

Techniques of the body and their relationship to identity



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Techniques of the body are essential to identity transformation. Discuss this proposition with reference to specific examples from contemporary lifestyle television.

Identity is an ongoing process that involves creating an image of the self, a 'brand'. However, what we do not realise is the fact that the dynamics of our identity is ever-changing and naturalised by the wider society. The lifestyles we have are constructed through daily "practices of consumption" (Jagose, 2003, pp. 113), whereby commodities that we consume and the lifestyles we choose play a part in the formation of our sense of self. According to Featherstone, "one's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer" (1987, pp. 55) that makes up their lifestyle. The notion of techniques of the body is one of the key elements that factors into the transformation of identity. Techniques of the body is a concept created by French sociologist and anthropologist, Marcel Mauss. The term refers to "the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies" (Mauss, 1973, pp. 70). These techniques are learned ways of doing an action, for example, having specific positioning of the hands and arms when walking or running. Mauss' framework relates to identity transformation in the way that the physical labour an individual does and how they do it provides an insight into what their identity is like, whether it is one identity or multiple identities. Similarly, this framework compliments well with Alison Hearn's claim that "the production of self must always involve some form of labour in order to create a public persona that might be of practical or

rational use” (2008, pp. 213). The concept of creating a brand of oneself through different types of labour and consumerism of commodities constitutes to the ways identities are transformed. The aim is to address concepts that factors into identity transformation by exploring arguments and insights academic scholars have regarding this topic. In this piece, the stance that I propose is that techniques of the body is somewhat key to identity transformation. However, it can not be said that this idea alone is fully held responsible for identity transformation. I argue that techniques of the body is essential as they are embodied within certain cultures and then internalised. Similar to habitus, techniques of the body has the effect of allowing us to embody ingrained habits that become a part of our identity. And finally, this idea of identity transformation through Mauss’ framework can be reflected in Australian contemporary lifestyle television show: ‘ Aussie Ladette to Lady’.

The varying styles of performing actions are manifested by individuals of certain cultures as those actions become internalised. When one associates themselves with a particular culture, that culture has a particular way of doing things – whether they walk, talk, sit and so forth – that may make them distinct from other cultures. As Swedish and Finnish scholar in psychology, management and organisation – Guje Sevon – would explain it: “ Western society applauds its winners” (2011, pp. 49). Individuals that look up to a group of role models of higher authority in a certain culture, “ praise their heroes” and tend to “ imitate them” (2011, pp. 49). They conform and adopt behaviours that reflect their role models because they may aim to have that same level of authority and success that their heroes have.

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According to Sevón's research on organisational imitations, imitation is seen as a strategy where firms save time and resources, while also achieving a "desired identity" (2011, pp. 52). She points out that identity transformation begins when the business asks: " *What would I like to be?*" (2011, pp. 53). In the business world, a modern identity consists of " self-respect, efficiency, autonomy, and flexibility" (2011, pp. 53) that most firms aim to see themselves as. Likewise, Sevón's ideas can be extrapolated and applied to cultures beyond the business world, where individuals use certain techniques of the body to achieve an identity that exudes a dominant trait in their culture. For example, one may act and dress themselves in a way that portrays themselves as a wealthy upper-class citizen so that they replicate that desired upper-class identity. The multiple ways one may imitate another by personifying particular techniques of the body is an aspect of identity transformation.

Techniques of the body that are used may influence individuals to accumulate habits that eventually become an aspect of their identity. Habits originated from the theory of habitus, a concept created by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. Habitus is the " inclination or disposition to act in a certain way and those actions have been shaped by past and present social interactions within a field" (Clarkin-Phillips, 2018, pp. 86). It is internalised during the early stages of acculturation, whereby these acts are performed subconsciously, without knowing what factors influences individuals to act that way. The habits that an individual may accumulate is the types of labour they use to create their identity or to brand themselves with. Examples of labour becoming a habit are discussed by Hochschild

(2003). She highlights that middle-class women in America “tend to manage feelings more” because they rely on men for financial support and as repayment, they “do extra emotion work” that involves verifying, enhancing and celebrating the “well-being and status of others” (2003, pp. 165). There is a heavy emphasis on women doing emotional labour as men do not use their emotions as a resource and lack the skills in managing emotions. The added pressure of society’s harsh views on women who put their emotions “less at the service of others” are deemed to be non-feminine, urging women to conform to societal expectations (2003, pp. 166) and escape the scrutiny. With women constantly working emotionally to satisfy society, men, other women and themselves, the labour may become a habit because of the reiteration of gendered expectations that surround them through media texts (such as television shows and advertisements). When emotional labour is perceived as a technique of the body, it may morph into a habit that becomes a component that transforms an individual’s identity.

Apart from Mauss’ techniques of the body, Australian contemporary lifestyle television plays an important role in identity transformation, in the way that they are consumed by viewers and how they impact participants of lifestyle television shows. Contemporary lifestyle television refers to television shows that use a modern framework that arranges everyday life around identity and consumer tastes. An example of an Australian contemporary lifestyle television show is ‘Aussie Ladette to Lady’. The series was first aired in 2009, similarly structured like the original British series ‘Ladette to Lady’. In each season, a group of Australian female contestants in their teens and twenties were flown to Egglestone Hall, a British finishing school. During

their stay at the finishing school, teachers teach them 'fine skills from the social and domestic arts', as well as skills of the 'British-ruling classes'. Contestants were to have 'respect, good deportment and good manners'. A group of three teachers determine which contestant is to be expelled each episode before the end of the season, who will proceed in the competition and win the final prize, where one contestant graduates as a lady having maintained proper behaviour and completed their transformation.

While there is a belief that contemporary lifestyle television shows guide viewers, it urges them to conform to etiquettes and follow certain ways of doing things. When contestants' behaviours were described as 'loud, vulgar, drunken and dangerous', it undermines "normative identities" by emphasising the need for "reconstruction of the self" (Redden & Brown, 2010, pp. 238). The stress of reconstructing the self is evident in 'Aussie Ladette to Lady' episode two of season one. Contestants had to skin a dead animal so that it could be used to prepare a meal for a group of British hunters after their hunt. The purpose of that exercise was learning to be a lady involves having 'to do things you don't wish to do and don't like doing with good grace', rather than running away from it or crying over a dead animal. Not only were women expected to excel domestically, they were also expected to be occupationally successful (Redden & Brown, 2010, pp. 242). This segment of the series highlights the different sorts of labour that women must shoulder in order to keep their composure in both the domestic and public atmosphere. It points out the behaviours women are expected to adopt to be perceived as respectable women in the community. In this case, there was heavy focus on women doing the physical labour of skinning a

dead animal in a graceful manner. Alongside the physical work involved, there was also the mental labour of the contestants having to force themselves to overcome their fear and anxiety of witnessing something nausea-inducing. The central focus of the show was the emotional and aesthetic labour that comes with being a lady. The contestants were required to remain calm and collected while completing a challenge they dislike. The aesthetic labour involves looking good, sounding right, projecting the right image and being well presented to satisfy expectations. On the show, the teachers reiterated to the women that they had to dress in proper uniforms with their hair tied up. According to media studies academic scholar - Kylie Jarrett (2014) - though women's labour "does not have a direct input into capital", the value of the labour is determined by the "consumption of use-values produced" (pp. 19). Not only does labour become a part of identity transformation, but the contestants' desire of wanting to be like ladies reinforces that. Taking a viewer's perspective, the way in which individuals consume lifestyle media may be internalised and embodied. That is, they may embody aesthetic styles and ways of behaviour. This demonstrates that not only can contemporary lifestyle television encourage identity changes in individuals who participate in television shows, viewers can also embody styles and ways of doing things as shown on lifestyle media.

It is important to recognise that individuals may have one identity or multiple identities. The lifestyles individuals choose to have and brand themselves influences how they identify themselves. Though Marcel Mauss' techniques of the body plays a role factoring into identity transformation, it is not

necessarily the most essential component. Pierre Bourdieu's framework of habitus is also an element of changes to one's identity, whereby techniques of the body can be turned into habits that individuals embody and internalise. Participants of Australian contemporary lifestyle television shows and those who consume it also experience changes to their identity.

Literature by academic scholars were consulted as 'Aussie Ladette to Lady' was used as an example of identity transformation. The television show may be seen as providing guidance to viewers, but it is also rejecting identities that are considered to be normal in the society and telling viewers what to do and how to do things. By disregarding and criticising certain identities, contemporary lifestyle television shows highlights how necessary reconstructing of the self is.

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