

Research on the Reconstruction of Gender Identity Affected by Fashion Consumption on Social Media

Yuxuan Liu^{1,†} Zichuan Liu^{2,*†} Chenyu Wei^{3,†} Jiaqi Yuan^{4,†}

¹ South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China

² The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

³ Central South University, Changsha, China

⁴ Communication University of Zhejiang, Hangzhou, China

*Corresponding author. Email: zichuanl@student.unimelb.edu.au

†Those authors contributed equally.

ABSTRACT

As the wider filter creates more possible room for clothing elements presented on social media, users are exposed to clothing content that is fashionable but not to their liking as well. Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, this paper discusses the perception and behavior of gender identity in the consumption process in the context of social media, especially focusing on clothing and gender identity. This paper finds that the public's sense of gender identity and actual performative behavior are impacted, and part of them even become related content producers through the process of identification in media consumption and the low-cost pleasure deriving from it. During these processes, the public's clothing taste becomes more unisex and genderless, implying that the possibility space of their aesthetic linked gender and perception of gender identity has been broadened via social media, and the relationship between clothing and identity performance related to gender has been clarified as well. This paper will be beneficial to further explore the relationship between gender, clothing and media in the field of gender studies, and will also provide a reference for fashion consumption in the new media era.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Clothing, Social Media, Possibility Space

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender, one of the most important identities of ourselves, have important influence on the ways in which we live our lives and interact with people around us. As media form the most important arena for shaping, articulating, representing and performing these definitions and the mass media blurs the private and public sphere, gender studies with a focus on media, become one of the main ways to understand our society, particularly with a focus on privileges, power, differences, scripts, stereotypes, etc [1].

When Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman," Judith Butler develops this concept to regard gender identity as "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" [2]. In this sense, gender is not stable, but an identity tenuously constituted in time, an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts, conceptions of which would be determined by our

interactions with environment [2]. Studies on media consumption and this socially constructed gender identity has underlined the dialogic process of how identity and consumption of media texts mutually shape each other, where audiences are seen as active producers of meaning while they consume media products [1]. Francesca Comunello, Lorenza Parisi and Francesca Ieracitano analyze how users perform and negotiate gender scripts on dating apps in their research. They highlight the affordance and constraints of dating apps, contending them to influence the performance and "de-inscription" of gender scripts [3]. Meanwhile, Sofia Caldeira, Sofie Van Bouwel, and Sander De Ridder analyse young people's negotiations and contradictory discourses that shape girls' understanding of their gender scripts. Significantly, they recognize the users' need to negotiate the culturally prevalent negative and gendered stereotypes in media consumption and production [1].

Made by people and worn by people, clothing narrates the socially constructed gender differences with a clear distinction in male and female. According to English feminist writer Virginia Woolf, clothing has a significant effect on our gender identity by influencing how we are perceived and how we perceive ourselves. In another word, clothing not only impacts perception of identity but constitute identity. In Woolf's view, our clothing allow others to see us as we present ourselves, and it allows us to create ourselves and recreate ourselves in new ways [4]. As Denise Riley says, "I project myself as being a such-and-such, I tacitly envisage myself participating in the wider social scene through some new identity category" [5]. For Riley, descriptive words and our own self narratives have a constitutive power. As we describe ourselves, we are asserting our own identities, but if we describe ourselves differently than we usually do, or in constantly different ways, we then take control, to some degree, over our own identities [4]. "Self-descriptions," Riley says, "are indeed costumes" and can be worn deliberately as if they were clothing [5].

Constituting the discourse of clothing and media, Chinese scholar Yirui Wang contends that on social media, viewers' reliance on and trust in cosmetic content have increased over time because of the convenience of viewing, the life-like content, and the high degree of communicative interaction [6]. Their demands for beauty content gradually switched from single informative requests to informative and emotional needs. With the interactive content on social media, such as make-up videos and pictures of daily outfits, the audience receiving information tends to be entertaining. It is easy for the audience to bring themselves into the first perspective of cosmetic content. From imagining themselves as the main character, they will soon taste a sense of satisfaction. Through this way, learning from others has steadily become a more straightforward and more emotional process. Thus, the impact of make-up or clothing content on social media has increased, and viewers are more likely to be affected unconsciously. Actually, this process can be interpreted as a kind of development of pretend play and virtual agents on social media, because "people are able to create virtual agents that are associated with someone else's body, and even to simulate this other body on the basis of narrated or read words" [7]. Steen also agrees that sociocultural forms of pretend play, such as mass media entertainment, may tap into this ancient system [7]. About genderless clothing, Guorui Yu suggests that deviation itself is a social theory that people must deal with clothing norms according to the needs of their social behavior. "As long as people's sense of security is not destroyed and interpersonal attraction is aspired to be improved, innovation of various clothing forms will never end, and unisex style will also find more diverse expressions"[8].

To specifically define, the unisex style should intend to obscure the identification of sex and conceal the diversity, while androgynous style seeks to unite the male and female body in one, which would lead to a return to a primordial cosmic unity [9]. The present research then looks into these particular clothing styles, which should symbolize, in some degree, the negotiation, subvert and reconstruction of gender identity via performance. The term "clothing" as used here refers to "all items of apparel and adornment" [10]. This broad definition of clothing includes cosmetics, jewellery, accessories, and hair styling as well as apparel items.

While most existing studies focus on the content and representations of the gender scripts, stereotypes and negotiated identities, there are not enough studies on how social media influences the perception of the relationship between clothing and gender performance. Applying communication and cultural theories, this research will therefore focus on audience' subjective perception to explore how media has revealed this relationship and how the audience's sense of gender identity and actual behavior have been changed in this process.

This research will take RED as a case study, which is a Chinese social platform that takes User Generated Content (UGC) as main innovation, encouraging young people to show themselves, socialize and make consumption decisions. The primary audience of RED is young women between 16-35 years old who mainly focus on the content of clothing, make-up, and skincare. RED is one of the most popular and influential social media and e-commerce platforms in the field of fashion and beauty in China. Therefore, it is representative to select RED and its female users as the main substance of this study.

2. METHOD

Qualitative and quantitative methods will be both adopted in this research.

2.1. Questionnaire Survey

To understand the cognition of female users of RED about gender and clothing initially and to guide the correct direction for further detailed subjective questions about gender and clothing in the next step, we designed a questionnaire survey.

Convenience sampling and Snowball sampling were used in this research. The questionnaire was first randomly distributed to some female users of RED through the internet. Then they were asked to distribute the questionnaire to other female users of little red books around them, and so on. The number of respondents in this survey rocketed dramatically, just like a snowball, and finally, more than 200 female users

of RED over the age of 16 have participated in this survey. They were asked to answer the questions and complete the Likert Scale.

The questionnaire mainly consisted of three parts: the basic information of the respondents, users' cognition of the relationship between gender performance and clothing, and the impact of the contents via RED on personal clothing and comprehension related to gender.

The basic information of the interviewees includes age, educational background, time, and frequency of using RED. In the Likert Scale, interviewees were requested to rate their perceptions of connections between gender and clothing and score the degree to which the problem situations fit their situations.

After the questionnaire was collected, the data through the effective questionnaires (n=200) was statistically analyzed.

2.2. Interview

To further understand the audiences' cognition of the relationship between gender performance and clothing, the impacts on users' habits of clothing brought by RED, and the process of gender cognitive changes, we selected 10 heavily dependent users of RED from the personnel participating in the questionnaire and conducted intensive interviews with them.

On the basis of the questionnaire in the first step, the interview questions basically cover the factors and processes that affect the participants' cognition of self gender performance, clothing gender expression, and RED's impact on clothing gender expression.

Based on a reflexive thematic analysis method, we recorded the contents of every interview and converted them verbatim into a text version. After that, We repeatedly reviewed and analyzed each respondent's answers, coded them, and finally divided them into two themes and eight sub-themes. We comprehended their detailed perceptions of the relationship between gender and clothing and the factors and processes that RED influenced through the interviews. All responses and participants are voluntary, and significant results and analysis are presented below in detail with participants' name anonymously.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The relationship between clothing and gender

3.1.1. Habits affect clothing

Some participants (n=4) described that the choice of clothing has a greater correlation with personality and

behaviors. The main factors are living habits, body characteristics, and appearance. One participant shared that, "My clothing style is more athletic, for example, I do exercise 5 times a week nearly every day, so I just wear sportswear with short hair." Another said, "(my dressing style is) Usually related to my hobbies, and according to my appearance and makeup changing, I will consider a more mature style and change in time."

3.1.2. Sense of gender identity

In terms of self-gender cognition, participants have a large difference of opinion. Some (n=3) described that their inner self-gender cognition is firm, it won't change no matter how the appearance and external performance looks like. For example, one participant said, "I have a very strong gender perception, I won't change my gender identity because of appearance and others' comments."

Other participants (n=5) debated that external changes, like appearance performance, clothing style, reflect inner changing as the line of self-perception or gender identity. One participant said, "Their inner things change first, then external performance will change. Because I feel that what we wear is still determined by our own hearts, which means gender cognition has changed and they will choose to express themselves in this way. At the same time, performance and behaviors after changing will further aggravate their own gender cognition."

3.1.3. Clothing for gender expression

According to questionnaire data, 49% of respondents believe that gender cognition and dress interact with each other, 22.5% think that gender cognition affects dress, and 25% think that the two do not affect each other.

Through interviews, participants (n=8) generally believed that clothing represents gender. Some participants described that dressing will be in line with their gender cognition, as girls will often buy some typical feminine characteristics of clothing, such as skirts, tight clothing, light clothing, etc. Moreover, as bystanders, people usually identify the gender of the person through the appearance as the line of clothing, haircut, makeup, and so on. For example, if a lady wears neutral clothing with short hair, people will have the misconception that "The person is a boy".

3.2 Perception and acceptance of the audience

3.2.1. Gain satisfaction and accept new clothing style

Over one-half of respondents in the questionnaire survey (67.5%) described that they would be attracted

by the new styles and were willing to imitate those. And they could gain satisfaction and happiness when they imagine wearing the same one. For example, one participant in the interview shared, "I would like to focus on clothing style that has their own ideas and creativity. It may not be right for me, but I feel that I could get pleasure from it especially when imagining it was me wearing those clothes. I also collect creative ideas from posts, and then I feel I can get exposed to new things at the forefront of the trend."

When discussing why they were willing to imitate, 82.96% of the respondents considered that they wanted to try a new style, and believed that the new clothing style can bring freshness to themselves and others; 71.85% of the respondents thought they hoped to provide a reference for their future clothing style, and re-position their style or find a style that is really suitable for them.

3.2.2. Temperament change of behavior

Respondents said that the OOTD (outfits of the day) had a certain impact on their behaviors. 70.5% of the respondents said that if they wear more feminine clothing such as skirts and gentle colour clothes with feminine makeup and hairstyles, they would pay attention to their words and deeds, and make their tone of voice and behaviours gentler and more elegant. If they wore more masculine or darker colour clothes with a short haircut, they would feel cooler than normal. One participant in the interview said, "After I cut my hair short, and then I put on my green jacket, I felt i were really handsome. And I thought if I were a boy, I would definitely have a lot of girlfriends. Then I draw a cool makeup."

The remaining respondents believe that occasional stylistic changes do not have an impact on their behavior, or have a minimal impact that they do not find.

3.2.3. Wider filter of clothing element

Over half of the participants in the interview (n= 6) described that browsing the post on RED would change their stereotypes or views about clothing elements. One participant said,

"At first, I couldn't understand or accept some clothing styles on RED, and i thought they' re weird and uncommon. But the more I was recommended and watched, the more acceptable i felt than before. I felt it' s pretty cool and they changed my mind, they gave me more choice about clothing elements and styles. In other words, my aesthetics about clothing fashion was expanded."

3.2.4. Unisex and genderless

Most participants (n=7) described that nowadays the gender restrictions on clothing are getting smaller and they thought they would wear the clothes they liked and would not care about the gender restrictions on clothing. For example, one participant said, "Creativity doesn't distinguish between genders. I think unisex or genderless is the most freeway for clothing. I think it's a person who wear this kinds of clothing are very brave and has a good understanding of themselves. "Others said, "I think the elements and style of the outfit can remove the (physiological) gender label, which cannot define a person's gender or identity. Now many brands also have a lot of genderless clothing styles, and the gender of clothes is gradually weakened now."

What' s more, according to the questionnaire data, 47.5% respondents did not pay attention to the fact that the clothing style matches their gender identity. Their priorities are comfort (86%), fashion (75%) and their own style (53%).

3.2.5. Communicator shifting

Seldom interviewees (n=3) shared that after scrolling through posts and trying new styles out, they were willing to share their changes and unique dressing style. It' s worth mentioning that their identity changed from audience to communicator, and after getting feedback from the audiences, the communicators were encouraged or advised (comments) to find more materials to produce different contents to share. In this process, they got a sense of satisfaction and achievement from the positive reactions among audiences.

3.3 The impact of platforms on information acquisition and perception change

3.3.1. The number of likes and comments

In certain circumstances, the Likes and Comments below the post will affect the user's judgment about the quality and popularity of the post. But overall, participants looked more objectively at the number of Likes and Comments.

In the questionnaire data, 27% of people considered that they are less affected or do not care about the Likes and Comments, 31.5% remain neutral. But 41.5% of users are affected more and usually judge the contents refer to Likes and Comments.

In the interview, some interviewees described that "When I scrolled through the post, I habitually look at the Likes and Comments first, and want to know others' opinions about that. If there are some negative

comments, I will be more cautious about the view in the post and think carefully about should I try this?"

What's more, there are also parts of participants who mentioned that the quality of the pictures, the rational use of text typesetting and emojis, and the appearance of the blogger, will also have an impact on their judgment.

3.3.2. Algorithm: personalized information recommendation

Some participants described that personalized information recommendations homogenize content. When users search the same type of keywords many times, the algorithm will recommend the same thing continuously until you search different keywords. But participants still accept such algorithmic mechanisms, believing that personalized information recommendations can meet their needs.

In addition, parts of participants described that they are less affected by the algorithm. For them, the channels of obtaining information are diverse and the styles they liked are extensive, which means they will acquire information across the platform. Therefore, they will search keywords on purpose and always change the keywords.

4. DISCUSSION

As a result of the wider filter, which creates more possible space for clothing elements, the results show that clothing temperament changes people's behavior, and their clothing style becomes more unisex and genderless, implying that their aesthetic linked gender identity has been broadened. The relationship between clothes and gender identity, as the findings of interviews shows before, clothing can influence one's feeling of gender identity, but it cannot define one's gender. Gender, according to Butler, is not a stable identity. It is one that is formed via the stylisation of the body, but clothing is only an external representation that does not establish a person's psychological or physical gender. Also, because preferences, habits, and circumstances can influence how people dress, it is not set in stone and can be altered. At the same time, gender identity develops throughout time, and the prospect of gender transformation can be realised through a change in style in between such activities [2].

Besides, people's activities define who they are and mould their image into that person. The results have revealed that those who regard themselves to be nice are more likely to dress in delicate, pastel colours. Personality is also influenced by their clothing. The notion that "pink belongs to girls" and "blue belongs to boys" is probably the first language that indicates the relationship between fashion and gender [11]. Gender relations, the way gender is performed through our

bodies, and iterations in the social meanings in which we live are all influenced by style and attire. As a result, components and styles that are not necessarily gender specific, such as the checkerboard aspect that is presently popular in China, are shifting and being embraced. In addition, the results support previous research from Davis [12], which shows gender was discovered to be a greater predictor of sex-related clothing behaviour than any other factor. Gender identification was also more prominent in women than in men. The results also illustrated that most of the young women are unconcerned with online remarks, are not easily influenced by others, and are more likely to stick to their own beliefs, which is a positive indication.

Based on the results, it can be concluded that people are influenced by the platform's algorithmic recommendations because of using social media (RED), and that even though people are rarely pushed to clothing content that is fashionable but not to their liking, they still click in because of the availability of high-quality images, which increased the possible clothing spaces. This also indicates the favourable impact of RED on consumers' aesthetic expansion when combined with fashion trends. After obtaining good effects from RED, users will selectively emulate what they wear and reconstruct their own/others' gender. This is due to the pleasure and practical value that people gain from looking at the clothes of these bloggers [2]. Users may even transition from consumers to producers as a result of positive reinforcement from others, making them more eager to share and support the arguments and hypotheses that we previously provided.

Furthermore, the reason why the androgynous style is the most popular one among young women is because that there is no cultural backdrop, no distinctive design element, no opinion leader, and no labelling in genderless style. Androgynous style is a view that simply implies extending the reach of the dressing outcome such that clothing has no sense of boundaries. It's an indication of abandoning stereotypical dressing ideas and the result of multi-dimensional perception. Genderless dressing makes wearing a diverse vehicle in terms of clothing elements, the coexistence of the maiden and the gentleman, as well as the merging of the adolescent and the noblewoman, making gender features of dressing impossible to discern with confidence. It is also a break from femininity and so-called male fashion on the surface [11].

The survey still has some limitations. We failed to collect abundant sample size, which made the survey less extensive, and the conclusion we reached are still limited to summarizing the laws that can be used universally. Besides, in the selection of samples population, their age group was concentrated in the range of 18-25 years old, and we ignored behavioral characteristics and cognitive characteristics of different

age. Moreover, we don't classify populations, nor do we take into account some of the uniqueness of special groups, such as the LGBTQ population.

5. CONCLUSION

While the culture that defines what is man or woman has been changing with the time, what remains still is the need for a sense of security about one's sense of identity, including his sense of gender identity. Focusing on audience's subjective perception, this study explores how the audience's sense of gender identity and actual behavior have been impacted by their consumption of fashion and clothing related content on social media. It can be concluded that clothing temperament changes people's behavior, and their clothing style becomes more unisex and genderless after related content consumption on social media, implying that the possibility space of their aesthetic linked gender has been broadened. More globally, adopting a feminist psychological perspective, this research has contributed to communication and cultural field in a relatively positive tone. Only when the possibility space is enlarged and diversity accepted, can young generation find their true anchors in this era of mass media which is full of competing voices and views. There is no doubt that this paper will provide a new case and perspective for gender research, and also help the academic community to further explore the relationship between gender, clothing and media.

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