

Shaping a lifestyle through art festivals: A case study of Simple Life

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ABSTRACT

A new segment has been booming, Wenqing (文青; similar to hipster) since 2010. Wenqing not only represents a new segment, but also forms a lifestyle. However, Wenqing is not simply created by an organization or social movement, but rather is socially constructed. Lifestyle is recognised as finding a new type of tourists (Shaw & Williams, 2013). While extant literature on lifestyle mainly focuses on the consumption, researchers highlight a need to understand how lifestyle is created and forms (Chaney, 1996; Shaw & Williams, 2013). This research collects data from 2014 to the present. Participant observation was used to understand how Simple Life employs gatekeeping in the creative brokerage process. Non-participant observation was used on sites when Simple Life took place. Semi-structured interviews, in total 32, with various stakeholders of Simple Life were conducted and transcribed.

This study initially finds that Simple Life employs gatekeeping strategies in various curation processes to create the Wenqing lifestyle. Through Simple Life, the festival organizer accumulates capabilities by interactions with different stakeholders. There are also permanent venues of handmade markets, shops providing health food, live house as well as the streaming channel for indie music to cultivate Wenqing lifestyle. Simple Life acts as a showcase and a platform, incubating an ecosystem for Wenqing production and consumption.

KEYWORD: lifestyle; festival; gatekeeping; creative brokerage

INTRODUCTION

With the “development of the Cultural and Creative Industries Act” in Taiwan in the year of 2010 , a new segment has been booming, Wenqing (文青; similar to hipster), especially for young people in mandarin speaking regions in Asia. Wenqing not only represents a new segment, but also forms a lifestyle. Wenqing, as a group of people, wears thick rimmed glasses, vintage and cotton clothing and skinny jeans. He/she listens to indie and unplug music, takes photos with single-lens reflex camera, prefers hand-made products and pays attention to environmental issues. However, Wenqing is not simply created by an organization or social movement, but rather is socially constructed.

The concept of “gatekeeper” was first proposed by the mass communication scholar Lewin (1947). That is, the news media will obtain a large amount of information from sources and use gatekeepers to decide information or products based on certain criteria.

In addition to being used in the field of mass communication, the gatekeeper theory is also used in the field of creativity. In the system theory of creativity, Csikszentmihalyi (1999) mentioned that creativity cannot be independent of society, history and culture. Creativity is achieved through the interaction of three parties; among them, schools or organizations in specific fields are composed of individuals with knowledge in professional fields, acting as gatekeepers to carry out screening or selecting works.

It is noted that the major drive is to form Wenqing as a lifestyle by Simple Life, one of the most successful and popular art festivals in terms of business model as well as accessibility to indie music. While extant literature on lifestyle mainly focuses on the consumption perspective in marketing, few researchers highlight a need to understand how lifestyle is created and forms (Chaney, 1996; Shaw & Williams, 2013). However, the relevant studies still remain few in number. The motivation of this study derives from observing a successful art festival, Simple Life, for a decade in order to understand how the festival organizers employs gatekeeping strategies to create a lifestyle, which is Wenqing in this study, aiming to explore the research question of “how an art festival shape and create a lifestyle?”.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Festival

With the increase in income and leisure needs, the development of festivals is now booming and diverse and it attracts a number of visitors to attend, participate and engage (Allen, Harris & Jago, 2002). While there is no common definition of festival, this study employs Getz’s

(1991) argument on festival, with the elements of open to the public, fixed location, certain purposes, planned contents and design. The main difference between festivals and leisure activities is that the purpose and theme of festivals are relatively strong and clear (Jani & Rilemon, 2016).

Festivals could be examined as a socio-cultural product as they are socially constructed and bound up with the evolution of cultural practices (Quinn, 2009; Chang, 2020). Chang's (2020) study claims that festivals can be seen as a platform in which stakeholders interact with each other to co-create value. The existing literature on festivals pays more attention to the role the festivals pay in society, as well as the impact they have on tourism and festival management (Getz, 2010; Prentice & Andersen, 2003). On one hand, similar to the abovementioned discussions, studies related to festivals focus on consumption, rather than other perspectives. On the other hand, art festivals can be comprehended as artistic production (Lynch & Quinn, 2022). Authenticity, creativity, and innovation mingle in this setting to create a unique experience for art consumers. Non-functional aspects make art production unique since traditional consumption concentrates on satisfying customers' utilitarian needs (Hirschman 1983; Chen, 2009, Chang, 2020). In this sense, targeting a specific lifestyle could enlarge the participant base in a festival. While the majority of the literature on both festivals and lifestyle focus on consumption perspective, some studies argue the need to pay more attention to the production point of view (Mair & Weber, 2019). As MacLeod (2006) claims, the discussion on festivals emphasizes consumption and the need to create lifestyle, by which people can recreate themselves symbolically.

Lifestyle consumption

From consumption literature, 'lifestyle' plays an important role in consumer culture. It can be seen as a segment of a market, in which marketers can position their product in a way that appeals to the interests of the target market (Sathist & Rajamohan, 2012). In other words, 'lifestyle' refers to individuals sharing similar consumption behaviours, identity, and social norms (della Porta & Diani, 2006). As a set of consumption practices which connects with everyday activities, lifestyle defines attitudes and values (Chaney, 2012; Wahlen & Laamanen, 2015). In this sense, lifestyle has a close correspondence with consumption; thus, 'lifestyle marketing' has become a topic to explore in marketing management, particularly in the discussions on experience economy (Mehta & Anand, 2012; Rakic & Rakic, 2015; Michman & Mazze, 2006; Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

The abovementioned shows the importance of lifestyle in consumption; however, the majority of the literature on lifestyle focuses on consumer behaviour (e.g. Divine & Lepisto, 2005;

Montoya & Scott, 2013), consumer culture (e.g. Featherstone, 1987; Dey, Yen & Samuel, 2020; Berger, 2020), tourism entrepreneurship (e.g. Shaw & Williams, 2013; Zhang, Lu & Sun, 2021) and social status (e.g. Contoyannis & Jones, 2004; Sobel, 2013). It is worth mentioning that in tourism entrepreneur literature, lifestyle is recognised as finding a new type of tourists (Shaw & Williams, 2013). It differs from previous tourism marketing studies which target the market by traditional socio-economic segments and seeks to discover a new group of consumers.

While extant literature on lifestyle mainly focuses on the consumption perspective in marketing, few researchers highlight a need to understand how lifestyle is created and forms (Chaney, 1996; Shaw & Williams, 2013). However, the relevant studies still remain few in number.

Gatekeeping in cultural and creative industries

‘Gatekeeping’ is a term commonly used in communication studies and refers to an important actor who screens whether or not information should enter the channel delivering to audiences; the person doing so is called the gatekeeper. Tushman (1977) introduces this idea to industrial management and defines the boundary role of the gatekeeper, who stands between industry and market and needs to understand the ‘boundary conditions’, meaning the understanding of game rules and participants, in order to organize the gatekeeping activities. In terms of industrial innovation process, awards, competitions, and exhibitions adopt the gatekeeping mechanism (Wen, 2006). Ter Wal, Criscuolo & Salter (2017) reveal that gatekeepers can achieve innovation in an organization.

Lingo & O'Mahony (2010) mentioned that in the past, the discussions on cultural brokerage of the cultural industry focused on the "tertius gaudens", that is, the intermediary (or broker) obtained benefits from its special information or social network access. However, there is a lack of discussion on how cultural intermediaries connect different people, information, knowledge, and ideas to implement the creativity project. Their research proposed four stages of creative brokerage, namely “gathering resources”, “defining project boundaries”, “creative production” and “final synthesis”, and defined the networks and work practices that intermediaries use to cope with challenges and ambiguities encountered at each stage (see Table 1 below). Lingo & O'Mahony (2010) proposed that intermediary work is a process of building collective creativity and identifying the ambiguities that will be encountered in the creative process, and how intermediaries use various strategic actions to deal with them. In addition, creative brokerage is a dialectical approach, that is, making good use of “tertius gaudens” and “tertius iungens” approaches. It is also emphasized that the brokerage practice

of “tertius gaudens” approach can also achieve the shared goals. The research of Lingo & O'Mahony (2010) gives us a deeper understanding of the brokerage practice in the creative industry, especially extending its discussion from the social network perspective to the resource and knowledge integration perspective. However, examining prior discussions on creative brokerage, it is found out that key actors in creative brokerage stages could be seen as gatekeepers.

The motivation of this study derives from observing a successful art festival, Simple Life, for a decade in order to understand how the organization employs gatekeeping capacity to shape a lifestyle, which is Wenqing in this study. The slogan of Simple Life “Do what you like and make what you like valuable” is prominent and connects artists, brands and visitors with similar values and identity, positioning itself as the ‘lifestyle festival’.

METHODOLOGY

Methods

This research is an ethnographic study, collecting longitude qualitative data from 2014 to present. Since the diversity of stakeholders in the festival, it is difficult to employ one method to collect data. As discussed earlier that, gatekeeping takes places in every stage of creative brokerage and is not easy to observe. Participant observation in the organization, which refers to Neutron Culture Co. Ltd., was used to understand how Simple Life employs gatekeeping in the production process, mainly in 2014 and 2016. This is, one of our research team members involved in a part of festival curations collected relevant data, with the consent of Neutron Culture Co. Ltd. In addition, non-participant observation was employed on site when Simple Life took place in Taiwan every two years in 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2024 (the festival was not taken place during COVID-19 pandemic) and fieldnotes were undertaken.

In order to understand the gatekeeping practice in different creative brokerage stage, semi-structured interviews with various stakeholder were also conducted. The research participants included founders of Neutron Culture Co. Ltd, festival organizers, curators, project managers, participant brand managers, sponsors, policy-makers as well as visitors. In total, 32 interviews were conducted and transcribed.

The setting

This study selects Simple Life as a case because of three reasons. Firstly, it is a regular running music festival, with admissions. In the past, art festivals in Taiwan were normally organized by government which were used to provide free activities to encourage public

participation. Simple Life Festival has been commercially operating when it launched to the public. It offers one-day, priced at about four times film tickets, and two-day tickets. Simple Life positions independent music as the main feature. Even though the price is not cheap, each Simple Life attracts 30,000 to 40,000 people, setting a box office record for Taiwanese music festivals. Moreover, the festival brand has successfully deployed to Shanghai, China, with great success as well. Secondly, Simple Life is unique and focused on lifestyle. Not emphasised much on certain indie music bands or stars, Simple Life uses the slogan of “Do what you like and make what you like valuable” to connect artists, brands and visitors who shared similar values and identity. According to the interview with one of the founders of Simple Life, Simple Life is positioned as an event to market Taiwan’s beautiful lifestyle. Lastly, Simple Life is an incubator between the music artists and brands. According to the observations, there are five stages for music artists in Simple Life; two stages are for mature and well-known music artists, who meet the value of Simple and would attract fans to come, and three of them are for indie bands or artists, who are in their early-stage career and not exposed too much to the public. The mixture of different scale of brands and success of music artists allows inspiration, exchange and exposure.

INITIAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research finds out that there are three main curations in Simple Life, namely music, event and brand curations. The core value and the slogan of Simple Life “Do what you like and make what you like valuable”; during the creative brokerage process, each gatekeeping practice in curations is surrounded with this core value.

The key gatekeeping capability of Simple Life organizer is shown as Table 1 below.

	Content of Simple Life	
Type of boundary	creative gatekeeping mechanism	Innovative gatekeeping mechanism
Curations	Music curation Event curation	Brand curation
Key gatekeeping capability	Professional knowledge	Curating capability

The music content conveyed by the organisers was only the indie band performing on the stage; in addition, and the event curation is unilaterally formulated by the rules through event design, without any communication and interaction with consumers. The above two type of

content is the one-way communication thus are classified as creative gatekeeping (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). For the brand curation, it is interesting to observe that there are more interactions and communications between brands and consumers, therefore, the contents delivered are relatively systematic and comprehensive. This could be categorised as the innovative gatekeeping mechanism. Hsiang et al., (2006) point out that this mechanism has to both define boundaries and maintain its systematic contents; therefore, compared with other types, this gatekeeping mechanism has a stronger dominance.

This research observes that Simple Life organizers does not follow the “theme” to invite certain types of performing groups but follow their intuition to the market to decide the contents of the festival, based on embracing the diversity of music and forms. During the “brand curation”, Simple Life team not only acts as the gatekeepers of the festival, but also uses its curatorial capabilities to assist new participant brand engaging in the festival. For example, Simple Life organizers used co-branding strategy to match some emerging brands and mature brands, in order to allow participant brands to present their brand value to the public during the festival. Therefore, this study suggests that, in addition to the innovative gatekeeping mechanism's emphasis on gatekeeping abilities, such as professional knowledge and information, thinking and decision-making, and communication and execution capabilities, the curatorial capabilities and the network capital have a decisive impact on the festival.

In summary, this study provides the following insights. Firstly, In addition to being affected by the gatekeeping strategies of the Simple Life, the process of defining boundaries is also limited by the content that can be selected. Secondly, various contents presented different types of gatekeeping, which also affected the key gatekeeping capabilities required. For example, music curation and event curation are selected by creative gatekeeping mechanism. Due to the undefined boundaries, the gatekeeping mechanism needs to use its professional knowledge to select suitable contents. It is found out that the curating ability was a key factor in shaping the gatekeeping results. Thirdly, the curation processes of Simple Life happens to follow the development of the gatekeeping process. The gatekeeping practice is actually implemented through repeated process. Lastly, the gatekeeping mechanisms taken place during Simple Life has an important impact on the organizational development of Simple Life team, which allows the organisation to continue the gatekeeping practices when planning the following Simple Life Festival.

From this ethnographic study, it is noted that the major drive is to form Wenqing as a lifestyle by Simple Life, which is one of the most successful and popular art festivals in terms of business model as well as accessibility to indie music.

This study initially finds that Simple Life employs gatekeeping strategies in various curating processes to create the Wenqing lifestyle. Through Simple Life, which takes place every two years, the festival organizer accumulates capabilities by interactions with different stakeholders over the long term. Outside the festival, there are permanent venues of handmade markets, shops providing health food, live house as well as the streaming channel for indie music to cultivate Wenqing as a segment. Simple Life acts as a showcase and a platform, incubating an ecosystem for Wenqing production and consumption.

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