

A Study of the Body Symbolization and Mediatization and Emotional Consumption of a Streamer

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Abstract. Live streaming is prevalent in news communication, leisure and entertainment, daily consumption, advertising, mass education, and telemedicine fields of our daily lives in China. Such hotly debated words as e-commerce, live streaming, short video, and growing figures reflect a new change in the universal lifestyle in the Internet era. Live streaming, a new form of communication, may become a critical medium for people to connect with society. Based on the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this article explores the body symbolization and mediatization and emotional consumption of a streamer. Streamers bolstered by the consumption society, add a new body spatial dimension through body symbolization and mediatization, thus creating the desire and impulse for consumption among viewers on the one hand. People are increasingly reliant on products and services related to emotion provided by the market to meet their emotional needs in modern society on the other hand. Streamers, as a medium, have become one of the main suppliers of these products and services. As emotional labor and consumption become increasingly prevalent, streamers utilize emotional, physical, and linguistic symbols to convey a symbolic narrative. Consumers actively engage in the interpretation of these image texts and participate in live consumption through symbolic interaction. Streamers inject a sense of competition, intimacy, visual pleasure, and watch desire into the emotional structure of viewers unattainable through traditional media, which drives their consumption behavior for emotion.

Keywords: Streamer, Symbolization, Mediatization, Emotional Consumption.

1. Introduction

In the previous years, the popularity of live streaming in all walks of life has become a global economic and social phenomenon. As a form of multimedia entertainment and interaction based on the Internet, live streaming entered the public eye in 2015; it grew to skyrocket in 2016, the first year of live streaming; it was booming again as live e-commerce was emerging in 2020. [1] Live streaming characterized by visual consumption and emotional interaction has gained popularity because more people have a higher demand for emotional pleasure and spiritual satisfaction in a consumption society.

The emergence and development of live streaming has revolutionized the way media is disseminated and transformed the dynamic between the medium and participating individuals. [2] It is characterized by instantaneous interaction with video images, with the changed logic of media image text production and enhanced interactivity between media subjects for a new kind of media reality. This characteristic directly affects the consumption practices of the participating subjects, allowing the bodies and emotions of streamers and viewers to take on new expressions in consumption practices. Live streaming creates rich media scenes by incorporating social life into live streaming as capital integrates the knowledge, perceptions, emotions, desires and bodies of the laboring subjects and transforms them into part of media products in the era of universal live streaming. [3]

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the crucial role of symbols and their meaning in human interaction. [4] Consumers often realize body consumption through the selection and use of symbols in a live broadcast. During the deeper interaction, streamers and consumers have a consensus cognition for the meaning of body symbols, which affects the body consumption concept and body consumption behavior of consumers and shows the obvious nature of symbolic interaction. Considering that a live scene is a field full of body symbols, analyzing the body symbolization and mediatization and emotional consumption of an anchor and the overall process of the live-streaming

economy shaped by group identity and emotional labor based on symbolic interactionism is conducive to further enriching and developing the application of symbolic interactionism in mediatization.

2. Concept and Classification of streamers

Live streaming is an online activity that provides viewers with real-time information using video, audio, and graphics. Considered a form of social media, it is characterized by its immediacy and authenticity. Based on this, streamers as an emerging group created by internet celebrities and live streaming come in. A streamer refers to opinion leaders who can get the attention and love of fans and affect them by presenting themselves in live streaming. As a whole, live streaming includes an anchor creating real-time content, an anchor delivery of this content to viewers, and viewers joining the live streaming to consume content. During content consumption, viewers can help shape the content-generation process by interacting with the anchor in a variety of ways.

Streamers can be divided into various types according to live content, personal identity, influence, and authenticity. Streamers can mainly be divided into two types: streamers for selling goods and streamers for no-selling goods. The first type can be divided into the independent anchor, branded anchor, celebrity [5], and official streamers according to their identity. The latter type can be divided into the show anchor and skilled anchor. [6]

3. The body symbolization and mediatization: capital fueling the consumption society

3.1. Body image symbols and aesthetic catering of streamers

In 1937, the American social psychologist H. Blumer proposed symbolic interactionism [7], which states that human interaction is mainly represented by symbolic interaction and includes symbols, context, and the meaning space of interaction. Symbols, which are the fundamental building blocks for communicating significance, perform a crucial intermediary function in social interaction. Context pertains to the circumstances or setting in which individuals engage in their activities, encompassing the object of their actions, role associations, and particular events. The context can set off symbolic interaction as meaningful symbols can only convey their exact meaning in a context. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the behavioral activities of individuals be achieved by interaction with others based on various symbols.

The context of live streaming is a field full of body symbols where pretty boys and girls act as streamers. Body aestheticization has become a prominent social and cultural trend. In this trend, the body is objectified as a commodity available for consumption, even the most stunning commodity. [8] In the consumption process of live streaming, the body turns from a natural body and a productive body into a consumer body. The body symbols produced on the basis of the material body, as a visual-cultural resource, need to be encoded to produce a body landscape through the communication media. The body transforming into a body landscape for consumption means it has become significant capital for streamers. For streamers, especially female streamers, the commodification of the body is the key to attracting and maintaining a fan base. Revenues earned by them reflect their abilities to capture, create and satisfy the desires of their viewers through body management. Female streamers emphasize dressing, make-up, and fitness to have bodies that their viewers prefer. For example, the internet celebrity face is a product of self-disciplining the body by technologies to meet their viewers' imagination and desires for their bodies.

The consumption society is characterized by the consumption-oriented operation logic that the needs and desires of the consumer are seen as the driving force ahead of production, thus generating the concept of consumer supremacy. [9] However, another view suggests that the so-called consumer sovereignty is only an illusion: although consumers think they have the power to choose what they consume, the truth is that they remain controlled by capital and various cultural symbols. [10]

Currently, China is transitioning towards a society focused on consumerism. In this society, people's desires and physical forms are viewed as objects shaped by symbols and values. [11] Individuals use their natural bodies as social bodies: when people shift from the possession of their bodies to social show-offs and from covering their bodies in the past to displaying their bodies in modern times, shaping characters has gradually become a sure path for streamers to meet the aesthetics through their body image symbols. For example, fitness streamers promote fashionable body aesthetics such as mermaid lines, and swan arms. [12] With commercial promotion and widespread recognition of the ideal body, the motivation to shape a character gains external support. For the perception and understanding of the ideal body, the public is easily affected by social and fashionable ideas.

3.2. Body mediatization of a streamer

“Body mediatization” refers to streamers viewing their bodies as a carrier for information dissemination, thus realizing the production and reproduction of consumption desires. [13] Provided that streamers are a material carrier for information dissemination in live streaming, their bodies are not only an important means of production and consumption resource but also a medium. As we know, human interaction depends on a medium. Moreover, the body is an important medium. The communication scientist McLuhan [14], a proposer of the famous judgment that the medium is the message, thinks that the medium is the content of each other: the body can be the medium for in-person communication in face-to-face interpersonal communication and for non-in-person communication in non-face-to-face interpersonal communication. The human body is now commonly portrayed as narrative and lyrical symbol in mainstream culture, frequently showcased as the central subject of visual “communication” in today's visually-driven society. [15]

Although streamers and viewers can interact with each other in real-time, viewers are never able to touch or test products directly across the screen. Therefore, streamers can only convey messages to viewers through their body language. For example, streamers dress up and try on different clothes to show the possibilities of body aesthetics and different styles for clothing sales. The essence of this Seller's Show is presenting product information through symbolic body language to create a beautiful imagination and a sense of self-representation of the products in which viewers project their psychological desires, thus driving their consumption behavior. Indeed, it is only by retaining the body metaphor produced by images at the stage of abstract desire that images can be used as aesthetic commodities available for continuous development for capital appreciation, thus driving the public to complete purchase and consumption as their materialized form. In addition to facial expressions, gestures, product displays, and interactive communication with viewers, streamers can also express emotions through physical actions in live rooms, such as cover photos of female celebrity streamers in dresses and strapless dresses and photos of handsome male streamers, to attract viewers enter live rooms due to their sexual and emotional resonance.

Besides, body mediatization is also reflected in that viewers symbolize the presentation of body images and interact with an anchor during live streaming through rewards as virtual gifts. “Virtual gifts”, such as “Like”, “Flower”, and “Kiss”, are a kind of Expression Package with the function of body narration, which simulates the viewers' expressions, movements, and emotions. As a visual self-representation pattern, virtual gifts project the viewers' virtual bodies [16] online and realize their physical presence in a certain way, with a more intuitive interactive effect.

4. Emotional labor and emotional consumption

Emotional labor is a term coined by the American sociologist Hawkshead in her book *The Finishing of the Mind: The Commercialization of Human Emotion* [17]. She has argued that laborers engage in emotional labor except for physical labor, which requires a reconciliation between consciousness and feelings, suppressing their own emotions and providing emotional value to others. The existing studies have pointed out that streamers are engaged in a kind of emotional labor where they provide emotional value when interacting with their fans through different words and

performances. Online emotional streamers provide emotional value to bottom-ranking men that they do not have from everyday life based on the logic of bottom-level participation and male dominance. Whereas emotional streamers rely on cultivating emotion to win the favor of their viewers in return for material rewards (mainly bounties paid by viewers) [18], the streamers for selling goods have shifted their work pattern from emotional labor to digital performance labor as their benefit mechanism has shifted from gift reward to commissions for selling goods. Sociology, especially cultural sociology, has a relatively more in-depth study of emotional labor and the impact of emotions on individual consumption behavior. Some scholars have pointed out that live webcast has prompted a Simulacra Community in which the interaction between the anchor and the viewers stimulates various types of emotional experiences, such as ecstasy, joy, emotion, and sadness. Through the streamer's all-knowing storytelling, community members communicate and establish collective experiences and behaviors that are perpetuated and strengthened within a contextual sequence of events, culminating in symbolic Interaction Ritual Chains. Moreover, the members acquire an identity translocation and collective identity through the emotional ritual practice of these symbolic codes, while identity is related to the dimension of emotion and indispensable from repeated interaction and rituals. Some researchers have argued that the communication and interaction between streamers and fans, as well as between fans and followers, creates a virtual emotional community. Therefore, we should not only see the streamers in live streaming as emotional laborers but also pay attention to the mechanisms underlying this emotional labor effect.

Dongfang Zhenxuan Live Room is a representative example of the emotional labor of the streamers. They endow the goods with the value of cultural symbols and cleverly add narratives with interspersing life philosophies, thus giving viewers a sense of immersion. The key factor that determines the purchase of goods by viewers may be an emotional factor attached to the goods - spiritual culture, in addition to a rational factor of the use value that consumers as economic persons seek to maximize their utility and purchase goods at the cheapest price. Live streaming in Dongfang Zhenxuan Live Room is not only an instrumental activity of selling commodities but also a symbolic activity of selling spiritual culture. That is why it attracts fans from the middle-income group. The specific cultural atmosphere shaped by this live room satisfies the spiritual and cultural aspirations and consumption needs of specific fan groups by giving the goods a cultural connotation beyond their use value. For example, one fan said that even though he lives near the sea, he couldn't resist buying the prawns from Dongfang Zhenxuan Live Room because he felt they looked more cultured [5]. A fan also entered the Dongfang Zhenxuan Live Room four times in four consecutive days, buying a bag of rice each time, because he had empathy for the streamer's experience, insights on life, and knowledge and cultural attainment derived from the rice sales. It shows that streamers in this live room provide emotional value to viewers and inspire their empathy in interaction and communication. [19] In this sense, it is also a kind of emotional labor and a process of forming Interaction Ritual Chains.

5. Conclusion

The burgeoning live streaming has completely changed the traditional media communication mode and reshaped the connection between media and viewers. It is unique that it allows streamers to convey information more effectively through instant video and images and enhances the interactivity between viewers, bringing a whole new media experience to them. When streamers are communication subjects, their live-streaming marketing becomes a process of personal body mediatization. During this process, the body is both an important means of production and consumption resource but also a medium as a material carrier for information dissemination. Streamers bring together individuals with the same qualities from all walks of life and create an atmosphere through different words and performances, thus allowing them to enjoy the emotional value in the consumption and to purchase goods when getting an emotional experience. In this process, capital appreciation and profit creation are quietly accomplished invisible to consumers, with their

participation gaining emotional value on the one hand and being marked up and becoming part of consumerist production and social reproduction on the other hand.

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