

## Examination of the Use and Value of “Celebrity” in a Chinese Context: A General Education (GE) Teaching Case Study

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**[Abstract]** A mixed teaching methodology was adopted in a new General Education (GE) course named “Celebrity and Entertainment Business” at the Hong Kong Baptist University. This course aims to enhance active learning, critical thinking, and sociocultural relevance by discussing recent and real cases related to celebrity culture in various media industries across Asia. Results showed that direct interaction with local celebrities allows students to gain first-hand and in-depth insider insights. Up-to-date case studies motivate students to participate actively in discussions. Teaching evaluation results found that the course is well-received by the students. Detail course design will be discussed.

**[Keywords]** general education, celebrity culture, value of celebrity, teaching format, Hong Kong

More than serving as a spokesperson of a product/brand, celebrities and figures of fame play an important role in the creative sector. A new General Education (GE) course entitled “Celebrity and Entertainment Business” maps the increasingly central importance of fame and celebrity from a mass communication and marketing perspective. In this course, students will investigate the culture of celebrity in relation to entertainment, media, advocacy, identity, and business models. It aims to introduce the phenomenon of stardom, including some case studies of individual film, television, advertising, popular music, and political stars, and to investigate the media influence of celebrities in a Chinese cultural context.

In this paper, we will share the teaching experience of an interdisciplinary GE course named “Celebrity and Entertainment Business” by locating the position of the course in the GE program at the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) and by explaining the concepts and teaching methods of the course.

### General Education in HKBU

The GE program at HKBU was designed to provide students with the foundation of a well-rounded university education and to train students to be critical thinkers and independent learners so that students are equipped not only with in-depth knowledge of their academic specialty, but also with a broad range of general knowledge. To achieve these goals, the program is structured according to the core-distribution model (Hanstedt, 2012) in which distributional requirements are combined with core requirements. The distribution requirements include five areas of learning, which are arts, business, communication/visual arts, science/Chinese medicine, and social sciences (General Education Office, 2014).

In the current structure of the GE program at HKBU, courses are arranged under five major areas. (i) Arts. Courses in the area of arts aim to lead students to reflect on the place of arts and humanities in society and human history to foster an appreciation of human achievements through language, culture and thought. (ii) Business. Courses in business highlight how business and management principles shape contemporary human experience, and business- and management-related concepts are used to analyze business issues and evaluate economic activities. (iii) Communication/visual arts. Courses in this area are drawn from media studies, journalism, and visual arts. While some courses adopt a historical or analytical perspective, some are more related to the production of creative works. These courses aim to introduce students to various modes of communication, to enable them to develop skills essential required to exchange information, and to understand the process of generating meanings. (iv) Sciences/Chinese Medicine. Courses in this area emphasize the importance of demonstration, observation and experimentation in cultivating an understanding of the basic principles of sciences or Chinese medicine for non-science majors. Students will learn to develop a questioning mind and to relate those concepts to daily life to appreciate their significance

in society. (v) Social sciences. Courses in social sciences aim to instill students with an understanding of how social sciences understand human behavior and social/cultural life. Key areas covered by the courses include identity, community, social justice, cultural heritage, public policy, and so forth.

In addition to the five areas of learning, interdisciplinary courses cover two or more areas of learning. The interdisciplinary courses strive to integrate knowledge and approaches from various academic disciplines to help students recognize and synthesize different perspectives on a given issue. The courses give students the opportunity to think outside of the box and aims to cultivate critical thinking and a sense of open-mindedness.

### **Background of the Course**

“Celebrity and Entertainment Business” is one of the interdisciplinary GE courses. It covers both the areas of business and communication. It is a newly designed GE course developed by the Communication Studies Department in the School of Communication. The course was first launched in 2014 with a total of 35 students enrolled. The students came from various academic disciplines, including Visual Arts, Business, Social Sciences and Communication. In this course, students learn how celebrities are used in marketing and creative industries, celebrity and audience relationships, media, and celebrities. They also learned about the impact of celebrity culture on individuals and society.

The idea for the course originated from the recognition of the value and importance of the entertainment business and celebrities in our society. The entertainment business, like film, television, music and animation, are key areas of creative industries in Hong Kong. In recent years, the industries have continued to grow and to play a significant role in Hong Kong. In 2012, the cultural and creative industries generated an added value to Hong Kong’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of more than HK\$97 billion, representing around 4.9% of the GDP (Census and Statistics Department, 2014). It was a prominent growth from 2005 when the added value of the industries was still around HK\$52 billion (Census and Statistics Department, 2014), signifying the rapid expansion of the creative industries in Hong Kong.

As an influential player with potentially enormous economic significance in the entertainment business, celebrities are more than merely actors or singers in the industries. It is generally believed that a celebrity is “given greater presence and a wider scope of activity and agency in society” (Marshall, 1997, p. ix), and, therefore, is able to attract much attention. With the more advanced technology in today’s world, the relationship between celebrities and their audiences has become even more intimate. Thus, celebrities’ capacity to communicate effectively with a large audience within a relatively short time became a valuable form of capital or surplus-value (van Krieken, 2012).

To utilize this form of capital better, celebrity is extensively studied from the perspective of business. “Celebrity and Entertainment Business” focuses on the use of celebrity in various areas, such as media, branding, self-image, health communication, and so forth. During lectures, students observed the use of celebrity in marketing and identified the factors mediating the effectiveness of its use. The course provided students with a communication viewpoint to examine why a celebrity endorsement works and how celebrity may influence consumers’ behavior. Celebrity endorsement is essentially a form of persuasion through which consumers are persuaded to consume a particular product/brand. Through theories of persuasion, like source credibility (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) and source attractiveness (McGuire, 1985), students were taught to understand the process of persuasion in celebrity endorsement and how various attributes of celebrity may influence consumer behavior, including the students’ own behaviors.

Celebrity endorsement and the celebrity culture are influential in shaping social and ideological values in today’s highly mediated society. The course acknowledged the ubiquitous existence of celebrity and led students to assess the influence of celebrity culture. Concepts of social psychology, e.g. social learning (Bandura, 1977), social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987), etc., were utilized to allow students to explore how celebrities have impacted the construction of self-identity, self-image, and consumer behavior. It also provided a chance for students to ponder how they relate to celebrities and to examine effects of the celebrity culture on them.

### Objectives of the Course

Upon successful completion of this course, students were expected to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the use of celebrity endorsement, the culture of celebrity and its impacts, such as construction of self-identity, celebrity-driven consumer behavior, gender and race, stereotypes, and idol worship;
2. To examine various theories that explain the influence of celebrities;
3. To identify appropriate research methods to measure the social, cultural and personal impacts of celebrity endorsement; and
4. To analyze the ideologies embedded in celebrity endorsement.

### Teaching Methods

This course aims to enhance active learning, critical thinking and sociocultural relevance through discussion of recent and real cases related to celebrity culture and the celebrity endorsement of fashion, luxury, and lifestyle brands in various media industries across Asia and particularly in Greater China. To achieve these aims, a large number of up-to-date case studies and guest lectures were embedded in the classes to help students think more critically about the intersection of entertainment and civic engagement in the new media era. This course is composed of three distinctive features of a GE course: normal lecture, case study, and guest lecture (celebrity talks).

### Normal Lecture

In this course, students will learn about the use of celebrity in marketing and creative industries (e.g., film, advertising or digital entertainment), as well as its impact including construction of self-identity, celebrity-driven consumer behavior, gender and race, stereotypes, idol worship, etc. Figures of interest to be studied include film figures, music, sports, cultural and political celebrities, and public constructions of celebrity, such as online bloggers. This is fundamentally a preliminary course designed to strengthen students' understanding of the influence of the culture of celebrity on the societal values and choices in a Chinese culture. Major theories related to the use of celebrity and the influence of celebrities on consumers were discussed, e.g. source credibility model (Hovland et al., 1953), source attractiveness model (McGuire, 1985), meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), etc.

Four major topics are covered in the lectures. First, the topic of celebrity endorsement examines the economic value of celebrity. It looks into the use of celebrity in marketing and branding and the factors mediating the effectiveness of the use. Second, the social values of celebrities are identified. Examples of celebrity advocacy and involvement in non-profit sectors are included for critical analysis. Third, the topic of consumer-celebrity relationship reflects on how people relate to celebrities. Moreover, a semiotic perspective is applied to study how celebrities engage/communicate with audiences and manage their image using various forms of media. Last, the impact of celebrity culture is examined, especially its influence in the area of body image, consumption and self-identity.

### Case Study

Case studies were expected to bring several benefits to the course, because case studies provide an opportunity for students to contextualize the theoretical concepts (Richards, Gorman, Scherer, & Landel, 1995; Styer, 2009), thus bridging the gap between theory and practice. In addition, using case studies as an interactive learning strategy in teaching will shift the emphasis from lecturer-centered to more student-centered activities. Such involvement will encourage students to participate actively in discussions about critical issues, problems inherent in practical application, and fundamental dilemmas in realistic scenes. This process of active learning can also train students' analytical and critical abilities (Lichtenthal, 2004) and provide an opportunity for them to develop important skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving, etc. (Styer, 2009). Finally, this type of learning will increase students' enjoyment of the topic and hence their motivation and desire to learn (Richards et al., 1995; Styer, 2009).

Cases discussed served as vivid examples that helped to add variety to the course and to assist students in applying theories learned in lectures to real-life scenarios in an integrated fashion (Richards et al., 1995). Cases are effective learning tools in attracting attention and helping students to understand and remember important concepts (Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004). Culturally relevant case studies are currently unavailable in the market, but they would be instrumental for this course. Real-life examples will enhance students' understanding of communication and marketing theories in a specific cultural context. In this course, a few case studies related to the use of celebrities and their influence on consumers' consumption, health awareness, behavior, and self-image were discussed. For example, the examination of the use of a Hong Kong actor, Chow Yun Fat, in various advertisements contextualized concepts learned in lectures and demonstrated to students how celebrities were actually used in Hong Kong. Moreover, it enabled students to understand how perceptions toward a celebrity were shaped by the social and ideological environment and how those perceptions might influence the effectiveness of the use of celebrity in branding.

In addition, case studies were used to demonstrate to students the potential influence of celebrities in motivating consumers to change their behavior. Students were asked to study a case about a campaign launched by SK-II, a Japanese beauty brand, in Singapore and Malaysia. The brand invited a Chinese actress, Tang Wei, to be the ambassador for its "Bare Skin is Best Skin" campaign. Along with some testimonials of other local TV personalities, a series of communications featured Tang Wei without make-up to encourage women not to wear make-up for a day. Many women followed suit. The campaign was a success and greatly increased the sales of the brand. The case study exemplified the idea that celebrities are potentially effective in influencing consumer perceptions and even in changing consumer behavior.

The recent Korean TV drama, "My Love from the Star," which was extremely popular among students, was another example of cases used in class to arouse students' interests. During the lecture, students were asked to examine how products of various luxury brands were displayed in the drama. Since the drama significantly increased sales of the products, students were asked to analyze whether the drama/the celebrities involved were used as a tool to inspire wants and to promote consumerism.

Along with the cases, several discussion questions were provided to guide students to explore the topics during class discussions. Students were invited to share their opinions and ideas based on those questions. Discussion is a meaningful classroom activity, as students can benefit not only by learning the topics more thoroughly, but also by learning how to discuss, which is an effective way to promote personal growth (Dillon, 1994). Through discussion, students are able to engage in the topics and form ideas and sentiments in relation to the concepts. Moreover, by exchanging ideas, asking questions and attempting to answer them, students help each other to explore the topics further. These kinds of meaningful exchanges encourage students to become active and independent learners (Dillon, 1994).

Furthermore, class discussion followed by the presentation of a case study is an effective learning tool in training students' communication skills, including both linguistic proficiency and logical proficiency, which is also one of the intended learning outcomes of the GE program at HKBU. Class discussion provides opportunities for students to express themselves and to communicate with others in an organized and socially formal way, which prepares them for future professional and social situations. In addition, class discussion may help students to build their self-confidence, to learn how to interact with others who may hold opposing views, and to cultivate virtues of conduct, such as respect, openness, and reflectiveness (Dillon, 1994). These skills are essential for students to address and resolve future professional situations, in which cooperation and teamwork are much valued.

### **Celebrities Talk**

In addition to the normal lectures and case study, two local celebrities, Mr. Bob Lam and Miss Stephanie Cheng, were invited to give a guest lecture. Mr. Lam is a local disc jockey and TV host/actor in Hong Kong. He has come to fame recently and is well known for his humor and spontaneity in hosting events/TV programs. In contrast, Miss Cheng is an experienced singer and has worked in the music industry for more than ten years. She is famous for her petite figure and singing performance.

Mr. Lam and Miss Cheng were invited to share their work experiences in the entertainment business, and students were also encouraged to ask questions and interact with the guests. The guest lectures were a

valuable learning experience through which students were able to approach the entertainment industry from an insider's perspective and to glimpse how celebrities were actually used in commercial and non-profit sectors. It helped the students to contextualize the theories learned in class and to assess the applicability and validity of theories in the local context.

During the guest lecture, Mr. Lam shared with the students his criteria for accepting an offer of celebrity endorsement and how his image may increase/limit the range of products/brands that he is deemed suitable to endorse. Mr. Lam's comments reflected the actual use of celebrity in marketing in Hong Kong and the mediating factors affecting its effectiveness. He also demonstrated the autonomy of a celebrity in choosing whether to endorse a product, which provided a practical context for the theories learned in class, as most of the theories do not look at celebrity endorsement from a celebrity's perspective.

While Mr. Lam focused more on the commercial side of celebrity endorsement, Miss Cheng shared with the students the role of celebrity in the non-profit sector and how she used social media to interact with her fans directly and instantly. Through the guest lecture, students learned how Miss Cheng's involvement in the non-profit sector increased the publicity of those organizations and encouraged her fans to start volunteering. Thus, students were able to substantiate the social value and influence of celebrity on society and the public.

### Course Evaluation

The course's assessment methods were designed to match its goals. Two mid-term tests were used to assess students' understanding of the materials covered in the lectures and their ability to analyze the use of celebrity and the impacts of celebrity culture. The tests required students to explain key concepts and to write analytical essays. In addition to the mid-term tests, students were required to hand in a reflection paper after each guest lecture. These "thought papers" were designed to encourage students to relate to and reflect on the materials learned in class and to promote critical thinking. Moreover, the thought papers are a great opportunity for students to improve their language ability.

In addition to individual assignments, students were also assessed in groups. They were required to work as a team to analyze a case of celebrity in relation to its social, economic and cultural context, and to examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of its use of celebrity. Moreover, students were asked to conduct interviews on the topic of consumer perception toward celebrities with mental illness in Hong Kong and to present their findings in class and in a written report. In this way, they were able to learn how to use a qualitative research method (conducting interviews) to measure the celebrity-audience relationship and the impacts of mentally distressed celebrities in health communication. Both projects were aimed to test students' understanding of the topics learned in class and their abilities to contextualize and apply the theories and the concepts.

### Conclusion

"Celebrity and Entertainment Business" integrated knowledge and approaches from two different academic disciplines, business and social sciences. Various teaching methods were adopted to enrich the learning experience. Through the interdisciplinary approaches, the course allowed students to understand key principles of the disciplines under study and to connect the two disciplines to gain insight into the phenomena in relation to celebrity endorsement, celebrity culture, and the ideologies embedded in them. The cross-disciplinary approach exposed students to different modes of thinking to enable them to look at the same issues from more than one perspective. In this way, they were able to learn to question existing assumptions, to respect other people's opinions, and to examine different perspectives critically. Moreover, students were led to relate to the topics by thinking more critically and by reflecting on the potential influence of celebrity culture on themselves.

Therefore, the course empowered students with the critical and analytical skills not only to prepare them for future professional situations, but also to equip them with the powers of self-reflection and self-evaluation, which are fundamental no matter which discipline they pursue. Although this is the first time that such a course has been offered in our university, this course has been well-received as shown in the

latest teaching evaluation exercise. An average score of 4.5 or above was received on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Students were satisfied with the insights gained and the applicability of the course structure especially through direct contact with two local celebrities. In addition, students acknowledged the significance of discussing up-to-date case studies, as all cases were able to help them broaden their understanding of the issue of the use of celebrity in the context of Asia. Students were able to understand the multi-facets of celebrity power and culture and their impact on branding, the society and consumers in-depth. In the future, case studies including local celebrity should be considered, as those case studies would enhance local and cultural relevance on the topic discussed.

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