaluated by the seller in their own words but rather using copied or paraphrased product description from the official website or some beauty blog, the product being introduced is actually substituted metonymically by the legitimate product from the store; the social actor that is providing the product, that is, the unauthorized reseller, is also replaced by the trustworthy company or the professional beauty blogger. This rhetorical strategy lends to producing a paradoxical sense of authenticity for the beauty sample and for the seller: while the individual effectively mobilizes resources to craft a knowledgeable and well-informed image when promoting their beauty sample, the actual link between their sample and the store-sold product is risky.

Figures 3 and 4 show a post on Carousell that advertises a French brand foundation sample. The recontextualization of the original product description such as its function and formula, which is conceived by the professional content writers of the cosmetic company, makes the advertised beauty sample sound more authentic and appealing. It helps persuade the potential buyer into trying this foundation sample so that they could feel the nourishments of the natural formula and experience the fascinating effects as promised by the description. Through omission of the social actor—the seller herself from the text and the

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(價值HK$19) $3/包/1.5ml C [redacted]
Everlasting Youth Fluid Foundation
(#103 Ivory / #105 Nude) 煥顏緊緻光感
粉底液 sample 試用裝 (最後2包)
HK$3

over 3 months ago by [redacted]

4 Chat Make Offer

Figure 3. Screenshot of a post on Carousell advertising a French-branded foundation sample, part 1. Translation: (Valued at $19) $3/piece, 1.5ML. Cxxx [brand name] Everlasting Youth Fluid Foundation (#103 Ivory/#105 Nude) samples (last 2 packs available).

replacement of the subject (i.e., using "the foundation" to replace the beauty sample with the original foundation product)—the seller positions herself as an informative "agent" of the brand who is eager to promote the product by introducing its samples. She provides abundant information about the sample's ingredients and functions, while backgrounding the potential attributes (e.g., when they are obtained and may expire, kept under what kind of conditions)

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Figure 4. Screenshot of the product information of a French branded foundation sample on Carousell, part 2. Caption: 這款粉底液能即時煥發年輕輪廓, 有效展現透亮及無瑕膚色, 含有豐富的有機燕麥籽多醣, 可瞬間提拉輪廓, 仿如塑形美妝面膜, 拉緊及平滑肌膚, 隱藏皺紋及瑕疵；更蘊含菊苣及紅海藻萃取，日復日激活膠原增生，促進肌膚新陳代謝, 令肌膚回復緊緻平滑, 從內改善肌膚透亮度及剔透感 (The foundation that fully restores your complexion's youthful glow. Instantly restore a glowing radiant complexion with this new Skin Tone Optimizing complex. Conceals age spots and imperfections. Contains extracts of chicory and red jania that help optimise the skin's luminosity and radiance).

of her *re*sold products. The text in figures 3 and 4 could also be read as a type of positive self-presentation, whereby the seller gains situational power by borrowing the cleverly crafted product description and labels herself as a connoisseur of valuable beauty samples. She undertakes an "authentic" personhood via the brand image associated with the product without putting to question the slippery nature of her beauty sample business.

Figures 5 and 6 present the product information of a Japanese brand makeup base sample, through which the seller mobilizes the role model authority as well as the authority of conformity (van Leeuwen 2017) to legitimize and authenticate her beauty sample products. Aside from stressing the samples are authentic and that she has the record of obtaining them as a member of the brand from the store, the seller claims that she is using the product herself. However, due to the PRO-drop phenomenon in Cantonese (店主我都用緊, meaning "I'm using myself," omitting the pronoun),[4] it is ambiguous whether she is referring to the

4. A *pro-drop* language, such as Cantonese, omits pronouns in certain cases when they can be grammatically or pragmatically inferable.

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新番 合共25g=一支 貨裝日版日文
S Primavista OL 至愛 Long Keep
Base (10小時不容裝)持久控油底霜 香港
專門店貨 包平郵
HK$80

3 weeks ago by

5 Likes

5 Chat Make Offer

Figure 5. Screenshot of the product information of a Japanese branded makeup base sample on Carousell, part 1. Translation: Newly arrived. 25g/piece. Original Japanese edition Sxxx [brand name] Primavista OL [office lady]'s favorite long-keep base (effect lasting 10 hours). Obtained from Hong Kong retail store. Surface mail postage included.

original product or the sample she is using. Moreover, she lists two perks that help differentiate this particular makeup base, including (*a*) it is an OL's (office lady's) favorite makeup base and is long-lasting and nonoily; (*b*) it is sweat-proof and sebum-proof, so it won't make the skin look oily in the hot and humid weather. The source of these reviews is unspecified, but these could have been

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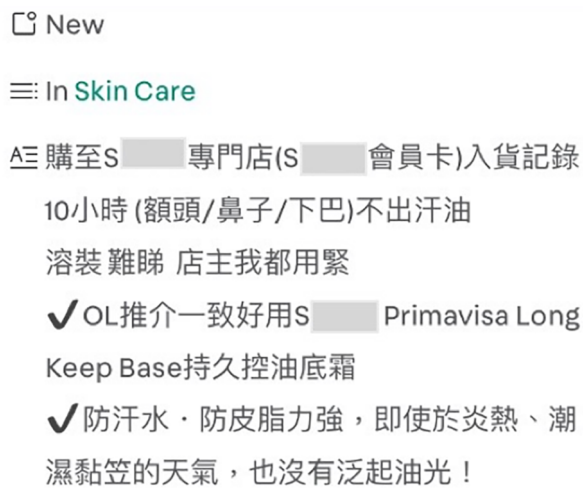


Figure 6. Screenshot of the product information of a Japanese branded makeup base sample on Carousell, part 2. Translation: Purchased from Sxxx (brand name) retail store—keeping the membership card with purchase record. The effect would last 10 hours (at your forehead/nose/jaw) without making your makeup oily or dissolve. I am also using this myself. This is an OL (office lady)'s favorite product—Sxxx (brand name) Primavisa Long Keep Base. Sweat-proof. Sebum-proof. Wouldn't make your makeup oily even in hot and humid days!

taken from a beauty blog that the seller finds online, since this makeup base is said to be an "OL's favorite." By mobilizing other users' testimonials that foreground certain features of the makeup base, the seller secures consent to her situational power and in turn invites the potential customers to try. Both her business and her beauty sample products are legitimated and rationalized. Linguistically, this is done by making metonymic link between the sample and the original product. In other words, the only represented difference between her samples and those products purchased from the store is the volumes that they come in. And again, the *re*sold nature of the item is backgrounded.

Deployment of Commercial Jargon

A few types of jargon related to transactions and retail have been repurposed or developed by sellers and buyers of Carousell. The first type involves lexicons that are unique to Carousell itself, which are invented and conventionalized by frequent users, such as 面交 'face trade' (trading face to face—appearing in English), "fast trade" (trading on the same day—appearing in English), and 包平郵 'free surface delivery' (the cost of surface mail is included). The second type is borrowed

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from retail industry and incorporated into the lexicons of individual Carousellers, such as 貨 (goods), 發貨 (dispatch goods), 庫存 (stocks), and 清貨 (clear stocks), even if the "goods" are just a few small samples worth HK$10 (approximately US$1.3). Similar to the second type of jargon, the third type is related to strategies in sales promotion. For instance, if the seller has stocked too many samples and want to clear stocks, she might sell them in a *fukubukuro* 福袋 (lucky bag). Of Japanese origin and now very common in Hong Kong, a lucky bag refers to a grab bag filled with unknown random products and sold as a substantial discount. The seller might also mark 買兩件減$2 (HK$2 off if you purchase two of the items) or 最後2件 (the last two items) in the product information. The deployment of these marketing or promotional strategies produces a sense of authenticity for the cosmetic samples by positioning the sellers as legitimate product providers and the buyers as customers, adding a touch of verisimilitude of the shopping mall. It also assists to produce a "cultural event"—one that is highly affected and mediated by the post-Fordist consumerist ideology, instantiated in the form of a shopping campaign, and can be experienced online.

It is possible that some sellers on Carousell have had experience working in the retail industry, but since Hong Kong is a highly commercialized city that is saturated with commodities, it is not surprising that most people are familiar with such lexicons related to retail and sales and would repurpose them in their own small-scaled business. It even seems to be a normalized trend that Carousellers are using terms from retail or sales to introduce their product and communicate with potential buyers. These types of jargon assist the sellers to discursively construct a kind of professionalism that catches the potential buyers' attention and facilitates communication. Most importantly, drawing parallel to official retail business, in both seller's and buyer's discourse, is one of the ways to show recognition of the online beauty sample business. For instance, the buyer would also send an inbox message saying "有貨嗎？" (literally "Are stocks available?") to the seller, showing that they are frequent and efficient buyers that concurs with the market logic. Thus, the authenticity of the product is coconstructed and corationalized by the buyer.

Advertising the Product in the Expert's Tone

As mentioned above, it is commonly noted that Carousellers introduce the ingredients and functions of the beauty products by paraphrasing the company's descriptions in an expert's tone. In some occasions, Carousellers would provide evaluations of these products, such as quick to absorb and easy to apply, through impressions of reading the advertisement, even if they might not have used these

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products themselves. This is also an instance of metonymy: the social actor that provides the information is shifted from the reseller to the expert, or the experienced user of the product, and this is artfully done through recontextualization and entextualization.

Figures 7 and 8 present examples of how the beauty sample reseller provides positive evaluations for the product she is selling. By drawing upon her own experience and knowledge, she offers rich description for the British brand cooling hydrating gel mask she sells, such as "refreshing," "hydrating," "moisturizing," and "comes with a cool and gel-like texture." These qualities make the product "very suitable for summer use." The added thumbs-up emojis position the seller as the experienced, affirmative user. Likewise, she recommends the British brand hand cream to the potential buyer by foregrounding its often overlooked nail protection functions. She describes it as a product so nourishing that it is especially suitable for autumn and winter use and, by extension, refers to it as "ideal for office ladies working in air-conditioned offices." Based on the brand's introduction of the nourishing effects of the product, she reapplies the explanatory logic and reimagines this product for working females in Hong Kong. She adopts the tone of an expert who promotes products at a higher level, freely appropriating the already available product information with her own understanding and imagination, turning it into metadiscourse. Thus, while she is able to reach and guide a larger audience to choose her sample products, she also gets to establish herself as an authentic seller.

Inventing Transactional Rules

Under the influence of Hong Kong's high degree of commercialization, many Carousell sellers have invented original transactional rules between themselves and the buyers, primarily taking the form of terms and conditions and disclaimers, to address particular types of liability. Due to the informal nature of Carousell transactions, bargain and even lowballing are very common. Some sellers would state explicitly that they are not accepting bargains. In the case of meet-up trades, some sellers would set a minimum value of transaction so that the profit they make from selling cosmetic samples would not be compromised by the cost of time and the transportation fare they have to spend in order to fulfill the trade. In some cases, the seller would encourage the buyer to receive the product via local surface mail, with the cost being borne by the buyer.

> Description 1: $6 per piece. Authentic products obtained from the retail store. Brand new and never used; only the packages are removed as

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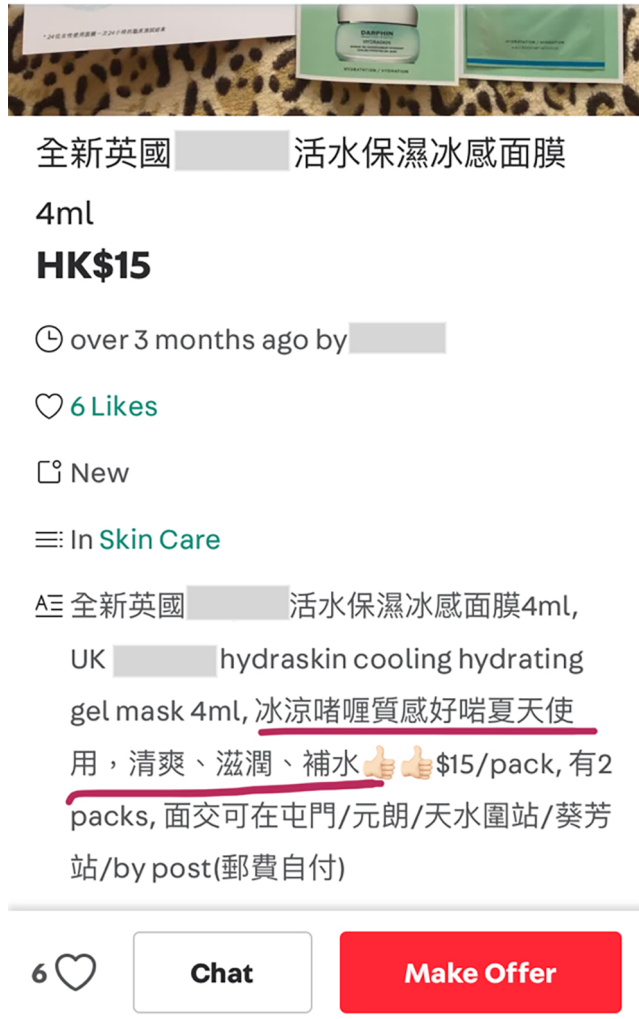


Figure 7. Screenshot of the product information of a British branded moisturizer sample on Carousell. Translation: Brand new British branded hydraskin cooling hydrating gel mask 4ML. It comes with a cool and gel-like texture and very suitable for summer use. It is refreshing, hydrating and moisturizing (thumb up emojis). $15/pack, and 2 packs are available. Can trade at Tuen Mun/Yuen Long/Tin Shui Wai/Kwai Fong station/by post (postage is borne by the buyer).

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Figure 8. Screenshot of the product information of a British branded hand cream sample on Carousell. Translation: Brand new British branded top-seller aroma softening hand and nail cream 30ML. It is sealed and never opened. It should be used within one year after it is opened. Retail price: $98. Aroma notes are pink cedar and wild fig. Except for moisturizing the hands, the cream can also protect the nails and make both your hands and nails feel nourished and keep them free from the dry weather in autumn and winter. It is ideal for office ladies working in air-conditioned offices. The cream comes with the original paper bag from the brand. Can trade at Tuen Mun/Yuen Long/Tin Shui Wai/Kwai Fong station/by post.

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shown in the pictures. No bargains. Purchase of four pieces is minimum for meet-up trades. I can meet at Mong Kok/Kowloon Bay/Lai King/Olympics MTR stations. Thank you.

Description 2: Feel free to make an offer with your price. I will sell as long as your offer is reasonable. No meet-up trades. The buyer bears the postage if the item is delivered by local mail. I can send the product by surface mail or through a local courier paid by the receiver.

Description 3: I am selling these items in a set; no individual purchases are acceptable.

Description 4: The products are dealt on a first-pay-first-served basis. I am not exchanging my commodities for others. My items are for sale only.

No exchange is available for sold items. The buyer bears all the risk.

I am selling my products at a low price, partly for environmental purposes and partly for my items to find the right owner. But recently I discovered that some people are reselling my products at higher prices. This behavior is extremely unacceptable. Once I discover this, I will leave this person a negative comment and report them.

Such transactional rules are intertextual with the terms, conditions, and disclaimers that people come across quite often when they are making a purchase for product or service nowadays. By devising these texts, the seller gets to construct a self-responsible image that ensures the transactions run smoothly and protects their informal entrepreneurship. Although these rules (which typically appear at the position of the product description) might sound assertive in tone, they work in principle of reciprocity and protect the interests of both sides, as it is also to the potential buyer's advantage to know what to expect prior to the transaction. They assist in constructing a role pair between the seller and the imagined buyer, granting them respective responsibilities. They also lend authority to the author by showing them to be experienced Carousell sellers, who know what to do and what to expect in normal transactions and from the other party. On the other hand, it grants them initiative in a transaction as well as situational agency.

While these sellers mobilize and reproduce neoliberal discourses in creative forms, manifesting their agency in a highly competitive marketplace, their practices also reveal the precarious nature of their business. Given the slipperiness of online transactions and the platform design of Carousell, the seller can frequently be stood up by the buyer, a waste of both her time and money. For this

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reason, declining or setting a condition for meet-up trades helps counteract this unfavorable factor. It also shows that the profits generated by the sale of cosmetic samples are not great. However, people—especially females—continue to engage in this practice nonetheless. We can think of Carousell as a platform that provides socially disempowered and disprivileged groups, a space for reconstructing their agency that is somewhat curtailed by the highly commercialized society. In the globalized, neoliberalized, and digitalized economy, individuals can use their linguistic creativity to reimagine the living world around them. By drawing upon the registers available in their stylistic repertoire, Carousellers position themselves as entrepreneurs possessing authority and authenticity, utilizing metadiscourse to promote their small businesses. We can see how the neoliberal ideology links international enterprises and individuals across spatiotemporal scales.

Conclusion

In this article, I present analysis of how users of Carousell, an online classified platform in Hong Kong, advertise their cosmetic sample products through linguistic and semiotic creativity. Via a series of recontextualization and entextualization strategies, Carousellers get to manipulate hegemonic semiotic resources for their own use and formulate metadiscourse to establish their authority and commercial authenticity. In the social atmosphere of entrepreneurialism and consumerism, these individuals emerge as self-responsible and sagacious entrepreneurs who draw on various stylizations to distinguish themselves in the vast online marketplace. Carousellers' practice demonstrates the democratic potential of online platforms in the globalized economy. In striving for better living conditions, socially disadvantaged groups and people in the Global South can employ opportunities brought about by the Internet economy to transcend the spatiotemporal and sociopolitical constraints they face. Meanwhile, consumers can also become smart prosumers by taking advantage of the information afforded by the platform rather than falling victim to the consumerist logic.

My analysis calls for a renewed look of the notion of sociolinguistic scales in the online-offline nexus (Blommaert 2019). The platform economy is accompanied by the circulation and dissemination of large amount of information and text across contexts. When these resources become reappropriated and repurposed by different social actors, different meanings and potentials come into being. This raises the issue of power structures—ones that are layered and entail multiple orders of indexicality—within which representations are emplaced. More research

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is needed to explicate the nuanced indexical orders when we seek to understand mediated representations in the globalized world today. Time and space are no longer metaphors but indeed play vital roles in forming the contextualizations. The analysis also sheds light on the importance of intersectionality in understanding scalar sociolinguistics and globalization. For instance, when we examine the doings of people of different races and social classes that are mediated through social and cultural means, we should carefully trace the trajectory of the semiotic resources they employ and gain better insight into the power dynamics. This study of Carousell is just a start.

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