

Understanding the media and celebrity cultures



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'Celebrity' can be regarded as the subsequence of the cultural penetration of capitalist commercialism, as well as is the residual products resulted from the rising of popular cultural industry in the 20th century. The emergence and development of modern consumer society have carried on the flourish of celebrity culture. Popular culture is full of the celebrities' radiance. The advantage of technology has changed people's everyday life. The growth of income and leisure time has turned people's attention on the issue of consumption. In order to satisfy consumers' increasing desire of material and cultural consumption, celebrity and its relative industry have emerged and taken root in the ground of popular culture. Simultaneously, the growth of social democracy, decline of religion power, and commodification of everyday life has contributed to current position of celebrities, they become the idols to the mass population in diverse aspects. In majority conditions, celebrities has become the essential carriers of mass media, and also been fanatically imitated. Sports stars, movie actors and other kinds of public media images almost become icon and deity in many people's mind. Celebrity culture has provided the role mode of fashion, external appearance, and personality for audience. In the world of mass media, celebrities has crosses from the range of entertainment, sports, politic, and business, to each territory of social life. From nobody to a popular superstar, the process needs an complete productive system, and undoubtedly, mass media is the best choice. Majority movements undertook by media are mainly surrounding the celebrities: the scriptwriter maybe make an executive screenplay for the celebrities; the movie director has possibility that shape a films star by classified image; the photography, light and costume might all serve the celebrity for his or her celebrification and

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commercial benefits. Under the impact of these series efforts, the fan group have come out, and then, a new market serving fans has emerged, by which, the deified status of stars have established and consolidated day by day. Celebrities utilize media to complete self-propaganda, media reversely use them to create substantial commercial return. However, in general, partial celebrities distaste the close supervision coming from media, similarly, media dislike celebrities' arrogance as well. In this perspective, there is a kind of indivisible and hostile relationship between media and celebrities. In this study, there are two questions going to be answered, first, what kind of changes have happened on the way of getting fame under the context of contemporary consumer society? Secondly, what kind of role has mass media played in the process of celebrity production, or we can say what are the relation between mass media and celebrities?

The Concept of Celebrity Culture

There are many studies undertook of how the way of people getting fame has changed from ancient to contemporary period. It has primarily concentrated on the differences between 'hero' and 'celebrity'. 'Fame', as P. David Marshall (2006) stated, is only able to be gain through exemplified greatness in some way or other. In order to become great and known by everyone, a man has to possess the characteristics of making people admire his courage, talent or nobility. Shakespeare had divided great men into three categories: 'those born great, those who achieved greatness, and those who had greatness thrust upon them' (P. David Marshall, 2006. p. 72). Thomas Carlyle (1996) explained heros in six categories: divinity, prophet, poet, priest, man of letters, and king, all of who have a common feature that their

process of getting fame is slow and by the natural way of becoming well known. Their fame was not made overnight, but was through a mysterious procedure as which God ruled the the generations. However, since the 'Graphic Revolution' (Boorstin, 1992. p. 45), the definition of fame to people has changed into an item which can be manufactured through the channel of media. Celebrity culture has emerged, and people's consciousness of hero have been confused. Actually, as P. David Marshall (2006) reported, 'the hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name' (p. 81). Rojek (2001) has similar point with Marshall, he believes that 'mass- media representation is the key principle in the formation of celebrity culture' (p. 13). He also induced the emergence of celebrity as a public preoccupation into three major interrelated processes: 'the democratization of society, the decline in organized religion, and the commodification of everyday life' (p. 13). In other words, the democratic revolution challenged people's idea of belief, they want to find the celebrities from common mankind, who can 'replace the monarchy as the new symbols of recognition and belonging' (p. 14). Simultaneously, with the development of commodification, celebrities are regarded as the best tools for mobilizing populace's consumption desire.

In the following section, the primary task is to discuss celebrity culture in the context of consumer culture, and its impacts on our consumption habits. To the conception of consumer culture, there are a lot of versions. Chinese economist Lezhong Wang (2002) has defined consumer culture as the presence of human's creativity in the consumption territory, and the

sublimation and crystallization of individually rational practices of mankind. Consumer culture includes natural environment, human environment, material resources made by human beings, spiritual and cultural products, and the consumption behavior which is full of creativity and benefits for human health. In addition, Chinese sociologist-professor Haohui Xiao (cited in the translation of Lezhong Wang, 2002) points that broadly speaking, consumer culture is the combination of consuming material and spiritual culture; in a narrow sense, consumer culture is the reflections of consumption on people's ideology, which are including the elements of consumer philosophy, consumer value, consumer ethics, consumer behavior, consumer taste, consumer aesthetics and consumer psychology, which are the ideological totality of reflecting and understanding consumer character during the consumer practice. Synthesizing former statements of the conception of consumer culture, why don't we understand it simply as a material movement in the procedure of consumption, which is accompanied with psychological thinking and value orientation. When consumer culture has become a natural environment, consumerism was going to derive. The so-called consumerism points to a kind of living style: the consumer purpose is not for satisfying realistic requirement, but pursuing the manufactured and motivated desire, constantly. In other words, what people consumed is not the value-in-use of commodity and service, but their symbolic significance (translated from Pingwen Huang, 2003). The expression of consumerism in the territory of cultural consumption is cultural consumerism. Respective cultural products and cultural spirits inevitably play the role of symbolic consumer goods. These spiritual products on the form of entertainment is alternative, and capable of very rapid mobility, but the innate ideological

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values cannot be replaced. Thus in this context of consumer culture, what role of celebrity has played?

For understanding the impact of celebrity on contemporary society, Chris Rojek (2001, p. 29) provides three approaches: subjectivism, structuralism and post-structuralism. Subjectivism emphasizes the unique characteristic of celebrity. Generally, this kind of characteristic of celebrity is from innate talent, which is formed naturally, and becoming the primary force that attract audiences' attention. Structuralist approaches to celebrity have attempted to provide scientific understanding of celebrity. They attributed the origination of celebrity to the influence of the cultural industry capitalism, and masculinity (Rojek. 2001). Guy Debord (cited in Rojek, 2001. p. 34) has suggested that industrial culture as a culture of signs and ' the purpose of celebrity culture is to shepherd the populace into imitative consumption'. On the aspect of capitalism, celebrities are serving entertainment industry, and the reason why the masses can be attracted by celebrities, as Edgar Morin (1961) claimed that because celebrities could fulfill the regressive needs of the audience, which is on the level of psychology. In this respect, the celebrity can be understood as a carrier of ideology. David Marshall (1997) following this due, suggested that celebrity has a political function. It could be applied to contribute, propagate and extend certain forms of subjective values, such as individualism and heroism. Marshall also claims that mass media is the essential channel to realize this political function of celebrities. In Marshall's statement, celebrities to the audiences has taken effect as symbolic signs, which are embedded with psychological meaning. Another proposal of structuralism is

that 'celebrity is the extension of what might be called fundamental types of character and embodiment in society' (Rojek, 2001, p. 40). For this suggestion, Orrin Klapp (1962) thinks that because of the mass communications industry, the fundamental types in contemporary society have been successfully extended by the appearance of celebrities, subsequently which provides the important prototypes for the audience to emulate.

The most valuable approach of understanding celebrity culture for this study is the post-structuralism, which is frequently associated with structuralism, but examine the problem of celebrity images as a whole and how those representations of these images are produced and consumed. Rojek (2001, p. 44) defined the notion of the post-structuralist approach as that 'star image are inflected and modified by the mass media and productive assimilation of the audience'. In this respect, the images of celebrities are the common consequence of the work of media agents, press, publicists, producers, fans, and gossip columnists. As a result, the celebrity system could be used to fulfill political, economic, and cultural requirements.

Associated with the consumer culture previously mentioned, the following section will concentrate on the celebrification process. Above all, the precondition of celebrity culture the context of capitalist consumer society. The logic of capitalism requires consumers to maintain increasing consumption desire for capitalist accumulation. However, people's desire are too various to unify. For constantly maximizing the market share, manufacturers need some thing that could tie consumers' attraction in a long run. In this sense, manufacturers found that celebrities are the desirable

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issue because, as what I mentioned, celebrity has the function of filling the psychological lack in human's mind. Rojek (2001, p. 15) claims that celebrities humanize the process of commodity consumption by the way of structuring human sentiments.

Then, why celebrity could attract audiences attention on psychological level?

Richard Dyer (1998) has regarded stars 'as a phenomenon of consumption' (p. 17), which originates from the four categories relationship between stars and audience: emotional affinity, self-identification imitation, and projection.

This types of audience and star relation was firstly reported by Andrew Tudor (1974) in his book 'Image and Influence', with the range of star and individual identification and the order of consequences. 'Self-identification' and 'projection' belong to the high range of identification, in the contrast, 'emotional affinity' and 'imitation' (of physical and simple behavioral characteristics) are classified to the low category.

Dyer (1998) furthermore integrated Tudor's discourse, reconstructs the way of how these four categories of star/audience relationship emerged. 'Emotional affinity' as the weakest category, maybe is the most common

sense among audiences. Audience finds there are an attachment between he or she with the star on the narrative of individual personality, and then, the sense of involvement has brought up. 'Self-identification' happens when 'involvement has reached the point at which the audience-member places himself in the same situation and persona of the star' (Tudor, p. 81). As for the third category-'imitation', which is the primary reason for stimulating consumption as it is the commonest phenomenon among the young people, and establishing a kind of sentiment with audiences beyond the sphere of

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media texts. People who reaches the category of 'imitation' are willing to consider stars as a role model and emulate their clothing, hair style and expression. For this, purchasing the products which are relative to the favored star is a subsequent behavior of audiences on this class. 'Projection' as the last category is like a distillation of 'imitation', which pursues the deeper similarity with the adoring stars.

Dyer (1998) concludes that from this accounts of the star/audience relationship, audiences participate few in the process of shaping the phenomenon, they are generally following the designed routine of celebrity production. Thus to manufacturers, 'celebrities are commodities in the sense that consumers desire to possess them' Rojek (2001, p. 15). For the stable economic growth, capitalism requires mobilizing abstract desire in the unconsciousness, and celebrity culture has been recognized as 'one of the most important mechanisms for mobilizing abstract desire' due to 'it embodies desire in an animate object, which allows for deeper levels of attachment and identification than with inanimate commodities' (Rojek, 2001, p. 189).

After understanding the impact of celebrity culture on consumption society, the next step of the celebrification process is referring to the relationship between mass media and the celebrity, or we can say how media product the celebrity. In the following part, I will integrate detailed examples to elaborate this complex.

Media and Celebrification

Celebrity culture is a prevalent phenomenon in contemporary society, its main mechanism is on the strength of celebrities to reach certain purposes. However, different from the great man in ancient period, modern celebrities are made through the tautology of media publicity to get audiences' attention on the 'big names'.

Under the system of media institutions, the appeal of celebrity culture is characterized on three major aspects. Firstly, celebrity culture has promoted in various territories, the so-called celebrities are not merely refined to the range of entertainment, such as film, television, and music, but also involving sports stars and political celebrities. And in the media world, celebrities are active in all the sphere of entertainment, politic, sports, business and social life. For example, Arnold. Schwarzenegger as a successful actor of action movie, got the same achievement on the ground of politic. Secondly, the commercial application of celebrities is increasing, which also can be called as celebrity strategy. In such a circumstance of globalized economy, the combination of celebrity culture and commerce is increasingly close, to some extent, celebrity culture already, become a commercial strategy.

Mass media is the key force in the activity of celebrity culture for commercial development. No matter what kind of celebrities, in modern society they have to borrow the powerful strength of mass media, especially the channel of television to increase own fame. Actually, contemporary media culture seems to turn to a kind of celebrity culture. Thirdly, the impact of celebrities is more deep and broad. Celebrities' impacts are not just restricted on the film ticket results, or television audience rating, the more effective one is <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-the-media-and-celebrity-cultures/>

that they are the symbolic of fashion, success. Dyer (1998) thinks the stars, mainly film stars, have become models of consumption for everyone in consumer society (p. 39). As what I mentioned previously, this phenomenon is resulted from a psychological imitation. In this respect, celebrities are beyond the images shaped in media texts, and intervening in audiences' everyday life, with providing the models of ideal personality and imaginary style which are matching with audiences' desire.

To mass media celebrities are as well as irreplaceable. In capitalist consumer society, the sustainment of media institutions is largely replying on the immense profits produced by advertising sponsors, who seek to on the strength of media propaganda to prompt commercial interests. In this perspective, media needs to use the activity of celebrities to stimulate and sustain audiences' attention and desire, consequently, to maintain the consumption of sponsored products and own economic benefits. As a result, the relationship between celebrity culture and media are interdependent. However, to media, the concrete celebrity member is changeable, to some extent.

In following analysis, certain film stars are picked up to elaborate the relation between celebrity and media. In a long time, film as a typical formation of media means is the breeding ground for celebrity culture. As early as the period of silent movie, the Western film industry has created the superstar-Charlie Chaplin. A top hat, sharp toe shoes, black mustache, tunic and loose trousers successfully shaped the classic Chaplin and his Ciarlo image around the world. Resulted from the preoccupation to his image, hundreds of thousand fans went to buy the small statue of the homeless image he played

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in the film. In 14th December of 2004, the prop-a bamboo cane, which was used by Chaplin in the film 'Modern Times' came under the hammer in London Christie's auction house, and finally got deal by 47, 800 pounds. (From Internet Source, Dec, 2004). From this, maybe we can see how successful and persistent the image shaped by film is. The development of movie has contributed numerous film stars, and who are also regarded as the essential element of Hollywood films. The big name of star generally is the guarantee of ticket value as audiences are willing to pay money for their favored stars, so producers as well as prefer employing stars to make predictable profit result.

With the engagement of superstars and the frenetic hype before the show time, stars and the film could both be famous. An effective instance is the Hollywood film 'Ocean's Twelve', which was showed on 2004, and assembled the top famous stars on that time: George Clooney, Brad Pit, Matt Damon, Andi Garcia, Julie Roberts and Catherine-zeta Jones. The executive official of Exhibitor Relations Paul has said that film fans commonly prefer the films gathering all stars together, watching this kind of film will feel like one time shopping for Hollywood top stars. According to the data of Exhibitor Relations in 12th December of 2004, it showed that last week, 'Ocean's Twelve' has got the top position of the North American Box office by \$40, 900, 000 which created the forth highest box office of opening premier in the history, just after 'The Lord of Ring'. Many Hollywood analysts even foresaw that 'Ocean's Twelve' will extend the success of the part one "Ocean's Eleven", and earn much more money. In the commentary of this film, a large part of audiences said that no matter what the narrative is, they have to

watch it just for the stars (From Internet sources, 14th Dec, 2004). By comparison, the commercialization of Chinese film industry and celebrity culture took place lately. In the early film times in China, a series film stars like Linyu Ruan and Xuan Zhou had few commercial feature, they just treated acting as a professional job. Besides, at that time China was still caught in the situation of foreign invasion and repression, the development of commercial system was not complete, the aim of filming a movie, to large extent, is for diffusing and agitating populaces' passion and confidence of fighting, rather than earning box office and profits. This situation has modified since the conduction of the reform and open policy, people have noticed that film industry is good way for making profits. Film producers began to concern market trends, and be aware of the importance of contenting audience's needs, trying to search what kind of film genre and film star will be preferred by Chinese people, and for what reason audiences are able to consume films. As a result, from the gradual growth of Chinese film industry, it is clear that consumption pursuit is the precondition of film production and birth of star.

Star Production or Consumption

Within the interdependent relationship of celebrities and mass media, a question called the 'production-consumption dialectic of mass communications' has suggested by Edgar Morin (1968), which means stars are a phenomenon of production that arising from what the film makers provide, or of consumption that arising from film audiences demands (Dyer, 1998, p. 9). Firstly, as for the discourse of 'stars as a phenomenon of production', which is regarding stars as products of mass communication.

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For example, majority American film stars are the products of Hollywood. Hollywood production has been considered as a capitalist production, and in this sense, the function of film stars is concentrated on the economy of hollywood (Dyer, 1998). Robert A. Brady (1947) suggested that stars are a kind of capital possessed by Hollywood industry, which is characterized as monopoly, which is also the first element in the economics of Hollywood classified by Dyer (1998). The second role of stars is investment. Dyer (1998) analyzed that stars to film makers are a secure guarantee, which could promise their investment on the film has the profit value. Thirdly, stars themselves are a major investment to film makers, the commission for stars' appearance takes a large portion of the whole film budget. The last element stars representing is the market. Alexander Walker (1974) reported a similar point that ' the use of a star to stabilize audience response' (p. 15). For film producers, an effective way to organize the market is to attract audiences' attention.

Secondly, the question is ' are stars a phenomenon of consumption that arising from film audience demands?'. Actually, in Part1, the account of the star/audience relationship has answered this question by ' the audience's role in shaping the star phenomenon is very limited' (Dyer, 1998. p. 18), because stars are made by mass media to satisfy the requirement of commercial interests. However, because the feature of modern celebrity culture is largely dependent on the work of media publicity, audiences have possibility to take a part in the process of star production. To modern people living in the consumer society, being wealthy and famous as a symbol of success, which actually is equivalent with the connotation of modern star. In

American culture, the individualism is a primary value, which effects American people in everyday life. It advocates that everyone has the fair right to be successful as if you can grasp a good chance, and pay hard work, regardless of talent and application. In the star system, this value should have reformed, as it requires the ordinary people who want to be star have certain talent and specialness, of course, good luck is also an indispensable element (Dyer, 1998). In this respect, under the context of modern mechanism of celebrity culture, people's value towards success has changed. They dream of being famous, no matter by what kind of way. Apparently, being star is a deserving way to get success, because on the strength of media, maybe the dream will be realized overnight. As a result, in contemporary society, people who have a star dream is a normal phenomenon.

Like I mentioned, media get used to mobilize audiences' desire to maintain consumption. when they found audiences' desire of being star, they have began a new round of star production among the ordinary people, as the economic return will be more intensive, in this operation, stars are playing the role of production largely. This principle has also been noticed by Chinese media system. The television program ' Super girl' is an typical instance, which is operated by a local television station of China. The basic program policy is that, it provides a platform for ordinary people to present their talent on singing, any female who are interested in singing all could participate in this contest, the last three winners will get ten years contract with the music corporation, which means the winners of this television singing competition will be shaped as music stars. This contest has three

professional music juries, but the final determinative right is in the hands of audiences, who can vote their favorite participants through mobile texts. Of course, the text was charged as several times as ordinary fee, thus undoubtedly, the communication corporation is the biggest sponsor. This program almost swept the whole country in that time, the reason why it can be so successful is because, first of all, it provides a chance for ordinary people to show their talent before public, which is impossible in normal life. Secondly, it transfers the power of star production to audiences, which to some extent makes audience feel like they are more close to the star system, which in ordinary life is a fantastic stuff. Lastly, through this program, someone who ever is an ordinary citizen has actually become a music star of China, this outcome further promotes audience's attention on the star they selected out, and have a kind of intimacy with the star.

From this process, we can find that the biggest winner is media itself. All the program is a public projection of star production, but the producer is audience self. By this way of making audiences engaged in the production could absorb audience's attention and desire in a more broad sphere, after all, television is the most effective communication tool. Associating with this instance, the mechanism of modern media institution is apparent, under the motive of finally commercial return, stars can be manufactured randomly as a kind of production in consumer society.

Conclusion

The commercial flourish has led to the extension of celebrity culture. Celebrities become the living representation in this modern time. They

create dreams for massive ordinary people, who have been made as the accessories of commerce unconsciously. People are relying on celebrities to make the final decision on consumption, and regarding them as the indispensable image model in realistic life, the impact is not only on the external style of outfit, but also on the psychological movement. Idol chasing, worship, and imitation already become a kind of prevailing fashion in 21st century. If say celebrities provide imaginary scene for the masses, then mass media is the producer of this fantastic picture. Relying on mass media and basic communication technology, celebrities get soil to root and grow up. We even can say that celebrities are the result of mass media production. To our audiences, since we have few influence on the process of celebrity production, the only thing we can do is to recognize the innate character of this mechanism clearly. It is not suggesting to criticize the celebrity culture entirely, but proposing to find our respective correct position in this circumstance. Like I mentioned, there are major four categories of stars/audience relationship. In real life, the person who belong to the former two category-'emotional affinity' and 'self-identification' are both normal, because which just result from a sense of involvement in the films as well as other media texts. However, person who if is caught in the 'imitation' and 'projection' categories, the influence will be active in his/her realistic life, because it is possible of them to lose themselves just for imitating the living style of their favored stars in or beyond screen images.

In this study, there are two main limitations should be pointed out. Firstly, as celebrity culture is a fairly complicated topic, this study merely provides brief introduction of the reason of the emergence of celebrity, the way to

understand celebrity, and the impact of celebrity on media in consumer society. The analysis of detailed media text is for elaborating the relationship between media and celebrity culture, but the data is limited. Secondly, the impact of celebrities should be on various territories, but in this study, I narrowed the scale of celebrities in the level of film stars, as I think they are more typical and easy to get touch in. In the future, the research of celebrity culture should concentrate on the depth of certain detail, and give consideration with all possibilities in that territory. Besides, the standpoint of audience is also necessary to be involved, as they are the final information receiver, the way how they understand the propaganda, the news of celebrities is important resources for the study of celebrity culture.