

Mainstreaming, Counter-Co-Optation, and Depoliticization by a Counterculture

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Drawing on the social constructionist theory of social movement, this netnographic study examines the relationship between countercultures and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations in the context of free/open source software culture. The result shows that when a counterculture aims to change the social order in a domain of the marketplace, the counterculture or a sect of it could mainstream its subversive ideologies and practices, counter-co-opt certain tools (e.g., laws) of the mainstream culture and dominant corporations, preempt some forms of corporate co-optation, depoliticize its own ideologies and practices, and both confront and collaborate with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations.

The relationship between countercultures and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations has intrigued consumer culture researchers for decades (Frank, 1993; Holt, 2002; Marcuse, 1964). In the literature on the focal relationship there are three different theories. The classic co-optation theory (Ewen, 1988) conceptualizes this relationship as a confrontational one and assumes a doomed fate of countercultures. In contrast, the hip consumer variation of co-optation theory (Heath & Potter, 2004) conceptualizes this relationship as a symbiotic one. But the re-politicizing co-optation theory (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) argues that by creating countervailing markets, a counterculture can reclaim its cultural meanings co-opted by corporations. Despite their differences, the three theories implicitly assume that countercultures avoid becoming mainstream, that only corporations depoliticize countercultures' subversive ideologies and practices, and that the focal relationship is either confrontational or collaborative.

The social constructionist theory of social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000; Buechler, 2000; Swidler, 1986) suggests that a countercultural movement is a political-cultural process in which its members create and negotiate their ideological frames by tapping the mainstream culture to construct the social order of their own version. Accordingly, a counterculture could mainstream its ideologies and practices in a certain domain of the marketplace; a counterculture or a sect of it could depoliticize or reframe its ideologies and practices; there could be frame wars within a counterculture due to a sect's depoliticization act; and the focal relationship could be both confrontational and collaborative. Drawing on this theory as my theoretical lens, I aim to contribute to the literature by examining these theoretical possibilities in the context of the free/open source software culture.

In the next section, I first review the extant literature and then develop a social movement theory-based view of co-optation as the conceptual lens for this paper. This conceptual development is followed by an explanation of my methodology and findings. Finally, this paper is concluded with a general discussion.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Three Co-Optation Theories in the Extant Literature

Countercultures are social groups that co-construct and promote a set of ideologies and practices that contradict, subvert, and threaten those of the mainstream culture (Yinger, 1977). Individual members of a counterculture negotiate their ideologies and the meanings of their consumption practices in their interaction with each other and with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations. In the extant literature on the relationship between countercultures and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations, there are three different co-optation theories.

First, the classic co-optation theory sees countercultures as doomed challengers of the mainstream culture and dominant corporations (Ewen, 1988). Corporate co-optation is defined as the process in which the mainstream culture appropriates the consumption objects co-created by a counterculture but negates its subversive ideologies through corporations, which are major agents of the mainstream culture and market the goods and services that embody the negated versions of the counterculture. The consumption objects (e.g., images, symbols, expressions, meanings) co-created by a counterculture can be seen as its creative products (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). For Ewen (1988, p. 247), corporations can easily co-opt an image (a creative product) of a counterculture, only requiring that the image (1) “be able to be *disembodied, separated from its source*” (i.e., ideological separability), (2) “be capable of being ‘*economically*’ mass produced” (i.e., economical mass producibility), and (3) “be able to *become merchandise, to be promoted and sold*” (i.e., merchantability and marketability). Through mass production and marketing, corporations commodify the subversive ideologies underlying a counterculture’s creative products like images. In this assimilating, negating, and commercializing process, the mainstream culture maintains and reproduces its dominant status, empties and decontextualizes the rebellious political and cultural meanings of co-opted countercultures, and keeps the rebellious styles in the fashionable commodities. Corporate co-optation makes the images of a counterculture become mainstream and “signals its eventual disposal” (Ewen, 1988, p. 253). In response, countercultures can only create new rebellious images, leading to a new cycle of corporate co-optation.

Second, the hip consumer variation of co-optation theory views the focal relationship as a symbiotic one. Holt (2002) argues that postmodern consumers need the co-opted countercultural styles to build their identities and thus countercultures are merely grist to the mill of corporations. For Frank (1997), the 1960s counterculture led to a hip consumerism with insatiable thirst for distinctiveness, originality, and rebellion, which perpetuates the ever-escalating consumption and production; and corporations offer products and services dabbed with the co-opted version of the counterculture and its distinctiveness, originality, and rebellion for the public to play identity games and to perform rebellion rituals. It is argued that the values of countercultures align with the capitalist mainstream ideologies. Claiming their subversive political agenda, countercultural consumers only pursue distinctiveness and social status through their creative consumption practices. So, corporations do not co-opt their practices but respond to and learn from these practices that are not subversive to but welcomed by corporations (Heath & Potter, 2004).

Third, the re-politicizing co-optation theory argues that a counterculture can re-politicize its subversive consumption practices after dominant corporations co-opt and depoliticize these practices. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007, p. 137) contend that the first two theories questionably treat “all forms of commercial activity as manifestations of an undifferentiated global structure—consumer capitalism.” They argue that countercultural consumers can re-politicize their co-opted practices by building countervailing markets that “amplify, implement, and actively promote the countercultural principles, meanings, and ideals which have been attenuated by corporate co-optation” (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 138).

But, in some contexts, the focal relationship could be different from what the three theories explain. If a countercultural movement aims to change the social order in a certain domain of the marketplace (Buechler, 2000), its members may promote their subversive ideologies and practices to everyone in the relevant market and do their best to make their ideologies and practices become new dominant ones in the

market. Also, its members can co-opt the mainstream culture by tapping the mainstream culture as a tool kit (Swidler, 1986) to promote their ideologies and practices, and depoliticize or deradicalize their ideologies and practices to attain legitimacy for better growth (Benford & Snow, 2000). To comprehensively understand the focal relationship, we need to examine these theoretical possibilities. To do so, we can turn to the social constructionist theory of social movement for a new perspective.

A Social Movement Theory-Based View of Co-Optation

Social movements are intentional collective efforts by aggrieved groups to transform the social order that embodies the dominant ideologies of the mainstream culture (Buechler, 2000). These groups could launch countercultural movements to build a new social order that embodies their ideologies that subvert the mainstream ones. Countercultural movements often give birth to countercultures (Buechler, 2000). Different from members of a counterculture who aim to distinguish themselves from mainstream consumers via unique consumption practices (Hebdige, 1979), members of a counterculture resulting from a countercultural movement may aim to change the social order in a certain domain of the marketplace by replacing some mainstream ideologies and practices with their own subversive ones. So, countercultural consumers may promote their ideologies and practices to all other relevant consumers and aim to make their ideologies and practices become new mainstream ones in the relevant market.

The social constructionist theory of social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000; Swidler, 1986) assumes: (1) a social movement is embedded in the mainstream culture that provides a tool kit from which the social movement can select some tools to frame and to promote its own subversive ideologies and practices; (2) a social movement needs legitimacy for growth; and (3) the members of a social movement are heterogeneous. Thus, some members of a counterculture resulting from a countercultural movement can use tools of the mainstream culture to build their ideal social order and to mainstream their subversive ideologies and practices in the society; but other members can depoliticize their ideologies and practices to gain legitimacy for better growth. According to Benford and Snow (2000), a counterculture has two major framing tasks: (1) diagnostic framing (i.e., identifying social problems, sources of causality, and culpable agents) that defines who the enemies are and who we are and (2) prognostic framing (i.e., proposing solutions to the problems) that defines its practices and strategies toward the culpable agents. Members of a counterculture may engage in frame disputes if they have competing frames about their ideologies, the social problems, their own and the enemy's identities, and their solutions.

The mainstream culture is a cultural context in which countercultures are embedded. According to Swidler (1986), the extant stock of ideologies, values, laws, and practices in a cultural context is a tool kit from which social actors like countercultural consumers can select some tools to construct their own lines of action. Because using a tool of the mainstream culture is more culturally resonant and legitimate for the society that is dominated by the mainstream culture, using a tool of the mainstream culture (e.g., current laws) in its own frames helps a counterculture recruit members and allies efficiently and effectively and is difficult for the mainstream culture and dominant corporations to counterframe (i.e., framing against the frames of the counterculture). Also, because the meanings of any tool of the tool kit are socially constructed and can be given different meanings for different interests, a counterculture can select a tool of the mainstream culture, imbue its own ideologies into this tool, filter out the mainstream ideologies underlying this tool, and redirect the reinterpreted tool against the mainstream culture and its major agents—dominant corporations. This means that a counterculture can selectively counter-co-opt some tools of the mainstream culture.

According to Benford and Snow (2000), a counterculture and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations could engage in ongoing, dynamic frame wars. Being diagnosed as problematic by a counterculture, the mainstream culture and dominant corporations may counterframe the social reality by delegitimizing the counterculture's ideologies and practices as being against well-accepted ideologies, values, laws, and practices (e.g., culturally illegitimate, illegal). Delegitimizing a counterculture could limit its ability to recruit members and allies and limit its access to necessary resources for growth.

In response, the counterculture or some of its members (i.e., a sect of it) may deradicalize its frames by proposing new ideologies, practices, problems, and solutions that are more compatible with the mainstream culture. By deradicalizing, this counterculture or this sect can (1) gain a certain degree of legitimacy and access to some resources (e.g., friendly media exposure) from the mainstream culture and its agents (e.g., corporations, governments) and (2) recruit more members and allies in the society and thereby increase its influence in the society. As a result, this counterculture or this sect better grows, and the mainstream culture is less threatened. By deradicalizing its frames, this counterculture or this sect empties out some elements of its ideologies and practices and collaborate with the mainstream culture to a certain degree. That is, this counterculture or this sect strategically depoliticizes its ideologies and practices.

Reframing could cause frame disputes in a counterculture. By depoliticizing its ideologies, practices, problems, and solutions, a counterculture redefines itself and its enemies, practices, and goals. But, not all of its members would agree to depoliticize its frames. When some members reject the depoliticized frames, this counterculture would split into two sects; before it splits into two separate consumer cultures, the two sects coexist and compete with each other for members and allies. With two sects in this counterculture, its relationship with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations becomes complex. The sect adhering to its original subversive ideologies and practices continues to confront the mainstream culture and dominant corporations. But the sect depoliticizing its ideologies and practices both collaborates with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations to a certain degree and threatens the mainstream culture and dominant corporations to a lower degree.

Drawing on the social constructionist theory of social movement as my theoretical lens, I aim to contribute to the literature by examining the focal relationship in the context of a counterculture, which results from a countercultural movement that seeks to change the social order in a certain domain of the marketplace and engages in intra-communal frame wars related to the mainstream culture and dominant corporations. In doing so, I consider two research questions: How does a counterculture interact with the mainstream culture/dominant corporations and frame its own ideologies and practices? What are the political and cultural implications of this interaction for the consumers involved?

METHODOLOGY

Because the explored interaction, frame wars, and related political and cultural implications are sensitive to contexts, I used a netnography methodology (Kozinets, 2002) in this research. In particular, I sought a culture site where a counterculture resulted from a countercultural movement that aimed to change the social order in a certain domain of the marketplace and engaged in intra-communal frame wars. To this end, the free/open source software (FOSS) culture was selected. In 1979, the copyright law was applied to software in the U.S. and deprived programmers of the four freedoms of using software, modifying software, sharing software, and sharing modifications. In 1984, Richard Stallman launched the free software (FS) movement to challenge proprietary software firms (i.e., the dominant corporations in the global software market) and to restore the four freedoms by writing and using FS (whose source code is open to the public). The word free in free software means freedom rather than free of charge. Devoted FS programmers use certain software licenses to prevent firms from developing proprietary software based on the source code of FS. In 1997, seeing the word free as too radical and threatening for the mainstream business world, some FS programmers relabeled the programs they wrote as open source software (OSS), giving birth to the OSS sect, which is friendlier to proprietary software firms. Since then, the FOSS culture has consisted of the FS and OSS sects. Using its producing power, the FOSS culture challenges the dominating status of proprietary software firms in the global software market; and the FS and OSS sects continuously debate on whose ideology and practices better serve their community and the society.

In this article, the terms of FS sect, FS programmers (who emphasize the four freedoms more), OSS sect, and OSS programmers (who emphasize the pragmatic benefits of FOSS more) are used for analytical

convenience. Although the FS and OSS sects emphasize freedom and pragmatic benefits to different degrees, they collaborate closely on many FS and OSS projects.

The growing global market of FOSS, the ongoing ideological debate between the FS and OSS sects, and the confrontation-cooperation between the FOSS culture and proprietary software firms attest that the FOSS culture is a proper cultural site to examine the relationship between a counterculture and the mainstream culture and dominant corporations. Also, it has been used to study the political and cultural dimensions of consumer creativity (Hemetsberger, 2005).

Data were collected from online archives of consumer discourses of websites of GNU Emacs, Debian, Apache, Gentoo, Linux Virtual Server, OpenOffice, Org-Mode, Wine, and Zeux projects (FOSS projects) and the web sites of the Free Software Foundation (FSF) and the Open Source Initiative (OSI), interviews with 14 FOSS programmers, and blogs, videos, online articles and books of FOSS programmers. I conducted seven e-mail interviews (from six to 12 rounds), five phone interviews (from 50 to 120 minutes), and both e-mail interviews (both were 2 rounds) and phone interviews (from 80 to 90 minutes) with two extra persons. The phone interviews followed the existential-phenomenological format (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The e-mail interviews followed an unstructured format. The 14 interviewed FOSS programmers came from China, Germany, Netherlands, the U.K., and the U.S. A data-driven procedure was followed to collect data, which were ideology-ridden and rich in political and cultural implications. The data analysis and interpretation followed a constant comparative method to seek patterns of meanings and themes (Spiggle, 1994).

FINDINGS

Theme One: Fighting for All Inhabitants of Cyberspace

To fight against proprietary software that dominates the global software market and is protected by the copyright law, FS programmers passionately promote their freedom-oriented ideology of software, aiming to break down the constraining hierarchy in the market for all software users. In our interview, Qing (male, aged 30, a member of the Zeux project) said:

First, many proprietary programs require that you can use them for personal use free of charge but you will be charged if you use them for commercial aims. In this way, proprietary programs put a limit on our freedom. Second, source codes of proprietary programs are encrypted. It is hard for users to read. So, you have no freedom to study how the programs work. . . . The freedom to study it is deprived. Third, for example, one colleague in my neighboring office does not have an operating system. If I let him to install my windows XP, this is an illegal act. So, I have no freedom to share with people around me. The last freedom, for example, if I feel that one aspect of Windows XP is not good, I cannot improve it because I don't have the freedom to enhance it. As a user, I, as a living being, can only be controlled by Windows XP.

This quotation illustrates that FOSS programmers like Qing resent the social order in the software market reinforced by the copyright law and frame proprietary software firms as “evil[s]” that “deprive” users’ freedoms and “control” users’ living experience (quoted from Qing). If using, studying, and modifying software are mainly for personal interests (e.g., solving problems, improving one’s coding skills), sharing software and modified software has a broader implication. In an interview, Wisdom (aged 40, male, a member of the Zeux project) said:

Among individuals, you help me, I help you, and I help others. It is very normal for human beings. It is a universal value of human beings. . . . Why do you prevent me from doing this? It is this software copyright system that prevents me from helping my friends, my family, my neighbors, my colleagues, my classmates. Stallman’s ideas are such simple ideas. So, he believes that software should be free. . . . I believe this is . . . a value

that everyone needs, everyone follows, and everyone hopes to gain in his or her own inner heart.

For Wisdom, sharing is a universal value embraced by all human beings in their inner heart and the freedom to share is pursued by everyone: sharing is of “human nature” (quoted from Wisdom; see Belk, 2010). However, proprietary software firms use the copyright law to prevent proprietary software users from sharing. In interviews, Qing and Wisdom frequently used “we” and “human beings,” suggesting their belief that all software users share the same existential state: they are unequally treated against their human nature by proprietary software firms. For FS programmers, FS is “a public good” (quoted from Arthur, male, aged 21, a member of the Wine project) which is owned by a specific FS project, freely accessible by the public, and embodies the ideology of public ownership, a “solution” (quoted from Qing) that helps them build a new social order in the global software market where all users can live a unconstrained life. With FS, all users can freely run a program for “solving problems” (quoted from Song, male, aged 22, a member of the Zeux project), study a program for “learning” and “self-development” (quoted from Song), modify a program for “actualizing” their “creativity” (quoted from Yuan, male, aged 40, founder of the Linux Virtual Server project), share a program with others for the “enjoyment of helping others” (quoted from Levy, male, aged 44, a member of the Debian, GNU Emacs, and Org-Mode projects). Thus, their community is seen as a space where human beings live freely and thereby naturally. But, Stallman pointed out:

Today's free software community works well enough to show that freedom in cyberspace is viable. But only a fraction of the inhabitants [of] cyberspace are in our community, and of those who do participate, most of them still use some non-free software. We have a long way to go to complete the liberation of cyberspace. (Mathias, year unavailable, pp. 2-3)

This quotation reveals that, like activists who aim to convert all other consumers to follow their own ideologies and consumption practices in the study of Kozinets and Handelman (2004), dedicated FS programmers see converting all consumers who use non-free software to FS users as their own long-term “liberat[ion]” mission. They want all software users to live freely and naturally. This is why Qing actively promotes the ideology of FS to other people by sharing FS with his colleagues when they need to solve some problems, posting news about FS in the Internet, and co-authoring a book related to FS with fellow Zeux project members. Similarly, the FSF initiates various events, public speeches, and conferences to promote its freedom-oriented ideology around the world (see the list of events initiated by the FSF at <http://www.fsf.org/events/aggregator>). In a certain sense, the FS sect’s mission is to mainstream their subversive ideology and practices of producing and using FS, or to co-create a new social order in the global software market (Buechler, 2000).

Theme Two: Counter-Co-Optation for Preempting Corporate Co-Optation

Consumers know the possibility of corporate co-optation and take actions against it (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). To prevent firms from developing proprietary programs based on the source code of FS, in 1989 Stallman created the General Public License version 1 (GPL v1). The heart of the license is the term of copyleft, which requires all programs derived from a GPLed program to allow the four freedoms. Since then, GPL has been the most popular license in the FOSS community. Stallman explained in a message posted to a mailing list:

Copyleft uses copyright law, but flips it over to serve the opposite of its usual purpose: instead of a means of privatizing software, it becomes a means of keeping software free. The central idea of copyleft is that we give everyone permission to run the program, copy the program, modify the program, and distribute modified versions—but not permission

to add restrictions of their own. (Stallman, 2006, September 15, “Copyleft and the GNU GPL,” para. 2)

This quotation demonstrates that FS programmers promote a freedom-oriented ideology of public ownership, legitimize their ideology and practices, and safeguard FS as a public good with the copyright law by allowing “everyone” in the global software market to enjoy the four freedoms and by forbidding adding any restrictions on the four freedoms. Flipping the copyright law, copyleft legally *preempts* the opportunity for firms to directly co-opt the source code of FS, a creative product of FS programmers. Also, using the copyright law, a governance tool of the mainstream culture and dominant corporations, is more culturally resonant to the public (Swidler, 1986); with copyleft, the FS sect can more effectively frame FS as a legal alternative to proprietary software in the global software market. Ironically, when proprietary software firms originally lobbied for applying the copyright law to software in the U.S., they planned to use this law to protect their right to profit from proprietary software and to limit the four freedoms. This is fighting fire with fire (Stallman, 2009). With copyleft, the right to the four freedoms is safeguarded rather than restricted (1) by the copyright law that embodies the ideology of private ownership and judges copying, sharing, modifying, and redistributing software as illegal and (2) by proprietary software firms that rely on the copyright law to limit users’ creativity and control users’ usage. So, with copyleft, FS programmers creatively *counter-co-opt* the copyright law, emptying out its underlying ideology of private ownership, preempting direct corporate co-optation (i.e., dominant corporations directly integrate the creative products of a counterculture, with or without modification, into their own commodities), and safeguarding their own subversive ideologies and practices.

Because the GPL can effectively prevent firms from directly co-opting the open source code, many OSS programmers also use the GPL to safeguard the source code of their open source programs although they are not comfortable with the subversive freedom orientation of the GPL. By June 2006, the FOSS community won all legal cases against firms that violated the GPL v1 (details are available at <http://www.gpl-violations.org/about.html#history>). But, many FS and OSS projects do not use the GPL, opening a window for corporate co-optation. Thus, dedicated FS programmers actively promote the GPL in the FOSS culture.

The game of corporation co-optation versus consumer counter-co-optation is dynamic. Some proprietary software firms have claimed that many free programs and open source programs violate their patents. Since the release of the GPLv1, some firms have publically stated that if a program violates certain patents owned by these firms, and if the redistributor that offers the program to users does not get patent licenses from these firms, these firms will sue against the users and the redistributor. Some business users and redistributors of FOSS made private deals with and paid huge money to some proprietary software firms to avoid being sued. Consequently, these proprietary software firms indirectly co-opted FOSS because these firms indirectly made profits from FOSS by receiving patent license fees and made the co-opted FOSS proprietary in a certain sense. In response, the FSF released the GPL version 2 (GPLv2) in 1991, which states that, when a redistributor offers a program under the GPL v2, the user automatically receives a license from the original licensor (i.e., a proprietary software firm who claims that the program violates some of its patents and gives patent licenses to the redistributor) to copy, distribute or modify the program; and the redistributor cannot put any further restrictions on the user’s freedoms. Again, using the GPL v2, FOSS programmers counter-co-opt the copyright law, emptying out its underlying ideology of private ownership, preempting a patent-law-based, indirect way of corporate co-optation, and safeguarding their subversive ideologies and practices.

However, as Stallman stated in a video, “the adversaries of freedom don’t stand still, they’ve thought of new ways to separate users from their freedom since GPL version 2 came out. So, we have had to find ways to block them from doing this” (Free Software Foundation, 2007). One new strategy for a proprietary software firm to co-opt FS indirectly is entering into patent protection agreements with a redistributor of FS, which requires payments to each other, and allows the users of the programs of the two parties to legally use each other’s patents but the proprietary software firm does not give a patent license to the redistributor. For example, Microsoft and Novell signed such an agreement in 2006. To

prevent this new way of indirect corporate co-optation, in 2007 the FSF released the GPL version 3 (GPLv3), which requires that anyone who has written or modified a program under GPLv3 must provide users all patent licenses necessary for users to enjoy the four freedoms guaranteed by FS. If a redistributor cannot satisfy this requirement, it should not offer programs under the GPL v3.

The history of the evolving GPL has an important theoretical implication: legal safeguard is critical for corporate co-optation and consumer counter-co-optation. Not legally protecting their creative products (e.g., images) might explain why some countercultures are doomed as the classic co-optation theory argues (Ewen, 1988). But, if a counterculture safeguards its creative products with a legal tool, firms cannot legally co-opt the creative products although the conditions of ideological separability, economical mass producibility, and merchantability and marketability are satisfied (Ewen, 1988). So, the condition that a creative product of a counterculture lacks legal safeguard might be the fourth condition for corporate co-optation.

Although many FOSS programmers (especially those emphasizing freedom) use the GPL to prevent corporate co-optation and publically criticize proprietary software firms, to get more resources for growth, the FOSS culture also collaborates with proprietary software firms in some forms. Some proprietary software firms are involved in many FOSS projects by donating money, equipment, and code to these projects and by delegating their own employees to work on selected FOSS projects for learning programming skills from FOSS programmers, influencing future software trends, and developing a good reputation among FOSS programmers (O'Mahony, 2002). Thus, the FOSS culture both confronts and collaborates with proprietary software firms.

Theme Three: Strategic Depoliticization and Frame Disputes

Being framed as evils that limit users' freedoms and threatened by the growing market of FS, proprietary software firms have counterframed FS programmers as pirates and FS as inferior software to delegitimize the FS culture, causing fear, uncertainty, and doubt about FS in the society and blocking the FS culture's growth (Szczepanska, Bergquist, & Ljungberg, 2005). In response, some FS programmers replaced the term of FS with the term of OSS in late 1997. According to the Open Source Initiative, a leading OSS organization, open source "is a development method for software that harnesses the power of distributed peer review and transparency of process. The promise of open source is better quality, higher reliability, more flexibility, lower cost, and an end to predatory vendor lock-in" (Open Source Initiative, year unavailable, "Mission," para. 2). The terms of "better quality," "higher reliability," "more flexibility," and "lower cost" are highly business-like. This definition focuses on technological excellence and economic efficiency, which are consistent with the ideology of instrumental rationalism of the mainstream culture and dominant corporations (Marcuse, 1964), suggesting that the OSS sect depoliticizes the FS movement's subversive freedom-oriented ideology. Eric Raymond, a leader of the OSS sect explained:

[Free software] makes a lot of corporate types nervous. . . . we now have a pragmatic interest in converting these people rather than thumbing our noses at them. There's now a chance we can make serious gains in the mainstream business world without compromising our ideals and commitment to technical excellence -- so it's time to reposition. We need a new and better label.

[. . . .]

We suggest that everywhere we as a culture have previously talked about "free software", the label should be changed to "open source". . . .

And, we should explain publicly the reason for the change. Linus Torvalds has been saying . . . that the open-source culture needs to make a serious effort to take the desktop and engage the corporate mainstream . . . this re-labelling . . . is part of the process. It says we're willing to work with and co-opt the market for our own purposes, rather than remaining stuck in a marginal, adversarial position. (Raymond, 2007, para. 4, para. 6, and para. 7)

This quotation illustrates the OSS sect's goals: to "work with and co-opt the market for" its own purposes and to avoid "remaining stuck in a marginal, adversarial position" or to become mainstream. This sect "pragmatically" depoliticizes the FS sect's freedom-oriented ideology that threatens the legitimacy and market share of proprietary software firms (i.e., the mainstream businesses) and "makes a lot of corporate types nervous," and promotes its own ideology that is acceptable to the mainstream culture and dominant corporations. Also, because OSS programmers focus more on technological excellence and economic efficiency rather than freedom, many OSS projects use non-GPL licenses, allowing firms to co-opt OSS or to develop proprietary software based on OSS. One benefit from such a practice is that it can attract more business users (who do not want to share their own modifications of OSS with the FOSS community) and thereby expand the market share of OSS more quickly. For the OSS sect, strategically depoliticizing its ideology and practices can help achieve its goals: to co-opt the market and to mainstream its practices (i.e., developing and using OSS) without talking a threatening ideology.

Consequently, on the one hand, proprietary software firms face a weaker ethics-based threat to their legitimacy from the OSS sect and thereby become more likely to collaborate with this sect. On the other hand, with more and more business users accepting OSS and proprietary software firms being involved in various OSS projects, OSS is becoming mainstream in the market. OSS programmers are also becoming mainstream, not being "marginal, adversarial" fighters against proprietary software firms but working with these mainstream corporations. For example, Microsoft hires some OSS programmers to contribute to its own OSS projects. So, the OSS sect does achieve its two goals as some feminist activists did by deradicalizing their ideologies to make their movement more acceptable by the mainstream culture (Meyer & Gamson, 1995).

However, such reframing has led to heated frame disputes within the FOSS culture (Benford & Snow, 2000). In an interview, Song critiqued the OSS frame as follows:

Open source software gives up some types of freedom. But this practice brings something what Stallman called short-term benefits or material benefits. It depends on what you focus on. . . . You might think Eric Raymond betrays the spirit of free software. They talk about the same thing but look at this thing from different angles. I think Eric can lower his commitment to freedom but we should not let everyone to lower his or her commitment to freedom. . . . It is a retreat, or giving up. Put a positive spin, it is adaption to the reality. I think, in essence, it is a kind of retreat.

For FS programmers like Song, although the OSS sect's reframing may help business users accept the practice of opening source code and thereby help this practice become mainstream more quickly, such benefits are only "material" benefits lacking the essence of freedom. For FS programmers, although they aim to make FS become mainstream, it is not meaningful enough for their programs to become mainstream without the essence of freedom. The words "betray," "retreat," and "giving up" express Song's negative attitudes toward the OSS sect's reframing act. One big concern of the FS sect is that some proprietary programs can be very powerful and reliable; thus, according to Stallman (2007), the label of OSS that focuses on powerfulness and reliability might reward proprietary software firms in this situation. Insisting on the political nature of FS by focusing on its freedom orientation rather than practical or instrumental benefits, FS programmers like Qing and Stallman only use free programs in their daily life although some proprietary alternatives are more powerful and reliable. This insistence on the political nature of the FS movement is more explicitly shown in the following quotation:

For the free software movement, free software is an ethical imperative, because only free software respects the users' freedom. By contrast, the philosophy of open source considers issues in terms of how to make software "better"—in a practical sense only. It says that nonfree software is an inferior solution to the practical problem at hand. For the free software movement, however, nonfree software is a social problem, and the solution is to stop using it and move to free software. (Stallman, 2007, para. 7)

This quotation displays the two sects' differences in diagnostic and prognostic frames (Benford & Snow, 2000). Assuming software has ethical implications, the FS sect frames nonfree software as "a social problem" (i.e., the proprietary software firm-users hierarchy) and FS as "the solution" that is "an ethical imperative." Taking an amoral approach, the OSS depoliticizes the frames of the FS sect, framing nonfree software as "an inferior solution to the practical problem" and OSS as a technologically superior solution. For Stallman, OSS does not solve the social problem that proprietary software firms divide users and control the ways users could use proprietary software. Instead, "What if the software is designed to put chains on its users? Then powerfulness means the chains are more constricting, and reliability that they are harder to remove" (Stallman, 2007, "Powerful, Reliable Software Can Be Bad," para. 2). Clearly, for dedicated FS programmers like Stallman, more technologically powerful and reliable software more strongly limits its users' freedom and the ideology of instrumental rationalism is wrong without being enlightened by ethics. Despite their different assumptions, ideologies, and practices, FS and OSS programmers collaborate with each other on various FOSS projects to build a new social order in the global software market where they can live freely and naturally.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on the social constructionist theory of social movement (Benford & Snow, 2000; Buechler, 2000; Swidler, 1986), this research examines the relationship between countercultures and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations in the context of the FOSS culture. Three themes emerge from the data: (1) fighting for all inhabitants of cyberspace (i.e., the FOSS culture seeks to mainstream FOSS that embodies their subversive ideologies and practices by actively promoting FOSS to the general public), (2) counter-co-optation for preempting corporate-co-optation (i.e., some FOSS programmers counter-co-opt the copyright law to safeguard the source code of FOSS), and (3) strategic depoliticization and frame disputes (i.e., OSS programmers intentionally depoliticize their ideologies and practices to mainstream them more quickly, leading to the ongoing frame disputes between the FS and OSS sects).

These themes have four theoretical implications. First, in contrast to the extant theories that assume that countercultures avoid becoming mainstream, these themes suggest that a counterculture may actively mainstream its ideologies and practices if it aims to change the social order in a certain domain of the marketplace. Such a counterculture may result from a social movement that aims to replace the dominant social order with its own ideal one (Buechler, 2000), for which becoming mainstream may indicate its success rather than disposal (Ewen, 1988). Differently, countercultures that aim to be different from the mainstream culture or seek otherness (Hebdige, 1979) may do their best to avoid becoming mainstream. Distinguishing the two types of counterculture could refine our understanding of their different consumption practices and relationships with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations.

Second, similar to the re-politicizing co-optation theory but different from the other two extant co-optation theories, the second theme suggests that a counterculture or a sect of it could safeguard its creative products that embody their subversive ideologies and practices and preempt some forms of corporate co-optation by counter-co-opting some governance tools of the mainstream culture and dominant corporations and by emptying out the mainstream ideologies underlying these tools (Swidler, 1986). Specifically, a counterculture or any other independent consumer community (that is legally independent from the control of a firm), can use some legal tools to prevent some forms of corporate co-optation. For example, the FSF has released a document that discusses how FOSS projects can use the copyright law, the corporate law, and trademark law to safeguard their creative products (Fontana, Kuhn, Moglen, Norwood, Ravicher, Sandler, Vasile, & Williamson, 2008).

The possibility for a counterculture to counter-co-opt the current legal system is critical for us to theorize co-optation. For Ewen (1988), corporations can easily co-opt a counterculture's creative products if the creative products can satisfy three conditions: ideological separability, economical mass producibility, and merchantability and marketability. But, this study shows that lacking legal protection might be another necessary condition for corporate co-optation. The history of the evolving GPL also

shows that a counterculture and dominant corporations may adapt to each other, leading to an ongoing game of co-optation versus counter-co-optation.

It is possible for general consumers to counter-co-opt current laws, limiting firms' ability to co-create value with consumers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). A firm may arguably claim its ownership of the designs created by its consumers who use the design tool kits provided by the firm to design new products. But, if a consumer community that is legally independent from firms uses some legal tools (e.g., the copyright law, the trademark law) to safeguard its own creative products (e.g., designs, expressions, symbols, brands), a firm may not freely co-create value with this community or co-opt the community's creative products without the community's permission. Thus, co-creating value with consumers may face legal barriers set by consumers.

Third, different from the three extant theories that assume that only corporations depoliticize countercultural ideologies and practices, the third theme suggests that a counterculture or a sect of it could resort to some mainstream ideologies (e.g., instrumental rationalism) and strategically depoliticize its own subversive ideologies and practices to gain legitimacy and resources for mainstreaming itself more quickly. But, the counterculture or the sect of it still, to a lower degree, challenges the mainstream culture and dominant corporations.

Finally, different from the three extant theories that assume the relationship between countercultures and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations as either confrontational or collaborative, the third theme suggests that the focal relationship could be both confrontational and collaborative. When some countercultural members depoliticize their own ideologies and practices but still challenge the dominant ideologies and practices in a certain domain of the marketplace, the counterculture as a whole both challenges and collaborates with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations.

This study contributes to the literature on co-optation by developing a contextualized, social constructionist view of the relationship between countercultures and the mainstream culture/dominant corporations. It is suggested that when a counterculture aims to change the social order in a certain domain of the marketplace, countercultural consumers could actively mainstream their subversive ideologies and practices, selectively counter-co-opt certain tools of the mainstream culture and dominant corporations, creatively preempt some forms of corporate co-optation, strategically depoliticize its ideologies and practices, and simultaneously confront and collaborate with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations.

This study suggests that, for a firm to co-create value with a creative consumer community successfully (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), the firm must pay attention to legal issues. The firm must know whether the consumer community uses certain legal tools to safeguard its communal creative products (e.g., product designs, linguistic expressions, symbols, communal brands). If so, the firm must avoid commercializing the communal creative products directly. The firm might consider the following actions: sending its own employees to be involved in the creative process of the consumer community to learn creative skills from the community, hiring some leading members of the consumer community to tap their relevant knowledge and skills, developing complementary products to a creative product of the community to benefit from the popularity of the product of the consumer community in the market, and contributing its own technical expertise and knowledge to the consumer community to influence the technical directions of the consumer community. Even if the consumer community does not legally protect its creative products, the firm might need to consider sharing some benefits with the generator of the creative ideas (a specific consumer or the community as a whole) which the firm wants to integrate into its own products or services. Helping the generator of the creative ideas to apply for copyrights or patents, paying the generator for a license that permits the firm to use the creative ideas commercially, or cross-licensing with the consumer community might help the firm co-create value with the consumer community legally and legitimately without being perceived as an exploiter.

Future research could explore other strategies that countercultures use to deal with the mainstream culture and dominant corporations in other countercultural contexts. We also need research on how firms could co-create value with a counterculture as authentic supporters or members of the counterculture

without being seen as unfairly co-opting countercultural consumers' competency. Such research will enrich our understanding of countercultures, co-optation, and co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

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