

Discipline and Breakthrough of Female Body in the Context of Consumer Society-Taking the “Rabbit” Group of Patients with Eating Disorders as an Example

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ABSTRACT. *In the Current Consumer Society, the Urge to Shop and Eat Has Been Liberated, and More and More People Believe That the Beauty and Status Symbols Brought by Consumption Have Also Made Lightness as a Kind of Self-Management Distinguishing Symbol So That the Body Bears Special Social Expectations as the Stared Object. the “Rabbit” is a Group That Repeatedly Struggles between Consuming Food and Physical Discipline. This Article Tracked and Observed the Communication Content of Chinese “Rabbit” Groups from April 2018 to December 2019 on “Baidu Tieba”, “Meet Rabbit App”, “Zhihu” and Other Platforms, Finding the Number of This Group Had a Uprising Trend. from the Perspective of Physical Discipline and Gaze Theory, the Author Attempts to Analyze the Discipline and Defiance This Group Has Suffered, in Order to Improve the Understanding and Care for the “Rabbit” Group from the Society.*

KEYWORDS: *Consumer Society, Physical Discipline, Gaze, Eating Disorders*

1. Introduction

Eating Disorders, as a Complex Mental Illness, Include Bulimia Nervosa and Anorexia Nervosa (the Restricting Type and the Binge-Eating/Purging Type). It is One of the Diseases That Causes the Highest Mortality among Mentally Ill Patients. Today It Has Developed into a World-Class Problem That Threatens women’s Health.

Approximately 0.7% - 4% of the Population is Suffering from Bulimia Globally. in the UK, 5% to 10% of Women between the Ages of 14 and 24 Suffer from Eating Disorders. in the United States, Up to 15% of Young Women in Their 20s Experience Overeating and 7% Experience Forced Vomiting. in China, about 30% to 60% of Adolescent Girls Try to Diet for Losing Weight, about 7% to 12% of Them Are Extreme Dieters Who Are Prone to Developing Anorexia. the Author

Traced the Platform of Baidu Tieba and Found That within 20 Months, the Number of Posts for the Theme of Gluttony/Emetic Increased from 90,000 to 367,000, and the Number of Followers Increased from 25,000 to 55,000. This Growing Group Has Created and Improved Unique Communication Ways in Their Circle on the Internet, Making “I Want to Slim” to Be a Female Common Desire for the Body.

According to Scholars Such as James n. Butcher, Slim Body as a Cultural Ideal Was Likely to Take Root in the 1960s. This Paper Believes That the Excessive Attention to Slimness, on the One Hand, Results from the Anxiety Caused by the Huge Gap between the Real Self and the “Perfect Body” Shaped and Continuously Presented by the Mass Media, and on the Other Hand, is the Obedience to the Foucault-Style Rules Hidden in Daily Life. It is in the Gaze of the Others That the “Rabbit”, People with Eating Disorders, Gradually Lose Themselves.

2. Chapter One, the “Rabbit”: a Secret Group Made Public

The Name “Rabbit” is Derived from the Chinese Homophones of “Rabbit” and “Spit” (Both Chinese Pronounce as Same as “Too” in English), and Maybe They Are Unwilling to Expose Their Real Morbidity, So This Self-Proclaimed Metaphor is Used on the Internet. the Group Consists of Patients with Eating Disorders Who Have Binge-Eating/Purging Type Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa. Patients Pay Too Much Attention to Body Shape and Are Very Sensitive to Weight Gain. They Will Eat a Lot in the Normal Situation of Depression, Frustration, Anger or Even Boredom. the Following Sense of Guilt, Remorse and Uncontrollable Anxiety after Binge-Eating Will Force Them to Use Improper Methods to Induce Vomiting, Such as Hand Picking and Intubation. Long-Term Overeating and Vomiting Will Have a Great Impact on Health. Such as Hoarse Voice, Rotten Teeth, Collapse of the Digestive System, Amenorrhea and Even Death.

In This Paper, by Observing a Total of 50,000 Online Communication Contents from April 2018 to December 2019 and Combining Relevant Research Data, the Author Found That This Group is Mainly Female and the Age Range is between 14 and 40 Years with Various Occupations, Including Students, Models, Nurses, Florist Owners, Expectant Mothers, and the Like. the Main Communication Platforms Are “Meet Rabbit App”, “Baidu Tieba”, “Zhihu”, Etc. in Order Not to Be Found by the Public, They Often Use Linguistic Argots in Communication. for Example, “It” Means Chewing Food and Then Spat out after the Taste; “Bottoming” Refers to Using Corn or Other Chewy, Low-Calorie Foods as a Base of One Meal; “Tuber” is the Person Who Uses Tube to Induce Vomiting; “Dating” Has the Meaning of Binge-Eating Together. the Communication Content is Relatively Brief, Consisting of Sharing Each Meal Overeating Portion, Inducing Vomiting Methods, Seeking for Verification Like Asking Whether the Use of Tools is Correct, Asking for Help, Making Appointments, Showing Body Appearance and So on.

Because the “Rabbit” Rarely Reveals True Self in Real Life, the Same Experiences Online Can Quickly Build Trust with Each Other and Have a Secret Circle of Friends. At the Same Time, They Can Find a Sense of Identity and

Collective Belonging There. When They Are Not Accepted by the Outside World, They Can Build Their Own Cultural Rules on These Platforms. for Example, the Slogan of “Meet Rabbit” Theme of Baidu Tieba is “to Love Each Other”. after the “Inducing Vomiting” Theme of Baidu Tieba Was Shuttled Down, “Meet Rabbit” App Was Then Developed in November 2017 by a Self-Proclaimed “Rabbit” Who Suffered 4 Years from Inducing Vomiting. the Reason for This App Was Introduced on the Homepage: “I Found a Lot of Similar People on the Internet by Accident, But There Are Various People in Baidu Tieba Which Brings Difficulty in Communication. So the Idea of Creating Our Own Secret Garden Came into Being.”

This Closed, Ritualistic Collective Communication Presents Two Sides. on the One Hand, Platforms Such as “Zhihu” Are More Objective, to a Certain Extent Bearing the Function of Rescue: “How to Cure Binge Eating Disorder?” and Other Related Questions Have Become a Cure for Seeking out of This Strange Circle. on the Other Hand, It Has a Self-Soothing Effect, Which Makes More Sense to Spontaneously Domesticate the Body in Accordance with the Norms. Girls Show Their Daily Routine with Easy and Cute Punches on the Surface, Reducing the Fear of Binge Eating Behaviors. for Example, Miss Arto, Who Has a History of More Than Ten Years of Forced Vomiting, Said: “When I First Found the Same Kind of People, I Was as Happy as Aliens Found the Kins on a Different Planet. Before That, I Always Doubted If My Lifestyle Was Crazy and Sick.”

3. Discipline: Body Shaping and Social Control

For more than two thousand years, the “body” in philosophical vision has undergone the process of being devalued, rediscovered, and reshaped. In the ancient Greek period, Plato thought that “the soul should be eternal and the body would be short”, which was then obscured. By the 19th century Nietzsche broke the dual opposite structure of soul and body and then proposed “the awareness of power”. In the 20th century, Foucault proposed that “the body would be constructed by hegemony such as power, culture and economy, and there would be no absolutely free individual”². Now the body itself has become a very important symbol in contemporary culture.

Body discipline is a focal issue in body theory. By using the manipulability and plasticity of the body to discipline it, such as foot binding, breast augmentation, etc., it can be reshaped to fit the requirements of culture and concept of era. Scholar Li Fen believed that “the body was disciplined as a carrier, which essentially reflected that the body was not only the most important carrier for gender construction and representation, but also the actual and direct center of social control.” Sandra Lee Bartky pointed out that the discipline of the female body had been realized, including the determination of female appearance and body size; the generation of specific postures and actions of the female body; and the display of the body as a decorative appearance. Gan Xuehui explained with the specific example of high heels which had become a symbol of the female body that “The female body was the product after the social discipline.”

By observing the messages posted on the online platform, it was found that the “Rabbit” group mostly carried out strict physical discipline. Some of them are suffering from eating disorders just during the very crazy weight loss process. Miss HY, who has experienced 7 years of gluttony and forced vomiting, believes: “The entire social environment implies that women’s failures are caused by fat and ugliness, while being thin can solve this pain.” Guided by this misconception, the “Rabbit” equates thinness with success and sees building a perfect body as a shortcut to happiness. They unconsciously transform the “cognitive body” into a “submissive body” that is adapted to and useful to the social culture. What’s more, the hope to gain stronger competitiveness in work or love is depended on controlling the physical body. This confirms Baudrillard’s view, “Contemporary women are both nuns and managers of their own bodies, responsible for keeping them beautiful and competitive³”.

The “Rabbit” group’s control of self-body reflects the process of changing from passive “other discipline” to active “self-discipline”. Just as Tian Xiaomin’s interpretation of Foucault’s micro-power theory: “Under the guidance of universal standards, individual members of society have to adjust his or her behaviors, becoming a standard-conforming, uniform person.” In the landscape of “Panorama Open Panopticon”⁴, the original purpose of enhancing the power of self-discourse was lost in the group of compliance.

4. Gaze: Vision from Males

A survey by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) showed that 27.3% of women, but only 5.8% of men said they were “feared” about gaining weight; 35% of women but only 12.5% of men still felt they were fat despite being told they were thin by others. By contrast, why will women be more troubled by their bodies than men? Li Fen believed that this was because the beauty of women needed to accept the social scrutiny and recognition, rather than the self-considered beauty or not. In this situation, the “male gaze” from the dualistic opposite of women cannot be ignored.

The “gaze” theory evolved from Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage and was then applied by feminists to the field of visual culture research. The issue of gaze in women was first noticed by John Berg, who pointed out sharply in the book of “Ways of seeing” published in 1972 that since the 17th century, female nudes in European oil paintings have not been portrayed in their original image, but according to nude appearances appearing in the eyes of male viewers, like female figures in paintings of “The Elders and Susannah” and “The Large Bathers” -- the objects being watched and peeped at, because they suddenly realized that someone was watching themselves, so they deliberately posed some gestures of expression, surrendered to “the power of men and oil painting owners”.

In 1975, Laura Murvey, as the first person to apply post-psychoanalysis to feminist film criticism, wrote in the book of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film” that most of the women in movies after the 20th century were appeared based on the

image of “being gazed at by men”. Women are gazed at both by the audience and by the hero in the film.

In the relationship between men and women, the gaze becomes a seeing of power, and women become a “landscape”. Men’s observation and evaluation of women become the key to women’s success. In order to better meet the eyes of men, women always pay attention to their physical appearance and focus on others’ gaze, “the impressions of others to her replace her own impressions.”⁵

Princess Diana in the UK, had overeating and forced vomiting experiences after Prince Charles made critical remarks about her weight during the engagement period and gradually moved away from her. The Chinese live broadcast of the blogger, Miss Ate, suffering from binge-eating disorder for 10 years, began with a straight hit from her boyfriend: “Let’s break up, you are not beautiful enough and thin enough”. Failure to satisfy the gaze of males becomes the source of failure in the eyes of people with eating disorders. Therefore, in the gaze of desire, commodification, and simplification, the “Rabbit” group is increasingly pushing herself to become a more “feminine” and “standard” body.

5. Slim: The Beauty Trap of a Consumer Society?

“Consumer society” is the social form in which consumption has become the dominant driving force and goal of social life and production. It was born in the western capitalist countries in the 1950s. The logic of modern consumer society is to shape the rational body image through mass media. The individual body is anxious due to the gap between herself/himself and the standardized one, and then surrenders to the discourse of consumption.⁵ Zhou Xian stated in the book of “Reading Picture, Body, Ideology” that when the contemporary body industry legalized and universalized aesthetic standards that only a few people could achieve, it was transforming a mandatory norm about the body into the inner needs of countless individuals. Only in this way could the aesthetics of the body create a consumer market with great potential.

Under the temptation of commercial interests, the ideal body shaped and continuously presented by the mass media has made a significant impact on the formation of women’s “Being thin is beautiful” concept. Yang Jinyu pointed out in the thesis “Discipline and Resist: Power, Body and Reality TV” that the female body has fallen into the beautiful trap set by consumerist ideology without getting rid of the control of patriarchy. The monitoring mechanism established by media technology and women’s self-control constitutes a more stringent and delicate discipline mechanism. As the patient with eating disorders Ms. WW said when talking about the cause of her disease, it was more like the gene loaded me, and the environment pulled the trigger.

Why is the body given too much attention? Baudrillard came up with a novel point of view, in which he believed that the previous fast made diet and abstinence possible, and its function is to draw the contradictory conflict among the body, food and consumption completely to the collective belief for restricting. Today, this

aggressive impulse has been liberated, and a great deal of energy has been transformed into a general concern for the body. Therefore, the body becomes a dangerous substance for restraint and abstinence.

In a food hyper-consumption society, lightness has become a symbol of distinction, being able to have a graceful figure reflects the good self-management ability, and losing weight has become a collective desire. This also explains why looking back at the Stone Age, the ancient Chinese Tang Dynasty, and Tonga, Ethiopia and other developing countries, being fat would be considered as beauty, however, in the consumer society, slimness and beauty are inseparable.

6. Refactoring: Fighting Under Stigma

Erving Goffman proposed the concept of stigma in his book of “Stigma”, referring to a one-way “naming” power relationship in which one group imposes a degrading label on another group or individual. It is originated from tattoos or imprints on slaves or criminals in ancient Greece. When the individual or group is stigmatized, the feeling of shame and suffering of social unfair treatment would arise. The “Rabbit” group is a stigmatized one by the internet.

For a long time, binge-eating and forced vomiting has been regarded as the abnormal behavior without willpower, and the “Rabbit” group has been labeled INCOMPREHENSIBLE, NEUROTIC, and CRAZY and so on. Ma Xiaomeng in the thesis “Imbalance and Reconstruction: Self-identify of Eating Disorders in Virtual Community Interaction -- an investigation of Baidu Tieba” pointed out that eating disorders are defined as mental illness, which deepens the public’s prejudice and rejection of patients with eating disorders. This is not conducive to patients’ recovery, but further aggravates their self-identity disorders.

The causes of eating disorders are complex and long-standing, as this “self-vomiting” picture has been described in ancient Egyptian tomb paintings. Breaking through the barriers of discipline and gaze is not easy, but it is not without a trace. Borrowing from Foucault’s point of view, man is subject to physical discipline, but the individual is not submissive. Because the power is diffuse and ubiquitous, the resistance to power can only be partial, not holistic.

Globally, the sparks of the fighting stars have begun to ignite. In October 2017, Demi Lovato, a 25-year-old star in the United States, published a documentary on her 8-year struggle with eating disorders on YouTube to inspire other patients to get rid of nightmares. Film and television works such as “Empty” and “The Secret Life of Mary Margaret: Portrait of a Bulimic” have also increased public understanding of this group. In Boston, ads on buses will have slogans: The real you is sexy, and there is a small line under the girls’ pictures: No retouching on these girls; Barbie, which is popular all over the world, starts to have different body shapes and skin colors, in order to convey the idea that we don’t have to be frightened by the body we have, we love every kind of body shapes.

In China, although the public has very limited understanding of this group, in recent years, through the articles post by new media, related popularization of science written by scholars and the stories of cured patients, the voice of the “Rabbit” group has also increased. On November 27th, 2019, HN. Rex, a Chinese eating disorder patient, published a video on Bilibili website with the title of “Bulimia and I, using binge eating to escape reality and using forced vomiting to deceive the body” to tell in details about the process of the beginning suffering and finally curing bulimia, in 30 days the watching amount reached 415,000. “Zhihu” also began to appear related themes like “As a roommate with a girl with bulimia, any good suggestions to help her feel better?”

However, the achievements abovementioned does not mean the struggle would be smooth. Due to the anonymity of the virtual network, the “Rabbit” group was able to present themselves and seek supports online, but after returning back to the real life, it is still difficult to change the status of being regarded as heterogeneous and stigmatic. As a special group that has not attracted widespread attention, they need urgent understanding and help. How to establish a reasonable aesthetic and cultural orientation, and how can the social and medical circles provide timely and effective help to enable this group to complete the reconstruction of identity in reality are worthy of our pondering.

7. Comments

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