

The Case Study of Saturday Night Live Asian Audience Attraction Strategies

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Abstract. In recent years, the numbers of ethnic minorities in the world have grown at a relatively fast speed due to globalization. Marketing professionals have conducted various types of research to discuss the methodology for ethnic marketing, however, the deficiency of comprehensive business analysis could still be a problem. The article utilized the case study of the American comedy show Saturday Night Live (SNL), to discuss the issues of Asian attraction tactics within the comedy business. Three advantages have been found as the show shapes a daring-to-rebel image for Asian hosts, tries to avoid stereotypes by role assignment and practice it effective humour pattern, which is widely recognized by many cultures. Nevertheless, the SNL's defects include a shortage of Asian representation and missteps in news promotions that could not be ignored. Therefore, to flourish in the future, the show needs to employ more Asian casts which are also key opinion leaders within their minority groups, involve more punchlines that reflect Asian social struggles and consider the culture scenario when posting the marketing content.

Keywords: Asian, SNL, Marketing.

1. Introduction

The quantity and intricacies of global and interior immigration and the rising numbers of ethnic minorities in multiple regions have become critical characteristics of today's world [1]. In America, minorities such as Asians, African Americans and Hispanics have become a massive proliferate market [2]. Even as the third fastest ethnic minority group, Asian Americans have already reached approximately 23 million which is 7 per cent of the country's population and continue to grow at a relatively fast velocity [3]. Additionally, Asians in the United States have higher income levels compared to other minority races in general [4]. The major income for the TV show industry is through advertisements [5]. Fossen and Bleier suggest that high online program engagement (OPE) which is the audience's involvement in a TV show's online interaction and discussion would lead to high viewership toward the TV advertisements [6]. Thus, to increase the revenue for TV programmes, there is a growing demand for marketers to attract and engage the audience segments with high quantities and purchase power. The ethnic minority in the US, especially Asians could be a great fit for this requirement. Previous research has proposed a few marketing tactics toward ethnic minority groups. For instance, Licsandru and Cui state that attaching multiple cultural elements and minority behalf on the marketing exchange process could alleviate the attention from ethnicity and drive sanguine emotions among minority consumers. The tactic could also mandate the brand an unbiased image, showing that it is open and susceptible towards ethnic minorities, which could drive optimistic impressions towards the advertisement contents and increase the desire towards the products [7]. Additionally, in the domain of entertainment, carefully designed ethnic roles without stereotyping could increase the audiences' affiliation with the characters [8]. However, despite multi-ethnic marketing strategies, there is still a lack of holistic analysis of specific real-life business models on this topic. Therefore, this paper aims to provide comedy TV show producers with insights about how to attract ethnic minority audiences, especially Asian audiences in the field of marketing. The NBC TV program Saturday Night Live (SNL) will be used as an example, and in the following paragraph, the advantages and disadvantages of its Asian ethnic audience attraction strategies will be analysed followed by some constructive suggestions.

2. Case description

The SNL is an NBC weekend nighttime programme created by Dick Ebersol. It satirizes current affairs and keeps challenging the limitations of the videoland and amusement. The show first started in October 1975, and soon its popularity massively increased. In 1980, the programme had become an apotheosis phenomenon in pop culture [9].

However, after the original cast departed, the SNL began to lose its viewership as the new cast lacked the capabilities to engage the audience. At that time, the show suffered a downfall. Ebersol left the SNL in 1985, and Lorne Michaels took over the show and made a few adjustments that proved relatively successful [9].

Overall, ever since the programme was aired, the SNL has always been the reflection of society as it would grasp and lead the trend of pop culture [10]. In the previous episodes, SNL has already made some attempts at Asian cultures and social related jokes such as the punchline 'Rude Buddha' in 2013 August and the 'Customer Service' in 2017 October. Likewise, the show expanded its market to Asian countries by selling its copyright. The Korean version of SNL was aired in 2011, followed by the Chinese version in 2018 [11]. In Season 45, the SNL had its first Asian regular cast, Bowen Yang [12]. Until today, Yang have been its cast for 5 years. These actions could be reasonably interpreted as a sign that the SNL is aware of the massive growth of the Asian market and has the intention to attract more viewership from Asian audiences.

3. Advantages

Notably, Asian hosts in the SNL are often associated with ethnic humour. Ethnic humour refers to a category of comedy that usually utilizes stereotyping as a joke [13]. One example is that in 2000, Lucy Liu the first Asian woman to host the SNL, played multiple Chinese stereotype images as her opening [10]. Lion states that, despite the critics, humour would be a potent instrument for the younger generation of ethnic minorities to protest the unreasonable societal and political content and satirize the stereotypes that the white culture would recognise as a fact [13]. Theoretically, for some of the minority youth, it is brave and respectful to mock the stereotypes within society. According to social identity theory, people tend to affiliate themselves with the social categories that they consider to reflect their merits [14]. Therefore, the daring move of the Asians cast in the show might have a positive impact on fandom targeting certain Asian audiences. However, this practice also has potential drawbacks which lead to stereotype scandals.

Overall, the SNL has put their Asian hosts in a relatively sanguine position [10]. In recent years, the Asian member of SNL gradually have had more chances to demonstrate their unique personality. One of the good examples is Bowen Yang's imitation of British singer Charli XCX in season 50. Asians in America have been viewed as silent and dissociable figures [15]. Thus, associating Yang with the dramatic and vivacious singer role could be a good way to overturn this stereotypical image. According to Tan et al, consumers would relate the brand to more optimistic images if the brand mitigated the stereotyping roles and associated ethnic minorities cast in more diverse and unexpected positions [16]. The SNL's surprising Asian cast role assignment could be a great reflection of this theory.

Moreover, SNL's performance in the international market has proved that its comedy mode has the capability of attracting customers from multiple cultural backgrounds. For example, the Korean version of Saturday Night Live (Korean SNL) adapted the comedy mode of the original American version including program rundown, cast arrangement and content segments (the show also has sarcasm toward Korea's culture and economic and politic-related issues). From 2011 to 2017, the Korea SNL aired for 9 seasons and reached a relatively high average audience rating [11]. Therefore, the humour of the comedy pattern of SNL has proved to be understandable globally.

4. Disadvantages

However, despite of excellent performance of previous Asian hosts and the newest Asian regular cast, the lack of Asian minority casts is still a serious problem. Until 2016, the number of white casts in the show was still approximately nine out of ten. Moreover, of the more than 800 people who hosted the show, there were seldom East Asian representatives and fewer West or South Asian representatives [17]. Although the number of Asian cast members increased in recent years, their proportion in the total number of SNL casts is still micro. This phenomenon did not fit the growing scale of Asian audiences in the US and around the globe. Most importantly, the deficiency of representation might impact people's attitudes toward the show. According to the social identity-based attitude generation model, the attitudes of consumers to the target brand could be impacted by their social identities [18]. Lack of Asian minority exposure might lead to the disengagement of Asian audiences as they experience and alienation from their ethnic identity when watching the show. This might lead to indifferent or even negative attitudes toward this comedic brand among the Asian community.

Additionally, from the marketing perspective, SNL's publicity tactics failed to attract Asian viewership because they did not consider the Asian culture context. Show-related news is one of SNL's marketing stimuli, which demonstrates what the programme (product) could offer and how it relates to the audience (consumer). When the audience is exposed to the the marketing stimuli, they experience the process of understanding which is comprehension [3]. People with Chinese or Korean heritage are usually influenced by high-context culture and they tend to dig the information under the surface [19]. When Asian actors or comedians become hosts, the show would public news that demonstrates their pride in their ethnic minority identity. For example, NBC News highlighted the "First Asian cast" in SNL's news title report Bowen Yang and the Hollywood Report emphasised 'First Asian Women to Host in 18 years' when reporting Awakwafina joining the SNL. However, the show had its Asian host as early as 2000 [10]. Therefore, instead of showing pride toward the ethnicity, to viewers with high contexts, the fact that the Asian hosts are still being tagged as "the first to come" after 24 years might appear as a criticism of the lack of diversity.

5. Suggestions

To strengthen the preponderance and overcome the challenges, the following recommendations have been given to the SNL:

5.1. Increase the Diversity Level by Making the Employment Standards More Inclusive

The SNL could freshen its brand image by hiring more Asian staff with existing popularity. A key opinion leader (KOL) refers to someone who is admired and impactful toward the public's values and behaviour [20]. According to Chandra and Christian, KOL influence is positively related to customer satisfaction which could impact customer loyalty [21]. In show business, cooperating with KOL would be a great tactic for increasing audience satisfaction with the show. Therefore, the SNL need to recruit more employees and hosts with good reputations that identify themselves as Asian. These people would serve as the key opinion leaders (KOL) within the Asian community, which would ideally help the show gain more positive impressions and attract loyal fans within the Asian minority groups.

5.2. Boost the Amount of Asian-related Punchlines that Reflect the Social Problems

The SNL could use more Asian-American-related comedy elements in some episodes. Clues of ethnic culture could be a useful tool in minority consumer attraction [22]. SNL as a comedy programme that is popular for making comedy out of social problems could be a great fit for this method [23]. Moreover, stereotyping is not the only issue that Asian ethnic groups are facing. Social problems within the Asian community are various and they could all be great comedic materials with special Asian-related humor. The American mainstream media ABC have already attempted this

aspect by launching the 6 season comedy TV series *Fresh of the Boat* which is a story about the life struggles of an Asian Family in the US. The show was a huge success in audience ratings [24]. Also, Hollywood has taken action by making more Asian-related films in recent years, such as the 2018 movie *Crazy Rich Asians* which is the first romantic comedy focused on the Asian community [25]. Thus, SNL should spend more effort exploring more categories of ethnic-related humour and bring them to the big screen.

5.3. Carefully Consider the Different Cultural Structures of Asian Audiences

SNL's media marketing content should consider the thinking pattern of high-context culture. Generally, most of the American population belongs to low-context culture [26]. Therefore, it is sometimes easy for them to ignore the comprehension process of a high-context culture community as their thinking patterns are to some extent the opposite. The marketer of the SNL should be aware of the differences between the communication styles of each culture and be dedicated to finding the balance between the two of them. For instance, people with high-context cultures would prefer to express thoughts through images in online communications [27]. Thus, to better engage the Asian viewers, the NBC online marketing content about the Asian cast could include more pictures demonstrating elements related to their ethnic background and their friendly interactions with other casts. Nevertheless, the United States' low-context culture which favours straightforward information cannot be ignored [28]. Marketers still need to clearly illustrate the meanings of the pictures in the written content.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the SNL gained popularity to some extent due to the brave moves of the Asian hosts. It expands the Asian option roles which alleviates potential inappropriate stereotyping and its comedy pattern is proven to be acceptable in Asian cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, the SNL still lacks Asian cast members and its online marketing promotion methodology failed to recognise Asia's high-context culture. To increase the viewership within the Asian audience and improve their engagement with the show, the SNL is recommended to enlarge the Asian staff in the SNL, add more jokes related to social issues faced by the Asian community and implement a marketing strategy for high-context culture as well as low-context culture.

The analysis could serve as a reference for comedy TV shows or other forms of comedy programs that want to expand their market to the Asian community. Moreover, it could provide insights about how to improve diversity and equality in the marketing process and show production. Additionally, the practices could also contribute to social justice and inclusiveness facilitation.

Nonetheless, the paper has its limitations. For instance, the SNL is a TV show with longevity and large popularity. Thus, it already has its fan base, which might be a lack of referential value for start-up comedy programmes. To improve the marketing strategy, researchers need to further analysis different comedy shows in different development stages. Moreover, the examples demonstrated in the paper are mostly about East Asian representatives because of the SNL's insufficient members with other Asian subgroup backgrounds. Whereas, the cultures of different Asian ethnic groups are significantly various. Therefore, researchers in the future should evaluate all the subgroups respectively, while being aware of the major cultural context of America and present more comprehensive solutions for Asian viewership attraction.

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