

# *Identity cognition and group shaping: A study of live streaming*

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**Abstract:** This paper mainly analyzes how the live streaming media platform represented by Douyin constructs the audience's identity and group cognition. I will first focus on the background of the spectacle of the Internet and the kitsch tendency of live streaming, and examine the cultural logic behind it. Studying how live streaming completes unconscious identity construction and shapes individual identity into the group portrait, and exploring how the individual and identity of the audience are objectified as economic symbols, thereby depriving them of emotion and self-expression. It is helpful to explore how individuals can survive and express themselves in the mass flood of new media and streaming media era.

## 1. Introduction

In CCTV's March 26, 2017 "Focus on Agriculture, rural areas" channel, the reporter went to Miao Xia village, Ruzhou City, Henan Province, to interview children addicted to playing mobile phones. When the reporter tried to ask the children what they want to do in the future, and tried to awaken the children's aspirations about life and persuade them to study hard, several children gave a jaw-dropped answer: they want to be Wanghong when they grow up. When the reporter asked the reason again, they sincerely replied: "Because Wanghong can make a lot of money."<sup>[1]</sup> Interestingly, it is not just a few children who are addicted to mobile phones have such simple ideas. According to a survey by Xinhuanet, 54 percent of the post-1995 generation are most looking forward to Wanghong and streamers as their future jobs (Sohu 2020).

This may not seem surprising at all, if you look at the scale and income from live streaming and being an Internet celebrity. According to a survey released by the China Internet Network Information Center, the number of live streaming users in China has reached 816 million by December 2023, accounting for 74.7 percent of the total Internet users (CNNIC 2024). In terms of revenue, the report released by the China Performance Industry Association shows that the market revenue of China's online performance (live streaming) industry in 2023 will reach 209.5 billion yuan, an increase of 5.15% compared with 2022 (CAPA 2024). Such a huge income and popularity is difficult to prevent the village children or even any young people in the job search stage to consider joining the group of live streaming.<sup>[2]</sup>

In douyin live streaming, the indicator to measure the number of viewers is in the upper right corner of the interface. When the number of live viewers exceeds 100,000, "100,000 plus" will be displayed. The core logic of a live streaming is that the streamer tries to attract more viewers through

various live content, and chasing "100,000 plus" is the common pursuit of all streamers. When the streamer tries his best to attract the unconscious audience, these individuals are incited and induced by the community to do unreasonable things. It also starts to draw attention to how live streaming can unconsciously discipline people's behavior, thereby reshaping and constructing people's identities. I will first analyze the cultural logic of individuals forming groups in live streaming, and try to study how live streaming attracts viewers and induces consumption through virtual digital gifts and picture presentation, and shapes groups and identities in this process.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. The spectacle of live streaming and kitsch culture

Integrating the instant, intuitive emotional activities of human social activities and life experiences, and transforming them into abstract values, regenerating them as frozen commodity forms, this is the "basic operation" of spectacle (Debord 2021), and realized commodity fetishism in this process. As the foundation of social economy is no longer the substantial first-order relationship between material production and consumption in the traditional industrial society, human society has gradually entered the second-order relationship between symbols, spectacle and consumption. Under the guidance of the logic of spectacle, it is natural for the visual viewing of appearances to replace the tactile experience of reality, because this visual viewing satisfies the entertainment nature of the public to the greatest extent. Whether it is political events, sports, or entertainment news, it seems that only when it is presented as a spectacle can it attract widespread attention. According to Debord (2021), this is not a visual deception processed by mass media technology, but a worldview that has been objectified.<sup>[4]</sup>

This spectacle has been further developed in the digital age, moving towards emerging patterns that are rather voyeuristic and exhibitionistic, libidinally invested and prevailing over the pleasure of violence and aggression (Bastos & Bastos 2010). In the live streaming content, many streamers do not attract the audience through the introduction or popularization of abstract knowledge content, nor professional skills training, but mostly a kind of entertainment and daily recreational chat. These chats are not ordinary narration (because that would not attract a large enough audience), but have certain themes, which are mostly kitsch. For instance, a male streamer might ask sexually suggestive questions and use metaphorical language to tease the female streamer, such as using the word "sausage" to refer to male genitalia or "drivingacar" as a euphemism for sexual activity. And in the process, attracting a large audience, male streamers will even ask viewers who give a lot of gifts to leave messages and read these (often lewd) messages to female streamers.<sup>[5]</sup>

The spectacle of the digital age seem to confirm the Frankfurt School's concept of a "culture industry" (Horkheimer et al. 2002). The demand for entertainment is both an inevitable result of the capitalist mode of production and one of the most typical products it produces. The mechanism of cultural industry is to produce products for the cultural market and the public that guide people to relax (Călinescu 1987). On the streaming media platform, we can see that everywhere is full of "pre-digested" images and drawings, and the audience can easily obtain information intuitively without any value judgment and aesthetic analysis. Artistic prototypes are quickly processed by the mass media and cut into fragments of kitsch information scattered across streaming channels. After the audience input these one-sided and intuitive information, whether misunderstood or not, the artwork loses the sense of sanctity and ritual in this process. As the aesthetician Dorfles (Dorfles & McHale 1969) sums up, this lack of ritualistic elements causes the spectator to be indifferent when confronted with the various forms of transmission and representation forced upon him. The shaping of spectacle is not a one-way conspiracy of the cultural industry, or the whole of their plan.<sup>[6]</sup> The shaping of group aesthetic taste and homogenized group is the necessary condition for the formation of spectacle and kitsch art. This kind of culture processed by the cultural industry and mass media was called

"homogenized culture" by Macdonald (1953), and this culture was even processed like "homogenized milk". Under this highly consistent homogenized culture, the audience is also processed, and their taste and emotional needs are cleverly manipulated by the technologists of mass culture (Macdonald 1953), and they are gradually shaped into a homogenized group virtually.<sup>[7]</sup>

### 3. Shaping of group

In this sense, we try to understand the shaping of groups through the spectacle and kitsch created by the cultural industry. Adorno (1997) implicitly proposed the relationship between kitsch art and ideological domination. The self-evident ideology that the masses reactively and resentfully enjoy low art and entertainment; It is this state that expresses the ubiquity of repression. Under the post-modern cultural logic ruled by the cultural industry, replicable works of art surround the world. What people see on the Internet is the same ideologically processed information, and what they see in the movie theater is exactly the same copy of the movie. The reproduction and large-scale mass production of cultural products have gradually eliminated the uniqueness and truth, and human beings have created culture, while the commercial expansion of culture has made reality recede and the subject lose. As Jameson (1983) argues, the disappearance of individual subjectivity means the complete dismemberment of the post-modern self-body and mind-man is already a decentralized subject, unable to perceive reality, a self without a center, a self without any identity.<sup>[8]</sup>

The audience in the live streaming room was initially randomly entered, scattered and fragile, and could not constitute the concept of a group. In today's live streaming practice, we can see that the audience is crazy about buying virtual gifts for their favorite streamers, and crazy about leaving messages in the bullet screen. After you click the icon on the screen to join the "fan group" of the streamer, a cohesive icon will appear in the profile of your account to represent the fanatical fans of a certain streamer. This shows that the audience in the living room has been transformed from a relatively scattered individual to a certain solid group, and the shaping process of this group is what we are interested in.<sup>[9]</sup>

According to Hill's multidimensional model of affiliation (Hill 1987), getting positive stimulation, getting emotional support, getting social comparison information, and getting attention from others are the reasons people connect with others and form groups. In the live streaming room, the streamer calls each audience a family member, providing enough emotional value, and the first word of the audience's screen name (somewhat similar to the family name) plus the suffix of big brother or big sister, and speaks out in a sweet voice to show full respect and intimacy.<sup>[10]</sup> These positive emotional supports and stimuli make individuals in a wait-and-see state condense around the streamer into a relatively stable group, individuals join groups because of the desire to be noticed and to be highly respected (Derber 2000).

This emotional value exists not only between the streamer and the audience, but also within the audience. Douyin offers a number of online virtual gifts for viewers to spend, and when the amount of money spent reaches a certain level, users are given a digital title of nobility, up to level 75, which usually costs millions of yuan.<sup>[11]</sup> It is obvious that the number of levels of noble titles is proportional to the user's spending power, and different noble titles will have different luxury effects in the live streaming room with the user's message or gift, in order to create a sense of superiority over others, bringing emotional value, so as to achieve their own "social goals" (Schachter 1959), attracting individuals to connect with each other and form a group. People use group relationships to evaluate themselves (1959), immersing themselves in the need for affiliation while constructing a distorted sense of identity in this process.<sup>[12]</sup>

#### 4. The symbolic turn of the identity and body

Identity in the digital age is more self-constructed through what people say and do online. To some extent, this allows people to move away from biological nature and social reality, such as race, gender, hometown, kinship, and so on, in favor of a freer identification. In the digital age, the past individualized, historical and non-homogenous philosophy of body and identity seems to have retreated after the perfect shape and outline shaped by the digital industry, the value creation method and activity logic of body labor in the digital age have changed, and the working body mentioned by Heidegger has gradually faded in the streaming media platform. The body and the object are separated from the close connection with each other and no longer a metaphorical body that symbolizes labor value and social relations, but a "epidermic" (Ferguson 2000) type of body. What the audience needs to express their love and recognition in the live streaming room is not the exquisite tools designed in the industrial age of human beings, but the love Icons and virtual gifts that can be sent at the click of the screen.<sup>[13]</sup> All social needs can be perfectly applied in live streaming through the simple operation of the end of the limb, without the need to shake hands and hug and other etiquette forms containing sincere feeling and human wisdom. The body is only connected to the object on its surface, and the meaning of the body and the object is no longer determined by the connection to each other, but by the symbolic system in which they are located.<sup>[14]</sup>

In a consumer society, individuals and groups largely construct their identities based on goods and services, while social citizenship or religious belief in traditional societies no longer plays an important role. Bowman attributes this to "fluid modernity" (2013). In the live streaming room, groups of fans of a particular anchor refer to themselves as the army, changing their headshots and nicknames to achieve a semblance of unity and consistency that seems to be the same as the army's standardised uniform.<sup>[15]</sup> These individuals create different social values and represent different social identities with their own professional abilities in real work, and these identities and contributions are compressed into homogenized symbols in the broadcast room, and the numerous social roles and identities are unified in the broadcast room into a member of the army that provides economic value to the anchor and the platform.<sup>[16-17]</sup>

#### 5. Conclusion

Behind the hot live streaming boom, there are not many researchers to invest in the cultural logic and improvement space behind it, which is difficult to measure and intervene. Most of the audience lost their reason to indulge in it, but did not realize that their identity was gradually distorted into a refined audience shaped by capitalist kitsch culture. Before this spectacle is further eroded, adequate academic attention and improvement measures become increasingly important.

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