**MED5041 MEDIA CULTURE**

**Research Report**

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“What is the cultural significance of Gangnam Style?”

**Introduction**

The viral music video “PSY Gangnam Style” which reached 1,594,725,073 views as of May 12, 2013 in YouTube is based on the song written and produced by Park Jae - Sang and Yoo Gun – hyung who are the famous Korean recording artist and popular poet. Becoming famous by his stage name “PSY” Park Jae – Sang has performed in Gangnam Style music video creating a worldwide impact very vibrantly seen in YouTube. According to Wikipedia sources, the unique horseback riding dance along with the pop song attracting many people all over the world, this Korean pop music by this South Korean musician PSY was released on July 15, 2012, influencing popular culture in the society.

Referring to the lifestyle of people living at Gangnam District of Seoul, a region in Korea, the ‘Gangnam Style’ has many positive as well as negative reviews with regard to the catchy beat and PSY’s amusing dance moving in the music video. ‘Guinness World Record’ has made its recognition as the most ‘liked’ video on YouTube. With the influence of this song, it has been a source of parodies for people of various age groups inspiring to adopt such style. As the music video increased its popularity, the signature dance moves were performed by many famous political leaders, actors and actress. The live performance by PSY at different parts of the world has attracted a wide range of audience and gained fame.
The impact created by ‘gangnam style’ music video has influenced people culturally in various aspects. It has not only affected people of Korea, but also people from different parts of the world ranging from children to old age people. Therefore, it itself leads to an investigation on “What is the cultural significance of gangnam style?” This report would contain a literature review, methodology and also explore its findings. Finally, a critical evaluation of overall aspect of research on cultural impact made by this music video would be included in the conclusion section.

**Literature Review**

The term ‘Culture’ differs by its meaning with constant change in respect to the time period which increased the difficulties in defining the term even by experienced cultural theorists. According to Raymond Williams, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct systems of thoughts.” (Philip Smith, 2000, 1). Cultural studies area diverse field of study which includes various approaches, methods and academic perspective.

In Theodor W. Adorno (1997) study of ‘The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, where he states ‘popular culture’ as “The product of a cultural industry whose goal was to stupefy the masses with endless mass produced copies of the same thing.” The release of audio visual ‘gangnam style’ with the catchy music and signature dancing style has led to popular culture in society. “A clear judgment concerning the relation of serious music to popular music can be arrived at only by strict attention to the fundamental characteristic of popular music: standardization” (Adorno, Theodor. W 1941). With this, I intend to put forward my investigation process into “How gangnam style has influenced popular culture in the society?”
Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book, ‘The Selfish Gene’ explains about the gene-centered view of evolution. It refers to the number of copies of genes the organism is used to evolve globally for its maximum fitness. With these explanations, Dawkins coined the term, ‘memes’. A large number of memetic studies started exploring during that period. In an attempt to explain the process of cultural information being spread, ‘Internet memes’ were introduced. It is the way through which information passes from person to person via Internet. The introduction of communication via Internet led to social interaction over a wide range of audience which has led to the rapid growth of any subject online. In a way, it is now used and serves as a platform for advertising by marketing agencies which would reach the masses and an instant response is produced. It has become a form of inexpensive form of mass advertising. This is main source of which my research subject has gained a large impact. The viral impact of gangnam style has been created by You Tube responses which have spread all over the world. The style and its popularity have been increased culturally with the effect of technology.

By considering the post-modernism effect and its cultural impact over the society, I observed the recent cultural theory approaches by John Storey’s (2006) in the research, “Cultural Theory and Popular Culture.” It examined the study of modernism and post-modernism influence over the people. One among the post-modernist theorist, Fredric Jameson whose works were examined by Storey. His study catalogues the key features of postmodern culture as self referentiality, irony, pastiches and parody. This approach was applied in the research process on the cultural impact of Gangnam Style whose popular music and signature dancing style was mimicked and performed by various other artist, public, etc. Several videos of parody and mimes related to PSY style were uploaded in the social networking website, ‘You Tube’, from different parts of the world having a wide response.
A research conducted by Tyler West (2011) of Elon University on the topic, “Going Viral: Factors that lead videos to become Internet phenomena”, examines the top 20 viral videos by analyzing each video content. By considering the elements used in viral videos, the study finds a relationship to the popular culture and viral marketing strategies. Another similar research report of Lindsay Brandon Hunter (2011) also focuses on key findings of the role of memes, viral video and the involvement of digital culture in the society. Gangnam style has its similar impact made in the society which relates to the key findings of both the research reports.

By the application of the study made by these theorists, it would help in supporting my arguments of my research study.

**Methodology**

**Virtual Ethnography**

Ethnography means the writing the culture (Anderson, James 2012, 351). Ethnographic societies are the scientific description of the customs of people and cultures. Christine Hine (2000) has explored the new technologies of communication that is ‘Internet’, as a method used for research purposes. The research through online communities is known as ‘Virtual Ethnography’. It serves as the traditional way of studying culture and society. Christine Hine (2000, 14-38) considers Internet as a site for ‘cultural formations’ and a ‘cultural artefact.’ Internet is now been viewed as a strong means for promoting the effects of culture.

With the understanding from Christine Hine (2000) interpretation in her book, “Virtual Ethnography,” I decided to apply this methodology for my research to identify the cultural significance of “Gangnam Style”.
According to Christine Hine (2000, 8), “Ethnography can be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it.” Ethnographers often engage in the fieldwork to immerse themselves in culture related to their study.

Robert Kozinets (2006) also coined the term, ‘Virtual Ethnography’ as “Ethnography conducted on the Internet; a qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications.”

Gangnam Style went viral worldwide with the most watched videos having more than one billion views in YouTube. Hence, Virtual Ethnography was the best suited method to study the audience reaction culturally. A vast range of videos were later put up in YouTube which reflected the imitation of Gangnam Style. Since YouTube being a social networking website, the video has reached people of different parts of the world. The impact has been made not only on the people worldwide, but also it has influenced people of different age groups and professions. This impact can be seen in the videos uploaded by different people who reflect the cultural effects of Gangnam Style on their lifestyle.

By using this methodology, it would lead me to apply relevant theories in my research process such as post modernism by observing the reaction of audience and the influence of Gangnam Style in society. The works of memes are also noticed. The new dancing style and the music have also led to popular culture in the society which can be observed by many video uploads.

With the knowledge gained by studying the views and approaches made by Christine Hine and Robert Kozinets, I started doing Virtual Ethnography by focusing my study only towards
YouTube videos. I made the observation of different kinds of videos being uploaded which is related to Gangnam style. People have also produced similar videos of their own performance that seems to be inspired by PSY style. This reflects the impact made on people. And also, I noted down various response made by people to the video from their comments. I also tried to develop conversation by commenting on others view but there seem to be not much response or notice of the comment. This is due to the continuous updates of comments by each and every second in YouTube even now under the most watched “official video of Gangnam Style”. This response is noticed worldwide and the opinion of people differs according to their cultural region and interest. From these observations and methodology approaches, I am able to find the cultural significance of “Gangnam Style.”

Key Findings

The research process has led my findings into various aspects. I have thus reported by concentrating on different theories and its cultural significance in society.

Impact on Popular culture

The range of influence of popular culture varies with regards to different age groups and places. The new genre of style has attracted and grabbed the attention of all starting from children, youth, politicians, actors, actress, farmers, old people, etc. This has led to popular culture in society.
“Popular culture seen as vital and creative yet embedded in a site of struggle,” says John Docker (1994, 160) in his study on Postmodernism and Popular culture. The eye catchy movements by PSY and ever tuned music were inevitably popular in the society due to the creative ideas and its vital role and influence by online source, ‘YouTube’.

South Korean rapper PSY performance in ‘gangnam style’ have resulted in playing Korean pop music video in all parts of Seoul’s region which has colonized the rest of the world too. The mass appeal of this music was due to the presence of all kinds of elements of music which was modified to enhance a new form of style. While combining the different tracks of music by using same variety of sample from one song to another in order to ‘create, re-create and modify’ several tracks results in standardization of music. “The result is a constant reproduction of the same thing” (Theodor, W. Adorno 1997).

In the modern society, the popular culture has shown its effect on day today activities of children. It is shown in a YouTube video (5th February 2013), ‘Gangnam style wake-up effect on babies’, which analyses the effect of gangnam music made on children which wakes a child from sleeping. The new genre of style attracts the children where they try to imitate the style and perform it.

Adorno (1997) by referring to the term ‘Culture Industry’, he proposed ‘Popular culture’ which relates to standardization. “Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry” (Docker, John 1994, 160).

The performance done by politicians such as Ban Ki-moon, Barak Obama and Alan Simpson creates a cultural impact of the dancing style on society. With the increasing demand of PSY style, it has influenced the politicians on adapting the horse riding dancing style. The popularized
video of gangnam style performance by the public receives less likes when compared to the performance done by PSY.

**How is it postmodern?**

The visual scene of gangnam style reflects the real culture and society of life of people at Seoul, a district of Gangnam. “*A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded.*” (Bourdieu, Pierre 1984) The visual scene and the lyrics seem to be meaningless for the people from different countries. The pop music and the unique style of dancing grabbed the attention of audience towards Gangnam video in spite of not being aware of the meanings of the lyrics and about the visual scene.

John Storey (2007) conveys the notion for challenging the idea of modernism as ‘new sensibility.’ To this, a post-modernist theorist Fredric Jameson, states: “*In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles.*” With the growing popularity of gangnam style in YouTube, the involvement and interest shown by people in uploading parodies and mimes work of PSY style reflects the cultural impact signature dancing style has made on society. Hundreds of parodies and dance imitation have gone viral which are mostly performed by kids, celebrities, fans and even by farmers which reflects the effects shown in society. Simon Dentith (2000) states: “*Any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.*”
A YouTube viewer from India has commented in the video (14th September 2012) ‘PSY Explains Gangnam Style Dance’s Origin’ saying that PSY was inspired from Kannada movie named ‘A’ and has copied ‘Uppi style’ dance. It is said that PSY has recreated it as ‘gangnam style’. A YouTube video (8th October 2012) named ‘gangnam dance was founded by this man called uppi…!’ also claims that ‘Upendra’, the actor of that movie was the founder of gangnam style dance. These observations reflect the concept of ‘Hyperreality’ by Jean Baudrillard (1988), a post-modernist theorist. It refers to the copy of original work where the work being copied is given more value than the real thing. It gives more importance to what has been symbolized than what the thing actually is. Likewise, the signature dance style of PSY is known for its symbolization towards the “horse riding” dance style.

These aspects of Postmodernism on gangnam style have led its impact in a viral platform among the mass audience.

**Internet memes**

The major reason for the success of gangnam style was due to the viral impact that has been created in you tube. The viral videos are explored having a mass audience in social networking websites which includes YouTube. More than one billion viewers of YouTube video (15th July 2012) “PSY- Gangnam style M/V” reflect the cultural impact of new technology in todays’ world.

According to Richard Dawkins (1976), the memes which is similar to gene is considered as a ‘unit of culture’. Internet memes has given rise to social relationship among people of different countries which could be noticed in the comments section of you tube video where people share their thoughts and views reflecting their unique cultural identity.
With the development of technology such as Internet, the cultural development in society has also been increased. The accessibility of information irrespective of the location has been developed. The knowledge is spread to people via Internet irrespective of the division of classes in cultural society as categorized by Matthew Arnold. The ‘gangnam style’ YouTube videos and its parodies, memes work, performances by the public, farmers, politicians, actors, actress etc reflects the usage and access of different kinds of people. The uploading of such videos in regards to ‘gangnam style’ has shown that the technology has overcome the theory of Matthew Arnold (1869) and his phenomenon of categories of classes in society into ‘Barbarians, Philistines and Populance.’

With the semiotic approach of Virtual Ethnography, it was observed that because of sensational hit made by the music video gangnam style, the comment section from few response reflects their marketing techniques used in selling their products. The ideology of business people reflects here where they could publicize or sell their product in order to reach the large customers from various parts of the world. The viral impact of memes has also led to viral marketing aspect, an inexpensive approach, which has changed the lifestyle of the small business people culturally.

**Conclusion**

In the research process of applying Virtual ethnography methodology to identify the cultural significance of the viral video of 2012 “gangnam style”, it has resulted my findings in various aspects.

The word ‘culture’ has now a meaning ‘mass attraction’ for the people who suspends all their differences of regionalism, the old becoming one with the young ones and vice versa for
willingly getting inspired by such ridiculous signature dance and the catchy beat. The mass appeal of this music was due to the presence of all kinds of elements of music which was modified to enhance a new form of style. While combining the different tracks of music by using same variety of sample from one song to another in order to ‘create, re-create and modify’ several tracks results in standardization of music. “The result is a constant reproduction of the same thing” (Theodor, W. Adorno 1997).

The music video of PSY in Gangnam style has created a sensational hit having a worldwide impact. In order to represent the lifestyle of people at Seoul, a part of Gangnam, PSY produced music video in such a way that it results in representing the cultural behavior of people living at Gangnam. In an interview PSY explains that, “Gangnam style is a satirical piece aimed at mocking the high class South Koreans in Seoul who express their lifestyle though a particular way of dressing and presenting themselves: the ‘Gangnam’ style.”

The pop music and the unique style of dancing grabbed the attention of audience towards gangnam video in spite of not being aware of the meanings of the lyrics and about the visual scene. The major reason for the success of gangnam style was due to the viral impact that has been created in YouTube. The viral videos are explored having a mass audience in social networking websites which includes YouTube reaching the large customers from various parts of the world.

The signature style of dance moves which symbolically represented the “horse riding” dance has made PSY style of uniqueness. Even though, the debate of copyright of style from the Kannada movie is prevailing. This dance style has resulted in creation of parodies, memes and performance by various people which also reflects the cultural significance on the society.
Bibliography


[Accessed 17 May 2013]

Appendices

Blog link: http://sbd106.blogspot.co.uk/

Observation:

- The most watched music video Gangnam style
  
  Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0.

- Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOX9Lla6ed0

  The baby wakes listening to the Gangnam music.
The politician Ban Ki-Moon tries the dance style with PSY

Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fsZnIcZoA4
- Alan Simpson dances gangnam style
  Link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2W0fDRA5zw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2W0fDRA5zw)

- Obama dancing for Gangnam style
  Link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7Rs4A_1ivw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7Rs4A_1ivw)
• The Bollywood artists Sharukhan, Katrina and Amitab Bacchan are dancing for Gangnam style in a programme.

Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu4_69g7Tnw
- A school performance in the ground for the song Gangnam Style.
  Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqpXnEuAb5g

- A Gangnam Parody song - Mitt Romney style
  Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTCRwi71_ns&list=FLnWFZVZZZH2I35sr39
  mL2ww
• Marketing

ProlaxGames 2 months ago
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Reply

• Gangnam style to be copied from Uppi style

Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BlznmBmyE2I
- Viewer response
  Link: http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC19HMYfGhZd15m5DGec_fng

- PSY explaining about his idea about Gangnam Style in an Interview
  Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE2uOTFj8eU