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Fifteen Minutes
CELEBRITY
Interviewing with Insiders

Vivienne Leung S. Y. / Kimmy Cheng / Tommy Tse H. L.
The Project Title: Improving active learning, critical thinking and sociocultural relevance of the course

GDBU1855/GDSS1855 Celebrity and Entertainment Business

Principal Investigator: Dr. Vivienne Leung, Senior Lecturer, Program Director of Public Relations and Advertising major, Department of Communication Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University

Co-investigators: Dr. Kimmy Cheng, Lecturer, Program Director of Public Speaking, Department of Communication Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University; Dr. Tommy Tse, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong

Background of Project:

This project enhances the active learning, critical thinking and sociocultural relevance of the course through discussion of recent and real cases of celebrity creation and endorsement of fashion, luxury and lifestyle brands in various media industries across Asia, particularly in Greater China, Hong Kong and South Korea. Students will read a selected case study of various interviews with communication or entertainment industry practitioners. All case studies are developed based on real examples of celebrity participation in both traditional or new communication campaigns. After reading each case study, the students will discuss its implications and evaluate the social, cultural and economic dynamics of celebrity cultures.

These untold inside stories of celebrity endorsement or celebrity advocacy will stimulate students' interest in rethinking the economic and cultural implications of the phenomenon of stardom and facilitate classroom interaction. This project will improve the pedagogical approach by providing a common experience for active learning, thus enhancing students' sociocultural relevance and more engaging discussion and participation in class.

The Project Objective:

As quoted by Andy Warhol, “in the future everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes.” This project attempts to enhance active learning, critical thinking and the sociocultural relevance of the course through discussion of real cases of celebrity creation and endorsement in various media industries across Asia.

Key Issues and Problems being Addressed:

Most of the existing celebrity and entertainment business-related teaching materials available are developed in the West and based on the Western cultural context, especially that of the US. Culturally sensitive case studies are currently unavailable in the Hong Kong market for enhancing students' critical thinking and learning process. In light of this fact, the project will benefit students to learn and apply communication, marketing and other related theories in the Chinese cultural context specifically. Moreover, these case studies would not only provide a rich reference library and shared by other HKBU students who are interested in exploring the topic from interdisciplinary perspectives.

This project is granted by the Centre for Holistic Teaching and Learning (CHTL) at Hong Kong Baptist University (Ref No: TDG/1314/11).

Case Study

Introduction
The project produced 7 written case studies on the topics as listed below:

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<td>1. Historical development of management in the music and film industry</td>
<td>Mr. Anson Shum, Marketing &amp; Communication Director (Greater China), The Bluebell Group</td>
<td>Consultant of East Asia Music. The founding member of an independent production company, People Mountain People Sea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The use of celebrity in marketing communication</td>
<td>Mr. W allace Kwok, Artiste/Production Manager, Celebrity stereoty, idol worship, etc.</td>
<td>Management Consultant, East Asia Music</td>
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The Oriental Spa. Her works have appeared in the Journal of Communication in Healthcare and Motherhood – Pakistan's First Parenting Magazine. She has taught at the Culture and Media Domain at HKU SPACE as well.

Tommy Tse is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong (HKU), and he specializes in gender studies, literary and cultural theory, fashion communication and the creative industries in East Asia. His work has appeared in the Asian Journal of Business Research (MAGScholar), International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education (Taylor & Francis) and Luxury Brands in Emerging Markets (Macmillan). Tse has experience in marketing and advertising with various media companies and creative agencies, including ADO and TBWA. He has taught at the School of Communication of the Hong Kong Baptist University, the Department of Fashion and Image Design at the Hong Kong Design Institute and the Culture and Media Domain at HKU SPACE.

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**Patrick Suen**

*Rethinking the symbiotic relationships between celebrity and the media in the era of the Korean Wave*

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**Background of the Interviewee**

Mr. Patrick Suen is a seasoned columnist and film critic based in Hong Kong who writes about Asian films and Korean pop culture. After completing his MPhil degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong in 2000, he began to work as an editor at various cultural and lifestyle magazines, including Men’s Uno, MingPao Weekly and Metro Pop, in which he has had many opportunities to collaborate with different stars and celebrities. Out of his personal enthusiasm for South Korean culture, he started to learn Korean in 2001 and, unexpectedly, his gradual proficiency in the language enables him to work as a freelance translator and mediator for many famed Korean stars for various commercial projects and events, such as Lee Young-ae (李英愛), Kim Soo Hyun (金秀賢), Super Junior, Girls Generation, G-Dragon and Taeyang (two key members from the renowned Korean boyband Big Bang).
elucidated that this might be due to the strong persuasiveness and attractiveness of celebrity in increasing readership and driving sales. As noted by Mr. Suen, "Fans are crazy… I mean they are extremely crazy… They do that nothing, anything that can be mentioned in connection not only the media content but also the products directly and indirectly advertised in it. They need to know about everyone's social media, celebrities as people, no matter which generation they come from, all have a strong desire to admire someone."

Mark & Black (2011) indicated, "One of the reasons why people relate to celebrities is that they are role models, and role models influence the behavior of others. Therefore, when people see celebrities doing something, they want to do the same."

According to Elberse (2013), the rise of digital technology has reduced the cost of production and distribution, thus allowing the entertainment industry's amateurs and other industry outsiders to generate and disseminate their own creations. Unlike the traditional media that mainly focus on celebrity and media, the new media can make great use of the digital channel to spread their creations to their target audience. Gradually, they have the opportunity to build up sizable fan bases by themselves. This gives them power in negotiations with traditional media producers, which in turn, enables them to secure higher compensation. For example, "[I]n many cases, someone just uploaded a clip online, and out of nowhere he/she enjoyed instant fame, hence becoming a so-called celebrity." Therefore, to Mr. Suen, the definition of celebrity varies in different eras. Nowadays, everyone has the opportunity to become a celebrity with the propagation of digital social media. For example, "Through social media, celebrities have become so down-to-earth and approachable people. They may share their personal lives with others, which may attract more attention to their work."

Despite the declining status and sacredness of celebrities nowadays as indicated by Mr. Suen, the Korean idol groups have actually received great sensation worldwide in recent years. For example, "[Korean TV show] "Top of the K-Groups" (2012) road Korean pop is turning into an export success. Groups such as "Got7", "EXO", and "BTS" have become household names. To make these idol groups successful, they might attract huge fan bases with their unique style and charm."

As mentioned by Turner (2004), celebrity is a product of the representational process employed by the media in their treatment of prominent individuals. While the media are considered the gatekeepers of the media, the main function of the media is to create and maintain popular celebrity: the media need to create and maintain public interest in the media creation. Mr. Suen observed, "Potential celebrities must have a certain level of attractiveness and social media presence in order to be promoted. The media create and maintain celebrity by promoting it in order to achieve the status of being promoted."

In the global world, in order to strategically promote the status of not just South Korea's but also other countries' celebrities, popularity is not just seen as a product of the media. Instead, it is seen as a product of the celebrity's hard work and charisma across fans of different cultures and preferences worldwide.
invite members from China and Thailand to join so that the group can travel to those countries accordingly... By simply saying a phrase like ‘I love you’ in Mandarin, all the fans would go crazy. This proves the formula works.”

In contrast, Mr. Suen highlighted that the entertainment industry in Hong Kong was not as tactical as the Korean one. The term “guerrilla” was used as a metaphor to describe how the practice of the Hong Kong entertainment industry tried to create as many new stars as possible with limited foresight. “If the new stars become famous, that’s great! If not, just let it be. For instance, in a local music company established by a renowned Hong Kong male singer, many artists failed to become notable and popular in the long run, because I think the entrepreneur did not have a thorough plan. In the world of South Korean entertainment industry, everything is precisely considered and planned starting from the first day.” Therefore, whether it is based on his sarcastic or pessimistic perspective, Mr. Suen perceived Hong Kong celebrities as no longer being persuasive and marketable as those in South Korea, who were basically being mechanically and identically produced by a “cottage factory”.

However, when discussing the future development of the Korean entertainment industry, Mr. Suen expressed his concern since the “Korean wave” market has almost become saturated, “it [Korean pop music industry] is now situated in an embarrassing juncture. Members of many famed Korean groups are gradually entering their 30s, and many people are getting tired of seeing them in the media...[for the new generation] it’s very hard to loyally worship a single group for more than ten years. Famed groups such as Super Junior and Girls Generation have been established for nearly 10 years that many of their fans have turned from teenage girls to married housewives.” This is also the reason why the management companies of these K-pop stars gradually devoted much more effort toward refashioning them as movie/TV stars to suit the evolving needs and conditions of the audience/fans.

A Media Worker’s Insight on Media Industry Development

As an experienced media worker, Mr. Suen commented that the media in Hong Kong have been developed into a very sophisticated business, “starting from the ’70s/’80s, arrays of magazines have been published in Hong Kong. Even when I was in my tender young age, a newspaper called Television Daily was issued, dedicated to reporting television programs, stars and entertainment news on a daily basis, which was very rare in other countries.”

However, Mr. Suen expressed the opinion that Hong Kong media development has encountered obstacles recently, prompting it to lose its sheen – lacking a clear direction, so as the whole entertainment business in Hong Kong. “We do not know what to do next... the paparazzi reporting style used to be very entertaining to the audience, yet people start to feel bored now. In many aspects, there is nothing special to shed light on [in Hong Kong].”
The Escalation of Korean Celebrities and Its Discontents

While Mr. Suen talked about the experience of collaborating with different Korean stars, he asserted that the work mode of the Korean star industry was in many ways similar to the Japanese one that they both emphasized heavily on protecting the image of the celebrities.

“They [Korean entertainment companies] demand us to prepare the work to a meticulous level. For example, they may require us to send all the interview questions for their perusal and revision in advance… they are inclined to manage the image of their celebrities seriously.”

There was one incident shared by Mr. Suen showing that the Korean artiste management personnel generally overprotect stars.

“I met an up-and-coming Korean girl group before… everyone thought that they are quite adorable and amiable, the fact is that, however, they are respectively kept at a distance from everyone by a curtain set between each seat while traveling… that means I could not have any conversation with them even though they were sitting right next to me.”

Secondly, the lack of communication between the media and the entertainment industries in Hong Kong is another factor contributing to the cease of its development, “reporters still think that they are privileged to reveal the scandals of the artistes [and entertainment companies], they are immersed in a very traditional mode of thinking, leading the whole media industry to be stagnant at a rather old-fashioned mentality/media logic.”

In contrast, the media business development in Mainland China and South Korea enjoyed a meteoric rise recently, arguably due to the closer collaboration between the media and entertainment companies. Instead of taking a defensive role when dealing with the aggressive media, these entertainment companies cherish the power of media and diplomatically use them to meet their own ends. For instance, Mr. Suen mentioned the “excommunication incident” of a Korean female star from a regionally celebrated Korean girl group to illustrate his point.

“Kelly [pseudonym], a member of a famed Korean girl group, was rumored to be excommunicated rather than voluntarily leaving the group… while many people may worry that this might pose a negative image to her entertainment company, another hearsay insinuated that the company collaborated with a tabloid and tried to disclose some bad news of Kelly to the media from time to time [in order to end its unpleasant partnership with her and rescue the reputation of the existing girl group], making people to think, ‘Oh, the company is not that bad… Kelly herself is so weird that she is too obsessed with her lover and own fashion brand [without putting much effort to the group].’ The timing is just unbelievably perfect.”

When asked to comment on the influence of Korean popular culture to Hong Kong’s media landscape, Mr. Suen admitted that its influence is so strong and prevalent that it is not only limited to the media industry itself, but also the daily life of citizens.

“From 2010 onwards, more and more media outlets and publishers started inviting me to write columns related to South Korea, and it was truly sporadic! Everyone started talking about this country and the topic was not only confined to entertainment but also lifestyle… just taking Korean food culture as an example, it in fact has not changed a lot since twenty years ago, yet many people suddenly become so fascinated with Korean fried chicken simply because of one extremely popular television drama [My Love from the Star] in which Jeon Ji-hyeon (全智賢) frequently eats fried chicken.”

The proliferation of Korean wave immediately triggered the Hong Kong media’s interest in reporting any Korea news, and subsequently overshadowing the influence of Japanese culture.

“Many lifestyle magazines targeting adolescents no longer report Japanese fashion nowadays. In the past, Japanese fashion was categorized as chic and youthful… it is now superseded by Korean fashion that information about Korean street style and cosmetics has flourished and is coveted by the young audience.”
In comparison, the work mode of Hong Kong’s and Mainland China’s entertainment industries is different. As portrayed by Mr. Suen,

“comparatively, we can have a more direct conversation with the stars in Hong Kong, Taiwan or Mainland China… and we do not need to prepare too much that we just need to inform the artiste(s) about the clothing style.”

According to Mr. Suen, the overprotective practice of those in the Korean entertainment industry has scared off many Hong Kong media and entertainment industry personnel. In many cases, after the first collaboration, individuals resist working with Korean stars again, as

“they could be very troublesome… they on the one hand have the compulsive ‘seek after truth’ mentality resembling the Japanese style that requires you to prepare everything in the outset, yet on the other hand they would become very flexible [and chaotic] right before/during the event by altering everything planned.”

Mr. Suen elucidated that not all Korean stars are difficult to work with. It would be easier to work with actors/actresses since most of them are mature enough and their artiste managers would not protect them like spoiled kids.

“To me, making a movie is an act of team work, if you are not performing well, other people may put the blame on you; yet, when you are a singer, you are a superstar that you just need to stand on the stage and the fans will scream accordingly… this may create an illusion.”

In recent years, numerous established Korean celebrities successfully started their own entertainment businesses or artiste management companies. Mr. Suen attributed this to the fruitful experience they faced in the entertainment industry as well as their foresight.

“To me, legendary celebrities such as Lee Byunghun (李秉憲) and Bae Yong Joon (裴勇俊) are really smart; they foresaw that their fame could never last into their seventies, and therefore by utilizing their personal experience and connections in the showbiz, they set up their own entertainment companies in order to perpetuate their legacy by creating new stars. One notable example is Kim Soo Hyun (金秀賢), who was in fact reared by Bae Yong Joon.”

Emergence of a New Role: Between Artiste Manager and Celebrity Agent

While Mr. Suen was often praised for his highly proactive thought in learning Korean in the early 2000s, in fact he did not realize his particular zest for Korean culture would have given him manifold opportunities in the entertainment industry nowadays. As he pointed out,

“I never imagine that the Hallyu will develop into today’s structure. I learned Korean just because of my personal interest in language… when I was small, I tried Korean barbecue food and I found that this country is so close to us and interesting, so I was determined to learn this strange language… just until the broadcast of the Korean drama “Endless Love”, Hong Kong established its first Korean language school and I went there to learn immediately.”

After joining local men’s fashion magazine Men’s Uno in 2003, Mr. Suen had a lot of opportunities to work with local stars such as Chow Yun-Fat and Andy Lau. However, when the Korean drama Endless Love started to gain its popularity across East Asia, Mr. Suen tried to explore the opportunities in collaborating with Korean stars.

“I tried to find the contacts of Won Bin’s (元斌) and Lee Byung-hun’s (李明漢) artiste managers simply by searching online… and then I just sent the invitation e-mails to them in simple Korean… Surprisingly my efforts eventually paid off, the editorial collaboration was so successful and smooth. By setting up this example, I tried to reach other famed Korean stars such as Jeon Ji Hyun (全智賢), Song Hye Kyo (宋慧喬), Cha Tae Hyun (車太賢) and Rain in the following years.”

In 2010, while Mr. Suen was promoted to a managerial position at MetroPop, he realized that he did not enjoy the job a lot. “I like writing and don’t want to do managerial jobs, as they don’t really fit me.” Interestingly, his previous work experiences in various media outlets had enabled him to build professional connections with plenty of Korean artistes and brands. Therefore, at that time, tapping into the effect of Korean wave, different brands and organizations started approaching Mr. Suen for his help in liaising with these Korean celebrities and their management companies, gradually fitting him into this newly emerged role with multiple duties – as a Korean translator/interpreter, an ad-hoc agent, a “star-nanny” and a business mediator.

“At the beginning, they [brands] asked for my help in working as a translator. After 1 to 2 years, since I’ve worked for many famed Korean idol groups, they started asking me to directly liaise with those stars [and their companies]… therefore, apart from my role as a columnist and translator, now I am working more like a [celebrity] agent… my working nature keeps evolving.”
Conclusion and Implications

In short, the interviewee strongly believed that media is the most important agent in creating celebrity. The rise and fall of celebrity are largely determined by the propagation of media. Meanwhile, the media also relies on celebrities as their attractiveness and persuasiveness in the consumer market has a strong commercial value. This exemplifies the symbiotic relationships between celebrity and the media.

There presents a controversy of the ultimate effects of new media technology to contemporary celebrity culture in Asia, Mr. Suen considered the present-day celebrities already not as valued and esteemed as those in the good old days – attributed peculiarly to the standardization of star manufacturing system introduced by the Korean entertainment industry [and arguably originated from the American Hollywood system] as well as the prevalence of social media such as Facebook and Instagram.

With over ten years’ work experience in the media field, Mr. Suen recognized that the media in Hong Kong has developed sophisticatedly. Yet, currently it is also frustrated by its outdated business and reporting model. Therefore, it is important for the media in Hong Kong to collaborate more closely with other sectors, such as the entertainment industries, instead of isolating themselves. When discussing the experience of collaborating with Korean celebrities, Mr. Suen asserted that most of them were over-protected by their artiste managers and affiliated companies, hence producing much pressure on and restrictions to various collaborating parties, including those in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, Mr. Suen acclaimed the transformation of a handful of Korean artistes from the last generation, who successfully and smoothly changed their role from an artiste to an entrepreneur and strategically utilized their knowledge and experience in manufacturing stars, which is uncommon in Hong Kong.

Finally, Mr. Suen disclosed that he could never have imagined that the capacity of the Korean wave’s influence would reach today’s level. Riding on this sudden trend, Mr. Suen also triumphantly fitted himself with an emerging role of multiple duties in the East Asian entertainment industries, ranging from a media columnist to a film critic, from a Korean translator/interpreter to a flexible celebrity agent and mediator.

References


Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with Mr. Suen’s point of view that media is the most important agent in creating celebrity?
2. How effectively do you think a product endorsed by a celebrity can influence people’s buying decision?
3. Do you think the media landscape in Hong Kong has changed due to the influence of Korean wave as claimed by Mr. Suen?
4. What is your view on the future of the Korean entertainment industry?