

Unveiling Identity: Dian Di La Hai's Identity and Semiotic Play in "How to Become an International Supermodel" on Douyin

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Abstract: *In 2022, the Douyin influencer "Dian Di La Hai" rapidly gained popularity on the internet with his video series "How to Become an International Supermodel," attracting significant attention and support from netizens. This paper aims to explore how Goffman's dramaturgical theory of identity and semiotics can help understand this video series. Elements such as ragged clothes, a paper flower collar, the iconic skyward braid, and a rural backdrop are transformed into an international supermodel image, creating a strong sense of contrast and providing immediate visual stimulation, which is the core formula of the series. By bringing back stage acts to the front stage, Dian Di La Hai showcases the essence of dramaturgical identity while breaking the traditional meaning of symbols through the combination of ordinary materials and luxury brands, thus presenting the deconstruction of cultural symbols. This paper delves into the application and impact of dramaturgical theory and semiotics in the context of network society through the analysis of this video series.*

Keywords: Douyin, Dramaturgical theory of identity, Semiotics, Networked identity, Cultural symbols, Identity construction, Network society.

1. Introduction

In 2022, a Douyin influencer, a young man at Shenzhen University named "Dian Di La Hai," rapidly gained popularity on the Internet. His series of videos "How to Become an International Supermodel" attracted significant attention and received tremendous support from network users.

The phenomenon of cross-dressing in China, particularly as presented by Dian Di La Hai, highlights the unique cultural interpretations and commercial adaptations of this practice on platforms like Douyin. Unlike traditional Western notions of cross-dressing, which often focus on gender disruption, Chinese cross-dressing videos emphasize the dramatic transformation and visual contrast, appealing to a broad audience through humor and surprise.

2. Understanding Cross-Dressing in the Chinese Context

In Western culture, "cross-dressing" typically refers to a type of entertainment or a serious endeavor to disrupt biological gender norms. It has been linked to the defiance of established gender roles. Cross-dressing in China has a similar developmental trajectory to that of transgender people (Tang et al., 2021, p.663). However, the concept of cross-dressing in the Chinese context, particularly on platforms like Douyin, is different. Cross-dressing videos on Douyin attract netizens' attention by leveraging the huge contrast before and after the transformation (Gu & Li, 2022, p.402). It is essential to clarify that male cross-dressing performances on Douyin have become a highly commercialized and popular genre, distinct from traditional notions of cross-dressing (Tang et al., 2021, p.664).

The popularity of cross-dressing videos on Douyin can be attributed to their ability to provide instant visual gratification and amusement. The dramatic transformations serve as a form

of visual spectacle that captivates the audience. This spectacle is often enhanced using exaggerated props, makeup, and costumes, creating a stark contrast between the performer's ordinary appearance and their transformed state.

Moreover, these videos often incorporate elements of humor and satire, making them more relatable and entertaining to the audience. The performer's ability to poke fun at themselves and embrace their exaggerated personas adds to the video's appeal. This approach not only entertains but also engages the audience on a deeper level, encouraging them to participate in the dialogue through comments and shares.

3. The Concept of Makeover

Brenda Weber (2009) introduced the notion of "makeover TV" in her book *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Weber discusses "makeover" in reality TV as an exposure of authenticity, inviting viewers behind the scenes to witness the process from 'before' to 'after' (p.22). Dian Di La Hai's videos can be analyzed using this concept, as he films the entire transformation process and presents it to the audience. Douyin, as an online social media platform, can be likened to reality TV, with both having virtual performance stages. Weber (2009) notes that her definition of "makeover" includes revamping bodies, psyches, behavior, and more (p.27), making "makeover" a suitable term to describe Dian Di La Hai's content.

The makeover is traditionally a back stage act, providing impression management preparation, a hidden activity in social interaction. In "How to Become an International Supermodel," this back stage preparation becomes a front stage performance, with the dressing details made public as part of the storyline, creating a dramatic contrast. Dian Di La Hai is one of the person on the Internet to introduce back stage performance in makeover videos, making it a unique way of self-presentation and identity-building.

4. Growth and Impact of Dian Di La Hai on Douyin

In April 2022, Dian Di La Hai's "How to Become a Chanel Model" makeover videos became a hit on Douyin, receiving 2.5 million likes. He subsequently released makeover videos for PRADA, CELINE, LV, Parisienne, and other big names, creating a "How to Become an International Supermodel" craze. As of June 20, 2024, the hashtag #InternationalSupermodelWearChallenge has received 1.2 billion views on Douyin.



Figure 1: Dian Di La Hai's Douyin interface. Source: Douyin mobile platform

The network flows of subsequent creations, such as "National Style Boy" and "How to Become a Brand Spokesperson," have gradually stabilized and reached new highs. The surge in network flows attracted numerous brands to show their faces in the comment section, marking another landmark event in Dian Di La Hai's unprecedented rise. By Jun 2024, the 21-year-old sophomore had 12.7 million followers on Douyin.



Figure 2: Various brands in Dian Di La Hai's comment section. Source: Douyin mobile platform

According to Juliang Xingtu data, Dian Di La Hai had only 440,000 followers on February 1, 2022; 552,000 on March 1; and 613,000 on April 1. By April 13, the account surpassed 1 million followers, reaching 1.046 million. In the last few days of April, Dian Di La Hai gained nearly 5 million followers. Regarding dissemination indexes, Dian Di La Hai outperformed 100% of his competitors in the same category (Ju, 2022).

5. Representation of Dramaturgical Theory of Identity

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, introduced in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, explores performance strategies for individual self-presentation at a micro level, suggesting techniques for "impression management." Goffman (1959) defines "performance" as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion that serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" and utilizes the concepts of front stage and back stage to describe areas of performance (p.8). In the front stage, an individual is aware of being observed by an audience and performs according to specific rules and social conventions, aiming to project a desired image and persona (Goffman, 1959, p.36). Conversely, in the back stage, the individual's behavior changes as there is no need for performance (p.50).

Goffman introduced a novel conceptualization of identity construction using dramaturgical metaphors to study human interaction (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.101). Goffman (1959) analyzes interpersonal interaction and how individuals "perform" to project a desirable image, using the theater to illustrate contrasting front stage and back stage behavior; during interactions, participants are viewed as "actors" (p.70). This performance is referred to as "self-presentation" by Brown (2014), as it provides a means to create new identities and perceive themselves as better versions of themselves (p.162).

Inspired by Goffman's dramaturgical theory, Meyrowitz (1986) argues that while Goffman's model of back and front region behaviors describes static stages and is limited to face-to-face interaction, its implicit principles can be adapted to describe the changes in situations and behaviors brought about by new media (p.46). In *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, Meyrowitz expands on Goffman's theory, suggesting that new media blur the boundaries between private and public acts, merging different public scenes and leading to "sidestage" or "middle region" behaviors. These behaviors allow individuals to develop deeper back stage and more forward front stage behavior styles, significantly altering social interaction patterns (p.50). Meyrowitz's work indicates that new media create a hybrid space, influencing how individuals manage their identities by blurring the distinction between private and public spheres. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how Dian Di La Hai navigates his identity presentation on Douyin, blending elements of private and public personas to engage his audience.

With the development of digital media on the Internet, dramaturgical theory has been used in face-to-face interpersonal communication research and mass and online communication. Much of the literature revolves around self-presentation and impression management on digital media platforms. Identity as performance is viewed as a natural component of social interaction as people create identity performances that fit their environments. Online environments elevate this creation of performance to a new degree through increased self-consciousness (Pearson, 2009, p.1). Boyd's (2014) study of teens' networked identity creation

on social media takes what Melowitz describes as "a contextual collapse occurring when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and demand different social responses" (p.31). This concept of dynamics is introduced in teens' interactions with social media. She points out that self-presentation is never constructed in a void, and what makes impression management in the online environment so tricky is the networked nature of the environment in which teens find themselves (Boyd, 2014, p.48). Thus, the boundaries of the performance framework are blurred in the online society, which creates confusion in the identification of performers.

Using Goffman's "self-presentation as performance" as a theoretical guide, Van Dijck (2013) focuses on the shaping of online identities by users on different platforms, suggesting that platform owners use interface technologies to facilitate unconscious self-expression while also enabling conscious self-promotion (p.201). The development of online identities in cyberspace highlights the fluidity of personal identity in the modern age, where rapid changes in technology and society impact how individuals present themselves (Wiese et al., 2018, p.47). As the Internet integrates further into everyday life, the strategies for self-presentation have become more varied and complex, making the concept of identity in digital spaces multifaceted.

The application of dramaturgical theory is crucial for understanding how online interactions differ from face-to-face interactions. For example, Sachs et al. (2021) link front and back stage behaviors to networked identity, highlighting how exposure to external expectations and the behavior of others can influence how individuals manage their identities in digital spaces (p.3). This dynamic allows individuals to navigate between front stage and back stage lives more freely, adapting their performances based on social norms and audience expectations.

Additionally, Pearson (2009) connects Goffman's theory of social performance with Granovetter's notion of the social tie, arguing that identities on social networking sites are deliberately constructed performances that span front and back stage, public and private spheres (p.1). This approach underscores the complexity of identity construction in a networked society, where the boundaries between personal and public life are increasingly blurred.

6. Semiotics in "How to Become an International Supermodel"

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, is another critical framework for understanding Dian Di La Hai's videos. Saussure's model of the signifier (the form of a word or phrase) and the signified (the conceptual meaning) offers a lens through which to view the transformation of everyday objects into symbols of high fashion in these videos (Yakina & Totu, 2014, p.6). For example, a ragged piece of cloth becomes a symbol of haute couture, and a paper flower collar is reinterpreted as a luxury accessory.

Peirce's semiotic theory further elaborates on this by

introducing the concepts of the representamen (the form the sign takes), the interpretant (the sense made of the sign), and the object (the thing to which the sign refers) (Petrilli, 1999, p.301). Dian Di La Hai's videos utilize this triadic structure by presenting ordinary items (representamen) in a high-fashion context (object), creating a new interpretation (interpretant) that challenges conventional meanings.

Barthes (1972) expands on this by discussing how myths serve as a second-order semiotic system, where signs in the first system become signifiers in the second (p.130). In this sense, Dian Di La Hai's transformation videos can be seen as creating myths of identity and fashion, where the mundane becomes extraordinary through the process of signification.

The application of semiotic theory in Dian Di La Hai's "How to Become an International Supermodel" videos is evident in several key aspects. Firstly, the performance aspect is central to the videos. Dian Di La Hai meticulously constructs his on-screen persona through the careful selection of props, costumes, and settings, embodying the essence of semiotic analysis. The contrast between his everyday attire and the glamorous supermodel persona he creates highlights the transformation's semiotic shift.

The props and costumes used in these videos also serve as semiotic tools. Each item is carefully selected and positioned to signify luxury and glamour. The contrast between the initial, unglamorous state and the final, polished look underscores the transformative power of the makeover, reinforcing the semiotic shift from ordinary to extraordinary.

By applying Saussurean and Peircean semiotics, this study will analyze the symbolic meanings of various elements in Dian Di La Hai's "How to Become an International Supermodel" series. The analysis will explore how these signs function within the videos and how they contribute to the overall narrative and aesthetic.

Moreover, the study will examine the implications of semiotics in the context of online platforms and consumer society. The digital environment of Douyin allows for rapid dissemination and reinterpretation of signs, making it a fertile ground for semiotic analysis. By understanding how symbols are constructed and deconstructed in this space, the study will provide insights into the ways in which digital media influences cultural production and identity construction.

7. Mystification and Performance

"What does he look like?" This is the biggest question that has been on the minds of netizens since Dian Di La Hai became popular, and the contrast between the two images before and after the makeover, as presented in the video by Dian Di La Hai, has also been much talked about.

The question of what the honest "Dian Di La Hai" looks like and whether he looks the same before or after the makeover has become the second hot topic of discussion in addition to Dian Di La Hai's makeover videos. And there is even a single topic on Douyin called "The Other's Perspective of Dian Di La Hai," which means everyone wants to see what Dian Di La Hai looks like in real life. Goffman (1959) writes of

mystification, "If we see perception as a form of contact and communion, then control over what is perceived is control over contact that is made, and the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact . . ." (p.67). In the process of interaction, to prevent the performer from becoming too close to the audience, a certain social distance must be maintained between them so that the audience cannot fully understand the performer and is mystified, thus creating a sense of awe (Katovich & Longhofer, 2009, p.390).

Mystification is at the heart of Dian Di La Hai's makeover performance. There is an inextricable link between his sense of contrast in appearance and the mystification he presents in the video. In Dian Di La Hai's interaction with the viewer, he is undoubtedly in control of the source of information, as the viewer can only see the contrast between his before and after the makeover.

In contrast, the actual process of the makeover is non-transparent. In "How to Become an International Supermodel," the videos all start with Dian Di La Hai in a wildly exaggerated and ugly image, which is very different from his international supermodel image. After the changeover, he is dressed in luxurious clothes and make-up, with professional lighting and post-production photography, making it impossible for viewers to make the connection between the before and after, leading to a sense of "magic." so that the viewer is cut off from the before and after images of his transformation and thus curious about this mystification.



Figure 3: Dian Di La Hai posted the "twin brother" and comments from users. Source: Douyin mobile platform

The secrets hidden by this social distance are not secrets, nor are they necessarily secrets. Goffman (1959) said that the real secret is that the audience is not allowed to know this (p.46). Dian Di La Hai sees mystification as a strategy, and there may not be any secrets behind the scenes of the seemingly mysterious mystification act that the audience sees. Still, he does his best to perform and disguise it from the audience based on their expectations. For example, he even posted a picture of his "twin brother," suggesting in the comments that he had twins to confuse the audience even more. Goffman (1959) states that "misrepresentation is held to be an

intentional act." One can arise through words or actions, vague statements or misleading literal truths, non-disclosure, or prevention of discovery (p.41). The "misrepresentation" is evident in the back stage of Dian Di La Hai's video. The back stage scenes of Dian Di La Hai were often shot in rural areas of China, where the dilapidated houses, uneven land, and his deliberately ugly image of a rural boy were deliberately designed to make viewers suspicious of his fashion performance.

8. Bridging the Gap Between Back stage and Front Stage

The "back stage" is the counterpart of the "front stage," which is the area that is invisible to the audience and the part of the stage that the performer doesn't want the audience to see and is not accessible (Goffman, 1959, p.69). Comparing other makeover bloggers on Douyin, it is easy to see that they show their makeover results directly, with only the front and back stage offered separately. However, in "How to Become an International Supermodel," Dian Di La Hai filmed how he achieved his makeover and made the details public, which takes up two-thirds of the video. At the same time, he focuses more on the presentation of the environment before the makeover, satisfying the audience's desire for voyeurism back stage. By presenting a back stage performance that most people don't want others to know about, he is moving his show back stage, or, more precisely, using Meyrowitz's "middle region" to explain it. For Meyrowitz (1986), the middle region act means that the performer and the audience no longer have an absolute front or back stage. The current development of electronic media has brought more of the back stage front (p.51). In today's Internet environment, people can present themselves on social media without restriction (Whiting & Williams, 2013, p.363). And it is no longer surprising that back stage performances are being presented to the audience.

In Dian Di La Hai's video, viewers can see his actual self back stage before the makeover and his ideal self on the front stage after. Before cross-dressing, he wears regular short sleeves, unwashed hair, a dull complexion, and a deliberately ugly expression to make him look like a makeshift rural boy. He performs using the characteristic camera movement of a food blogger, zooming in on details of the makeover materials he uses, such as torn clothes, used trash bags, and rusty buttons. His back stage performances are, therefore, practically no different from those on the front stage, all carefully crafted and designed scenarios. The true self that should have been shown back stage also became the true self after the show. For example, cutting white paper into collars and taping them to clothes, sewing bow ties by hand, grabbing a neighbor's grandfather's teacup, and so on, using extremely ordinary and unusual raw materials and crude production to draw the audience directly into an expectation of the finished product that follows the boundaries between front and back stage are increasingly blurred, and performance is everywhere (Masi et al., 2021, p.802).

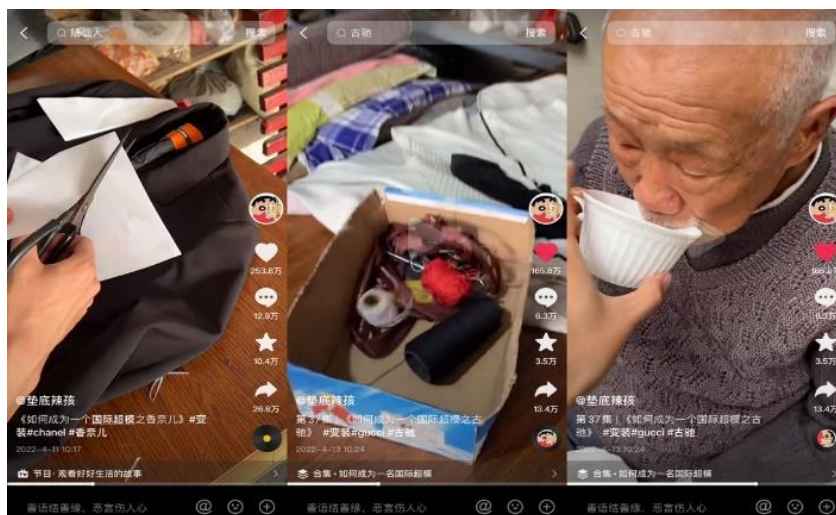


Figure 4: Costume making process of Dian Di La Hai. Source: Douyin mobile platform

9. Context Collapse of Networked Identity

Dian Di La Hai's collaboration with the Chinese milk tea brand ChaBaiDao illustrates the concept of context collapse, where the blending of different social contexts leads to confusion and unexpected reactions from the audience. When ChaBaiDao posted before-and-after photos of Dian Di La Hai's makeover on Xiaohongshu, the response was overwhelmingly negative. This reaction highlights the challenges of navigating multiple social contexts and the potential for identity misalignment across different platforms.

Boyd (2014) describes context collapse as the phenomenon where distinct social contexts merge, forcing individuals to reconcile different norms and expectations simultaneously. Dian Di La Hai's networked identity, carefully crafted on Douyin, did not translate well to the Xiaohongshu audience, leading to a collapse in the perceived authenticity of his persona. This incident underscores the importance of understanding audience expectations and the complexities of maintaining a consistent identity across various social media platforms.

10. Breaking the Link Between Signifier and Signified

In "How to Become an International Supermodel," Dian Di La Hai effectively breaks the conventional link between the signifier and the signified. Saussure's model posits that the relationship between the signifier (the form) and the signified (the concept) is arbitrary yet culturally ingrained. Dian Di La Hai subverts this by transforming everyday objects into symbols of high fashion, challenging traditional associations.

For instance, a ragged piece of cloth, typically signifying poverty or neglect, is repurposed as a fashion statement, signifying elegance and style. This reconfiguration aligns with Barthes' (1972) concept of myth, where the original sign becomes a signifier in a new context, creating new meanings and cultural associations. Dian Di La Hai's creative process deconstructs and reconstructs these symbols, offering a fresh perspective on identity and fashion.

Peirce's triadic model further elucidates this transformation.

The representamen (the physical form) of the objects used in Dian Di La Hai's makeovers takes on new interpretants (meanings) through their presentation in a high-fashion context. The object (the actual item) remains the same, but its cultural significance is altered through the creative process, demonstrating the fluidity and complexity of semiotic interpretation.

Dissolving Boundaries Between Elite and Grassroots Culture
Thanks to the development of science and technology and the increased productivity of modern society, we have changed from being enslaved by things to being dominated and haunted by symbols. Modern consumer society is no longer just a world of goods and objects; it has become a kingdom of symbols (Baudrillard, 1998, p.77).

From a macro perspective, the world has entered what Heidegger calls the "age of visual culture" (Mitchell, 2007, p.50), where fashion is essentially symbolic consumption. In Dian Di La Hai's videos, international brands such as Gucci, Celine, and Givenchy have long been given symbolic meaning by consumerism, becoming symbols of status for the powerful and the wealthy.

In the framework of a consumer society, consumption of culture can be separated into multiple degrees, people can enjoy high-quality, complex cultural items but also look for easy ways to reduce tension and let out their emotions (Baudrillard, 1998, p.99). Dian Di La Hai's videos are clearly in the latter category. The "How to Become an International Supermodel" series of short videos is a kind of inspirational content that expresses the "grassroots reverse" by comparing before and after the makeover. The social mentality of the grassroots is highly complex. On the one hand, they aspire to a glamorous and decent life, hoping to climb the social ladder. However, on the other hand, they are frustrated by their inability to achieve their desires, thus creating a "deliberately distant" mentality toward elite culture. Dian Di La Hai's videos dissolved the boundary between elite and grassroots culture.

According to Roland Barthes, the consumed myths are produced at the level of secondary systems of meaning or connotation (Barthes & Lavers, 1972, p.130). By constructing the "myth" of fashion, luxury goods serve to "enforce the

interests and values of the ruling class and preserve the existing social power structures." In the structural perspective of the "myth," the consumption of fashion brands is a classification of aesthetic taste that is used to distinguish between "high and low" users, constituting a kind of "cultural arbitrariness" and "symbolic violence" and maintaining the "reproduction of power relations" (König et al., 2016, p.203). The grassroots identity of Dian Di La Hai and his casual use of worn-out props shatter the myth of capitalism and project a picture of "ordinary people reaching out to fashion." For the viewer, learning about the style of a fashion brand from the video or even watching the video of Dian Di La Hai can become their own cultural and symbolic capital to differentiate themselves and seek identity, thus contributing to his popularity. At the same time, it also satisfies, to some extent, the psychological needs of the grassroots. As Weibo users said, "I do not care if he looks like this in person; if I could have his beauty quotient and makeover skills, I will feel more confident." In this process, it is implied that ordinary people can break through their original image and create a new visual impact through self-transformation. This transformation process may also be able to be replicated in oneself, fulfilling one's own fantasies.

11. Cultural Recontextualization

Dian Di La Hai's videos also serve as a form of cultural recontextualization, where Western high-fashion elements are reinterpreted within a Chinese context. This process involves taking symbols and practices from one cultural framework and adapting them to another, creating new meanings and associations. By incorporating elements of Western high fashion into the rural Chinese backdrop, Dian Di La Hai creates a hybrid cultural narrative that resonates with both local and global audiences.

This cultural recontextualization not only makes high fashion accessible to a broader audience but also challenges the dominance of Western fashion narratives. By blending elements from different cultures, Dian Di La Hai's videos promote a more inclusive and diversified understanding of fashion and identity.

12. Conclusion

Dian Di La Hai's "How to Become an International Supermodel" video series provides a compelling case study for applying dramaturgical theory and semiotics in digital media. Through careful performance construction and the innovative use of cultural symbols, Dian Di La Hai not only entertains but also challenges conventional notions of identity and fashion. His success on Douyin underscores the power of these theoretical frameworks in understanding contemporary digital content. The blending of front stage and back stage elements, the semiotic reimagining of everyday objects, and the interactive nature of the platform all contribute to the video's appeal and effectiveness.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory and semiotics offer valuable insights into these videos. By analyzing the performative aspects of identity construction and the symbolic meanings embedded in the performances, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how digital media shapes and is shaped by

cultural and social practices. Dian Di La Hai's work exemplifies how digital media can create engaging, transformative content that resonates with a broad audience.

This study provides insights into the complex processes of identity construction and cultural production in the digital age. Future research could further explore how sustained exposure to such content influences viewers' attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, investigating the role of digital platforms in shaping these identity performances and understanding their algorithms and affordances could reveal how they influence content visibility and popularity, which is crucial for promoting more inclusive and diverse representations in digital media.

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