

Young adults' TV consumption and their implementation of filial piety in Taiwan

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Abstract

The ethnographic turn in mass communication and audience research manifested the limitations of those traditions which de-contextualize the audience from their consumption environment and drew our attention toward the role of the media in one's everyday life in the contemporary world. It's assumed that ordinary people do not just watch TV without any reflection on that activity as a whole, they construct personal meanings according to their cultural identities and individual experiences.

Filial piety is considered a virtue and defined as the duties, feelings or the relationships existing between children and their parents in most oriental cultures. Spending time with parents, trying to understand how parents feel, need, and want, and accompanying parents in their leisure activities are regarded being filial. This study explores how young adults accompany their parents watching television. Research on family television has been abundant, however, little is attended to the way television mediates the relationship between young adults and their aging parents.

It was found that, different from those who live with their parents, young adults who do not live with their parents due to work or study choose to watch television with their parents with a purpose of keeping company with them and showing concerns and care about them rather than simply "watching television". They are inclined to "tactically"(as in de Certeau's "Making do": uses and tactics, 1984) use their limited time at home to spend with their parents. Young audience's co-viewing with their parents is incorporated into their implementation of filial piety. This study displays how peoples' media consumption being appropriated and transformed to create personal meanings in light of their own interests and rules in the practice of everyday life.

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Introduction

TV was luxury goods in the 50's in Taiwan. Nowadays, many families have more than one TV set in a household. According to Nielsen media research, 93.8 percentages of people had watched TV the day before asked. Only 51.3 percentages of people had got on the Internet. TV is still primary for many people in Taiwan. It is used diversely in the family contexts. TV is considered a resource in the environment , a behavioral moderator, and a socialization facilitator.

Television viewing and domestic events and activities are always intertwined. Increasing channels and content diversity provide opportunities for family members to watch together. TV creates contexts where members get to sit down and talk (Sun, 1997). However, TV viewing might improve family relationship, yet ignite the conflicts among members sometimes. TV consumption can cause alienation if one is highly indulged (Chen, 2000).

Ethnographic studies of television in everyday life are still relatively rare and even less conducted in a non-Western context. Chinese societies are family, clan, kinship-centered and largely different from those in the individualistic, Western cultures. Thus, the family TV viewing contexts and patterns in the oriental cultures are worth noting (Lee, 1998).

The rise of the Internet and the individualization of media use environment seem to weaken the influence and significance of TV. However, TV viewing is a low-involving, easy-to-use and for-everyone kind of media. Most homes have a living room with a TV set in it, and that's where most interactions occur in the house. Television viewing is integrated into family routines and domestic activities unnoticed. James Lull is the first to explore the social uses of television. His work drew our attention to understand the use and interpretation of TV consumption in the domestic contexts.

Lull's interest is in participant observation of in-home acts of viewing which are considered to be socially constructed, because "viewers not only make their own interpretations of shows, they also construct the situations in which viewing takes place and the ways in which acts of viewing and program content are put to use at the time of viewing and in subsequent communications activities"(Lull, 1990, p. 148)

Television becomes an indispensable existence and has matured from being a piece of furniture to a family member in contemporary homes. Everyone in the family can get in touch with it (TV) and also get to another family member through it. For a young adult in Taiwan, the role of television has been changing while they are growing up. When they were little, parents supervised their TV viewing and chose the programs and content for them, and then when they got in high school, the viewing time became very limited.

Not until they got in college or started to work can they watch TV freely. TV was found harmful to children and adolescents in their school performance, attention, weight, values, even health risk behaviors in the quantitative, administrative research (Gorin, Raynor, Chula-Maguire & Wing, 2006; Jackson, Brown & Pardun, 2008; Jennings & Walker, 2009; Paavonen, Roine, Pennonen & Lahikainen, 2009; Van Zutphen, Bell, Kremer & Swinburn, 2007).

TV was also accused of jeopardizing both the quantity and quality of parent-child interaction (Kirkorian, Pempek, Murphy, Schmidt & Anderson, 2009) and causing people to have less time for nurturing primary relationships (Tucker, 2007), consequently leaving them to ignore the people in their immediate environment. However, when the life cycle of a family proceeds, the children gradually grow up and the parents age, their status and relative importance in the family start to overturn. The ways and contexts of the young grown-ups watching TV with their parents have never been elaborated. This study attempts to describe and explain the unique TV co-viewing pattern which is between young adults and their parents.

Inspired by concepts of "social use of television" by James Lull and the "ways of operating" brought to light by Michel de Certeau, this study tried to display how audience used TV consumption for the construction and maintenance of desired relations at home and how audience created their own meanings through the ordinary and everyday rituals, such as watching TV.

In Taiwan, it is not unusual for young adults to keep their parents company by watching TV with them. The use and interpretation of this type of media consumption is the focus of the recent study.

The ethnographic approach of audience research

The conceptualization of "audience" has been evolving through the history of

audience study. It has inclined to a postmodern, constructionist perspective recently. That is, there isn't really such a thing as the "audience" out there, audience is, mostly a discursive construct produced by a particular analytic discourse (Alasuutari, 1999; Fiske, 1991; Neuendorf, 2001).

Silverstone pointed out that audiences always inhabit different or overlapped spaces and times, it hence should not be conceived a social category with a clear boundary.

The development of more qualitative and ethnographic work on the media audience has led to a stress on the idea of everyday life. In Lefebvre's work, he made a crucial connection between modernity and the development of the everyday, and he emphasized that the everyday infuses all aspects of life, not merely the family or leisure (cited from Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1988, p.167)

Lu(2007) elaborated that watching TV, reading newspaper, getting on the Internet, etc. always co-exist with audience's everyday routines. In Alasuutari's (1999) renowned article about phases of reception studies, in the third generation, he argued that the main focus is not restricted to finding out about the reception or reading of the program by a particular audience, rather, the objective is to get a grasp of our contemporary "media culture", thus, it can be seen in the role of the media in everyday life. Today, most interests in audience study lie in what people do in the real world, for example, how people watch TV at home?

Ang (1996) criticized that audience research often takes the audience out of their contexts of consumption. Moore (1993), Morley (1986), and Lu (2007) also advocated a move toward a genre-based, contextual model of media consumption in everyday life to look closely at the interaction, hybridity, contradiction, and negotiation between media use and daily routines and other sociocultural activities.

The recent study portrayed how young adults' TV viewing with their parents is embedded in their everyday practices and how they make use of it to construct and maintain that relationship with their parents.

The media consumption at home

Family is the main locus for daily consumption and a significant context for media consumption. Most scholars accentuating audiences' everyday settings analyze the media consumption in the family, such as Lull's "Inside Family Viewing", Morley's

“Family Television”, and Silverstone's “the Household and the Consumption of Communication and Information Technologies”. There is no doubt that the medium of television and family life tie closely. The family relationship is more and more mediated by commodity consumption including media consumption (Lu, 2005). Watching television together is still the primary leisure activity for many families in a metropolis (Sun, 1998).

Television is in connection with domestic culture and becomes part of the family (Silverstone, 1996). The ways the family interacts are associated with the ways the family members use media. The experiences of family life include a great deal of media experiences which constitute a part of family history and memories (Lu, 2005). People make social use of television to facilitate or hinder interpersonal contacts and conversations. By observing the ways family members watch TV, we will be able to see how TV is connected to their family life.

Morley (1986) claimed that watching TV is not an individual action, but rather a series of interactions. The way television is used in the family is also a result from continuous negotiations. TV provides an atmosphere and context for family members to talk and the contents of television give subjects to chat or “gossip”. TV gathers family members easily and watching TV is regarded a symbol of family get-together or even coherence. Participants share time and space when watching TV and also exchange personal experiences and feelings.

The consumption and production of TV

Individual subjectivity and personal agency have become one of the main concerns in cultural studies in recent years, so as in the field of audience research. de Certeau's (1984) work reflects this trend, although he does not directly address "individuality" or the "subjects" per se. It is the modes of operation or schemata of action he discussed the most. de Certeau explained that between the analysis of images broadcast by TV(representation) and the time spent watching TV(behavior), there should be a study of what the cultural consumer “makes” or “does” with these images during the time. The “making”, used to be called consumption, is the secondary production hidden in the process of utilization. The potential of consumption is to utilize, appropriate, and to give meanings to the cultural objects, however, in a devious, silent, and invisible way.

Audiences hardly embrace the meaning of a text assigned by the writer, instead, they make personal meanings and create their own pleasure. Users or consumers of cultural commodity whose status as the dominated element in society make countless transformations in order to adapt to their own interests and rules. Furthermore, audience's creative appropriation or undetermined use is not only embodied in reading or interpretation of texts, but also in the ways they make use of the media.

Based on Silverstone (cited from Lu, 2005), one of the elements of consumption is "incorporation" which indicates the ways objects and technologies are used. When a medium enters a household, it will be tamed to adapt to the family. Media consumption has to be incorporated to the family daily routine. Audiences define media in their own ways; they impose their own time, space, habits, and intentions to the consumption. Through appropriation and transformation, audience makes the meanings of consumption their own.

Media consumption and the practice of "new" filial piety

Filial piety, or Xiao is a concept originating with Confucianism that outlines the way in which family members should interact with each other. The younger family members have the responsibility to respect and obey those older. Filial piety is essential in the parent-offspring relationship in Chinese society (Yeh, 1996). When the children grew up and become independent, they then should pay a debt of gratitude to their parents by taking care of them (Liu, 2008). Li & Chuo(2008)thought that filial piety is just being kind to one's parents from the viewpoint of laypeople, though there might be particular moral standards for filial piety in different societies.

Due to industrialization, urbanization, and democratization, the definitions and domains of filial piety today have been changing. In the past, one is thought to be filial if he dedicates himself to the nation and the society. Today, the domain of filial piety moved inside the family where the parents and the children relate. The foundation of filial piety shifts from patriarchy to the connections and bonds between the two generations (Yang, Yeh, & Huang, 1989). Liu (2008) emphasized the mutual understanding, consideration, emotional expression between parents and their children in modern time. Yeh (2009) also claimed that the "mutual" filial piety is active, voluntary, cross-contextual, strong and universal. Thus, "to spend time with parents", "to do leisure activities with parents", "to talk with parents to understand their perceptions and thoughts", "to understand and care for parents' needs and wants" and all regarded being filial (Yeh, 2009).

The change of the ways to carry out filial piety might provoke various ways of expression. People may develop all different ways to show their filial piety, such as to watch TV with parents. This study explored how young adults' obligation is executed through TV consumption.

In 1980, Lull's book "Inside Family Viewing" concerned the use of television within a home, how families interpersonally construct their time with television, and how the television mediates the relationship among members. In 1990, the book "World Families Watch Television" edited by Lull, analyzed the relationship between television and family life across Western and non-Western cultures. World families include those in Britain, Venezuela, West Germany, the United States, China and rural and urban India. The ways people use and interpret media consumption are nested and constructed within culturally diverse circumstances. Following the two books, the recent study attempts to look at the ways young people watch TV with their parents in our particular, filial piety-stressing, Chinese culture.

How TV mediates family relationship is little known and studied. Kim (2006) indicated some specific ways in which television is integrated into the everyday lives of women of different generations and class positions in South Korea. She described Korean women's experiences of television in the intimacy of domestic life, in particular, in relation to their husbands. It was found that working-class women in their 50s live in misery and under their husbands' domination and do not have much time to watch TV. Working-class women in their 30s reveal a different husband-wife relationship intersected with the everyday experience of television. Watching TV together becomes a ritual for the couples, providing a sense of security and intimacy to those women. Middle-class women in their 30s don't see their husbands much since the latter are always at work or drinking socials after work. The husband-wife relationship is constantly shifting, being negotiated and redefined by the women. Middle class wives seek to gain power and control and maximize personal gratification within the home territory by embracing all the territorial resources, including television. Middle-class women in their 50s see themselves as earning the right to leisure in the same way as their working husbands. The term "patriarchy" is felt irrelevant to the older middle-class women.

Through participating observation and in-depth interviews, Lee (2008) explored how working-class foreign spouses in rural areas in Taiwan watch TV in their family. It was found, with scarce social resources and wealth, watching TV becomes the

simplest, cheapest pastime to these women. For foreign spouses, watching TV enhances their linguistic and cultural competence, as well as the relationship with their kids and in-laws, especially their mothers-in-law. Audiences in different situations and cultural backgrounds deliberately appropriate TV rituals to structure function in their everyday lives.

Methods

To get to know the contexts and situations regarded to audiences' TV viewing, this study used in-depth interviews to understand how the young adults watch TV with their parents. The semi-structured interviews were conducted through face-to-face or telephone. The research question of this study arose from researcher's personal experience of TV viewing with family members in the past, as well as the experience sharing with those who took the graduate level course "Audience Studies". The researcher used to watch TV with her grandmother and the times of viewing and the types and contents of the program watched are completely different from those viewed alone. The graduate students all seem to have similar experiences. Hence, how young adults watch TV with their parents and older family members intrigued the researcher. The respondents were searched and recruited through interpersonal networks. When the interviewer and the interviewees are acquainted, it'll be easier for the respondents to talk freely about their TV viewing at home.

The interviews aimed to gather information about the respondent's family members living together, number of TV sets, and where they are set up, everyone's daily schedule, including watching TV. How the respondent got along with his parents or older family members, how the respondent (living at home or outside, such as dormitory or rented house) interacted with their parents, the frequency and types of family activities to engage in with their parents, all sorts of questions were asked. Also the context and experience of co-viewing with parents; when, where, with whom, what kind of program, what else they are doing when they watch TV together. These are asked to illustrate the respondent's relationship with his family and the relationship between family life and TV consumption. Total eight respondents were interviewed, and the interview were recorded and transcribed subsequently.

Results

TV co-viewing provides a natural, convenient way to interact in the family

For young adults, TV viewing provides a natural, ordinary way to be with parents, to spend time with them without much effort, disturbance and trouble. TV is so deeply incorporated with family life, young audience loves to choose it to accompany their parents. They say watching TV doesn't need to arrange in advance. It's casual, no need to prepare, no need to get out of the house, easy to start and stop, no pressure and no pain. TV consumption is just part of the daily life of a family.

...the TV in home, it is in a semi-public space, you can come if you want, or just leave when you don't want. It's never forced. Watching TV is not as good as family tour to enhance family relationship, yet it is an in-home entertainment, It'll help family relationship in the long run.(April)

A lot of times, you don't really want to watch TV (together), we just need the topics of conversation or just to do things together, things that won't cause conflicts, but make people interact.(JP)

TV co-viewing provides contexts that facilitate interactions among family members

Television in home is not just a hard and cold object. It can talk, it can sing and dance, most importantly, it can gather people. Television offers topics of conversation and contexts in which people can sit down and relax and talk. TV puts people off guard and makes conversation easy. Interesting enough, people watching TV together do not really "watch" TV, sometimes they just talk and laugh and chat with each other without really attending to what is on TV. TV is also talking and singing in front of them, yet is not shut down. It seems that TV is a member of the family and talk and chat with other members.

The contents on TV give people subjects of conversation; where to have fun, where to eat great food, what's happening in the society, plots in dramas, contest programs, sports relay, etc. TV offers material for family members to entertain, relax, and have a good time together. For young adults, the material from TV and the circumstances of TV viewing seem to be a matter of no concern to themselves, that is, to talk about stuff from TV with parents and the elders is a safe way of interaction. People avoid personal topics that might cause embarrassment and unease by talking about trivia on TV that is nothing to do with themselves.

TV changes the meaning of the living room. It has got sound and voices when it is on. and the sound and voices attract people to come along and watch. It's people's actions that TV initiates matter.(April)

It's easier to be with my mom when watching TV together. We don't have many common subjects to talk about. She won't understand my school stuff. if I try to talk about it, she would probably ask me when I can graduate, or why I haven't got a boyfriend...(JP)

My mom would watch those Taiwanese singing programs which I don't watch, and mom would sing along with those contestants. Listening to her singing, I feel it is enjoyable to watch TV with the family.(April)

TV consumption is embedded in the fabric of family life

How family watching TV together reflects the quality of relations among members. Those are alienated hardly watch TV together. The closer the relation is, the longer co-viewing time is, and the more intimate the viewing context is (living room vs. bedroom). Thus, the mode of family co-viewing indicates the quality of family relations.

My dad is a "house-husband", he watches news and the programs in the financial channels, and I'll watch with him in the dining room...With my mom, It is often in the evening time when she comes back from work or after dinner. We watch drama, and prime-time programs in my room. She would do exercise on the treadmill at the same time.(Brice)

Furthermore, it was found that the time, place, and contents the respondent watch TV with their family are closely linked to family members' daily schedule, including work and leisure.

My brother has totally different schedule from me, he gets home very late. If I have something to ask(usually a favor) from my brother, I will stay at the living room, wait for him to come back, and watch some TV with him, and ask him when the commercials go on.(Penguin)

TV consumption seems so naturally and silently incorporated into family custom, it makes up the audience's everyday life with other activities. The way of family

co-viewing is the consequence of the adaptation, coordination, negotiation of members' work, leisure, and other sociocultural activities. Thus, media consumption is not just about using media, rather, is about a lifestyle, it's a part of audience's customs and rituals.

Me and my dad, I watch fishing program with him and we'll talk about how this or that kind of fish tastes , or how the fishing rod got bent so much even the prey is not very big, or we will talk about baits or the length of fishing line for different kinds of fish. Watching TV enables us to talk about things we did together or encountered.(Yu-Ting)

Parents also use contents on television to teach and advice their kids. It was found that parents try to impose their values and principles to their kids through co-viewing. The news stories and the plots in dramas all supply good stuff for the parents to "preach".

There are quite a few newstories about drowning lately. My dad would ask if we get near creeks or go into the water, he would want us not to. Sometimes I got irritated. Come on, I'm too old to get preached like that, but still, I just let him talk.(Hsiao-Shih)

Co-viewing as a "tactic" of practice

Today, filial piety is still the most important virtue in our culture, though the meaning of traditional family ethics has changed (Yeh,2009; Young & Huang, 1991). People are inclined to find convenient and efficient ways to carry out their filial piety, especially for those who do not live with their parents and do not have much time to be with their parents. Watching TV with parents becomes the best option. The recent study found that young adults who do not live with parents, either for studying or work, will consciously and purposely choose to watch TV with parents, for it costs the least time and effort. For this audience, to watch TV is not really to "watch TV".

The young adults who live outside of family feel guilty of not being able to spend much time with their parents, they try to make full use of the time when they go back home.

I'll watch TV with my mom now, I did not do it. I go out of town to school and only come back during weekend. I go out with friends sometimes, and not much time left to accompany them.(JP)

I lived with my family when I was in high school. Mom and Dad are always around and you are used to have them and take everything for granted. Ever since I went to college and my grandma passed away, I realize that my parents would leave me one day. I should cherish the time with them, so I started to watch TV with them.(Brice)

After I go to college, I realize that I can't be with my family all the time anymore. I started to care about my relationship with them. You know, to watch TV alone is boring, so I feel that if I am home, I can't let my parents watch TV by themselves. I feel guilty not to be with them.(April)

With the parents, they watch programs which they do not usually watch or do not even like to watch. They don't care what is on TV since they do not really watch it. The audience transforms actions of TV co-viewing to their implementation of filial piety. They are doing "cultural poaching" to make the meaning of media consumption their own. One of the respondents in the study who lived in the dormitory said that she even chose to watch the programs that her mother watched in order to have something to chat when her mom called. Thus, young adults who do not live with parents utilize "watching TV" to accompany and please their parents. This is a tactic of practice as de Certeau (1984) called.

I would watch with my mom, but sometimes I got so bored, I would turn on my notebook and do my stuff beside her. She would watch the program and talk to me, or I 'll rent out some novels and read them next to her, and she can talk to me whenever she wants.(JP)

But those programs my parents watch, well, I'm not that interested in. Like, when they watch those Taiwanese programs, me and my brother are not very good in Taiwanese, and we can't understand what it is said. Yet, I just stay there to keep them company. Because you know, you are there, even doing your own stuff and not watching TV, it still means something to your parents because they know you are trying to be with them.(April)

Co-viewing is a result from negotiations

Young adults living with their parents do not seem to put much emphasis on "watching TV" with their parents. They don't make a conscious effort to do it. They said only when they are also interested in what parents are watching, they would sit

down and watch together. If they want something else, they would go for another TV set or just leave their parents. People living with family don't keep their parents company by watching TV since they have all kinds of other activities to engage in with their parents and spend enough time with them. They do not need to show their filial piety by deliberately watching TV with parents.

I went to the sports field and walk with Mom on Sundays beforetime, but I got lazy and it gets too hot and walking is boring. But I drove her there and then went to other places and I'll come pick her up later. You see , I'm a good daughter, ain't I?(Penguin)

I'll cook with mom and do outdoor activities with my dad, such as playing golf or going to some community activities. Watch TV with them?
Rarely.(Yu-Ting)

Audience living with parents does not sacrifice their preference for TV programs to watch something they don't like. Some respondents confessed to fight for TV in the house sometimes. To solve the problem, those who cannot see the rerun get to watch first, or to switch the channel till the commercial time, or the one who has watched for a long time has to yield.

The social use of television in the family is about a series of interactions and negotiations as Morley (1986) has pointed out. Yet TV consumption in the family is always entangled with the fabric of family life and the relations among family members.

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