

“Grassroots Idol”: Research on Cultural Significance of Web Celebrities

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Keywords: Grassroots Culture, Grassroots Idol, Web Celebrities.

Abstract. Web celebrities refer to the “grassroots idols” popular and well-liked on the Internet. The characteristics, coding patterns and consumer psychology of grassroots culture are in this way: to feel the pleasure of excitement and entertainment through comic and grotesque performances; to meet the need for success and encouragement through perseverant and inspirational stories; to get the freedom through free, easy and romantic plots. This unique web phenomenon not only shows the landscape of grassroots culture, but also meets the psychological needs of ordinary Internet users, and thus gives the web celebrities a corresponding cultural significance.

Introduction

“The 41th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China” released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) shows that the Internet users in China as of June 2017 are up to 772 million with a penetration rate of 55.8% [1]. It can be seen that the Internet has become an important platform in people’s lives. In particular, the technological support provided by the Internet as well as the low-cost or even zero-cost participation mode make it possible for ordinary Internet users (grassroots) to play a part in cultural production and gradually form an enormous network cultural landscape with grassroots atmosphere—grassroots culture.

Relative to elite culture, grassroots culture is a mass culture or a culture of civilians with characteristics of ridicule, disenchantment, spoofing and joking, as well as being tenacious, sympathetic, simple, low-key and romantic. With the web as a platform and the Internet users as protagonists, the Internet grassroots culture comes into being by free coding of the Internet users without the processing and transformation of elite culture or the guidance and norms of mainstream value. It is very close to Internet life, and very popular to netizens. And the coding mode of web celebrities and the characteristics of consumer psychology show the cultural significance of web celebrities.

Grassroots Idol and Web Celebrities

Idol belongs to a historical category and was originally used in religious field. As time goes by, the meaning of Idol changes from being elegant to vulgar, typical to popular and common. No matter how the object of idol changes, but its nature that means being worshiped and loved has never changed. Especially with the development of the Internet, people’s turn to have growing interaction in wider fields, and their interests and needs become more diversified. At this time, idol draws more attention on the Internet and idol culture gradually becomes a culture of civilians or namely grassroots culture. The idols made in this cultural landscape are also inclined to become popularization and grassrootization. In other words, everyone can become an idol as long as he has some merits, which is quite different from the traditional idols that must have heroic deeds, noble births, good education, brilliant career or admirable social status. The idol that is proposed spontaneously by the Internet users, promoted by the media and web is called “grassroots idol” in this paper.

Web celebrities and grassroots idols are closely related. Web celebrities refer to grassroots idols that are much concerned by the vast majority of Internet users. They are the result of the combination of virtual network and real society with an image of a particular nature that meets the mentality of most Internet users and with the influence of the Internet they are worshiped and sought after by the

netizens deliberately or unintentionally then become celebrities on web. It is clear that web celebrities do not come into being spontaneously while they are the product driven by the Internet to meet the psychological needs of Internet users. In addition, in order to become well-known, they often cause a sensation and attract eyeballs by means of speaking ridiculous words, showing images of clowns, wearing sexy clothes, and acting cute with the influence of network promoter. The web celebrities of this kind are signs of worship and adoration and they also imply being ridiculed, joked and entertained.

It can be seen from the above that the grassroots idols belong to web celebrities. The relationship between the two can be clearly defined in this way: grassroots idols are definitely web celebrities while web celebrities are not necessarily grassroots idols. Because grassroots idols are favored, worshiped and admired by people, while web celebrities are the objects that are entertained and ridiculed and they want to be famed for the sake of being famed though they have some elements of grassroots idols. Therefore, web celebrities have both the characteristics of idols and non-idols and fall in between idols and non-idols.

Coding Mode of Web Celebrities and Grassroots Cultural Characteristics of Consumer Psychology

Web celebrities are the result of excessive attention and consumption by the public and its coding mode has obvious imprint of grassroots culture. The following will have an analysis of three cases “Park Jae Sang—a Korean star”, “Bao Zhengzhong and his book *Lian Tan Di*”, and “Gu Shaoqiang—a teacher who wants to quit for a world trip”.

These three people are typical web celebrities with a deep influence of grass-roots culture. An analysis of the three cases helps to reveal the coding mode of web celebrities, the characteristics and significance of grassroots culture. The Korean star Park Jae Sang attracted the audience and became a world-famous Internet star because he uploaded a music video “Gangnam Style” on the YouTube website on July 15, 2012. His joking, funny dance and sweet melody in the video were widely imitated by the Internet users, and in 52 days the click rate of the video rose up to over 100 million, then from 100 million to 200 million only in 14 days, which makes him the only singer in South Korea whose single song gets a click rate of over 100 million thus breaking the Guinness Book of Records. The second case is Bao Zhengzhong and his book “*Lian Tan Di*”. Bao Zhengzhong became a web celebrity because he posted on the web saying “with 300 yuan I started my career as a street vendor and now I earn 150 thousand yuan”. His post immediately attracted more than 2 million netizens, and was dubbed by the netizens as a “*Lian Tan Di*” –prince of street vendor. With his typical grassroots identity, Bao Zhengzhong has motivated many netizens and became a web celebrity who enjoys great reputation for his personal success in entrepreneurship. The woman teacher Gu Shaoqiang won her reputation on web because of her letter of resignation from school on April 13, 2015 saying “The world is so big and I want to quit for a world trip” which was regarded as “the most sentimental letter of resignation in history”.

These three cases of web celebrities show that: web celebrities are the product of network coding and the consumer psychology of Internet users. The Internet is not only fast in speed but also wide in scope for news communication, and has now become the main platform of grassroots culture.

To Get Pleasure and Entertainment by Funny and Grotesque Performances

Public pleasure and entertainment makes up an important feature of grass-roots culture. It is formed by nothing but performer’s funny, grotesque and exaggerated behavior and image that give the Internet users pleasure of carnival and entertainment, and most of the time the pleasure is only for pleasure’s sake. This way of formation is also the coding mode of how web celebrities form.

That Park Jae Sang became a web star is not because the lyrics of “Gangnam Style” has profound cultural connotation or the dance is elegant, but because of his funny, grotesque, exaggerated equestrian dances and his repeated, simple, vulgar lyrics and melodies which give the audience sensory stimulation and mental excitement. With the promotion of the Internet and the craze of netizens, the clown-like performances became increasingly popular and were imitated by people with

their “Jiangnan Style for Wedding” edition, “Jiangnan Style for US election” edition, “Jiangnan Style for Ridiculing North Korean” edition and “Jiangnan Style for Rugby” edition, etc. Different editions of videos on the web show the public’s carnival and entertainment. And this style comes to the T stage and becomes a fashion. This also pushes Park Jae Sang to the international stage making him the world’s leading actor and idol. Although this clown-like performance will sooner or later be forgotten, it meets the Internet users’ entertaining psychology, enjoyment and carnival purposes. Perhaps, this is the web celebrities that the Internet users really like online.

Mikhail Bakhtin believes that when the “carnival” becomes a ritual—“carnival ritual”, there must be four preconditions: first, the relationship between people are casual and the status between are equal; second, there way of communication is fanny or full of comic remarks and jokes; third, there must be overturns to the traditional ritual rules; fourth, there must be vulgar remarks, clown-like behaviors, nasty mind, etc.[2] From Park Jae Sang’s way of success, it can be clear that Bakhtinian explanation is quite right for this phenomenon. First of all, that the netizens widely share and imitate “Gangnam Style” shows way of communication is fanny or full of comic remarks and jokes; secondly, the horse-riding dance itself is a mockery of the decaying life of nobles in South Korea, let alone the repetition and vulgarity of lyrics. Naturally this “style” has become a feast for the masses, gives people pleasure in entertainment.

To Get Success and Encouragement by Inspirational Examples

All people long for success or encouragement. This promotes the web to encode the successful men, the self-made grassroots in particular, with their inspirational stories and makes them web celebrities. Because the successful grassroots’ perseverance and firmness encourage the masses and they share similar social status and difficult experiences with more emotional feelings. In fact, in this coding process, the inspirational stories of the grassroots idols have become the spiritual forces of the Internet users for success. However, the masses do not care whether there is commercial trick or not for their purpose is to obtain some kind of spiritual demand.

That the grassroots idol Bao Zhengzhong became a web celebrity is closely related to his experience from a grassroots vendor to inspirational idol. If he is still down and out and with no amusing experience, he would never have become a web celebrity or an idol. He became popular both because the web had encoded his excellent spirit of being tenacious, perseverant, and hardworking, and the Internet users had shared his outstanding moral character and his status as a grassroots person.

In this process, netizens do not pay more attention to his achievements, but to his experience, identity and status before he became famous in order to get encouragement from his story. In Bao Zhengzhong’s story some key points are eye-catching: he was born in a poor family; he dropped school for lack of school fees; he was cheated when working as a migrant labor; he once slept out on the streets; he had a simple wedding ceremony; he started his career as a vendor with 300 yuan; finally he made great fortunes. Obviously, these key points emphasize that Zhengzhong is an absolute grassroots person, implying his experience in sadness and sorrows and his final success by continuous efforts, which undoubtedly is the chicken soup for the soul of many netizens who are eager for success. Because grassroots persons themselves have a strong desire to get out of their own realities, and Bao Zhengzhong’s story sets a good example for them and motivates many netizens to pursue their success and to meet their desire for success. As Erik H. Erikson puts it, people “are always thinking about how to combine the roles and techniques of early development with the current ideal archetypes.”[3] In Bao’s story, his personal experience and background make the netizens have a comparison and think their own experiences and ideal archetypes—for many of them hold that as long as they work hard, they can achieve the same ideal goals and can realize their own dreams as Bao did.

To Get Freedom and Willfulness by Romantic and Free-Style Plots

The creation of a romantic story and free-style characters is a coding pattern on the Internet to make web celebrities. Free-style characters with romantic storyline meet the netizens’ desire to be free and willful when they are consuming these stories. Both the romantic story and the free-style characters show a free life and willful mentality. Driven by this yearning for free life and willful

mentality, people are easy to make people with free-style and romance the superficial grassroots idols on web. Idols should be encouraging and positive people who make people either at work or in life feel a continuous driving force. However, superficial significance and speculation is the phenomenon that some people who have become grassroots idols by tempting the psychological needs of netizens with their romantic storylines.

In fact, the common encoding mode of web celebrities is to make up corresponding story plots to share emotional feelings with netizens according to the netizens' actual situations and psychological conditions. The teacher Gu Shaoqiang was hot online for six months since April 13, 2015 when she wrote a letter of resignation from school saying "The world is so big and I want to quit for a world trip" to October 2015 when she had her wedding with her husband. That "the world is so big and I want to quit for a world trip" speaks the voice of many netizens and tell their difficulties they have in life and the courage they need to do whatever they long for. The idea "to have a trip whenever I want" shows a free and easy attitude to life. Although the grass-roots people also have the desire to have a trip whenever they want, the reality is that they cannot have such an easy go for their poor conditions. They are not confident to afford the result if they go with their jobs lost, so they hide this idea deep in their heart or put their faith and hope in words longing for the distance with unrealistic laughter. Therefore, her letter of resignation reveals the free and easy lifestyle and naturally resonates among the Internet users. People may not easily quit their jobs for travels like Gu did, but they admire her for her courage and temperament.

The making of web celebrities is nothing more than the encoding, amplifying, and transforming of the prototype people by the network promoters to cause a network sensation and gain widespread attention. However, in this process although network promoters are the initiators of the web celebrities, the indispensable ones are the netizens who concern and take active participation in the coding, dissemination and acceptance, because the web celebrities are not only celebrities among the Internet promoters but among all the netizens. What's more, the power of all netizens is much stronger than the Internet promoters. What the Internet promoters actually do is only to discover the mental needs of netizens, concern the social hot events and amplify them. For instance, Park Jae Sang meets the needs of the Internet users for entertainment; Bao meets the needs of the Internet users for motivational encouragement; and Gu meets the needs of the Internet users to have a travel whenever they want. In fact, all web celebrities reflect the netizens' daily life and lifestyles, consists of their social mentality and fashion, tell their internal psychological activities, thoughts and feelings. For when netizens concern about the web celebrities, they will inevitably see their own shadows in them and ponder whether they can improve their own conditions. Therefore, the web celebrity has become a symbol, including comical, grotesque, spoof, joking, free-and-easy, romantic, perseverant, tough, dogged characters, which fully meet the needs of different groups of Internet users, and with the promotion of online media netizens reach their goal of entertainment, carnival, meditation and enjoyment.

Cultural Significance of Web Celebrities

The phenomenon of web celebrities reflects the characteristics of grassroots culture and the consumption psychology of netizens. The constant replacement of web celebrities and the change in the form of expression meet the satisfaction of the psychological, aesthetic needs and sensory stimulation of different groups of netizens. Therefore, the characteristics of grassroots culture of web celebrities through the Internet permeate the daily life of netizens and have both positive and negative significance for the construction and deconstruction of netizens' values and ideas and for the development of Internet culture.

Its positive significance lies in the following: their real portrayal of life, their inspirational stories and their fighting spirit are helpful for the Internet users to examine themselves, to experience their lives, and to stimulate themselves to strive for success; the comical and funny words or performances of web celebrities have flavored people's lives and eased the pressure of work for netizens; in addition, the public participation of grassroots culture makes up for the shortcomings of the elite

culture on the one hand and the cultural creativity of the Internet users can be fully developed for the prosperity of culture on the other hand. It can be seen that as a special Internet cultural phenomenon, web celebrity has a positive significance both in stimulating netizens' awareness of striving for success, awareness of participation, innovation and keeping physical and mental health, and in the prosperity and development of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics.

Its negative significance lies in the following: As grassroots idols in a certain period, web celebrities are also of characteristics of offensiveness, vulgarity, and impropriety. So when the web celebrities come to the same stage with the same influence as accepted cultural idols, they both weaken or dispel the positive significance of traditional cultural idols to a certain extent and possibly make cultural idols vacant [4]. If the traditional examples and cultural idols are vacant, this must lead to deviations of mainstream values and cultural differentiation. If the netizens lack proper aesthetic critical thinking, firm beliefs in political values, and normative ethical concepts, they are easy to lose their personality and self-values when they blindly pursue grassroots idols in the atmosphere of mass carnival. In addition, mass mentality and commercial hype are boosters for web celebrities. The former is the demand for the making of web celebrities, and the latter accelerates the making. Under the drive of marketization and benefits, this phenomenon of web celebrities often dims the boundaries of beauty and ugliness, good and evil, moral values, and norms. The negative influence may infiltrate into people's daily lives with the help of rapid dissemination of the Internet and further impact on people's thinking, values and moral concepts.

In short, netizens are the direct producers of web celebrities, which not only shows the netizens' right of speech, their cultural creativity but also vividly reflects the psychological needs and characteristics of grassroots culture of the majority of netizens. Web celebrities are under the operation of the market, which reflects the positive images of diligence, justice, and conscience, as well as the negative images of superficiality, ugliness, and mockery.

Human beings are good at learning. Their behaviors are acquired by observing, imitating certain "celebrity", "role model" or "idol" and then "form their own thinking and behavior." [5] Therefore, when we analyze the characteristics of grassroots culture, we should clearly realize that it is a special product of China's Internet culture, and we should have an objective attitude to judge this phenomenon with critical methods to see whether it is positive or negative. What's more, we should pass on the mainstream values of the society by discovering the inspirational stories in web celebrities to enhance the personal morals of netizens and develop their self-control and the ability to think rationally to avoid negative cultural influences. We should also strengthen the supervision, management and legislation of new media to pass positive energy in order to form a positive atmosphere of grassroots culture and make the Internet culture the spiritual home of Internet users.

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