

*Socio-Cultural Influence on the Creation of Media Production: A Case Study of The  
Asean Perspective of Bangkok Documentary*

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Abstract

This is a qualitative research with the following objectives:

- To analyse the process and conflict of a socio-cultural influence on creative choices when producing a documentary
- To study the production crew's perspective of intercultural conflict

The research methodologies used are observation, in-depth interviews and a focus group. The production crew of the documentary consists of five members of the new generation with diverse cultural backgrounds playing different roles; for example, the director from Thailand, the producer from Japan, the script writer from India, the cameraman from Myanmar, and the editor from Taiwan are all interviewed. The Asean Perspective of Bangkok is a documentary, a production-based research, created for broadcasting via social media. This documentary is produced to illustrate the way in which the Asean people view three aspects of the capital city of Thailand, namely, social, cultural and economic.

It is believed that the results of this research can develop media communication in terms of a sender scheme in the context of a trans-cultural environment so that senders can progressively work in peace with a good understanding of each other to uplift the content (text) of the media production in the Asean region in order to embrace the changes engendered by the forthcoming AEC in 2015.

**Keywords-** Socio-cultural influence, creative choice, documentary, intercultural conflict

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## **Introduction**

In this era of globalisation, people move across continents to live, study or work. Sojourners are those who travel away from their homeland to reside in a foreign country for a significant period of time. This term is used to refer to various types of travellers, including business people, students, immigrants and others who live and work in a foreign culture (Chong 2006). Intercultural communication is a huge challenge for people with different cultural backgrounds, nationalities and experience in workplaces throughout the world, since they need to corroboratively work with others in the same situation. Jandt (2007) generally defines intercultural communication as face-to-face interaction between people with diverse cultures, and while it is likely that they can work together without conflict and arguments, this is not guaranteed. When people with different beliefs and attitudes work together, there may be conflict or they may have an unpleasant reaction to each other during the working process; therefore, it is crucial to determine how people can work together and produce a successful outcome by understanding each other. When people from different cultures are part of a certain society, socio-cultural factors can have a huge impact on their decision-making and attitude. Being a member of a social reference group affects individuals' behaviour, beliefs and attitude, and they are more likely to be more influenced by the group's opinions than their own or any other culture. Socio-cultural diversity encompasses differences in ethnicity, gender, language and educational attainment, as well as financial status (Mertens and d'Haenens, 2010).

Media production is a field in which people from all different backgrounds gather together to produce creative work, and most of them stamp their identity on their part of the work to defend their belief. The final production cannot be completed by one person alone; a production team consists of more than two people at least and they necessarily come into contact with many more during the entire time of the production. A television documentary is a kind of creative work with a complex production process because it contains several steps in which people need to interact with each other; for example, research, location survey, brainstorming of ideas, script writing, shooting on location, interviewing and editing. Members of the production crew need to discuss, argue and share ideas to find a creative solution throughout the production process, which includes pre-production, production and post-production.

The Asean Perspective of Bangkok is a documentary created for broadcasting via social media to illustrate the way in which Asean people view three aspects of the capital city of Thailand, namely, social, cultural and economic. Five young people from different countries in Asia were assigned to produce the documentary, and the aim of this study is to illuminate

the way in which the process and conflict of socio-cultural influences affected their creative choices during the production of the documentary. It seeks to examine the production crew's perspective of intercultural conflict, and while cultural influence is usually examined in terms of the difference between norms and philosophical belief is fundamental to humans' thoughts and behaviour, this research focuses more on membership, social status and the way in which being part of a certain society influences individuals' decision-making, attitude and creative ideas. It is believed that this research can provide some guidelines for people who work in the media industry to live in a trans-cultural environment so that, as senders, they can progressively work in peace with a good understanding of each other to uplift the content (text) of media production in the Asean region in order to embrace the changes engendered by the forthcoming AEC in 2015.

## **Literature Review**

### **Small Intercultural Groups**

When members of different cultures interact, they form culturally-diverse groups, and if all the members of the group make a contribution, this increases their creative potential (the ability to develop unique choices for making decisions) (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992; Shaw, 1981). The activation of personal and social identities will influence the equity of the contribution, and thus the effectiveness of the group. Turner (1987) explains that social identity is founded on "ingroup-outgroup categorisation based on similarities and differences between people who define themselves as members of a certain social group and not of another."

### **Influence of Culture on Perception**

Perception and behaviour are part of the cultural experience. Singer (1987, p.9) observes that "we experience everything in the world not as it is – but only as it comes to us through our sensory receptors." Therefore, the way we respond to the external world is primarily the result of how culture influences our perception. Culture has a greater impact on the perception process than on the sensation itself (Tajfel, 1969; Triandis, 1964). Jandt (2007) proposes that human perception is a three-step process, the first of which is selection, the second is organisation, and the third is interpretation, each of which is affected by culture. He further explains that, in terms of the first step of selection, individuals are exposed to more stimuli than they can possibly manage within their physiological limitations; therefore, in the second step, they select some stimuli according to the situation and organise them in a meaningful way. The third step, which is perception involves interpretation, and the same stimuli can be interpreted differently by various people.

## **Influence of Socio-cultural elements on social perception**

Porter and Samovar (1994) propose that social perception is a process whereby humans construct unique social realities by attributing meaning to the social objects and events they encounter in their environment. This is an extremely important aspect of communication. They also suggest that three major socio-cultural elements have a direct major impact on the meaning people attach to their perception, namely, belief/value/attitude systems, world view, and social organisation, all of which impact individuals' subjective meanings.

*Belief/Value/Attitude systems.* Beliefs can be viewed as individuals' subjective probability that some object or event possesses certain characteristics. Belief links the believed object and the characteristics that distinguish it. The degree to which individuals believe that an event or an object possesses certain characteristics reflects the level of their subjective probability and the depth or intensity of their belief. Values can be called cultural values, which are a set of organised rules for making choices, decreasing uncertainty and reducing conflict within society. Attitude is defined as a learned tendency to respond in a consistent manner to a given object of orientation. This means that people tend to embrace the things they like and avoid those they do not like. The cultural environment helps to shape and form people's attitude, their readiness to respond, and their behaviour.

*World View.* The world view deals with the cultural orientation toward philosophical issues, such as God, humanity, nature, the universe and other factors concerned with the concept of being. World view issues are timeless and represent the most fundamental aspects of cultures, such as the religious views between them. The world view influences cultures at a very profound level and it also affects beliefs, values, attitudes, use of time, and many other aspects.

*Social organisation.* The manner in which a culture organises itself and its institutions also affects the way in which its members perceive the world and how they communicate. It may be helpful to examine two of the dominant social units of culture, the first of which is *family*, which is the smallest social unit in a culture, but one of the most influential since it sets the stage for a child's development during the formative periods of life. The second is *school*, which is another social unit which is endowed with the major part of the responsibility for passing on and maintaining the culture. These represent a community's basic link with its past, as well as its taskmaster for the future.

## **Intercultural Conflict**

According to Gudykunst (1994) conflict is inevitable in any relationship, whether or not it is welcomed, and while many people view conflict in a negative way, he believes that it is neither positive nor negative. Although expressive conflicts arise in all cultures, people can maintain their relationship if the conflict is instrumentally-based. Meanwhile Ting-Toomey & Oetzel (2001) propose that intercultural conflict is expressed as a struggle due to the perceived incompatibility of values, norms, face orientations, goals scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes between a minimum of two parties from different cultural backgrounds in an interactive situation. Kenneth Thomas (1983) defines conflict as a situation in which one party perceives that the other is not satisfied or is about to be frustrated, while Pedersen and Hofstede (2002, p.196) argue that “culture is rather like the colour of your eyes; you cannot change it or hide it, and although you cannot see it yourself, it is always visible to other people who are interested in it.” They also propose that, when one person interprets outside people in a cultural context, it can result in misunderstanding and inappropriate intervention.

## **Research Design and Method**

This is a qualitative research to explore the process and conflict and to analyse the perspective of the production crew during the making of the documentary. Five members of the new generation with diverse cultural backgrounds who play different roles in the production team, were selected for interviews and a focus group. They include the director from Thailand, the producer from Japan, the script writer from India, the cameraman from Myanmar and the editor from Taiwan. They all are international students at Bangkok University International College (BUIC) aged between 19-21 years old, and they all have media production knowledge from the class they took last year and were randomly selected as having different Asean nationalities.

On the first day, the researcher explained the research objectives to each team member, as well as the process of the research and how the data would be collected. They were given a notebook and a project briefing sheet and asked to keep a record as a self-report in a production diary (a notebook). The production diary is used to describe their feelings and experience, and to report significant events they recognise, as supporting material to be cross-checked with the data from the interviews and focus group. They were then asked to produce a video with the theme of “Asean Perspective of Bangkok” in three aspects; social, cultural

and economic, and they could choose one aspect they were most interested in producing. The target audience of the video is Asean people living in Thailand and the Asean region and the objective of the video is to share knowledge and information of Asean countries and to prepare people for the AEC (Asean Economic Community), which is being formed in 2015. The documentary will be broadcast on the social medium, Youtube. Basically, the workshop consisted of five stages that included brainstorming, research for content, script writing, video shooting and editing. At the end of the production process, they will be asked to join a focus group session for about an hour to analyse how they worked together from pre- to post-production. Subsequently, the team members would be subject to separate in-depth interviews in another room to analyse any conflicting personal perspectives during the production. Also, they were all asked to hand their production diaries to the researcher at the end of the production.

Since this was a creative workshop, the members were encouraged to discuss, disagree, negotiate, convince, compromise and share ideas at every stage in the documentary production according to their diverse cultural backgrounds plus their different production responsibilities, ranging from director, producer and script writer to cameraman and editor. Participating in this experimental documentary workshop for almost a month can be an effective way to examine the intercultural process, in which their actions will reflect the level of teamwork performance, production value and creative solutions.

### **Research Findings**

The production team produced a documentary entitled *Opportunities in Bangkok*, which mainly focused on the educational opportunities available for Asian people living in Bangkok. Asean students and teachers were interviewed to talk about general educational opportunities and their experience in Bangkok, including the merits and demerits of living in Thailand's capital city. By the end of documentary, it was hoped that the image of Bangkok would show Asean viewers that it is modern city, which has everything people could desire, including the freedom of expression.

The production processes and how the team worked to develop the idea and make the video were analysed from the focus group. They were asked about the brainstorming session, how they searched for content for the documentary, how they chose the idea, how they designed the presentation techniques, how they shot and edited the footage, and they were also asked about the problems they faced during the production. In the pre-production process, they began to brainstorm ideas and defined the meaning of the theme assigned to the documentary, an *Asean Perspective of Bangkok*. They all had different views of Bangkok. They arranged

their ideas in the form of a mind map and considered many aspects, such as tourism, food, economy, politics, city life, transportation, traffic and many more. Everyone shared their ideas and no-one stayed quiet. During the first session, they were unable to choose and narrow down the topic for the documentary they wanted to produce so they decided to meet again the next meeting. In the second meeting, they met up and discussed what they wanted to do for four hours, but they were still not able to find a big idea to start structuring the script. Unfortunately, the meeting continued into the third week of the workshop and they were still unable to finalise the idea. The fact that they were not able to find a topic upset some of the group members because of the lack of progress on the project. Most of participants thought that it was taking too long to access the main idea and the big question of the documentary, so they decided to interview other Asean people for new ideas. They began by asking their relatives, friends and assorted acquaintances, and when they reviewed the answers, they found there was some relationship between them. They then realised that all the people they knew were students and teachers who had moved from other Asean countries to work and study in the educational field in Thailand and most of them perceived their stay in Bangkok to be the opportunity of a lifetime. So they finally settled on the main idea and concept, and entitled the documentary *Opportunities in Bangkok*, focusing on the educational field. The script writer wrote the script for two days and then the shooting took about one week, while the editing was finished in about five days.

The in-depth interviews were designed to determine how people with different cultural backgrounds interacted with each other, and how their culture and socio-cultural influences affected their creative ideas when producing the documentary. For example, did any conflict or arguments affect their creative choices? What was their perspective of working with people from different countries? The ideas they had about Bangkok in the first brainstorming session were totally different. The producer from Japan said:

*“Everything in Bangkok is complicated from the media to the government. There is nothing certain in this city. It’s completely opposite to Japan where everyone follows the rules.”*

Meanwhile, the script writer from India observed that

*“Bangkok is a safe place to live compared to my home town.”*

Then the director from Thailand quickly responded,

*“No, I don’t agree. Bangkok is not safe at all and I think it’s a place for tourists with many foreigners.”*

The camera man from Myanmar viewed Bangkok as being

*“.....very international because we can meet people from all around the world.”*

After defining the theme in the first brainstorming session, they began to share ideas and design the content of the documentary. Again, they shared ideas with different reasons to support them. The script writer from India wanted to do a documentary about two people of different ages living in Bangkok to show how Bangkok has changed throughout the decade. At first, the group quiet liked the idea, but they thought it would be hard to find two such people, and it would be difficult to shoot it and obtain footage of images to represent Bangkok in the past. Therefore, this idea was abandoned. Meanwhile, the cameraman from Myanmar wanted to make a documentary about the gay issue since this is not as open in her country as it is in Bangkok and she wanted Myanmar to become more open about homosexuality.

*“Yes, in my country they have gays, but they don’t show up because people look down on them, and say you were born men; why do you want to be women? It’s not open. That’s why I want to do gay thing. If it’s Ok with people in Thailand, I want my country to know it.”*

However, the editor from Taiwan said that, although he quite liked the idea, there was no point in relating the Asean perspective of Bangkok to this subject, so this idea was also abandoned.

It was then that the production team decided to interview people they knew to acquire in-depth information because they could not gain a clear perspective or fresh ideas from books and online articles. They started with all the people they knew who were Asean and had come to Bangkok for educational purposes. They listed them all and found relations that were students and teachers and obtained the idea of opportunities with education from them. The script writer and the camera man said they both agreed with this idea because in their home countries of India and Myanmar, children are always being sent to study in other countries. They expressed their views according to their shared background;

*“In India , they believe that if you go abroad, you learn something from a developing country”*



*“I agree with the idea that Bangkok is a good opportunity for education. I also came here because there were no major communication arts in Myanmar”*

When they discussed about mood and tone of the documentary. There are two sides having different idea. The script writer from India want to make documentary look more serious to present reality and the fact of Bangkok while the rest of the group want it more relax and entertaining. For presentation techniques, the script writer was the only one who insisted to interview just two to three persons and asked for deep information while the rest members needed ten interviewees from Asean countries if they could find those people since they thought when we talk about Asean perspective , we need more than two people. There is one more conflict during production. When they designed greeting shot in introduction part of documentary and wanted to show how ten Asean nations greet. The producer from Japan and director from Thailand wanted each team member to present all those words while the script writer from India doesn't agree with them. She said

*“I just wanted to show my lips but the group wanted to show the whole face. They think it's better than just the lips. I don't understand why we have to be in the video. It's a non-Indian idea”*

Along the production, each member tried to speak out and fought for the idea they believed. They always talked straight if they didn't agree or didn't like anything involved with the production. When asking them about how do they view working with people different country as conflict causing trouble they answered in different view point.

The director from Thailand said

*“Not really; conflict can create a bigger better idea. At first, I might not like the idea much, but when I hear another angle, I might think it is quite interesting. I love to work with foreigners because they are all more active and speak out more than Thais”*

The editor from Taiwan said

*I don't think we had conflict. It was all about accepting different ideas. I would say this group work has given me an 'Open Mind'. We listened to each other's different opinions.”*

The script writer from India said

*“I think it’s just a way of thinking. I try to think what’s more important. The other four people may take it personally but I think about it as being realistic since the video is going to be public and published on Youtube”*

The producer from Japan said

*“ I don’t think so. We all from different countries, but we are kind of linked. We all come from countries in Asia. We have a similar cultural background. I don’t think it has a big impact. Some topics might be sensitive for some members, so they might feel uncomfortable but a middle person like me would say, Ok. We should change.”*

### **Discussion and Limitations**

People from different countries may have a different perspective or belief or have had a different experience. For example, when asked their opinion of Bangkok, each member defined it in a different way. The script writer from India viewed it as a safe place to live compared to her home town, since she said there was more crime and poverty in the cities in India, while the producer from Japan thought the city was complex due to the government, media and lifestyle. The Thai director also disagreed that Bangkok was safe. (Jandt , 2007 ) also proposes that human perception is usually a three-step process, one of which is interpretation, so that the same situation can be interpreted differently by diverse people. Every participant in this workshop, apart from the Thai director, had come to live or study in Thailand for a while, but their different cultural backgrounds caused them to perceive Bangkok in a different way. Another idea came from the camera man, who wanted to do documentary about gays, which is not open in Myanmar the way it is in Bangkok. This illustrates how culture influenced the ideas for the documentary. Porter and Samovar (1994) share the view that people act out of the personal uniqueness they bring to the situation; for example, everyone brings a different background, and as a result, individual meanings are attributed to a shared experience. Events mean different things to different people because of their unique history. Individuals are not only influenced by personal experience, but more importantly, by their culture which refers to the knowledge, beliefs, views, values and behaviour acquired by a large group of people and passed on from one generation to the next.

For the final main idea of the documentary, the main message, *“Opportunities in Bangkok”* came in an educational way by the strong support of two members of the group who come from Myanmar and India. They both agreed that their home countries like to send children to

other countries to be educated so that they can learn from them. This idea was also supported by the other team members who felt a close connection with the topic of education that convinced them to produce the content from something familiar to them. The director from Thailand knew a teacher from the Philippines who came to Bangkok to work in the educational sector and she also agreed with this idea. When they finally agreed to make this creative choice, it showed that not only did their cultural backgrounds affect their decision-making, but socio-cultural influences also played a significant role in producing the content of this documentary. Although they came from different countries with a different degree of knowledge, beliefs, views, values, norms, behaviour, traditions and philosophies, becoming a social member of a society as a sojourner made them realise the issues that were most closely related to their social status, i.e. as international students living in the host country of Thailand. As a result of the workshop, socio-cultural influences became a crucial aspect of the creative choice of this documentary production when the production team with different cultural backgrounds worked through the process and conflict was followed by an agreement with the idea when their social perception was affected by socio-cultural factors. They are influenced by the social environment of the community in which they live and are part of, and this socio-cultural aspect has an impact on their behaviour, attitude and belief. This finally affected their creative ideas when producing the documentary at the brainstorming stage in this workshop, which was a significant part of the media production before writing the script.

One distinctive conflict that affected the group's creative choice was when the script writer from India wanted to make a serious documentary rather than an entertaining one, and this was an opposite idea to that of the director from Thailand and the producer from Japan. They argued and discussed the reasons. The Indian thought that, from the documentaries she had seen, it should be serious with deep information from just two or three selected people. In contrast, the producer and director wanted to break the rules and entertain the audience by designing the introduction with entertaining graphics and music. Kenneth Thomas (1983) proposes that conflict arises in a situation where one party is frustrated and dissatisfied with the actions of the other. Another cultural conflict was when the director from Thailand and the producer from Japan wanted to interview ten people from Asean countries to represent the "Asean perspective", while the script writer from India thought that two or three people were enough to obtain in-depth information. Also, when the script writer from India said that she did not want to be part of a documentary as the production crew to show how Asean people greet each other, proclaiming it to be a non-Indian idea. This illustrates that cultural differences can prevent people from understanding each other well. Pedersen and Hofstede (2002) suggest that a person's behaviour is interpreted by the cultural context of outside people, and if it is wrongly interpreted, it causes misunderstanding and an inappropriate

reaction. Wiseman (1995) maintains that there is the potential for increased conflict in small intercultural groups because of the differences in decision-making preferences. When people from different backgrounds get together to resolve a problem, they will always disagree about the best way to make a decision.

When intercultural conflict occurred in the workshop, the work was successful because they were open to new information and understood and were aware of each other's point of view. All the team members understood that they had conflicting ideas about how to produce the documentary and the style of presentation. However, when asked about how they viewed this cultural conflict and if they found it difficult to work with people from different countries, they all said that they did not view the process as a conflict. They were open-minded and understood that they just had different ways of thinking and they accepted the differences.

### **Conclusion**

Intercultural knowledge opens doors to the treasure house of human experience. It helps people to understand the beliefs, values, and worldviews that influence alternative intercultural communication approaches. They can understand the logic that motivates the actions and behaviours of others from diverse cultural backgrounds, but they cannot define one action that is influenced by cultural or social factors, which makes it necessary to analyse many aspects of human behaviour. Cultural differences turn into cultural conflict in every group and organisation, but understanding is the first step to acceptance. The biggest benefit in accepting cultural differences is that cultural diversity enriches everyone (Liu , Volcic and Gallois , 2011) Cultural differences do not prevent people from communicating with each other; rather, they enrich them through communication, even if there is cultural conflict during the process. Future researchers should study other cultural factors that affect the creative ideas of intercultural group work with different nationalities from different continents from both the east and the west.

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