

Style Surgery

-- Social skin
nurturance and
modification





Who do you think he is? How do you judge it? What is the blogger's purpose in posting this blog?

We can guess that he is a male engaged in the sales industry. Although he is wearing a suit, the suit is obviously a universal size. And because he has dark skin and an unadorned body and expression, people may think that he is a working-class person who is not financially wealthy.

The blogger posted a photo of his image and the subsequent question, "Can't find a date, what do you think is my problem?", implies that he himself thinks that his problem lies in his dress. This is a simple way of understanding the above concepts. The blogger believes that his clothing will affect others' impressions of him, causing him to lose some social value.



What are the changes? What has the blogger done to change himself?

The blogger changed his hairstyle, learned makeup, and developed a skincare habit. At the same time, he also constantly buys new clothes to try out a style that suits him. Finally, he developed a fitness habit and not only regularly goes to the gym but also buys nutritional supplements and eats fitness meals.

Because the blogger's goal is to find a female partner, he posted on Xiaohongshu, where the audience is mostly female, and placed himself in the gaze of women. Different from men's dominant discourse on women in real life, this case achieves the reversal of power structure. Therefore, it can also clearly show the relationship between the power holder and the object.

Read posts and comments of it. Summarize the common keywords in different posts and comments



Main Arguments

- The poster exhibits a self-awareness of responding to power and actively transforming oneself.
- The commenter demonstrates a dominant discourse in the process of interpellation and nurturance of the body.
- There is a shared premise between the power holder and the individual: to incorporate the body into the prescribed "normal" trajectory so that the body has exchange value.
- This process fully reflects how social discourse trains and nurtures a social body. The masses, platforms, and algorithm technologies can all be organizers of this social discourse. The personal body, as an object of nurturance, commodification, and consumption, can be regarded as a screen projecting the influence of social power on the body.



找不着对象，大家觉得我问题出在哪
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2021-12-06 10:00





Futher Discussion:

- These people use some of the same keywords, such as "college freshmen," "Xiaoai Tongxue," etc. They also take photos in the same style, such as photos at home in the countryside or dormitory. Their accounts have considerable transformation results in a very short period of time. Do you think this is a marketing strategy? If so, would it challenge the conclusion we reached today?

Teaching Script of

“Style Surgery -- Social Skin Nurturance and Modification”

Teaching Target: High school students without concepts related to body theories.

Teaching Objective: Using cases of "Normal People Makeovers" on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu, to show students how individuals actively transform their bodies in response to mainstream discourse and understand how power intervenes and cultivates the body practices of individuals.

Part 1 Introduction and Basic Theory

Hello everyone. Today, we are going to discuss some cases of “Normal People Makeovers” on Xiaohongshu (a Chinese social media platform).

At the beginning of the course, I would like you to take a look at the person on the first slide. He is “Xiaoaotongxue”. This is the origin of the popular “ordinary person makeovers” type of posts on the social media app Xiaohongshu (also known as RED). He uploaded this photo and asked fellow users for some advice. You have two minutes to observe. I want you to guess who he is. Any information is acceptable, such as age, profession, economic status, etc.

Students think that he is around 20 to 30 years old, from a third-tier city or below, and possibly a low-income worker. Why did you make such judgments? I would like to ask some students to share the clues of your judgment.

The students describe the evidence of judgment: the male has dark skin, a short stature, and uncombed hair. Although he wears a neat suit, the suit is obviously a standard size. His posture and expression are relatively plain, and he is slightly chubby.

Your observations are all very detailed, with a lot of descriptions of the male’s body. But how can we judge a person's identity by observing their body?

In fact, a person’s body is not as simple as we think. It can be divided into physical and social bodies. “Society, as a system of meanings, shapes how the physical body will be experienced.” (Cheung 2023: Lecture 2, Jan 16) At the same time, a person’s clothing,

as an extension of their skin, “constitute one such cultural medium, perhaps the one most specialised in the shaping and communication of personal and social identity.” (Turner 2012:487)

Simply put, a person’s physical body is “dressed” by social norms. When we analyze a person's dressing style, “Such bodily styles as we are writing of arise spontaneously but are also interpreted in the same spontaneous way.” (Douglas 2003:73) We think we are making natural descriptions, but we are still using sets of social norms to explain this body. When we analyze the male body, we instinctively use the social norms or experiences we have to make judgments.

The above is the theoretical basis of today’s lesson. I hope that you will remember that all body expressions are culturally constructed in the analysis that follows.

Part 2 Posts Analysis: Body as Consumer Objects

Let’s take a closer look at the text under his photo. He asks, “Can’t find a girlfriend, where do you think my problem lies?” I would like to ask everyone, what is the purpose of his post?

People think that he is seeking help to find a girlfriend. Let’s look back at his entire post, taking into account both the picture and the text. Firstly, we learn from the text that he is not favored by women, so he wants to ask netizens to find the reason and offer suggestions. By attaching a half-body photo of himself with no other relevant information, he suggests his own attitude: the problem lies with his appearance. The blogger believes that his appearance will affect others’ impressions of him, making it difficult for him to establish romantic relationships. This is a simple interpretation of the theory we previously discussed.

At the same time, his post was published on the social media platform Xiaohongshu. Why do you think this is the case?

Because the majority of Xiaohongshu users are women. This blogger has actively exposed himself to the gaze of many women in order to find a girlfriend and accept their critics and advice.

In that process, the body of the blogger “signify status and functions as sign-value only.” (Cheung 2023: Lecture 11 Mar 27) And then “the representation of the body” becomes “capital” and “fetish (or consumer object)” (Baudrillard 2020:277), embodying the exchange value of the body. Meanwhile, this also implies a tendency to fetishize the body, emphasizing the decisive role that appearance plays in heterosexual relationships.

Part 3 Posts Analysis: Body as Salvation

Next, I’m going to show you the results of his one-year effort based on people’s suggestions. I once again ask you to observe for 3 minutes. This time, you cannot simply describe his appearance but also need to point out the changes in his appearance.

The blogger has changed his hairstyle, makeup, and dress style to become more minimalistic. The post also includes photos of him showing off his muscles.

So, what did he do to achieve these changes?

He needed to constantly try new hairstyles and clothing styles to find what suited him best. He also learned about skincare and makeup and developed a habit of working out. In addition to going to the gym every day, he also bought nutritional supplements and ate healthy meals.

In fact, the blogger’s behavior is very similar to having plastic surgery, except that his transformation is not on his physical body, but on his social skin, namely his outward appearance. I call it “Style Surgery”. Such a transformation does not require expensive financial costs but relies more on personal effort. For people with low economic income like this blogger, improving what they perceive as their "shortcomings" transcends class boundaries. Through continuous self-improvement, this man has gained self-esteem and confidence. Therefore, such style surgery, like plastic surgery, can be a kind of “salvation” and “enhancement” for the body.

As Baudrillard said, these efforts were an “investment” of the “inside” world. He “narcissistically” invested in his body to “form it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world.” (Baudrillard 2005:278)

Part 3 Comment Analysis: Power Dynamics between Bloggers and Commenters

Do you think Xiaoaotongxue, the blogger, achieved success? We are not asking whether you like him or not, but if his transformation was successful.

His transformation should still be considered quite successful. He succeeded in transforming himself through hard work into a person who meets the social norms of the Xiaohongshu micro-community.

Now please look at the comments in the posts. You have 5 minutes to form into groups and summarize these comments. Each group should give me 5 common words used in the posts or the comments.

There are lots of keywords lied in the comments, such as “take advice”, “not sensitive”, height, weight, “self-discipline”, “nurture”, “n girlfriends are helping you”.

Here is where we should specifically dive deep into the discourse of the commenters and explore the relationship between the body and society.

There is a power dynamic between the poster and the commenter. The poster exhibits a self-awareness of responding to power and actively transforming oneself. At the same time, the commenter demonstrates a dominant discourse in the process of interpellation and nurturance of the body.

There is a shared premise between the power holder and the individual: to incorporate the body into the prescribed "normal" trajectory so that the body has exchange value. Those who seek for transformation become the objects of power, accepting its gaze and discipline. They accept these rules and, in turn, empower these commenters.

In such a flow of power, the body trains itself consciously and undergoes self-transformation actively and continuously. “The redundant ‘more perfect’ suggests that for some, plastica is not a one-time passage into normality, but a never-ending pursuit of incremental improve.” (Edmonds 2007:375) The desire for such transformation is promoted by affirming the symbolic value of the body while negating the natural body. Style Surgery “can be seen as one technology among many in a sexual republic where citizenship requires participation in a consumer lifestyle, the medical management of sexuality and reproduction, and an aesthetic tinkering with the body for therapeutic.”

(Edmonds 2007:376) Thus, the body is incorporated into the consumption of symbolic symbols.

Part 4 Conclusion and Further Thoughts

Our case fully reflects how social discourse trains and nurtures a social body. The masses, platforms, and algorithm technologies can all be organizers of this social discourse. The personal body, as an object of nurturance, commodification, and consumption, can be regarded as a screen projecting the influence of social power on the body.

Finally, I have a further question for you to discuss. I will show some transformation photos of ordinary people taken after the person in our example. These people use some of the same keywords, such as “college freshmen”, “Ordinary people Makeovers,” etc. They also take photos in the same style, such as photos at home in the countryside or dormitory. Their accounts have considerable transformation outcomes in a very short period of time. Do you think this is a marketing strategy? If so, would it challenge or enforce the conclusion we reached today?

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