

Hook Idea and Gender Performativity: The Somaesthetics of Male Celebrities in Backless Clothes

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the phenomenon of male celebrities wearing backless clothes has become increasingly common in the visual cultural landscape of the entertainment world, sparking public debate. It seems that backless clothes have gradually broken the boundaries of traditional gender narratives, and become a symbolic carrier with strong communication effects. However, male celebrities simply exposing their upper bodies to the public has long been commonplace, similarly, women wearing male temperament clothes is a normal thing. Why is it that male celebrities wearing backless clothes with femininity have become the hook idea to rise to fame? Therefore, analysing the communication logic and social meaning behind it is particularly important for understanding the somaesthetics of fashion and the dissemination of popular culture. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this article reveals the cultural mechanism and social meaning behind the communication of male celebrity backless clothes, providing insights into issues such as changes in public psychology, consumer culture and the construction of male identity.

KEYWORDS

Backless clothes; Gender performativity; Somaesthetics; Male fashion

1 Introduction

In recent years, the visual and cultural landscape of the entertainment industry has seen an increase in the number of male celebrities sparking public debate with their backless looks. From young actor Timothée Chalamet to Bad Bunny and designer Jacquemus, a number of male celebrities have attracted widespread attention for their backless looks, which have been hotly debated by netizens. It seems that backless clothes has gradually broken the boundaries of traditional gender narratives and become a symbolic vehicle with powerful communicative effects. As Baudrillard points out, in the post-industrial era, the body has become 'the most beautiful consumer product' and the bodies of celebrities emphasise their commodity and socio-cultural attributes even more in order to be viewed and consumed by the public. For this reason, they constantly package and modify their bodies in pursuit of the so-called hook idea. The backless dress has become their secret weapon for attracting attention.

The question is why male celebrities wearing backless clothes can evoke such a fierce public response, and why the visual politics of specific cultural meanings and aesthetic experiences that lie behind them can still make them the hook idea for fame in an era of visual excess. The backless dress is indeed a visual revolution in gender temperament that deliberately breaks the stereotypes of traditional gender roles by emphasising the feminine and seductive temperament of men, and completes the challenge to the gender binary, but girls wearing masculine clothing in the same way seems commonplace to the audience and does not seem to stir much public opinion. If the secret of network traffic is the backless dress, then men in the hot summer will lift their shirts to reveal their chests, or directly bare shoulders and bare bladders, which can be far more revealing than wearing backless clothes, but it seems difficult to attract a wide audience discussion. It is important to recognise that in the current social environment, women do not have the same right to go topless in public. Therefore, analysing the communication logic and social meaning behind it is particularly important for understanding the somaesthetics of fashion and the dissemination of popular culture. On the other hand, current academic research on gender performance and body politics focuses on women's bodies, and according to Li Lei's analysis of gender issues in the papers of CSCI representative journals over the past 10 years, she found that more than 90 per cent of the papers are about women, so it is also an important direction for academics to broaden their research perspectives to men's groups and achieve gender equality in the true sense of the word. On the other hand, the current academic research on gender performance and body politics focuses on women's bodies, and according to Li Lei's analysis of gender issues in the papers of CSSCI representative journals over the past 10 years, she found that more than 90 per cent of the papers are about women^[1], so the current academic focus is to broaden the research perspective to men's groups and achieve gender equality in the true sense.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, this article reveals the cultural mechanism and social meaning behind the communication of male celebrity backless clothes, providing insights into issues such as changes in public psychology, consumer culture and the construction of male identity. On the one hand, the paper analyses the evolution of the male body and the backless dress, and how the backless dress has evolved from a cultural symbol of femininity to a weapon for the liberation of gender and bodily constraints; on the other hand, the paper deconstructs the gendered power relations

in the communication of male celebrity backless clothes, and explores how capital, the media and the audience play the game of the aesthetics of the body, as well as the deeper changes in cultural perceptions behind it.

2 Discipline and Invisibility: The Power of Dress under Somaesthetics

Fashion, as an extension of the body,^[2] gives the unfinished naked body^[3] social properties and social meaning, making it a whole person. The discussion of dress, of fashion, is essentially about the 'body politics'^[4] discussed by Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. That is, how the body is shaped by power and used as a tool to maintain it through the medium of fashion; how physical health, ability and beauty are regulated through the medium of fashion; and even the most basic categories of sexuality and gender, which are constructed to reflect and maintain social power. As a fashion item, the backless garment is not only an external decoration, but also a symbol of communication that carries political power and ideology, becoming a vivid reflection of political ideology. Therefore, to understand its connotation, one must first sort out the socio-cultural environment in different eras to understand the political significance of the extended male body.

2.1 Disciplined Temperaments and the Disappearing Male Body

When it comes to male body and somaesthetics, Ancient Greece is a golden age of 'origins' in the public's eyes. The cult of male physical beauty is systematically presented, whether in the large number of sculptures of the male body that have come down to us, in the poetic texts that glorify the fit bodies of young men, or in public rituals such as Gymnopaedia. Even this cult of physical beauty was transformed from the private sphere into public discursive power through institutionalisation. A healthy body, systematically trained since childhood in the gymnasium, became an important symbol of citizenship, and its aesthetic value formed a symbolic isomorphism with moral character, directly determining the individual's position in the political structure of the city-state. The body thus transcends the physical realm and develops into a visual symbolic system that carries honour, power and existential value.

It can be seen that underneath the carnival of masculine body aesthetics, ancient Greek body aesthetics was a "logocentrism" based on the dichotomy of consolidating masculine hegemony. On the one hand, it constantly consolidates and strengthens the hegemonic masculinity, as "strong muscles and broad shoulders"^[5], and on the other hand, it socially excludes and stigmatises any masculine image that does not possess this masculinity. The image of masculinity as feminine is a parody of the inferior species of women, offending the authority of masculine centrism and normatively challenging the patriarchal gender order. This has the effect, as Butler notes of gender norms, drawing boundaries, determining how relevant social matters can be understood, defining a measure of what will and will not appear in the social sphere, and also determining 'who will be stigmatised; who will be the object of fascination and consumer pleasure?'^[6] In this way, the male body has also become an important means of enforcing gender norms, guaranteeing 'subordination of women and dominance of men'.^[7]

With the rise of Christian civilisation and the gradual control of religion over political rights, the body and its extended fashion were gradually reduced to a tool for its strict normative control over the society of power, constructing a strictly binary gender system of clothing. Men's clothing is either functional, to emphasise the value of men as real 'useful men' in creating the world or as a symbol of their wealth and status, showing their noble position as winners. Women's clothing, on the other hand, emphasised decorative elements that accentuated the curves of the body, such as corsets and skirts, as a projection of men's aesthetic desires, an object to be gazed at, landscaped, and an ornament to men's lives. With very different purposes, men's and women's clothes are differentiated in terms of types to make people become aware of the discipline of gender. In the eighteenth century, beginning with the Enlightenment, this dichotomy became more explicit in the fashion symbol system, further entrenching gender difference as an insurmountable category of perception. This is because during the Enlightenment people began to see the world through a more rational and pragmatic lens, with men embodying this rationality and high levels of education, and women embodying desire, sensuality and low levels of education. Fashion has responded to the different power relations of capitalism and cultural politics in many different ways. Western men's fashion has been reduced to a few simple items such as suits and trousers suits and a limited number of colours, and the focus is no longer on displaying one's wealth and social status, but on displaying the rationality and reliability of the man's will and behaviour as the head of the family. As John Carl Flügel named it "the Great Masculine Renunciation".^[8] Through this movement, the male body gradually receded from the stage and became the active spectator, while the female body remained present and became the object of the 'male gaze'^[9], reduced to a vehicle for the projection of desire, and fashion and dress gradually became an exclusively female culture.

2.2 Backless Clothes: A Symbol of Femininity and Desire

Of course, the birth of the backless clothes has no direct relevance to the history of the male body on display; after all,

in the patriarchal era of the 'male gaze', the female body was objectified and clothing was merely a tool to emphasise its beauty, physique and sexual attractiveness. During the post-war cultural transition of the 1920s, hedonism gave rise to new practices of body aesthetics. The 'bronzed complexion' of upper-class and bourgeois women, constructed through sunbathing, became a class identity, and the evening party was the perfect time to show off the results, which were fulfilled by the backless gowns designed by Madeleine Vionnet. Her innovative slanting technique made it possible to create a three-dimensional curve at the back, and these erotic and elegant garments quickly became the visual symbol of high society. After that, the backless clothes gradually evolved into different styles and became the most fashionable item of the time.

Although on the surface it seems that women's self-confidence was on the rise at that time, and fashion such as backless clothes was an important medium for them to express themselves. In fact, the purpose of their self-expression is still mainly to please men. The backless dress consolidates and reinforces the traditional dualistic femininity of being delicate, soft and curvaceous. Of course, its role in the initial liberation of women's bodies and in conveying women's self-awareness is still undeniable. Compared to women's backlessness, men's right to bare their backs is even more groundbreaking. Before the 1930s, under the traditional system of moral discipline, upper body nudity for both men and women was shameful, taboo and even an offence of public indecency. In 1930, four more men were arrested for violating the Public Morals Act by exposing their upper bodies at Coney Island Beach in New York, USA. As more and more men protested and sought to regain control of their bodies, in 1936 the Chicago Tribune finally legalised male nudity in a court ruling, marking a loosening of the norms of bodily display in public space, and men's bare chests were no longer taboo.

In fact, the reason why men have won the right to bare their upper bodies is that, on the one hand, they are the rule makers of the game and have the absolute right to define the socio-cultural framework, and on the other hand, the male body is seen as the embodiment of rationality, and the nakedness of the male body is seen as a necessity for social practice or physical labour or sport and exercise, and the body is not to be gazed at and does not have the role of an ornamental spectacle. But even though the male body is the embodiment of rationality, the contempt for their bodily desires is that while it is socially acceptable for men to wear bare shoulders, their chest hair remains taboo and must be covered. This is because thick chest hair is seen as the embodiment of physical desire and eroticism, and is indecent. It should be noted that the above discussion is mainly based on cultural changes with Western society as a reference. In traditional Eastern society, although it is also dominated by a dualistic patriarchal society, the tolerance of masculinity and the acceptance of physical freedom are significantly higher. However, this tolerance has a clear gender boundary - the female body as a disciplinary object is restricted to a degree similar to the strict disciplinary mechanism of Western patriarchal society.

It can be seen that as a medium for the construction and reconstruction of the identity symbol system by social culture, backless clothes and the fashion system continuously reshape the visual representation system of social roles through hidden disciplinary mechanisms, allowing individuals to properly integrate themselves into gender, cultural class and social identity through clothing style, body management and lifestyle. Through such "gender performance" they can become so-called "real" men or women. As Susan Kaiser has said, "From a performative perspective, gender can be described as a way of repeatedly styling the body; this styling is regulated by cultural discourse, but it becomes part of the ongoing experience of fashioning the gendered body on a personal and social level, as well".^[10] On the other hand, individuals can also perceive and shape their social roles through their choice of fashion and personal body style, thereby promoting the creative power of reconstructing gender power relations.

3 The Backless Clothes: A Weapon for the Representation and Liberation of the Male Body

As Shusterman said, "However, despite this intrinsic group-related character, fashion is also an individual affair".^[11] People consciously use fashion elements to express themselves and explore their gender identity. In everyday practice, they give meaning to the language of fashion, write their own commentaries and promote the development of fashion trends and fashion symbol systems. In the following section, we will explore in depth how backless clothes, as traditional "symbols of women and desire", help men to reconstruct their social identities and create a new gender society, while further realising what Shusterman calls the dimension of practical aesthetics, that is, improving the body through fashion liberating the body and their sensual lives.

3.1 Representation and Liberation of the Male Body

As mentioned above, men regained the right to expose their upper bodies in 1936. With the rapid development of the capitalist social economy, hedonism became popular again after the Second World War, men's fashion, the male body and temperament began to return to the public eye with a new look. Hollywood films reinforced the importance of body image and increased the popularity of men's fashion. The Peacock Revolution and Teddy Boys movements of the late

1950s allowed men to embrace the bright colours and rich, flashy elements they had abandoned, and gradually shifted men's fashion from serious and orthodox bespoke clothing to popular and diverse mass fashion trends. During this period, in addition to changes in men's clothing, the image, perception and norms of masculinity also underwent a groundbreaking transformation. Masculinity was no longer a single rational temperament such as strength and virility, but also began to accept the aesthetics of a slightly feminine temperament.

It was not until the bra-burning movement in 1968 and the Stonewall riots in 1969 that the third wave of feminism and queer theory formed a unique field of body politics practice. In order to achieve true freedom and to fight for the rights and interests of the body and related concepts, including identity and body expression, the body is used as a battleground^[12] and fashion as a weapon, a political means of expression for dissidence, rebellion and social reform^[13]. By deconstructing the gender coding system of clothing, they challenge the existing normative framework of society, launch a cultural breakthrough against the gender binary. In the domain of fashion, a conspicuous and efficacious strategy entails the disruption of prevailing gender symbols within clothing, encompassing the integration of elements associated with the female gender symbol into the design of men's clothing, and vice versa. This approach interrogates and reconfigures the symbolic framework of the prevailing social gender order. A notable illustration of this phenomenon is the adoption of backless clothes, once exclusively associated with women, by men as a means of challenging traditional authority and reclaiming their bodies.

In this movement of gender symbol reconstruction, pioneering designers such as Yves Saint Laurent, Jean Paul Gaultier were at the forefront, establishing a visual system that challenged traditional body discipline by systematically incorporating gender code carriers such as backless clothes and skirts. This creative strategy is essentially to reconstruct the discourse system of body politics, guiding the public to let go of the cognitive framework of gender stereotypes and return to the true existence dimension of human nature and the true desired body. In the contemporary fashion discourse system, genderless backless clothes have evolved into a significant symbolic medium for deconstructing traditional body discipline. This process of democratisation of clothing symbols marks the concrete practice of men's body autonomy. When muscle lines meet backless clothes, it is actually a paradigm shift in gender performance, constructing a new body politics in public space.

3.2 The Bodies of Male Celebrities: A Frontline Battlefield of Social Culture

In this war without gunpowder, celebrities, as trailblazers of cultural practice who initially adopted fashion weapons, assume a role of considerable significance. During the cultural upheaval of the 1970s, prominent musicians such as David Bowie, Freddie Mercury spearheaded the creation of a subversive male image through innovative designs of stage costumes. The backless dress, in particular, became a hallmark of these musicians, challenging conventional gender norms and defying stereotypes associated with tough guys. This transformation is not only a breakthrough in clothing style, but also symbolises the evolution of masculinity from single masculinity to multiple symbiosis. This allows the gender normative role of clothing to shift to de-gendering the body, while actively exploring an ideal free body norm and benchmark for society, opening up a more inclusive expression space for modern masculinity. Conversely, celebrities are active in the public eye for a protracted period. If they are frequently exposed on various media platforms wearing backless clothes, it can further break gender stereotypes in the public eye, and lead and even build a body concept and fashion for society that respects individual uniqueness.

In the context of a communication logic that is dominated by the contemporary attention economy, male celebrities create thoughtfully designed body landscapes through backless clothes that on the one hand satisfy the gender identity participation of specific audiences such as feminist consumers and queer people, resonate with the audience, and make it a representation of the culture, beliefs and identity shared with their group. Conversely, it functions as a challenge to conventional mainstream culture, stimulating public discourse and engagement with subjects, thereby attaining the objectives of attention-grabbing while fulfilling the demand for traffic proliferation. This phenomenon is indicative of the intricate dynamics of body politics in the contemporary media environment, and it also unveils the profound interconnection between the traffic economy and gender performance in the digital age.

4 Conclusion

In the contemporary media landscape, the popularity of backless clothing for men essentially constitutes a symbolic expression of body politics. It is important to note that, despite the long-standing popularisation of gender equality, the mainstream aesthetic system has come to accept women wearing men's clothing as a form of individual expression. In contrast, the public continues to be shocked by men showing their backlines, with stigmatising labels such as transvestite and pervert reflecting the deep anxiety of the patriarchal cultural system. This paradox of value judgement is rooted in the antinomy of the traditional gender order: when women imitate the image of male authority, they are still framed in

the position of being gazed, which is a way for women to express their worship of men; while men showing their back body curves like women means actively entering the visual power field of being gazed at, which is a stab in the back of patriarchy and a subversive challenge to the symbolic order of patriarchy from within. The social discipline mechanism is, in essence, fearful of the inclusion of male bodies into the object system of "being consumed" rather than the exposure of the body brought about by backless clothes. This deconstruction of gender power relations has had the effect of shaking the foundation of traditional gender division of labour and threatening the legitimacy of patriarchal rule. The symbolic value of backless clothes not only in the elimination of gender differences, but also in the disenchantment of the performance of the body, the disintegration of the violent discipline of gender stereotypes, the reconstruction of the subjectivity of the body through aesthetic practice, and the reconstruction of a more inclusive body politics paradigm.

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