

Our Group Research Topics

Celebrities are products of the interpenetration and combination of business and culture. With the rapid development of social economy, an indivisible close relationship has been generated between the cultural and celebrities consumptions. As publicity of the celebrities has been commercialized, celebrity's images on social network can naturally be converted into huge commercial profits. Thanks to the influence and impetus of consumerism and cultural consumption, consumption of celebrities has gradually become a part of today's social consumption, and the emergence and development of the star system guides the consumption of celebrity products (Lash and Lury 2007). With Integra as the platform of research and the sulfide posted by the American and Korean actresses and pop stars as the object of study, the study of our group intends to interpret the marketing strategy and effects of sulfide from celebrities as commodities, from the perspective of consumerism (Featherstone 1987).

The core competitiveness of Integra is its social network built with photographs, which have their own unique advantages in presenting the features of things: more distinctive visual effects(Featherstone 1991). For depiction of the ink-consuming things in the form of text, such as food, scenes, and portraits, the advantages of photographs mentioned above are reflected in a particularly evident fashion. 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).

The popularization of selfish posted on the network by celebrities benefits by the combined effects of consumer culture and mass media. For commercialization of the body is an important feature of consumer culture, celebrity sulfide also exists as a commodity, which is produced by the mass media and simultaneously infiltrated by the consumer culture. In its very nature, it is a representation of consumer culture, a means to create economic benefits using female images, in the dominance of a consumption era (Glynn and Giorgi 2013).

Given the large number of selfish posted by American and Korean female celebrities, and, subsequently, the wide range of research and huge number of carriers, we did not blindly adopt a quantitative research method. We believe that, starting from the visual effect of cultural studies, a qualitative research method is more preferable. We mainly used the media observation, text analysis, and photograph of empirical research. The lack of a large number of authoritative statistical data constitutes the difficulty of the study (Featherstone 1991)

Defining Cultural Studies

There are two schools that have made great contributions to media culture research, that is, the Frankfurt School in Germany and British Cultural Studies, which basically make the "two gems" in the research on media culture.

Transdisciplinary Approach

The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies both adopt the transdisciplinary approach. Some of their studies are unique and form the distinctive features of the methods for media culture research. The members of the Frankfurt School include philosophers, psychologists, economists and historians and so on. They all procure nourishment from other disciplines and then use in their own research projects, so as to form their own features. Like the Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies is committed to studying culture in the social relations and system through which it is generated and consumed, so cultural study is closely related to social, political and economic studies. The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies are similar in their abstract theoretical perspectives, which require them to integrate political economy, analysis of texts, and audience reception studies in the framework of critical social theory.

The difference between the two schools in their perspectives on media culture

Difference in research perspectives and interests

The American scholar Douglas Kellner has made a comparison between Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies on their research perspectives[1]. I quite agree with him. He said, “The Frankfurt School is extremely useful for analyzing the current forms of culture and society because of their focus on the intersections between technology, the culture industries, and the economic situation in contemporary capitalist societies. ... both the Frankfurt school and British cultural studies offer us resources to critically analyze and transform our current social situation and thus to develop a critical social theory and cultural studies with a practical intent.”(Nealon and Irr 2002).

“While in exile in the United States, the members of the Frankfurt School came to believe that American “popular culture” was also highly ideological and worked to promote the interests of American capitalism. ... The Birmingham group came to focus on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts. They were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film and other popular cultural forms on audiences. They also focused on how various audiences interpreted and used media culture in varied and different ways and contexts.” (Nealon and Irr 2002).

The Frankfurt School, which arose in the era when the Fascism was rampant, is more concerned with the suppression function of media culture in theory; while the British Cultural Studies came as nobodies rose in rebellion after World War II, so the researchers more emphasize the revolt function of media culture. If the British Cultural Studies focuses on “where there is suppression, there is revolt” in research, the cultural theory of the Frankfurt School will be “where there is revolt, there is submission”; if the Frankfurt School makes general critique of the political economy and cultural pathology, the Cultural Studies investigates the microscopic practice of

the audiences; the former emphasizes macroscopic survey without considering the concept of individual, while the latter attaches importance to individual experience and emphasizes microscopic analysis of texts. This is also the fundamental difference between the Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies in their perspectives on media culture and interests.

Horkheimer and Adorno from the Frankfurt School had seen the conformity of media by the power of capitalism and statism and had replaced the expression “mass culture” with “culture industry” “in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme.”(Scott (2008)—as noted by Adorno later in his essay *Cultural Industry Reconsidered* (Adorno 1975). Thus Horkheimer and Adorno preferred the term “culture industry” to the implicit expression “mass culture”. The mass culture is actually a type of culture industry in nature (Durham 2001).

The idea of Mechanical Reproduction of Benjamin revealed the separation of the uniqueness of a work of art through mechanical reproduction while Habermas had criticized that structural transformation of the public sphere is actually a result from the gantlet of “authoritative ideology” and “capital ideology”.

In short, the Frankfurt School concerns much of the “uniformity” of media by the external force. On the contrary, the Birmingham School takes media culture as being generated spontaneously during the course when media is used by the masses, resisting and struggling against the existing ideologies. Hall presented an assumption of trichotomy philosophy based on his three practical approaches of decoding which was later proved by researchers including Morley with empirical evidences. The theory of “pleasure” founded by Fiske focuses far more on the ways audience uses or “misappropriates” media, interpreting, distorting, making use of or subverting or transforming the established authoritative ideology of media, which is undoubtedly a view of media culture in relation with “resist”.

Distinction between Pessimists and Optimists

The Frankfurt School has shown a strong elitism disposition in their views on media culture which is widely criticized. The Frankfurt School has confined themselves to the elite position and dualistic values, rejecting or even steering clear of firsthand experience and in-depth study on the specific and dynamic media texts, showing a priori prejudice and repulsion against media culture up to a point.

Pessimism is found, between the lines, in their works, holding that mass culture is something that the capitalist industrialization has imposed on audience. They have paid much attention on critique of the materialized culture and therefore their aesthetic interest is described to be the “hopeless redemption” in essence. Stevenson noted that “members of the Frankfurt school tended to view popular culture through a

specific attachment to modernist art. This particular cultural disposition meant that they did not problematise the reading activities of a socially situated audience”(Stevenson 2002). And Mark Poster asserted that “in the former the working class has become an inert mass, manipulated by media and popular culture generally. For the latter the dominant forces have been able to establish a stasis but resistance continues at the micro-level of everyday life.” (Poster 2013).

Such pessimism had featured the Frankfurt School remarkably both in its early and late stages. As an example, Horkheimer and Adorno had argued in their book *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (Redmond 2007) that the more the audience relies on media, the worse situation they get manipulated and lose their discretion and as time passes, people will become captured by machines including media, i.e. human beings become enslaved by matter. The theme in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*(Redmond 2007) is that how “enlightenment” becomes “anti-enlightenment” due to the development of the mass media system and the rise of the consumer society. They alleged that media culture had obscured people’s intellect, deprived people’s minds and their liberty of creativity. Audience needs to be enlightened should they want freedom and the whole process of enlightenment is a process of demythologization and a relapse into magic and a process of critique as well. They have attempted to cultivate the intellect of the masses and enlighten the people by criticizing the general laws of production in the capitalism era (i.e. the age of machinery industry). Nevertheless, is yet to be seen whether the masses will again be manipulated by the commodity fetishism after being enlightened.

That is why some people tend to believe advertising claims and buy the products that are advertised. Therefore, the contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno lies in the “enlightenment” itself rather than the subsequence of the “enlightenment”.

This was the main source of their pessimism.

One of the major tasks of British cultural studies is to investigate the role of media and mass culture in the anti-establishment struggle, it has acquired a feature of fresh, open and positive attitude at the very beginning. Although the British cultural studies also saw the status and role of media in the whole social power field, as well as the repression of media culture by ideology, their theoretical interest focused more on active interpretation of media text by the audience, so once they indulged in symbol interpretation of media texts, they can hardly pull themselves out of it to reflect on issues behind the media system, whether there’s repression or not? (Kellner 1995).

Differences in specific methodology

Although both the two schools used interdisciplinary methods, they used different methods when dealing with specific media culture phenomenon, due to different time and space of the two schools’ emergence. From my point of view, the Frankfurt school of cultural studies mainly used critique of political economy plus critique of ideology; while the British cultural studies mainly used empirical research methods (ethnographic research methods) plus Semiotics. Frankfurt School originated in

Germany, a country with a profound flavor of philosophy, and gained a strong sense of speculation. Their political economy approaches were in accordance with their stance of social criticism toward capitalism, and their theories were leftists with a flavor of Marxism. The word “Critical theory” was first used as a concept by theorists of Frankfurt school to describe their theory, which referred to a social research method different from the empirical natural science. Such social research can never be value-neutral, but highly concerns social conflict, especially the dominating-dominated relationship in social conflict, by natural.

So, to reveal the nature of media power, they did political economy analysis on media, and proposed that media is part of the superstructure and serves the economic base, so the nature of mass media is to serve the propertied or the ruling class. They also saw the false and instrumental nature of media as an ideology, and pointed out the manipulating, deceiving and debating role of media ideology.

British cultural studies used theoretical approaches of sociology, anthropology and semiotics, and investigated the medial culture phenomenon.(Jameson 1991). Notably, application of ethnographic methodology by Morley, Fiske, etc. made studies on media more scientific and empirical, which doubtlessly introduced a special charm of methodology. Morley introduced sociology, anthropology, and ethnographic methodology into studies on culture media, and supplemented it with a flavor of positivism, making it more persuasive at most. While Fiske used semiotic approaches to interpolate the various media cultural phenomenon, and did all kinds of cultural analysis on its significance, definitely making the interpolation more dignified and profound. For example, Fiske had vividly explained the cultural phenomenon using theories proposed by structuralists Althusser, Levi-Strauss and semioticians Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, in his book “understanding popular culture”. And in-depth and detailed semiotic analysis on a single cultural phenomenon has become one of the characteristic features of methodology of British culture studies.

Challenges on Contemporary Media and Cultural Studies and how we deal with it

Quantitatively, media culture research mainly focuses on analyzing media products. Correspondingly, it adopts the method of text interpretation to make an analysis of text style, text features, and text connotation, thus inferring the social and cultural significance of text topics.

1. Women image and the establishment of women image on the social networks

The “women image” and its discourse construction are a relatively prominent challenge in the media culture research. The female stars on the social networks use their self-portraits to present female body images, which can reflect how they establish aesthetic space under consumer culture (Price and Shildrick 1999). From this entry point, we start to think about the relationship between the social networks and the esthetics of female’s bodies in a consumer society (Woertman and Van 2012).

Through a constructive analysis of the female stars’ images in instagram and a textual analysis of their fans’ responses, we are able to make a good analysis of the power mechanism behind the women images presentation on the current social networks.

Due to the influence of male-dominated culture and the control of commercial interests, as well as the passive discourse strategies of women's expression, the women's expression on the new media which is represented by the internet is actually a utopia of women's discourse power.

2. The close correlation between media products and culture of audience

The development of media technologies has subverted the traditional concept of audience to some extent. An increasing number of researchers have paid their attention to the audiences' initiative and sociality (Spence 1986). As a consequence, exploring how media products connect with people's daily life, especially the interpretation and practice of audiences in specific scenarios and the significance contained in this daily practice has become an important subject category in the media culture research.

A new challenge that has emerged is the group image and its cultural identity that have been established by the media. The research in this area includes an exploration of the fans groups, the fans images, the new media and the youth subculture. Studying the fans groups is not merely a general sense of reading appreciation research or reception studies, but a kind of consumer group and consumer behavior research as well (Grosz 1994).

The shape of the fans images reflects a complicated construction process, which includes the constructors' (the mass media) observation from different angles and the influence exerted upon the media's construction patterns by the features of journalism and communication. Other studies find that in the new media environment, individuals gradually obtain their self-identities through creating virtual identities (Giddens 1991). They confirm their own existence through the intermediary of media. The important angle of view in this field of research is the relationship between the new media usage, social class and ethnic group identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2012).

We adopt Williams' traditional perspective of cultural sociology, and believe that media culture is the process of producing, circulating and consuming cultural products through specific institutional logic and in a specific historical setting; and it is also the process of social meaning construction carried out accordingly. (Hall 2003). Therefore, the media products alone cannot constitute media culture; likewise, the analysis of media products without considering the process of meaning construction is not sufficient to constitute media culture study. This is also basic logic of cultural sociology orientation.

"Cultural sociology" is also a concept with more than one connotation, including "sociological study on culture" and "sociology of cultural orientation".

However, just as shown in Cultural Sociology, the distinction between the two connotations is not of great importance in carrying out relevant research (Edgell 2012). It presented a way in the "preface" of this book which is helpful in our thinking about "cultural sociology" as a research field and orientation: cultural sociology focuses on the processes of meaning-making, which are composed of three specific dimensions, including (1) every-day action, (2) the institutional production of cultural products, and (3) text of meaning expression. What constitutes social theory and media culture

as a proposition and what is the relationship between them are the topic that the British scholar Nick Stevenson (2001) focuses on in his book *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication*. The correlation between media culture and social theory is an important dimension of our research project (Santoro 2011).

The previous investigations on the self-image show of female stars were mostly cases based on text analysis, but few investigations have been made by placing it in the production and communication of cultural products, as well as in the scene and process where people select and use these products in their daily life; analysts often interpret it on a macro level while not in specific micro scenes. Therefore, there is a lack of relevant investigation on the practice of daily life in which people interpret media products and use media representation resources, which cultural sociology called cultural phenomena “on the ground”(Glynn and Giorgi 2013), in this research field. It cannot be denied that the grand problems of social and cultural transformations we are facing require us to focus on grand narration, and handle them in the critique and construction of grand narration. However, without the bottom-up experience investigation on the details of daily life and the survey of grand problems on this basis, the grand narration is easily made unrealistic and the theoretical construction is hard to associate with practical scenes. Therefore, the future research on media culture more than ever needs micro and systemic empirical studies, as well as investigations of the process and mechanisms of cultural practices in terms of sociology.

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