Male Color Consumption and Motivation from the Perspective of Fan Comments

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Abstract: With the improvement of women’s economic strength and ideological liberation, “She-economy” gradually prospered, and various consumer goods aimed at women’s demands continuously emerged, with “male color consumption” as the representative. From the theoretical perspective of symbolic consumption, this paper adopts textual analysis to study fan comments in Wang Hedi’s endorsement video of Downy Fragrance Beads, to explore how male color consumption is formed and developed, as well as the roles of female fans, capital, and mass media in the consumption process. It is found that the advent of the attention economy era, the well-designed advertising and marketing strategies, as well as the virtual intimate relationship between fans and the celebrity, are its realistic and psychological bases that cannot be ignored for their influence on the emergence and popularity of male color consumption. In addition, capital and mass media also play a very important role in the production and strengthening of male color consumption’s symbolic meaning, that is, under the support of capital and through the strengthening of mass media, male color consumption has realized the transition from use value consumption to symbolic value consumption, and has a certain impact on the awareness and behavior of female fans.

Keywords: Male color consumption; Fan comments; Symbolic meaning.

1. Introduction

Gender commoditization means in the form of “gender consumption”, incorporating gender into the whole economic activity, its circulation and exchange in a market like any other commodity, then the value is realized (Zhou, 2005). Unfortunately, from ancient times to the present, from China to the world, as long as there is a time and space existing gender commoditization, beyond all question, is female being the main object of commoditization no matter in quantity or scale. However, in recent years, the gender commoditization of male has become a new spectacle of consumption (Wang & Zhao, 2021). In other words, male color consumption which refers to a social and cultural phenomenon that takes male physique, image, temperament, taste, and even sex as the object of consumption becomes a new way of economic value creation.

Male color consumption is an increasingly public part of everyday lives in the form of advertising and other components of global capitalism (Horley & Clarke, 2016). In the new media age, this phenomenon is reflected in the increasing number of male stars with high appearance frequency on the screen and a large number of fans being attracted by their handsome appearances and various well-designed personas. These are beneficial to grasp huge fan bases for male celebrities, and then endorsements following, with even some traditionally female products now being endorsed by male celebrities. Previous studies also indicate that fans play a nonnegligible role in the emergence of this phenomenon in accounting for their visual and psychological needs.

Wang Hedi by virtue of Love Between Fairy and Devil became a big hit last summer, with the addition of his handsome appearance and humorous personality gaining wide attention. After he announced to be the brand spokesperson of GOLDOAST, the number of viewers in the brand’s live streaming room increased nearly sevenfold than usual, demonstrating the incredible appeal of the male star. At present, Wang Hedi has a large number of female followers on Weibo, and the majority of his Weibo launched from August 2022 to October 2022 have received more than 200,000 likes, showing his super popularity. Therefore, it is representative and worthy to select the Sina Weibo comments of Wang Hedi as the research object.

2. Materials and Methods

Considering the cultural connotation of fan comments, Jean Baudrillard’s theory of symbol consumption which derives from the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (Zeige, 2015) and Roland Barthes (Zhang, 2013) is seen as the theoretical foundation for this paper. Symbol consumption theory argues that the real purpose of thing consumption is symbol consumption which is a form of consumer self-realization and inevitably leads to the formation of a new culture of consumption with symbolic value at its core. Symbolic value means when an object or a commodity is consumed as a symbol, its value is based on the social status and power it represents rather than on its cost or labor value (Kong, 2002). In this paper, undisputedly, when male color is consumed, it inevitably involves the male star’ symbolic value which carries a certain cultural meaning and is reflected by the words sent by fans. In view of this, the paper employs Baudrillard’s theory of symbol consumption as its theoretical foundation to meet the purpose of the paper, namely, revealing male color consumption and its motivation from the perspective of the fan community through the analysis of cultural meanings explicitly and implicitly embodied in fan’ comments.

This paper intends to answer the following two questions: What are the realistic and psychological bases for the emergence of male color consumption? What are the roles of capital, and media in the production and strengthening of male color consumption’s symbolic meaning?

To address these two questions, a textual analysis would be carried out on Wang Hedi’s Weibo to explore male color...
consumption and its motivation reflected by the fan comments on Weibo sent on October 19, 2022, about the endorsement of “Downy Fragrance Beads”, a kind of laundry care product that makes the fragrance stayed on the clothes for a long time. Laundry care product on most occasions is treated as female product considering women’s main laundry responsibilities, especially since this product mainly functions in retaining fragrance, now being endorsed by a male. Choosing this Weibo can better reflect this spectacle that even for the reversed-gender products, fans will still follow the celebrity without too much hesitation only out of affection towards the male celebrity. Therefore, the chosen material is in line with the research topic of this paper. This Weibo receives 195 thousand comments which not only provide large enough research data but also dissect the reasons for the prevalent male color consumption and the embodiment of symbolic value.

3. Literature Review

According to Baudrillard (2001), in the current consumer society, people’s consumption of goods has transitioned from the consumption of goods’ use value to their symbolic value which means when people consume goods, they give priority to the symbolic meaning behind the goods. In view of this, male color enters into the consumption field. Furthermore, this phenomenon is closely related to the continuous advancement of the feminist movement explaining why relevant studies mainly focus on the symbolic consumption of male color and its interpretation from a feminist perspective.

Lian (2017) contended that women’s consumption of “male color” is mainly the consumption of the symbolic meaning behind them, which brings consumers unprecedented emotional comfort. Liu (2018) treated this as a subversion of the traditional gaze of women and men, a rebellion of women against male visual hegemony, and a manifestation of women’s struggle for their subject status. In addition, male color consumption is considered a typical product of consumer society, symbolic consumption directly stimulates people’s consuming desires.

The body had become the focus of modern people’s attention and is the most beautiful consumer product (Hu, 2017). More and more body consumptions were favored by people in television culture (Bourdieu,2000). The image of masculinlity portrayed on screen was created based on the market demand in which the body and temperament of men were regulated (Lu, 2009). Therefore, An (2010) put forward that in the current consumer society, not only were women’s bodies being sold as commodities, but men’s bodies were also gradually encoded into the consumer symbol system and become a symbolic commodity. For instance, the rise of “male color” had led to record ratings for television series, television dramas and reality shows — the excellent platforms for the spread of “male color” (Ni, 2015; Ouyang, 2019). However, in a study on fan economy, Jiang (2017) also indicated that regarding “male color” as a gimmick to sell products and bluffing are likely to lead to irrational consumption behaviors of fans.

It’s worth noting that male color consumption is closely related to the feminist movement, which represents the rise of feminism and the gradual improvement of women’s status. Chen (2007) pointed out that it was the development of feminism that made male color consumption gradually become mainstream, from consuming female color to consuming male color, from “male gaze” to “female gaze”. Women no longer assumed the role to be looked at but could gaze at and fantasize about the male body reflecting the trend of gender equality. Huang (2015) contributed this phenomenon to feminism that demanded equal status with men and this thought had entered the public sphere and become widely accepted by women. Gong (2017) treated this as a sign of the rise of women’s economic independence and cultural diction right. For instance, Talent Shows in which women sited on the judgment seat to comment on the appearances of men reflected the unprecedented dominance and authority of women (Chen, 2007) and it is a subversion of hegemonic masculinity (Lv, 2011). And Yang (2019) contended that male color consumption is a rejection and rebellion against patriarchal discourse. However, Wen (2016) argued that male color consumption did not imply the return of woman’s rights in the true sense or a break in the patriarchal order; essentially, it was a manifestation of the expanding trend of commodification. This idea coincides with Zhou (2017), namely, its essence was a manifestation of the expanding trend of commodification in which most women still undertook the roles of passive consumers, and the media had once again strengthened its control over women’s ideology.

In recent years, “she-economy” gradually come into people’s view. Under this economic model, a broad consensus that women were the force to be reckoned with in the consumer sphere and female’s market demands were seen as a way to gain profit by businesspeople, had been reached. Therefore, they applied the “male color” as a promotional point to create fantasies and happiness on the psychological level of women consumers to attract more attention and consumption. The rise of the “she-economy” had a nonnegligible impact on overall economic activities (Zhou, 2015). Therefore, more and more male celebrities were popular with women and were appearing on the screen (Huang, 2015). Hou and Luo (2018) found that fans were willing to pay for their idols’ movies, television, advertising, and online careers, which accelerated the production of symbols and the growth of the fan economy in consumer society.

4. The Realistic and Psychological Bases of Male Color Consumption

In view of the realistic base of male color consumption, there is no doubt that the arrival of consumer society, the improvement of women’s economic power, and ideological emancipation are the reasons for the gradual development of this phenomenon. While the influence of the attention economy and marketing advertising should not be underestimated. In terms of the psychological base of male color consumption, the virtual affinity between fans and male celebrities has a great impact on its popularity.

4.1 Attention Economy

In 1997, Michael H. Goldhaber formally introduced the concept of “attention economy”. Attention economy refers to
a special economic model in which a company maximizes the attention of users or consumers and cultivates potential consumers to obtain maximum future business benefits. In this economy, the most important resource is the attention of the public.

The image and physique of male celebrities are the most intuitive vehicle to attract the attention of fans. The stereotype—“beauty is good” leads fans to associate good looks with pleasant qualities. A look at the comments on Weibo shows a high frequency of the word “handsome”. Female fans directly admire and praise the male celebrity calling him “prince”, “knight” and others. And even for terms “cute” and “good-looking” which are more commonly used to describe kids or women, now employing high frequencies in these comments to describe the star.

Male color consumption is the “gaze” that fans give to Wang Hedi. The subject of the “gaze” is the one who has power and desire, and the object is manipulated by the other part (Wang & Zhao, 2021). In the new media era, “male color” is a powerful weapon to attract scarce attention. Female aesthetics have a clear dynamic role in shaping the images of male celebrities, and the market is paying an increasing number of attention to the preferences of female fans, thus producing more quantity of celebrities in line with female aesthetics. This can be seen in the Weibo comments of Wang Hedi’s studio. In the same advertisement for the endorsement of Downy Fragrance Beads, Wang Hedi’s Weibo is full of compliments, such as “cute”, “handsome”, and “fragrance”. On the contrary, his studio receives various criticisms and requirements, like “the next drama’s makeup is very important, bring your costume and styling designer into the group”; “the next thing is to make the most perfect costume and makeup design”. Although these comments have nothing to do with the content to be promoted by this microblog, fans can put forward their requirements without scruples, embodying the huge speaking right of fans in male color consumption.

### 4.2 Marketing Advertisement

The video advertisement of the product focuses on Wang Hedi’s introduction of product efficacy and application method in the tone of a boyfriend. Fragrance Beads are a type of laundry product, whose main function is to leave a fragrance on clothes after the product is used. In the traditional concept, women are the main consumers of this product, so it is also more often endorsed by women. For instance, Lisa, Yang Mi, and Zhao Liying have endorsed Fragrance Beads with different brands.

The video begins with Wang Hedi reaching his hand out to the screen and saying “Ready to go out?” in an intimate tone. In the scene, Wang Hedi is wearing delicate makeup and a pink suit. Pink is usually considered to be associated with love and romance, so the color of the suit has been chosen to match the atmosphere rendered by the product. “Pink, pink, Wang Hedi is so handsome”; “The pink suit is handsome”; “This pink color is creamy and cute...” and other similar opinions can be founded in fan comments. And even some fans call him “a pink piglet”. It shows that the choice of this color attracts fans’ attention successfully and paves the way for marketing. Supplemented by the 7 styles of the product and their corresponding fragrance in a form of a picture, fans can better choose the right product for themselves. As a result, the purchasing behaviors of fans can also be seen in the comments. For instance: “Get the same scent”; “Yeah eh, husband you will use it too, do we have the same scent right away”; “I’m happy to place an order! Causing my desire to buy!” These comments indicate that media “sold” the attention attracted by gender characteristics to advertisers, thus turning attention resources into economic value (Lu, 2006).

### 4.3 Virtual Affinity

When fans lack intimate relationships in real life and have no way to put their own emotions, it is easy for them to take their favorite stars as the object of emotional support, then stars become familiar and distant illusions accompanying fans. In the past, due to the lack of communication channels, fans only had a one-way and distant admiration for celebrities. While with the help of new media, fans can easily access Weibo to see the daily life of celebrities and celebrities can talk to their fans through Weibo, which brings them closer to each other. By purchasing the products endorsed by the celebrity, fans further strengthen their emotional connection with him. In this virtual relationship, fans can enjoy spiritual happiness and emotional satisfaction.

By analyzing the female fans’ appellations for Wang Hedi in comments, it can be found that fans addressed him as “elder brother,” “baby,” “husband,” “Didi,” “puppy dog,” “boss,” “my precious baby,” etc. From these terms, it can be seen that fans put themselves into a virtual affinity and their emotional needs are satisfied. On the other hand, for the sake of growing and consolidating their core fan base, celebrities sometimes through their words and actions on social media platforms to make their fans believe that they are “in an intimate relationship with their idols”. For example, in the video, Wang Hedi says to the camera, “Keep up the good work today!” and “Let the details add to our image”, which naturally brings fans into the intimate relationship they have envisioned with the male celebrity. And the use of the inclusive “our” brings the fans closer to the actor, making them feel better about their intimate relationship with him. Therefore, fans also express their care and support for the star in their Weibo comments, such as “Have a good rest”, “cheer up”, and “Look a little haggard”. Thus, in this virtual intimate relationship, fans have no qualms about expressing their admiration, praise, and care for the celebrity to gain emotional satisfaction.

When celebrities promote endorsed products, fans will be the first to provide support and to show their enthusiasm to the celebrities, they often make their consumption decisions within a very short response time and give feedback in the Weibo comments. Therefore, the relevant photos of their orders can also be seen in this comment section, they believe that this not only incarnerates the close connection with their idols but also allows businesses to see their idols’ ability to bring goods and promote the commercial value of the star better. In addition, in order to better reflect Wang Hedi’s endorsement ability, fans will also spontaneously popularize the product in the comment section, envisioning different scenarios in the workplace (“A newcomer to the workforce;
the scent being too strong when meeting with leaders and customers; having no time to replenish the perfume during a busy day”) to choose suitable scent products. In these comments, fans put their idol in a weak position and he needs to lend a helping hand. Furthermore, the advertising slogan “the fragrance is just right, daily life is no longer ordinary” was also well used by fans in their comments: “Buy it, and get sweet-scented with my precious” “wherever you go with Wang Hedi, where the fragrance goes”. These comments reflect the fact that in the hearts of fans, they are in a close relationship with their idol and are on a journey to seek fragrance with Wang Hedi.

5. The Production and Strengthening of Symbolic Meaning

Female is the consumers of male color, and their attention to male color gradually transitions from use value to symbolic value. This paper argues that the symbolic value of male color is obtained under the dual support of capital and mass media. Initially, women consumed male color out of their own aesthetic and emotional needs, which are real needs of women in daily life. While with the arrival of consumer society, in order to make the goods to be better consumed, the capital symbolized these goods with its power, and in virtue of the mass media to constantly stimulate, then the transformation of women’s attention to male color took place.

5.1 The Power of Capital: The Production of Symbolic Meaning

The essence of male color consumption today is the extension of the object of gender commodification from female to male, which is due to the profit-seeking characteristic of capital. In order to make male color more profitable, capital in virtue of female consumers appends more symbolic meaning to male color commodities.

In the process of the emergence of male color consumption, capital has shown its powerful force. With the increase in women’s consumption power, makeup and laundry products which are traditionally regarded as women’s products, now tend to find male celebrities to endorse them, and businessmen believe that female celebrities are far less capable of selling goods than male celebrities. Under the power of capital, male color consumption is connected with symbolic consumption, which gives symbolic meaning to consumption, and through the ubiquitous mass media, this symbolic meaning is continuously spread, and consumers are invisibly influenced by this value and start symbolic consumption. For example, in Downy’s broadcast room, the compere introduced Wang Hedi with words such as “confident, sunny, handsome, funny man”, as if he is the embodiment of these good qualities, and by giving Wang Hedi these symbolic meanings, he could better persuade his fans to make purchases, i. e. making fans feel that they could obtain these good qualities together with Wang Hedi by purchasing the product. In Communication Studies, the “persona” of a public figure refers to the overall image that is created and conveyed to the public in the long run through mass media channels. In the new media era, stars need to construct their various positive personas artificially and actively with the help of their economic teams and fans to deepen people’s notice of these stars. And stars also can better highlight themselves by “symbolizing” and “labeling” themselves in the age of attention economy, the extremely high frequency of the word “handsome” is the embodiment. One noteworthy Weibo comment is “Downy’s eyes are squinting and smiling, Downy drinks Coke Downy smiles”. These are two lines of Wang Xinling’s popular song “When You”. The fans cleverly applied the rhetorical technique of homophonic words to change “when you” to “Downy” which have similar pronunciations in Chinese. This Weibo comment is also widely publicized by brand owners, at this point expanding the product’s popularity.

5.2 Mass Media: The Strengthening of Symbolic Meaning

Mass media is ubiquitous in people’s working and living environments. Through the power of capital, male color keeps gaining new symbolic meaning, but the power of mass media cannot be underestimated in the process of male color’s popularity and strengthening.

In the process of male color promotion, advertising media is throughout all aspects of male celebrities’ working and living. Downy’s endorsement video takes Wang Hedi’s living room as the background to give fans a sense of intimacy because their idol is willing to show the most real side of his life to his fans. Therefore, the construction of the “warm man” persona in the video brings considerable profits for the brand.

In order to better reflect the influence of stars, core fan members value the “tags”. Fans attach the tag “Wang Hedi Downy Inspiration Spokesperson” when they retweet the Weibo. This behavior also stems from the fact that the Weibo stars’ ranking list is based on the number of tags. So, in order to let more people see their favorite idols, fans will care whether the retweets are with tags or not, and only the data with tags is valid. Based on this, it can explain why fans are so angry to query when they see the studio’s retweet without a tag: “Why don’t you bring the tag?”, “Can you seek professional fan operational staff? Can you take the corresponding tag?”, “Can you take a tag?”. This shows that in the hearts of the fans, at this moment, Wang Hedi is also like a product or a symbol that is tightly tied to Downy Fragrance Beads.

In addition, the gossip news widely circulated in the mass media can not only be regarded as the propaganda of the star but also be seen as the link between the production and consumption of symbols. Love Between Fairy and Devil tells a sweet and abusive love story between the hero and heroine. Many fans are addicted to the teleplay and even fantasize that the two stars are also lovers in real life. Video clips of the daily interactions between the hero and heroine are all over the We-media platforms, attracting netizens’ attention in which fans wield the right to produce and disseminate information. However, the studio and Wang Hedi himself did not release claims to prevent this irrational behavior, because, through gossip news, fans participate in discussions and stars gain people’s attention and exposure, allowing businesses to better see the influence of the star. The symbol represented by Wang Hedi in these videos is sweet love, and fans can’t help but bring themselves into this romance by video clip, raising their adoration for the star and spontaneously paying money,
time as well as attention to male color consumption. For example, many fans were influenced by the TV series to fantasize that Wang Hedi and the heroine are real lovers. Therefore, in the comments, “small orchid” (The name of the heroine in this teleplay); “Di Xin Yin Li” (the couple’s nickname based on their real-life names) can be found with high frequencies of appearance. For instance, “Di Xin Yin Li comes together for love, because witness your beautiful love, I have a more beautiful yearning for love”; “Didi, this bottle you are holding, is the fragrance that Xinxin endorsed before, right? It is the fragrance of small orchid ~~~~”; “Di Xin Yin Li support Wang Hedi’s new endorsement”. This shows that fans are looking for like-minded people in the network to make up for the residuals of their real emotions.

This shows that in the series production process of symbols, through the media’s communication, male color and the symbols it represents influence the consumer’s consumption psychology, spreading the symbolic value given by capital to the product silently. Women’s consumption of male color has transitioned from the consumption of use value to symbolic value, and females have become members of the media in the process of consumption, creating the spectacle of male color consumption together with capital and mass media.

6. Conclusion

As one of the diversified consumption types in today’s society, “male color” consumption has a strong appeal to female groups, especially female fan groups. On the one hand, the advent of consumer society has made “male color” a consumable item, especially the advent of the attention economy and the application of sophisticated advertising and marketing strategies that have made it possible for women to consume male color. On the other hand, the power of male celebrities themselves, supplemented by capital and mass media has created a virtual affinity between female fans and male celebrities which fills the emotional gap of female fans in real life, and thus the symbolic meaning of male color consumption is produced and strengthened. It can be seen that women’s consumption of male color is a kind of consumption of the hidden symbolic value behind it. In the process of male color consumption, women can release their emotions and gain a sense of identity. In addition, in order to stimulate female consumers’ continuous consumption, capital and mass media work hand in hand, that is constantly creating serial production of male color and producing new consumption needs for female consumers, then male color being endowed with new symbolic values. At this point, females have completed the transition towards male color consumption from its use value consumption to symbol value consumption, based on this, it is not difficult to explain why the current consumption of male color is so prevalent.

References


