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HKBU BEST PRACTICES CASE 1

Communication students researching on celebrities disclosing mental health issues

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Back in 2012, I was teaching a General Education course “Celebrity and Entertainment Business.” I designed a group project that asked students to do qualitative interviews about celebrities and health communication. Celebrity engagement in advertising has always been my research interest. My Master’s thesis was on celebrities and I published a book about celebrity culture in Hong Kong.

A while ago, I attended a conference at the University of Hong Kong about health and communication.

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

CELEB AND HEALTH COMMUNICATION

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES



I had a chat with one of the panel members. He said that when people do research in health communication it is usually about doctor and patient communication. He said, "Since your research interest is in celebrities, why don't you study celebrities and health communication?" I thought that was a good idea and this is the impetus for what happened concerning my experience with course-based undergraduate research experience.

In my class, I covered a topic on celebrity and health communication. As such, I asked the students to do a group assignment to explore consumers' perception toward celebrities with the health issue of major depressive disorder (MDD) in Hong Kong. Students were divided into groups and each student was responsible for conducting one interview. Interviewees were aged between 18 and 50. Students were required to design a list of questions about celebrities with MDD and their perception of those celebrities. The final deliverable of this project was a presentation that included a summary of findings, and possible social implications of this study.

In order to facilitate the learning process, I invited a few celebrities to give guest talks. I gave the celebrities a few guidelines about what they should cover. One topic was about mental stress. Apparently, celebrities are very stressful in their everyday routine, so I had them talk about the mental stress in the industry and their coping strategies. The other topic I assigned for the celebrities to talk about was the social impact of celebrities in Hong Kong. They talked about the values of being a celebrity and the impact of a celebrity on society. Then, we discussed interview protocols in class. Designing the interviewing protocols is an iterative process. It involved many consultation sessions outside of class time. I walked through the process of drafting the questions as well as how they would get consent from the respondents. Since this project involves interviewing, I also trained them to use probing skills and the use of follow-up questions. This also took a lot of class time. Since these students were GE students, I did not expect them to be experienced in research. I needed to limit the workload so that the project remains feasible, and students do not feel overloaded. Finally, I consolidated all the questions proposed by the group and came up with a final revision of the interviewing protocol with 20 questions.

Around 2014-15, I taught a required course called Communication Research Methods in our department. This allowed me to cover qualitative methodology in the curriculum. I used the output of the General Education course (i.e. the interviewing transcripts) I mentioned earlier as the input for this course.

I taught students to use thematic analysis to analyze the transcripts. Students learned how to code qualitative data, develop themes from the codes, and prepare a report for a class assignment. In their reports, they cover the research methodology of thematic analysis, the major findings of the study, and its social and marketing implications.

Looking back, I am very lucky to be able to teach a course that many students showed interest in. I think colleagues attempting to design course-based undergraduate research should select a topic that is of interest to the student. Other topics related to the course can be celebrities and the impact on body image. In the process of course-based research, I engage students as research partners.

I mentor them about the significance of the study and the expected outcome of the assignment. Through the thematic analysis process, we co-create knowledge about the impact of celebrities disclosing major depressive disorder on public awareness and understanding toward the illness, attitude change (if any), and implications to social marketing. I obtained consent from all the students in using the collected data and the themes developed to prepare a journal manuscript. I published a journal article from this data set in a community mental health journal. I acknowledged all the students who were involved in data collection and data analysis.

At the time when I conducted my course-based research project, course instructors were not required to apply for ethics clearance through the ethics review panel at the university level. Nowadays ethics clearance applications have become official. Anyone wishing to conduct research in a course must apply for approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee. This process may take a little bit of time. If colleagues want to incorporate research into your course in the future, think about applying for the clearance a semester early.

To sum up, I have designed and conducted course-based research as a tool for experiential learning. Students take ownership of the work and have a taste of an authentic research project.



About the author

Vivienne Leung is the Senior Lecturer cum Associate Programme Director of Bachelor of Communication (Hons) & Associate Programme Director of Master of Social Sciences in Media Management in the School of Communication and Film. She received her Ph.D. in communication studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. Previously she held positions at Grey Advertising and Fallon Asia/Hong Kong as a strategic planner. Her research interests include celebrity culture/effects and health communication. Apart from her book *Celebrity culture and the entertainment industry in Asia*, she also published in *Service Marketing Quarterly*, *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, *Intercultural Communication Studies*, *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, *Chinese Journal of Communications*, *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*, *Journal of Communication in healthcare*, *Patient Experience Journal*, *Community Mental Health Journal* etc. Vivienne was awarded the Outstanding Performance in Teaching and the Student Service Award in 2014/15 and 2020/21 respectively. She also completed the Professional Diploma in Digital Marketing; Digital Marketing Institute in 2018.

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Sources of images:

<https://powerbrainrx.com/rethinking-mental-illness/>

<https://www.axa.com/en/magazine/ten-things-you-might-not-know-about-mental-health>

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