Relationship of Multiple Proximities and the Selection of Online Foreign Programs (Qualitative Research of University Students from Mainland China and Hong Kong)

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Abstract

This paper reveals the reasons of Chinese oversea students selecting certain TV programs. A qualitative research has been done and we applied the Multiple Proximity Theory and Cultural Capital Theory so as to analyze the results. It turns out that linguistic proximity plays the most common and important role, while other proximities do affect the choices of interviewees but the influence of each proximity varys. Further study is recommended to focus on the different reasons of selections between genders.

Keywords: Multiple Proximity, Online, TV Programs, Chinese, Oversea Student.

Introduction

Television programs originated from different parts of the globe, ranging from USA sitcom to Korean dramas, consists of its local values and culture based on the countries of origin. As the Internet becomes available and accessible to many people, choosing programs from different origins is no longer restricted by feasibility. By digging into the reasons for audiences which in love with television programs of foreign origins, the qualitative research with in-depth interviews of four university students coming from mainland China and Hong Kong was conducted, in order to discover the relationship between their choices of origins of television and multiple proximities.

The study also explores that the availability of Chinese subtitles is a pre-conditional factor affecting the students to choose different foreign television programs.

Theoretical Framework

Multiple Proximities

This qualitative research is oriented upon the idea of multiple proximities brought by La Pastina & Straubhaar in 2005, in which cultural proximity in different layers and other types of proximities were once introduced. Cultural proximity refers to the tendency which audiences choose television programs that embed with the closest, most proximate and most relevant to their own cultural background. It can be further elaborated into geographical and cultural and linguistic factors.

In the case of geographical proximity, it is more likely for people to have their identity recognition built upon or influenced by their close neighboring regions. In this sense, the source for the characterization of self-identity is not essentially the derivative of national identities, but regional ones. On the other hand, people sharing similar history background or upholding common values tend to have cultural and linguistic proximity in terms of music, body language, humor, etc. La Pastina & Straubhaar (2005) also pointed out that there are other proximities, for example, proximity to modernity, genre proximity and so on. Proximity to modernity connotes audiences' fancies to programs which portray modernized societies with high-end, technological or upper-class, luxurious lives. It allows room for common audiences to picture and to place themselves in illusions of the seemingly unreachable life that differs from the common reality (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

Genre proximity was firstly proposed by Rafael Oregon in 1995 and was used to explain different genres' ability to facilitate to be "shared across very diverse cultures" (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 275). This study does not target on the embodiment of genre proximity in the program consumption of the students. However, genre proximity of programs originated from the United States is believed to be universal, at the premise of the influential cultural imperialism.

There are two rules we should bear in mind in the study. First, the idea of proximity is a spectrum in which we compare how audiences find programs from some origins more understandable or easier to relate to than that of other origins. Second, different kind of proximity can coexist at the same time, but they might be endowed with different priorities based on audiences' personal preferences.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu introduced the concept of cultural capital in 1986. In media studies, cultural capital refers to the criteria contribute to audiences' identity construction, which defines the ability and the ways of accessing and interpreting programs (media). Bourdieu (1986) categorized cultural capital into three forms defined as follows,

"… in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state…." (p. 243)

Among these forms, the cultural capitals in the objectified state and the institutionalized state are more often found in the use of interpretation of media. Objectified capital decides if one can afford the physical utilities for consuming the media materials, for example, satellite dishes for watching television of other countries, internet for a wide variety of programs with no limitation of time and place, etc. Institutionalized capital usually refers to audiences' education levels. People with higher education levels are more likely to possess more knowledge in interpreting messages in television programs of different kinds (Bourdieu, 1986).

Based on all characterization of cultural capital, it seems that people of similar education and

language levels have similar ability in getting access and interpreting programs. This provides a firm basis for setting up certain criteria for sampling of interviewees. Active audience theory by McQuail emphasizes the active role of the audiences in understanding and analyzing messages in media with their social and personal contexts (Watson, 1998). In association with the concept of cultural capital, audiences with higher education backgrounds take a more active role in decoding the message carried from the television programs and recoding to convey their own ideas while communicating with others.

Research Questions

This qualitative research targets on the following aspects

1. What are the motives of audiences selecting different foreign television online?
2. How do multiple proximities affect their selection and consumption?

Researchers attempt to keep the level of cultural capital of interviewees similar, so as to create a "vacuum" to focus on the study of the effect of multiple proximities on audiences, in order to lower the possible differentiation in outcome. Further description of sampling control will be illustrated in methodology.

Methodology

Research Perspective

This study implemented the phenomenological qualitative theoretical tradition. To reveal the individual motivations in choosing foreign programs online, audiences' sharing of own experiences is prioritized. The qualitative study is placed at the point-of-view of audiences (the social actors), in order to have better understanding and interpretation of their motives and experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Comparing with quantitative studies, figures and numbers generated from mechanical questions may not help to achieve an in-depth study of the audiences' experiences and their process of thinking (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Furthermore, we expect the openness of qualitative research will allow diversity of personal experiences, so as to have analysis and comparison of more perspectives, and therefore to literally identify the relationship between multiple proximities and individual selection of programs.

Data Collection Method

Research conducted an in-depth, face-to-face interview with each interviewee, in which they can completely express their personal ideas and perspectives (Lindof & Taylor, 2011). Generally, the questions are generated on the purpose of differentiating the interviewees' individual preference in terms of cultural proximity and other proximities.

To start with general questions, interviewees were asked to share their online watching habits in terms of origins, medium and frequency. Later on, non-directive questions were asked to figure out their motives in selection of online programs of certain origins. Directive questions with certain conditions were given to further observe the priority of proximities unconsciously embedded in personal choice. For instance, "how does it bother you if the foreign programs you watch do not have a Chinese subtitle?" is asked in order to distinguish whether how much cultural proximity (linguistics) matters in selection of programs.

In addition, all the interviews were either video-taped or voice-recorded so that resources can be credited and can emphasize the objectivity of our investigation.

Criterion Sampling

As mentioned before, this study aims to minimize the interferences caused by the difference in individuals' cultural capital by using criterion sampling.

The criteria used to screen and select interviewees were their origins, education level, TV watching habit and English command. Four Chinese and Hong Kong exchange students in Erasmus University were chosen to be the interviewees, consisting of 1 male and 3 female. Half of them were from mainland China, and the other two were from Hong Kong. Based on their neighboring geographical positions and the very similar Chinese cultural background, as well as their historical alliance, the ability of relating to cultures other than Chinese culture should be similar. In addition, their identity as exchange students in university showed that they possessed similar education levels, access to the Internet and basic or minimum English command. Fair access to Internet allows students to choose foreign programs of different origins.

The limited choices of foreign television programs provided in traditional channels are no longer the determining criteria limiting personal choice. However, even mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students share the very similar cultural background and are geographically connected the difference in their oral-language and political circumstance may form a nuance difference in their own sub national, regional identity (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005).

Analysis

After conducting four in-depth interviews, the results clearly showed that the foreign programs that students tended to watch on the Internet were basically the ones from South Korea and the United States.

Interviewees found Korean programs interesting in the sense of culture and language; whereas those preferred U.S. programs did not show any relatedness to the U.S. culture, instead, they treated like an English learning materials and tools which can facilitate their social connection. An interviewee pointed out that the programs in China or Hong Kong become cliché and not surprising,

"some (Chinese) television programs lack creativity especially the soap dramas, and they always end up the same".

She would rather choose U.S. programs on the Internet because of much more creative settings of scenes, plots and storylines, especially the characterization of females.

"In the foreign (U.S.) programs, females are always more independent and fashionable, which are quite different from the characters constructed in Chinese television."

Even though humble, dependent and conservative images of females dominate the Chinese television, she said that the character-setting in U.S. programs gave a more realistic depiction of females in modern societies nowadays. She said, the typical storylines of Chinese dramas were embedded with mainstream values of the society, but they bored audiences with the repeating routine. Another male interviewee also liked U.S. programs as the programs were like "eye-opener" and "fulfilled his curiosity". It is obvious that the reasons why these interviewees choosing U.S. programs online were to fulfill their need for more creative media content, to "open their eyes" and to fulfill their curiosity. They did not find any proximity in U.S. programs, but did feel that U.S. programs showing the modern images that filled the gap left by Chinese television. It is clear that proximity to modernity played a role in their selection of U.S. programs.

Another female student from Hong Kong chose U.S. programs based on her need in socializing with other international friends. She said, "[because] many international friends watch TV shows from US, they are popular among [the] world, that's why I pick up these to have more topics [to talk] with the international friends." Besides picking topics, she also mentioned that the English colloquial and slangs she learnt from the programs "make [their] conversations easier".

The influence of cultural imperialism of U.S. media products was manifested by the students'

choices in picking social topics and language-learning. They showed a tendency to connect U.S. culture and English to international framework. Take the case above as an example, to have common topics talk with international friends, picking U.S. programs seemed to be a safe choice. It revealed that, in the interviewees' conceptions, U.S. programs should be well known by and influential to everyone in the world.

Language-learning was given as the motives in watching U.S. programs by another two students. They all expressed the necessity to better their English and the willingness to "talk like a native". Imperialism of U.S. television does not only exist in the virtual world of media, it has extended its influence to the individuals' practices in real world.

All interviewees said they would not choose English programs if there was no Chinese subtitles or dubbing. One said English-listening could be "tiring" for her, and programs were "created for fun". Although they were all university students on exchange program and had a recognizable level of English command, still they confessed that watching English programs without Chinese assistance added difficulties to understanding the materials.

Another popular origin of programs interviewees would watch online was South Korea. They chose Korean dramas mostly due to the cultural criteria shared between Korea and China. Researchers sorted them into the following three criteria.

First of all, interpersonal relationships in Chinese and Korean culture shown in television are quite similar. Due to their close geographical positions, China and Korea started diplomatic activities thousand years ago and influenced each other's development in respect of social customs and communication habits. Some moral values were still conveyed along the shared history, and are shown in Korean dramas. These values include hierarchy and the idea of blood connection among family members. For instance, given by one of the interviewees,

"[i]t is very common in Korean dramas that junior members must respect and listen to the seniors under any circumstances; and the enterprises' relationships were all built upon the owners' families' connections…."

She also appreciated the respect shown among the characters in Korean dramas, and she could relate to the society with "clear social rank". In Western countries, people usually follow the spirit of contract and equality. Everyone is same, and is only obliged to do according to the contract signed. People seldom have "hidden rules" in interpersonal relationship. Students prefer the dramas in which realities shown are understandable and familiar to them. Secondly, both China and Korea societies lie on a certain level of patriarchy. Men dominate in the society and have a much higher social status and power over women. Many classic Korean dramas use this social characteristic as the storylines.

An interviewee took a popular Korean Drama, "Jewel in the Palace" as an example. The main character was a girl who served the Royal family in the palace. The story mentioned how she became successful under the suppression of patriarchy and monarchy. The interviewee said, "Many [female] friends love this drama. Besides the exciting plots, we have resonance to it. We feel angry or sorry about the injustice done to the character." Patriarchy is still running in China and Korea, although it is not as strong as it was in the past, audiences can still relate to it.

Lastly, Chinese and Korean have similar living style including the usage of Chinese characters. For example, both of them are using chopsticks, eating rice, celebrating same festival, emphasizing in family gathering and using Chinese characters, and the last factor need to be elaborated. Chinese have an inherent concept "the same nation using the same language". Of course Korean have their own language, but Chinese characters are part of it (due to the geographic problem, some Chinese words were spread to Korea.). One can easily finds Chinese character everywhere in Korean, even on Korean people's ID card. When Chinese students watch the Korean drama, they recognize the Chinese characters, and therefore, they feel intimate. "For example, (in Korean) 'Oppa' refers to real elder brother, or

often some close male friend who protect you like the elder brother. I simply use this term to describe my close male friends."

This is one of the examples what the audiences can learn from the Drama, some slangs like "Oppa" are also popular in China. When they use these slangs in their own country, it proves that they have already been influenced by Korean culture. China and Korea have historical alliances and certain types of shared culture. However, all interviewees said they would not watch Korean dramas without Chinese subtitles. This is coherent to the case of watching U.S. televisions. Researchers concluded that language barriers (cultural proximity in terms of languages) still exist in audiences' choices and are prior to the criteria of other proximities. Online media made subtitles available, so it did not seem to be a big issue for them in choosing which origins to watch.

Conclusion

To conclude, cultural proximity is obviously prior to other criteria influencing the students' choice of U.S. and Korean online television programs. On the other hand, from the results of the interviews, cultural proximity did not exist in students' choices of U.S. programs, whereas their motives landed on other factors. The premise of watching programs in foreign languages bases on the availability of subtitles and dubbing, which cultural proximity of linguistics was manifested. We believe that there are different results from female and male, females seem more prone to Korean dramas, that maybe one of the factor for further study.

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