

## **The Complex and Power-laden Contemporary Culture**

----An exploration on culture studies from ‘Celebrities’ Selfies on Instagram’ project

### **1. The definition of cultural studies**

The wide stretch definition of culture leads to the difficulties and bottomless efforts on cultural studies. Culture can be referred to the peoples’ living habits and customs, literature works by contemporary people, moral and value status of contemporary times etc. Therefore, cultural studies is an interdisciplinary subject which requires knowledge from multiple fields such as sociology, linguistics, anthropology, media etc. Cultural studies observe how and why human beings construct their daily lives, which always related to a series of social subjects such as ideology, social class, nationality, ethnicity etc. (Lash & Lury, 2007) Merely analyzing the written documents and literatures in history are not enough for human beings to fully understand culture; instead, it requires systematical research methods and various fieldworks. According to the definition by Couldry, culture studies could be guided by the empirical research and considered as a discipline, which ‘based on its history, values and overall methodological orientation’ (2000: 9). Due to the continuity of social phenomenon, it requires this empirical research to be sustained and focus on the past, current and future of particular social phenomenon. Since the cultural studies rely on the systematic, scientific and practical consideration, it can be regarded as a rigorous subject to be studied. Moreover, the researcher’s own impact on the research, which comes from researchers subjectivity and individual perspectives towards particular social phenomenon, also determine the self-reflexivity of cultural studies.

Tyler and Bennett (2010) argued that “celebrity culture is not only thoroughly embedded in everyday social practices, but is more radically constitutive of contemporary social life”. In the contemporary culture studies, many sociologists put their focus on the influence of celebrities on social relations. The rise of “celebrity chav”, namely “a figure who has become rapidly and unexpected wealthy or publicly visible”, shifted the traditional social class gauge which based on economic power to a new social class benchmarking featured as “symbolic capital” and “culture capital” (Tyler and Bennet, 2010), which the status and popularity are prioritized for social identification. Therefore, the common value and social behaviors are greatly influenced by the celebrity’s purpose “show-off” in public. However, the celebrity culture also demonstrates the rising of common culture, which could be best justified by the high visibility of concerning on the working-class, or people with relatively low economic capital, resulting “a shift from elite to ordinary” (Tyler and Bennet, 2010). Therefore, celebrity culture, as the driven force of contemporary culture, should be elaborately and comprehensively studied so as to capture the complexity of contemporary culture.

However, in my point of view, Couldry’s definition towards culture studies is not without limitation. First, culture studies could be regarded as a discipline based on

particular rules and regulations to be analyzed and traced. However, sometimes the complexity of culture could obscure some aspects of the explanation and exploration of culture phenomenon providing that culture studies follow the discipline of one subjects. Culture studies should be more inclusive. In the book of *The Interpretation of Cultures* by Geertz (1973), the definition of culture is essentially semiological which everything could be embodied meaningfully, which leads to the conclusion that analyzing meaning is not a kind of empirical science for discussing disciplines and rules, but an explanative science for discussing the meaning of everything. Secondly, Couldry's perspective towards cultural studies limited mere contemporary culture. Within this complex social background, it is also vital important to broaden our horizons and take into consideration of the social development throughout the history.

## **2. About my project**

My project focuses on interpreting celebrity culture from the use of Instagram which is a popular social network specifically by posting photos to connect friends. Selfies, a popular self-portrait photograph, proliferate actively on Instagram. In the era of the rapid dissemination of information, more and more people tend to prefer the light reading in shorter length and the photograph browsing which provides more perceptual intuition (Nead, 1992). Two celebrities' selfies on Instagram will be closely analyzed to see how they portrait themselves and how the audiences response them, in which we can have a better understanding about celebrity culture as current mainstream culture. By applying the theory of consumerism, our group developed the relationship between the celebrities and the audiences. Selfies are one form of "commodities" through media production while the audiences purchase and use these "commodities" as acts of "consumption". The image in Instagram are different kinds of Selfies at the first sight. But in fact, it is hard for us to know that whether it is the tactics of entertainment company to promote celebrities or pursue economic benefits. In addition, whether the accessories, cloths or any elements in the background are also placed for the purpose advertising is also questionable since the fans influence is the most effective way for circulation. What's more, both the beautiful selfies of Taeyeon and selfies of Miley Cyrus to show the unique personalities embody their aesthetic attitude and perceptions, which indirectly reveal the challenge of mainstream aesthetic value forced by consumerism (Cronin, 2005). Through the textual and visual analysis, we were equipped with better acquaintance with their relationship and celebrity culture as the mainstream control culture in the present.

## **3. Challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture**

All the materials and information related to understanding contemporary culture scattered proliferate within our daily life, making it difficult to clarify the rules or the orders about what consist of and contribute to contemporary culture. Through our project, there revealed three main challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture.

### **3.1 The challenges of defining 'Culture studies'**

Culture itself has already been hard enough to define it, so does 'culture studies' due to the difficulty to confine the scope of studying content. As a continual, systematic, and academic subject, culture studies have its own topics to be studied, concepts and methodology. According to Christ Barker (2009:5), it is particularly difficult to tell what is 'culture studies' since it is neither sociology, nor linguistics nor physics but what culture studies focuses have overlapped with these subjects. Culture studies should focus the issues on the common peoples life, how and why they think, rather than focus on elites, upper-class value and thinking. Our project selected the popular phenomenon in Media culture, from which to understand that the current value is largely dominated by the group who purposely produce culture and enable the common people to passively consume culture. Just as Christ Barker (2009: 9) stated that culture studies is a subject related to power and economic and social resources distribution which including the following aspects: who possess and manipulate culture production; culture production mechanism; the results of ownership and controlling power as the culture carriers.

### **3.2 The challenges of textual analysis**

Current culture studies have shifted the focus on merely discrete 'texts' into a wider 'textual environment'. Therefore, the complexity of textual environment brings great challenges for culture studies whereas on the other hand improve our ability to understand contemporary culture. For example, the effects of *Harry Potter* is hard to be understood only from the seven series books by J.K. Rowling, it is more important take the consideration of the films, related tourism attractions, museums, toys and so on. In addition, the connections among those commercial derivatives should also be taken into account. What's more, how the readers interpret the texts and their relations, which differs radically from person to person and assumedly should follow some orders or rules, are gradually coming into sociologists' intention. From the example above, it is clear to address the problem about how to conduct textual analysis, which could be coined as 'texts', the primary and the most concentrated object that has been studied, 'textuality', how different texts closely related to each other, and 'tactics', how the reader negotiated with the whole textual production differently based on different identity, class, etc., according to Couldry (2002: 70).

Therefore, in my research, isolated analysis on the selfies of Miley Cyrus and Taeyeon are not enough for understanding how consumerism constitutes the current mainstream culture. According to Couldry, when conducting text-related research, we should look in detail about how to produce the standardized meanings among vast textual resources and how these texts circulate. In the selfies, Taeyeon and Miley Cyrus portrait complete different image, which arose greatly doubt on whether these images on selfies presents their real personality or more ironically, these images reveals where the hegemony wants to lead the culture to. Taeyeon came to the spotlight since 2007 when she was the leader of the most popular girl group in South Korea. Their early immerse popularity makes these seven girls as the most influential people in the country and continually gained great influence in whole Asia. Among

Girls' Generation, Taeyeon was the most popular one and later on extended her career into film, television and so on. Since her debut, she always packaged herself as the image of a sweet, innocent and lovely girl, which can also be presented in her selfies in Instagram. At the same time, among her selfies, many luxury products such as Chanel earrings and bags also attracted lots of attention, imposing audiences to pursue the same level of consuming ability regardless of whether they can be up to or not. The celebrities' effects on advertising products nowadays gradually widely recognized in marketing and advertising industry. The audiences and followers were passive to receive the perception that this 'commodity' looks good with her, which persuaded them to purchase one as well. Some sociologists such as Lawler, suggested that this psychology contributed to the 'class inequality', or in other words, reshaped the hierarchy of class grading: the traditional class classified by economic status has no longer predominant, while the classification of 'superiority/inferiority', 'normality/abnormality', 'judgment/shame' (Lawler, 1999:4) plays the major role in class relations. To be more specifically, Taeyeon represents the class of superiority in not doubt. Her followers purchased the Chanel earrings that she showed in her selfies or merely the feeling as the superior's followers will make them feel superior even though they are education level, economic ability largely lag behind compared with the 'real superiority'.

In terms of Miley Cyrus, her image in public is largely divergent with Taeyeon. Miley is an American actress and singer who started up her career at her early age since her father is an American country singer. Her image was sweet and approachable at her early career life, which was easier to be accepted by the common value in public. In 2013, she suddenly cut her hair and completely changed her image in public from a lovely girl into a sexually explicit woman with tattoos and eye-catching styles. However, even though her sudden change triggered controversy debates and many of them criticized her new image, her new album release enjoyed great success. Instagram, as one of the best ways to portrait self-image, can purposely help her overturn her previous image. The seductive selfies with her tongue out and the selfies with exaggerated tattoos and peculiar-looking dressing attracted millions of comments and followers. It is indeed a bold action. From the comments of her followers, unlike Taeyeon, many of them actually despised and criticized her new image. In return, her defenders gave her unconditional supports and even follow her actions such as getting similar tattoos in their body. In a 2014 interview with W Magazine, Cyrus said that "I love weed" and "I just love getting stoned." But she still received great support from her fans. Her 'bad girl' image embodied the group of people who want to be the different from the rest of the world and persist on their own way no matter what others way, regardless of the fact that their celebrity's image is purposely set up by a group of people who expert in marketing and advertising and pursue the profitable success and influential power in public.

From textual analysis, our project could project some issues in contemporary culture. Firstly, there is not doubt that the celebrities can exert great influence on the public

therefore lead the public value, behavior etc. by the massive proliferation of current media tools. The sociologist Joshua Gamson stated that 'Celebrity is a primary contemporary means to power, privilege, and mobility (1994:186). Their influence are not only in the domain of entertainment field, but also in education and politics (Durham, 2001). However, current rise of 'celebrity chav', 'a figure who has become rapidly and unexpectedly wealthy or publicly visible', represented the 'dumbing down' of the culture (Coudry, 2000: 376). Taeyeon's followers pursue the luxury products which might be hard for them to afford; Miley Cyrus's followers will be misguided to get tattoo, use drugs and smoke which might eventually throw themselves into a self-abandoned life. In addition, from the responses to Taeyeon and Miley, we can also be inferred that the different value of Asian culture, which are more orthodox and shows the consistence in terms of aesthetic value whereas American culture are more likely to pursue uniqueness, difference and have their own characters and personalities. In those American value, the more different, the more exaggerated image he/she is, the more popular the he/she will be.

### **3.3 The challenge of visual analysis**

Visual studies in culture studies will focus on the concrete description of the object in our daily lives with a cultural perspective. Nowadays, with the rapid dissemination and powerful influence of digital media, the previous overlook of visual studies should be reclaim and the importance of visual studies in culture studies should been taken seriously as an systematic and academic discipline. There are some critics on visual studies. For example, some critics stated that 'immediacy and concreteness of the visible image is in danger of being spirited away the dematerialized, visual copy'(Mitchell 2002). Unlike texts and language, pictures, films, etc. failed to meet the requirements of perfectly delivery some spiritual and meaningful sense. Visually, in some sense, will limit people's imagination and bottomless thoughts. However, in current cultural background, the proliferation of different kinds of digital media have almost occupied every walk of our daily life (Featherstone, 1987). Therefore, it is hard to ignore its influence on our understanding towards everything around us. It is not difficult to say that the objects in the form of visuality have transformed the any attempt to define culture only with the form of language. In visual studies, not only the aesthetic perspectives and artistic styles can be fit in, even though the scientific analysis on technologies about film, photography etc. can also be able to brought into for understanding its influence on culture since all of these are the cultural production.

In my project, Instagram is a popular photography social network applicant, a kind of digital media by using pictures to connect millions of users around the world. Instagram's popularity is also the results of cultural development. Firstly, the images become the more preferred tool to attract people's attention due to its easy readability and convenient usability. Forcing by the current consumerism trend, therefore marketing and advertising team are more likely to use the visuality to persuade customers to agree their value so as to purchase their commodity (Lury, 1996). The success of the Instagram is the result of the sophisticated photographing technology to

beautify the pictures and their deep understanding of nowadays people's mentality on interesting interaction with their family and friends about where they are going and what they are thinking conveyed by the pictures. Selfies, a new buzzwords nowadays, has fully satisfied people's desire to polish and present the best-self in public. Secondly, visible image greatly changed people's aesthetic taste nowadays. Taeyeon's selfies well presented a beautiful girl's features such as skinny body figure, long hair, white skin, and big eyes, mostly from the perspectives of Asian people. From the comments of her followers, the majority of them tend to comment that 'you are so beautiful', 'you are my goddess' so and forth. On the contrary, the aesthetical elements in Miley's selfies are completely different. Instead of earrings, beautiful smile, lovely expressions, tattoos, Martin boots, distinct and exaggerate expressions etc. have become the fashion. All in all, these ways of aesthetic taste represents peoples' different perceptions towards beauty, which differ according to different cultural backgrounds. Thirdly, according to Mitchell(2002), 'modernity entails the hegemony of vision and visual media'. In my project, by analyzing the images two celebrities posted on Instagram, it is clear to find out its potential influence on different aspects of people's life nowadays such as their aesthetic tastes, their consuming temptation, and their attempt to find social identity by imitating the celebrities' actions posted on their Instagram. Through the visual tools, it becomes easier for the visible image producers to influence their audiences by concrete, direct but powerful guidance. Nevertheless, whether the image well reflect the reality or is enslaved by the groups behind the public image for their economic benefits or political influence obscures many audiences' eyes. What's the worse, even audiences are well aware its negative influences on their perceptions, it is impossible for them to jump out of the influences since the culture production is unavoidable for everyone.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Nick Couldry's definition indeed well illustrate the scope of culture studies and pointed out its challenges as well. On the other hand, culture studies is also a subject that is hard to give specific definition. Our project analyzed one of the most popular cultural phenomenon in digital media to explore. From the perspectives of textual analysis and visual analysis, the cultural meaning behind this phenomena was unfolded. However, it is just the tip of the iceberg within cultural studies which needs more efforts and evidence to better understand the contemporary culture and cultural production around us.

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