

**Reconsidering Deviance, Power and Societal Reaction: A Case  
of Hong Kong Net-bar Youth**

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## **Abstract**

In contemporary society, social reaction theory towards deviance is still an important perspective to study social problems; yet it also faces challenges. This study aims at exploring net-bar youth culture from the labeling perspective. Being labeled as net-bar deviants, suggested as soft labels, the youth articulated and expressed their own interpretation of the behavior from daily practice, contrasting the representation of social audience. At the same time, social control agents as government, police, school, media, and family stepped into mediating the youth's identity and enforcing rules to regulate the deviants. Different social players, including youth themselves, participated into the contest of defining, controlling, constructing, regulating and incorporating deviance discourses about the net-bar youth, demonstrating a bewildering array of interests, purposes, means, strategies, conflicts and struggles. Social power played a crucial role in the contest in both horizontal and vertical structures; while the social context of rapid changes, pervasive notion of individualization, accelerated mobility, and unprecedented development of information and communication society is influencing the public's perspective on standards and deviance. The complex process being analyzed in this study brings new insights into a decades-long theory, attempting to reconsider youth culture, deviance, social structure and power relation, and theory and its applicability to new situation, and bridge the gap between micro-macro levels of analysis in deviance studies.

## 摘要

在當代社會，研究越軌現象的社會反應理論仍舊是研究社會問題的一個重要視角，但其也面臨著許多挑戰。本研究旨在從標籤理論的角度探究網吧青年文化現象。作為被標籤為越軌者的網吧青年——本文將其描述為“軟標籤”——在描表達他們的行為時，往往出現很多和社會表述相悖的論述。同時，包括政府、警察、學校、媒體、社會服務機構以及家庭等的社會控制機制一併參與到越軌的論述爭奪中來，帶著不同的利益需求、目的、手段、策略、衝突和掙扎，以試圖去定義、控制、構建、規管乃至吸納網吧青年的越軌者身份。社會權力在這樣的一種身份表述爭奪中扮演了重要角色。而社會情境的改變——包括社會環境的飛速變化、個人主義理念的盛行、社會流動性的增加、以及信息社會的空前發展等——又在不停的影響著公眾對於社會傳統價值和越軌的看法。本文正是通過討論分析這個複雜的過程，以期為現有理論帶來新的思考，試圖重新考量青年文化、越軌、社會結構和權力關係、理論以及其在新情境下的應用，從而能夠調和越軌研究中微觀和宏觀層面的分析。

## **Acknowledgement**

Finally I reach the acknowledgement part of my thesis, something like an ending? But it feels just like a new beginning. When I started to take courses this semester in a country far away from Hong Kong, I couldn't help but kept thinking about the past two years: What I get, what I learn, what I understand, what I don't understand, who I meet, who I like, who I admire, whom I find no words to judge, etc. Memories like water flooding into me. I'd like to call the past two years a mid-way of my life journey, in which I want to devote the thesis, as a temporary stop, to my family, my friends, my professors and all the people I encountered who made me see the beauty of research.

The idea of doing a thesis on youth net-bar culture was originated from a course in globalization. Later on, I discussed it with 07, Yang and Tangyuan, who are my best supporters and comforters during the past years. I was actually interested in the cultural practices those youth exercised in net-bar through gaming. And later I encountered the idea of labeling in a sociology course, which, I thought, was helpful to analyze the phenomenon I was investigating. Through the whole process of working on the thesis, I have to give my special thanks to my supervisor Anthony, dear Joseph, inspiring Eric, and wise Francis. Without your caring and patience, I wouldn't be able to finish my study, not to say the thesis. And actually all the faculty I met are such kind and responsible, setting up strong academic role models for me and encouraging me to pursue my career in academia.

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I'm revising the thesis all in a rush. The whole project is far from perfect. There's much room to learn and improve. But anyhow, the thesis is kind of summary, metaphorically, to my two-year M.phil life, which will be perpetuated in my memory. Citing what Yang has said, I have special attachments to symbols like CUHK or SJC, because they represent and remind me of what and whom I love.

Glory be to God!

## **Introduction: Youth, net-bar, and deviance**

When I talked to my colleagues that I wanted to explore the Hong Kong net-bar youth and their culture, most of them felt surprised and doubted that whether Hong Kong has net-bars. In many existing literature, scholars discussed about the public space for people to go to surf the Internet, play games, have gatherings, and hold other activities (e.g., Gurol & Sevindik, 2007; Szablewicz, 2004). They used different terms to depict the space, say, Internet café, net café, cybercafé, Internet-bar, etc.. However, net-bar, in Chinese *Wangba*, is a very special public space in Asia regions (e.g., Huhh, 2008; Lin, 2005; Qiu & Zhou, 2005). Many young people go to the net-bar to play games, which is a popular activity among Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, as well as Hong Kong in the past decades. Unlike in Mainland China, where net-bar induces moral panics about youth delinquency, Internet/game addiction, and other social problems (Liu, 2010; Qiu, 2009; Szablewicz, 2010), it seems that net-bar in Hong Kong has caught up less attention among the lay public. According to the feedbacks from my colleagues and some of my students in the tutorials, Hong Kong net-bar is gradually out of notice or concern for ordinary people. It is argued that the fast-developed technology and improved social-economic status grant everybody the capability to equip with personal computer and Internet access at home. And the development of modern society also individualizes and privatizes interaction between people, causing trust-crisis and risks in relying on others (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990, 1991). All these contribute to the decline of net-bar as

a public place for youth gathering; or, at least, in the eyes of those outside the group, net-bar and its goers are gradually “invisible”. Problematizing the seemingly invisible, or underrepresent image of net-bar is the starting point of this study.

### **Net-bar: A contested discourse**

Yet, even in Hong Kong, a society that highly industrialized and modernized, net-bar is far from disappearance. Though no sheer number of net-bars available, more and more chain stores are establishing in recent years, largely monopolized by three big enterprises: i-One, Msystem and G-Force. In the past decade, net-bar has been the topic of government, social workers, media, medical professionals, and other interest-related actors, who call for concern, investigation, regulation, monitoring and legalization of the place, usually under the name of protection of the youth who frequent the net-bar. Media are very active in depicting net-bar usually as a place that working-class youth gather and conduct delinquent behaviors, such as violent physical conflicts, dealing drugs, touting adolescent-sex, and gangsters. On the contrary, industrial entrepreneurs claim technological advancement in the society facilitates the demand of high-tech devices for information and communication, and the gaming culture in Hong Kong also attracts people to gather in competition or for entertainment in the net-bars and other leisure sites, which results in a huge and profitable industry. The government is under pressure from not only social groups that urge to issue laws and regulation focused on the net-bar, but

interest parties that want to maintain and even expand the industry to gain more capital resources. Different interests await to be served, and different discourses around net-bar are contesting over time.

Nonetheless, seldom have we heard about the voice from the net-bar goers themselves, who mainly are youth as students. What triggers my interests in net-bar youth is my personal experience of playing in the net-bar when I was young. As a junior in middle school, I used to frequent the net-bar with my peers, enjoying a refreshing period of diving in the game world with only several bucks. But soon, we were forced to stop going to the net-bar mostly due to the views of those who treated us as unconventional rule-breakers. Designations like game addicts, school skippers, delinquents, and the like were appeared in the news and repeatedly heard from daily talks referring to the net-bar goers. I actually understood, at least I thought so, that all my friends, including myself, who went to play in the net-bar would have scarcely become a threat to the society or ruined our lives and studies simply due to gaming. But I could not pay the price for what others thought I was at that time. Thereafter, I never entered the net-bar, until I carried out this study, more than ten years later.

Though I'm talking about the experience in Mainland China, I have no surprise to find out many similarities in my Hong Kong informants' interpretation, compared with mine as an adolescent back in the old days, of how others perceive the net-bar goers. Hong Kong is a media saturated cosmopolitan, where games and creative industry are booming to become one of the pillars of the culture. Net-bar started to gain public

attention from 1990s, and soon became prevalent among young people. Accompanied with the development of cultures in game, manga, and comic, which is largely influenced by Japan and Korea, Hong Kong people is cultivated to develop its own gaming culture (Tin, 2012). In a representative survey, 14.1% and 43.1% of Hong Kong people have online gaming and web gaming experience, separately; While 19% of them have visited the net-bar or game center (Fung, 2012a). Nevertheless, the social discourses towards net-bar mostly are passive, which is obviously in local news reports and ordinary conversations.

Based on the personal experience and the studying context, I started to wonder what actually contribute to the imbalance of views on the same issue. What is going on in the net-bar? What's the nature of the behavior of going to the net-bar and playing games? Why do people have different, almost contradictory, perspectives on it? How do the net-bar youth themselves perceive the situation? What do they do to deal with the labels as a net-bar deviant? But what actually does a deviant mean? Bearing these questions in mind, I'm narrowing down the theoretical perspective on exploring the phenomenon to labeling theory.

### **Labeling perspective of the net-bar youth**

Labeling perspective is also called societal reaction theory. As what the name indicates, this perspective takes the social reaction of others toward a certain behavior or a group of



people as the fundamental parameter when defining deviance and social problem. The net-bar is a stigmatized public place (Lin, 2005), and the net-bar youth are only problematic and deviant when the social audience treats them so. Investing into this process of labeling the net-bar youth indeed invites conversation among different social players, mainly sitting in two camps: the youth themselves, and the others, both of which might not easily negotiate with each other on the issue. So to speak, either side would have their own arguments over the other, and discrepancies and disagreement are substantial.

This study narrows the scope of investigation on concentrating on the perspective of the net-bar youth themselves, trying to reveal their thoughts and ideas on the labeling process, and how they react to being labeled as deviants. Drawn upon the tradition of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, societal reaction theory emphasizes the social interaction in daily life and individual level of analysis, which is beneficial in understanding the personal communicative practice, that is, what and how the young people experience in the labeling process. While at the same time, this perspective also helps to comprehend the collective culture where the individual deviants share in their behaviors, lifestyles, and opinions on the social designations.

Furthermore, through the youth's interpretation of their experience in being labeled, the complexity of the process, which involves different social players, is also articulated. How different institutions, say, the government, the police, the school, the media, the family, etc., mediate deviant identity of the net-bar youth, and how the youth strategically

react to it through different ways, for instance, normalizing the behaviors, incorporating into social desirable elements, professionalizing into a career, or surrendering to the discourse and exiting, are largely conditioned by their positions in the power structure. Hence, power is underlined as an implicit central feature of labeling theory, explicating in defining, stigmatizing, regulating, and punishing net-bar deviants, in forms of a bewildering array of sources, discourses and mediations.

In addition, taken the social context of a highly developed and industrialized metropolitan city as Hong Kong into consideration, the context itself contributes to the formation, acceptance, diffusion, and resistance of those net-bar labels, shaping the public opinions and social reactions of net-bar activities. As argued by some scholars in late-modernity deliberations, the society is moving onto a stage where crises and risks are identified without origins due to the process of globalization, and personal lifestyles and awareness of the environment is highly individualized and detraditionalized with reflexivity over the relation between people and between human and the world. Simultaneously, the normative desirability of certain behaviors is facing greater challenges as social norms, values, and standards are more fluid and harder to sustain than ever before. Under the situation, it is very interesting to see how labels attributed to a behavior and a group of people is negotiated over time. More specifically, social changes and contextual situation condition the labeling process, in which the net-bar youth might have different approaches to manage the labels through their sub/cultural expression in response to the dominating cultures. And, at a point, even a dominant

culture is unsustainable, with more and more diasporic forms of cultures, where deviants would probably become normality.

All in all, the significance of applying labeling perspective to the net-bar youth case resides in testing an old theory in a new context, exploring the potential that enriches the perspective while re-emphasizes the analysis of power and brings the structure position of social players in a labeling process into consideration. In a cultural setting, the youth should be either overrepresented or underrepresented. Their specificities in social roles and expectations, choices of lifestyles and cultural experience, and subsequently the expression in daily encounters and interaction with others are resourceful for them to establish and interpret collective culture, which has its own merits and values, and nonetheless might not echo with contemporary but also transitory dominating ethos.

## **Methodology**

To tackle with the problem depicted above anchoring with societal reaction perspective, this study adopts focus group interview as a qualitative research method to explore the labeling process of net-bar youth. Against the angle of the youth, the purpose and aim of the interview are to invite conversation among a group of net-bar goers who have similarities in cultural experience whilst differences in personal expression and probably interpretation over social interaction.

Three groups of informants are recruited from personal contacts, totally 20 people.

The formation of the three groups is students aged from 15 to early 20s. Informants in each group are acquaintances and net-bar friends with each other, and the design of peer group interview is to set up a familiar environment for net-bar youth to articulate their personal as well as collective experience. Each of the interviews are recorded and coded afterwards for analysis.

Bearing the basic introduction on net-bar, youth, deviance, labeling perspective and the method of the study in mind, I'll turn to stretch out the theoretical foundation of the study in next chapter of literature review.

## **Chapter 1 Literature review**

### **Social construction of deviance and labeling theory**

To tackle my investigation into Hong Kong net-bar youth culture, the discussion of social construction of deviance comes first. By reviewing theoretical movements and empirical studies following social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, I then introduce the labeling theory because it mounts from the above two traditions and lays down the fundamental theoretical base of this study. While exploring related research theories and practices, I also outline the shared basis between my concerns on constructing deviant identity and the key tenets of these working perspectives.

#### **1. Social constructionism**

Social constructionism is, generally speaking, a body of theories about knowledge, of which the fundamental premise is that social reality and consciousness of objects are constructed in social contexts by human beings, instead of simply “out there”. Constructionism has its roots in cultural anthropology and phenomenology, influencing different branches of scientific studies such as sociology, social psychology, political science, cultural studies, communication, and other related fields, with their own research purposes, visions, and contributions, sharing a common anti-essentialist view.

Constructionist inquiry has reverberated across social science since 1960s, and taken its prominence in America sociology when Berger and Luckmann (1966) published their

book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, arguing that social interaction have constructed and helped to maintain all knowledge of humans, even the common sense knowledge of everyday life. Starting from this point of view, social constructionists insist that our knowledge of the world and self, and the description, explanation and/or representation of it are derived from relationship. Meanings of social constructs are re/produced through the ongoing and dynamic process of social interaction. Along the line of thoughts, social facts and objects of knowledge must be constantly maintained and re-affirmed in order to give them intelligibility and vitality to sustain; while at the same time, this process also offers the possibility to change and re/fashion our future. As juxtaposed as they are, these concerns that impulse contemplation and reflexivity from within a tradition enlighten critical thinking on those taken-for-granted and invites generative discourses (Gergen 1999).

A more relative programmatic book to the current study is Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) *Constructing Social Problems*, in which they defined "social problems as *the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions*" (p. 75, original emphases). This book pioneered in constructionist inquiry into deviance and social problems, inspiring substantial and trenchant theoretical and empirical challenges to prior normative/functional explanation to social issues such as substance abuse, mental illness, crime and delinquency, sexual misbehavior, and subcultural deviance.

Though contemporary deliberation on reality construction has various forms and

differences in their outlook, the present research anchors on the narrative and interactional work that produces and assembles realities in everyday life. It looks into the daily practice of net-bar youth, invites conversation among them, juxtaposes and contrasts their self-narrated identity and socially embedded discourse on them, and uncovers the underlying power dynamics on constructing deviance and youth culture. By addressing on individual communicative practices to response to and reproduce deviance, which is mediated by socio-political, economic, and institutional forces, in concrete social conditions, this study attempts to reconcile macro and micro level of analysis toward deviance, to provide, in most promising scenario, comprehensive understanding toward net-bar culture.<sup>1</sup> To reach this point, I'd turn to broach another intellectual tradition that sheds light on this study: symbolic interactionism.

## **2. Symbolic interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism can be seen as a working perspective emphasizes primarily on individual level of interaction through symbols in social environment. This perspective believes that social exchange and people's interpretation or definition of reality create what is real for human beings: we, understanding the present situation, actively participate into what we do and engage in interpretive process in order to define the environment rather than simply respond to it (Charon, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Constructionist inquiry has different scopes and generates various levels of analysis, based on which, investigation on macroscopic of collective representation and microscopic of individual face-to-face interaction are usually regarded as two ends of conventional scopes of constructionism. See also Holstein & Gubrium (2008).

Usually, it is believed that George Herbert Mead has given the rise of symbolic interactionism through publishing his lectures and notes, mainly the *Mind, Self & Society*, by his students. One of Mead's students, Herbert Blumer, has largely integrated works of his mentor and other pioneers in the realm, such as John Dewey, Charles Cooley, and William Thomas, among others, and avidly interpreted and promoted the perspective. Later, new criticism and directions for symbolic interaction have emerged because of a large body of new writers to this field, Howard Becker and Gary Alan for example. Until 1990s, there was a growing significance of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, which has been influenced by and is largely influencing traditional symbolic interaction studies.

As the founding father, Mead has taken the self as a relational being: "Selves can only exist in relationship to other selves." (Mead, 1934). Appreciating human interdependence, it is through social interaction, reasoned Mead, that we slowly create and accumulate symbols and develop the capacity for symbolization, in which language becomes possible when a shared symbol system establishes in the society. Perceiving the self as a social object, it indeed makes no sense that a self is independent from social process; and only through taking social roles by symbolizing others' response to my action, can I become conscious of myself, that is, understanding who and what I am. Mind, thus, is an inseparable part of social interchange, functioned as activities toward and inextricably interlinked with social objects, that is, self and symbols.

This perspective of self as inter-subjective self gave vital importance to symbolic



interactionists who have special interests in how social order and deviance come about. In terms of the interactionist approach, scholars examine deviance, in general or specific types, as a social phenomenon, based on which, people “perceive another person as departing from accepted norms, interpret the person to be some kind of deviant, and influence others also to regard the person as deviant and to act on the basis of that interpretation” (Rubington & Weinberg, 2008, p. ix). I’ll unfold the discussion of interactionism to deviance by concentrating on the specific orientation in labeling theory, or, societal reaction theory below.

### **3. Interactionist approach to deviance analysis: labeling perspective**

The discussions on social constructionist and symbolic interactionist perspectives provide hermeneutic roots and fruitful sources on conceptualization and empirical studies for the development of labeling perspective or societal reaction theory, which was originally emerged in analyzing deviant behaviors in sociology, criminology and social psychology. From the perspective of labeling theorists, deviance is not regarded as an etiological terminology but a social construct that is created and identified through social interactions. Thus, deviance is a designation – a label – that is attached to someone but not others, inducing a number of consequences from being labeled. Many sociological writers in 1960s and 1970s have excited the academic to loosely form a “labeling school” that related to a new sociology of deviance (Holstein, 2009). Some pioneers, Frank Tannenbaum, Edwin Lemert, John Kitsuse, Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, Kai

Erikson, and Thomas Scheff, to name a few, have long-lasting influence on the study of deviance with interactionist approach among later generation of researchers. But as well, this approach to deviance has been the subject of intense criticism since its birth and prominence.

### Historical development

Regarded as the founding father of labeling theory, Frank Tannenbaum (1938) focused on institutional influence of the criminal justice system on juvenile identification of deviance and delinquent identities, emphasizing, in *Crime and Community*, that imposing a label of deviance, or “dramatization of evil” in his term, triggered a psychological process in which the young self-identified as criminals, and “the process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious” (p. 19).

A fuller and more influential view on labeling perspective was put forward by Edwin Lemert (1951), who delineated primary deviance, which was assumed that someone would be labeled as a deviant, and secondary deviance, which was the behavior/social roles produced by being labeled, arguing that sociological significance on analyzing deviant behavior lied in the societal reaction by others toward who committed deviance and reorganized himself/herself: “When a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or a role based upon it as a means of defense, attack, or adjustment to the overt and problems created by the consequent societal reaction to him, his deviation is secondary.”

(p. 640).

John Kitsuse further elaborated the perspective by directing attention to the operation of social control agencies. Kitsuse (1962) was not interested in the deviant behavior per se; rather, he emphasized the significance of those who produced or manufactured the labels, the social control force: “A sociological theory of deviance must focus specifically upon the interactions which not only define behaviors as deviant but also organize and activate the application of sanctions by individuals, groups, or agencies.” (p. 256). In modern society, this type of social actors can be parents, peer groups, schools, moral entrepreneurs, mass media, police, government, justice system, so on and so forth.

However, it was Howard Becker who amplified attitude of deviance as a social construct in earlier researches, setting in motion a paradigm of studying deviance. In Becker’s prestigious book, *Outsider: Studies in the Sociology of Devicane* (1963), he stated how a rule offender being labeled as an outsider in the society:

“All social groups make rules and attempt, at some times and under some circumstances, to enforce them. Social rules define situations and the kinds of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as ‘right’ and forbidding others as ‘wrong.’ When a rule is enforces, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded as an *outsider*.” (p. 1, original emphasis)

Becker evidenced his argument with examples of how marijuana users and dance

musicians acted at odds with other people's sense of normality and rule-abiding. In line with the words, deviance is not a certain social category, nor simply behaviors related to psychological disorder that present in some people and absent in others. Rather, "it is the product of a process which involves responses of other people to the behavior." (Becker, 1963, p. 14). In the interaction between those who act the behavior and those who respond to the act, deviants or outsiders are labeled, in the efforts of re/establishing rules and maintaining social order by certain social groups.

Becker as a central figure of labeling theory, his widely credited contribution of *Outsider* has been circulated and became profoundly influential to revolutionize the conceptualization of deviance, departing from the psychological interpretation with its etiological concerns of deviant-formation. The proliferation of interpreting deviance in social context through social actors' interaction during 1960s to 1970s has indicated a new paradigm, which shifted the object of analysis from deviants and their behavior to the societal reaction toward those being labeled as deviants.

#### *Key hypotheses and empirical evaluation*

A large body of existing literature has identified, or thought there were, two tenets of labeling theory that constituted testable hypotheses and empirical implications. The first one regards to the social variables unrelated to rule-breaking behavior. Since admitting that deviance is not an inherent quality, the labeling process thus becomes a political interplay between the labeler and the labeled, in which lots of other social variables,

particularly those political-economic social attributes, take the stage that influence the official designation of deviance defined by social control organizations. Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) reformulated this proposition as the “status characteristics” hypothesis: “Given the occurrence of a deviant action, the decision of organizational agents to sanction officially (to label) an actor is *in part* determined by the social attributes (race, sex, social class) of the offender and/or of the offended party.” (p. 364, original emphases). The application of labels to a person is increasing contingent upon social status, class, personal biography and resources, etc..

This prostitution is unavoidably related to the power dynamics in a specific social context where the label is born. Power is underscored as a central feature of the societal reaction approach, though many would see it implicit rather than explicit. First of all, considering the origin of norms and deviance, rules creation and enforcement are usually obtained and imposed by relatively powerful social control agencies. With this regard, Lofland (1969) explicated deviance as a “conflict game in which individuals or loosely organized small groups with little power are strongly feared by a well-organized, sizable minority or majority who have a large amount of power” (p. 14). However, the gross volume of empirical research pertaining to the “collective rulemaking process” (Schur, 1971) is quite limited (e.g., Becker, 1963; Gusfield, 1986; Platt, 1977; Rothman, 1971). Another concern to this hypothesis involves that the social control organizations usually take “extra-legal factors” (Quinney, 1970) into account when define what is deviance and create the deviant status. Labeling theorists generate an abundance of empirical studies at

this level of analysis, mostly in criminology. Finally, individuals, i.e., deviants and non-deviants, also execute bargaining power over the labels in everyday encounter. A vivid example of this lies in Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (1963), in which he examined how people managed impressions of themselves when they were away from social norms. Goffman relied on autobiographies and case studies to analyze how those who might not fully accepted by the society adjusted their identities, and what strategies they adopted when in relationship to other "normal" people. Other examples include Cicourel (1968), Scott (1969), and so on.

The distinguished characteristic of labeling perspective, breaking with criminological traditional norm-based definition of deviance, is offered with a direct "consideration of the other people and institutions in influencing both the form and the volume that deviance assumes in any society" (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 364; see also Cullen, 1983).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, most attentions hitherto are scarcely put up onto locating the source of norms and deviance and interpreting interpersonal interaction in negotiated imputation (Kitsuse, 1975), but preoccupied with testing the casual relationship between status attributes and labeling outcomes. We will return to see how power, an implicit driving force behind the labeling process, is at work in analysis of conformity/resistance and social control in later section, through the case that how the youth negotiate the labels among themselves and within interactions with other social agents who generate public

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<sup>2</sup> In his book, *Rethinking crime and deviance theory: The emergence of a structuring tradition*, Cullen articulated: "...societal reaction may also function as a variable which shapes the deviant choices people make by closing off certain options while creating others. That is, quite apart from whether labeling heightens deviant involvement per se, it may have large effects in accounting for the type of deviance that occurs." (p. 130).

discourses on a caricature of net-bar goers.

The second core empirical implication of the labeling perspective, as many societal reaction studies directed, lies in the self-fulfilling prophecy, when being labeled affects subsequent involvement in deviant behaviors. Many writers who commit to the labeling approach have been concerned with the consequences of people being labeled as deviants by social control agencies. Deviant labels is said to generate stereotypical view toward the rule offenders, in which process other members of the society/group manifest an exclusionary reaction to deal with deviant behavior (Orcutt, 1973). The biased and/or hostile attitude to those being labeled and their limited participation in conformity in turn alternate self-perception that internalize a deviant identity, and deviant ascription ultimately becomes a “master status” (Becker, 1963). Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) phrased the “secondary deviance” hypothesis (also see Lemert, 1967, p. 63) in the context of juvenile delinquency as: “Given the occurrence of a labeling experience, the individual may experience an alteration of personal identity, may find access to conventional others and opportunities barred, and as a result may exhibit a greater involvement in delinquent behavior.” (p. 381).

Here what need to be clarified is that whether labeling leads to secondary deviation or not is far more complicated, involved different parties of social audience and conditioned by social context and contingent factors. Among the three main consequences an individual being labeled deviance – alteration of personal identity, exclusion from conventional opportunities, and increased involvement in further deviance

– none of which is inevitable, those who are labeled should acquire objective information about the label from others as well as subjectively adjust the self-image according to the label in order to make secondary deviation possible. This is part of the reason why empirical studies on linear relationship from labeling to secondary deviation generate large inconsistent and inconclusive results (see a review of Tittle, 1975; also see Bernburg & Krohn, 2003; Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006; Chiricos, Barrick & Bales, 2007; Sherman, Smith, Schimidt, & Rogan, 1992).

### Criticism

Since labeling theory emerged, it grew within a large number of critical evaluation and comments (Gove, 1970, 1975; Hagan, 1974; Petrunik, 1980; Plummer, 1979, 2011; Rains, 1975; Tittle, 1975; Triplett, 1993; Ward, 1971; Warren & Johnson, 1972), to the extent that “labeling theory for the most part is an invention of its critics” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 365).

A common critique about the theory comes from the origins of the label, which can be stated as “the chicken or the eggs” argument, that is, whether people’s unconventionally behavior or the label comes first. Labeling is a process through which the labels come to be adopted in the society, and that the deviants exist before or after the label popularized is understudied, or, let’s say, out of interests of labeling theorists.

Another common critique strikes on the definitions in the theory. Critics argued that many core concepts of societal reaction theory were poorly defined (e.g., Gove, 1970;



Hagan, 1973; Manning, 1973). Gibbs (1972) set forth a critique on Becker's category of secret deviance (Becker, 1963, p. 20), articulating its conceptual confusion. He explicated that, since secret deviance could not be seen or known by the social audience, preceding the labeling process there must have been a judgment that norms/standards were violated. But his own suggestion of focusing on norms as a truly sociological study of deviance was no easy solution (Pfohl, 1994).

Some critics see the societal reaction perspective is too determinant in the manner of "here is the label, so here's the behavior", which direct the spear to the self-fulfilling prophecy from primary deviance to secondary deviance, through which process the deviant identity is forming and becoming public. There are many factors conditioned the process. Yet many studies in the camp tended to focus on official launch of labels toward a certain social group. For example, HIV carriers catch up attention of the society because they are carrying a contagiously incurable disease, usually triggered the public panic over contacts with these people. Yet, a less obvious designation to the HIV carriers is that they are usually involved into excessive sexual behaviors or promiscuity, which is against normality/convention. This informal tag sometimes induces more profound consequences for the labeled, who would be risky in being casted out by his/her peers group and community. An overemphasis on formal labels such as those from the official organization, government, school and professional institutions would take the risk of overlooking the potential influences from informal labels, such as those from coworkers, parents, peers and friends. It also casts doubts on the origins of the labels and the

confusion in explaining the relationship between label and behavior.

In addition, it is often criticized that the labeling studies tend to overlook the structure influence in the labeling process. Though they do pay more attention on the underclass who are getting labels more frequently than those who are in upper-class, labeling theorists less address the meanings out of human interaction within the broader social structure, such as social class or socioeconomic status, gender, race and cultural context. Furthermore, from the labeling perspective, social control agencies are to sanction and regulate deviance so as to maintain social order and protect social values and standards. However, the normative desirability of the labels may not always be clear-cut and the meanings of the labels can also be negotiated over time.

All in all, the labeling perspective frequently analyzes what and how people are labeled, in regardless of when they are labeled, concentrating on the labeling process and its consequences. Yet, paying much attention on individual/interpersonal level of analysis by leaving out the discussion of the origins of labels and definitional confusion, societal reaction theory lacks of a vertical perspective on the power structure in a society, which indeed affects the process and consequences of being labeled.

#### **4. Reflection on labeling perspective: Application to the current case**

It must be noted that the popularity of labeling theory roughly since 1960s with its interactionist components can be seen as a direct reaction to the dominance of structural functionalist view, based upon which, scholars saw deviance and social problems could

be revealed in causal relationship as a result of psychological determinacy and/or structural conditions, in previous decades (Downes & Rock, 2011; Fine, 1993; Pfohl, 1994). It shifts the sociological tradition to societal reaction and its relation to the deviance in particular context. Its heyday is reached roughly in 1970s; however, thereafter, the perspective is more or less fading away, to the extent of being pronounced dead (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). In a review of the historical development of labeling perspective, Plummer (2011) pointed out that it was a generational theory that, in its widest sense, continued questioning social phenomenon yet for another generation of sociologists. This position is more apt, as many core themes of labeling perspective has refashioned recent work on deviance and social-control (see a review in Grattet, 2011; also see Cavender & Knepper, 1992; Link, 1987; Link & Phelan, 2001; Matsueda, 1992).

Though the current article presents “labeling perspective”, “labeling theory”, “societal reaction perspective”, and “societal reaction theory” as interchangeable terms for convenience and general reference, it is my position that the labeling or societal reaction is regarded as a research paradigm/perspective (Plummer, 1979) rather than a specific theory emphasizing much on “a simple minded propositional positivistic testable hypothetic-deductive hypotheses style of theory for labelling” (Plummer, 2011). Here, two implications derive from the point of view.

First, the focus and study areas are broadened if we recognize that the essential core of social reactions shaping deviance is the hub of labeling, though a large body of previous work ignored it. Past researches usually referred the term deviance in discussing

“big four” types of rule violation: crime and delinquency, mental illness and other psychological problems, drug use and addiction, and homosexuality and other sexual misbehavior (Best, 2004, p. 11). The introduction of societal reaction approach expands the scope of study to myriad forms of deviance, as it is being created, defined, and labeled through social process. Actually, the canonical book, *Outsider*, by Becker (1963) has already offered a good but less-discussed example. Becker discussed deviance with the subject of dance musician, demonstrating how the label of deviance was conditioned by social environment, how the labeled handled their identities to interact within community and with social audience, and how they developed their deviant career. This interactionist orientation gives insights in the current study, which focused on studying societal reactions and its relation to individual/group behaviors in the widest sense. Specifically, I’m interested in the interplay between the social control agencies, which assemble the negative and delinquent images of net-bar goers and enforce the regulation on them, and, the net-bar youth being labeled, whose behaviors through narrative express and exhibit their identities confronting the social representation.

Second, departing from positivism, the labeling perspective has also emanated from interpretive sociology, which concentrates on the meanings people attribute to actions and associate to social world. It is necessary to understand people who are labeled deviant from their point of view; thus the qualitative methods rooted in hermeneutic tradition are essential. Furthermore, leaned on this position, it is important to count on social context, that is, the power structure issue – cultural, ideological and economic-political – that

problematizes certain behaviors, constructs social problems, structures deviance, and intervenes in social interaction between social groups. This is also a response to the changing environment in nowadays society. Though the labeling theory emanated from symbolic interactionism tends to focus on meanings produced by interpersonal communication, it is necessary to bring in the structure and social context into consideration, since the labeling is happening within a specific social environment, which has profound effects on the process. This is, somehow, attempting to bring down the gap between macro and micro levels of analysis in the deviance study in a more reflexive fashion.

To achieve the aforementioned purposes, it is necessary to look at literature on the youth studies and social context where the application of the perspective takes place.

## **Youth and Hong Kong context**

### **1. Young people and social change**

The social changes in modern society provoke a variety of debates among youth studies, many of which notably explore young people's transition, identity, culture and subjectivity. Concepts as individualization, globalization, detraditionalization and reflexivity have been featured in youth studies, and researchers began to depict young people with a more active role in re/shaping their identities (e.g., Bennett, 2000; Miles, 2002; Muggleton, 2000; Nichols, 2002).

Miles (2002) has noted that the efforts to study youth culture and identity are usually damaged by the fissure of structural and cultural analyses of young people's life, in which the former tend to view the youth as victims that are disenfranchised from society, while the latter, represented by work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, overwhelmingly focus on youth subculture as strategically deviant or debased through which young people resist to dominant power structure. He suggests to study youth in the notion of lifestyles which expressed through the context of consumer culture: "young people's lifestyles reflect that while on the one hand the opportunities open to young people in a global society appear to be immense, on the other there are structural constraints that inevitably constrain their ability to be 'free'" (p. 67).

Culture must be addressed in specific context in order to analyze meanings constructed by the youth through interpreting their daily life experience and their social relations to the dominant culture. In a similar note, labeling perspective, though not fully in the interactionist fashion but with elements from social conflict perspective, does focus on the interaction among social agents, who are entwined in structural power relationships. However, "what is important here are not necessarily the power relationships young people find themselves entwined in, but how they actively deal with those relationships as individuals" (Miles, 2002, p. 67). By inviting the conversation among net-bar youth, the current study is actually attempting to uncover the strategies of how the youth negotiate their identities in the net-bar culture in response to the society's labels upon them.

## **2. Youth in Hong Kong society**

Under the wave of globalization and a variety of risks occurred around the world, such as the economic crisis, terrorist attacks and epidemic outbreaks, accompanied with the exponential growth of digital communication and global online networks, Hong Kong has been influenced by rapid social changes in its socioeconomic, political, cultural and technological development. And the youth are as well facing greater opportunities and challenges, where they must constantly re/negotiated their identities confronting external economic and technological globalization as well as internal social developmental challenges, which lead them to experience the identity crisis in a global age (Morley & Robins, 1995). In Hong Kong, though traditional saying goes like “young people are the key of future”, yet, youth is frequently depicted as social problems. As Hebdige (1988) noted, “In our society, youth is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem.”(p. 17). When concerning young people, the society is immersed with negative discourses on the situations of them, such as high unemployment rates, rise in number of young drug abusers, deviant youth culture, bullying in school, to name a few, which easily bring blames to young people and place them in a disadvantaged position that are problematic in nature (Chiu, 2005; Ho & Law, 2003).

In review of the history, mid-1960s has witnessed the rise of Hong Kong youth’s own culture of “Ah Feis” (literally as Teddy boys). Since then, young people are frequently constructed as anti-social and dangerous (Hong Kong Government, 1965),

especially after the riots in 1966 and 1967. In 1970s, the dramatic upsurge of reported juvenile crime rates further alarmed the society of delinquency (Tam, 2011), which has been ascribed to the failure of social system (Ng, 1975). Moving onto 1990s, the new generation of youth has been perceived as a lost generation (Leung, 1996). Then at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more youth are involved into increasingly popular discourses of youth substance abuse, gangsters, sex trades, delinquency and other forms of subcultures. Since “youth” is constructed as a social category, the society predominantly perceive young people as being “anti-social, marginal and pathological in society”, who act against the norms that should “be controlled and regulated on the plea of their abnormality” (Tam, 2011, p. 878). As Gray (1996) suggested, Hong Kong youth is frequently presented as a social problem, which required government intervention. Official rules and surveillance have been issued and operated, and social supporting system is building up, including outreaching social work, school work, family life education, and individual social services, which combines hard and soft arms of social control. One of the areas that draw attention of government and non-governmental alliances to regulate youth is leisure places such as game centers, KTV rooms, and net-bars as well.

Echoing the previous discussion, social controls are not only referring to social regulation forces but also strategies that aim to reduce the range of risks confronting young people. Nevertheless, the social control institution and mechanism unavoidably involve in much more complex situation than earlier times, when meet up with social



changes associated with late modernity features such as reflexivity, individualization and globalization. Under dramatically high exposure to media and information, youth can draw a bewildering array of sources to create distinctive styles and cultures, such as alternative bands (Ma, 2002) and otaku youth (Lin & Zhang, 2012). The youth have experienced changing traditions through all aspects over roles and identities, in which process they can exercise more freedom as well as constraints, creating/adopting particular approaches of expression in lifestyles and social relationships. Their voices are heard in many ways with the facilitation of information and communication technologies, also meaning that their social presence is expanding. A recent example is the significant roles that students/young people took in the protests of MNE (moral and national education, see Chen, 2012). But there is a deficiency in Hong Kong youth studies from a cultural perspective, which might be due to other factors that characterized the (late) amodernity in the emergence of diasporic cultures, as well as the temporal and spatial in the creation and sustainability of youth cultures (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002).

### **Research questions**

Previous discussion have demonstrated the societal reaction theory is a key theoretical base of this study, while the context of Hong Kong provides a testing ground where the society is developing into a later stage of modernity. To test the theory in a new context, the net-bar is chosen as a site to investigate the youth culture, social labels, and the

relationship between the labeler and the labeled in order to explore the dynamics among various social players over the issue of constructing youth deviance. Thus, the fundamental research question that guides the study is:

RQ: From a societal reaction perspective, how do net-bar youth being labeled as deviants?

In a more descriptive manner, the main research question contains the following questions that are to be explored:

R1: What are the labels that the society constructs to the net-bar youth?

R2: How do the net-bar youth deal with the labels in their daily life?

R3: What kinds of and how social players are involved to define and regulate net-bar youth?

These questions reverberate societal reaction research tradition in exploring social problems and labeling process through individual interpretation out of daily practice and interpersonal interaction. While on the other side, they emphasize the culture as collective behaviors that are contested to be represented not only by the youth themselves but also by other social players who try to mediate the discourse over youth identity in the net-bar. Herein, the significance of the study is unfolded in at least three dimensions.

First of all, as meanings are re/produced through social interaction and daily experience, the micro level of analysis, with the unit of individual, and the horizontal structure of social phenomenon, with the unit of collective behavior, are reconciled to invite and introduce conversation and interpretation among the youth toward their practice in the net-bar. Labeling perspective in studying deviance is more than simply symbolic interactionist tradition on interpersonal communicative practice and inter-subjectivity in symbolization; it is a useful tool to explore and examine group/collective behaviors, in which individual acts are connecting to a group of people who create and participate into a cultural form, in a loose or rigorous sense. Through the youth's expression and interpretation of the labels that are designated to them from the society, a picture of net-bar youth culture is revealed to understand the youth lifestyle and its social meanings on the behalf of the youth.

Second, by framing the research questions, this study also tries to investigate the structural positions of the youth and other social agents in the interplay of defining net-bar youth as deviants and their gaming practice as deviance within a specific social context. The vertical structure, that is, the power hierarchy of social players within a society, is seldom touched by labeling theorists, who traditionally are anti-structural-functionalist analysts. But as trenchant criticism, the broaden structure within a society has influenced the labeling process and the meaning-interpretation. When introducing the context of young people in modern society, the structure of the society is more fluid as well as more constrained. How label is created and mediated,

how social agents contest to control over the labels, and how the “insiders” and “outsiders” reflexively react to the changing situation are among those questions, to which structural and power analysis can bring incisive answers.

Finally, from individual to collective culture to social structure, this study seeks to bring new insights into the labeling perspective through integrating structural analysis that links micro-level of interpersonal interaction to macro-level of social conflicts and power dynamics within a society. By focusing on the case of net-bar youth, the study discusses the application of societal reaction theory in a contemporary environment, and revitalizes the perspective by not only adding new material in new context, but also fueling new elements in accordance with the social changes and intellectual sustainability.

## **Chapter 2 Methodological concern**

### **Focus group as a research method**

This study aims to explore the net-bar youth culture underpinned with societal reaction theory. How the youth are labeled, what the labels are, how they cope with the social reaction toward their behavior, and how they interact with social control agents such as government, police, school, family members, media and other social organizations are all questions that should be answered through investigating the youth cultural practices and their interpretation of experience. Thus, focus group as a research method is adopted. In this chapter, I'll illustrate the rationale of the method, explain research procedure and provide basic profile of the youth that are studied.

The focus group technique is widely used in market research, and gained a high profile in political election campaign and government image management. In social science, it is also an increasingly recognized approach in both quantitative and qualitative studies. Morgan (1988) has given a thoughtful and balanced review on the method, which, argued he, can be self-contained as well as in conjunction with other methods like participant observation and individual interviews. In his regard, focus groups are basically group interviews that rely on interaction within group members and supplied moderation of a researcher.

When comparing focus group to other qualitative research methods, Morgan contended that "The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction

to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.” (Morgan, 1988, p. 12). In the current research, I hoped to gain several advantages over participant observation and individual interviews in using the technique to understand how net-bar youth construct/interpret meanings about their identities through group discussion and conversation:

1. Compared with participant observation, focus groups have the value of locating a dense and focused set of data about perspectives and attitudes toward net-bar and its culture, information about which are difficult to access to and obtain in more naturalistic observation. I frequented a net-bar located in Tin Shui Wai<sup>3</sup> last December, trying to make some acquaintances for my research. It turned out that youth often grouped themselves and it was hardly for an outsider like me to get involved, especially when I looked older and simply not the type of net-bar goers. A more subtle implication appears that sometimes in the natural settings some experiences are not immediately available for observation. How net-bar youth perceive and self-express themselves and what their attitudes toward social designation of them are cases among these. During the data collection period, some other shared experiences and feelings among net-bar youth were also teased out, such as grouping to net-bar as nostalgia, that is, to memorize and cherish friendship

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<sup>3</sup> It is an area located in the northwest part of New Territories in Hong Kong, which is the habitation of lots of new migrants and working-class people.

back in the old days. It was through group discussion and conversation could a researcher effectively investigate how everyday knowledge, ideas, self-expression and linguistic exchanges operate in a specific cultural environment, and how the process of constructing meaning of experience and identity are revealed, realized and interacted.

2. If individual interview is superior in tapping into personal biography, focus group is advantageous in exploring “how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 5). Focus group research offers the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic, replacing the single interaction between interviewer and interviewee. This is especially important to reach my study purpose of exploring how net-bar youth identities are constructed and expressed. In a group setting, people are forced to be more consciously aware of different perspectives toward the same issue, either reconciling these differences or recognizing disagreement. The elaboration of shared/different experience compel the participants to utter opinions and exchange with each other, hence providing insight into a broader culture issue.
3. As suggested by Gamson (1992), focus group in general, peer group in particular, allows a researcher to observe participants’ intersubjectivity: the commonsense conceptions and ordinary explanations they share (Schutz, 1967). According to Schutz, people intuitively acquiring everyday knowledge depend on the

taken-for-granted natural attitude, which based on the assumption of a reciprocity of perspectives; hence they are defined socially not individually.<sup>4</sup> For intersubjectivity, “The key variable is the degree of personal contact and similarity of socialization” (Calder, 1977, p. 359), which will be greatest within primary peer groups than within larger, more encompassing ones. Thereafter, it is easier to observe ordinary languages and vocabularies participants used in daily thought and experience to construct meanings of shared features of everyday knowledge in peer group.

Focus group, crucially, is more likely to tackle with issues of how perspectives, ideas and meanings of everyday knowledge are constructed and expressed (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Gamson, 1992; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Peer group contrivance used here further narrows down the focus group methodology. Particularly, the groups constructed here are pre-existing groups involving familiar acquaintances. Although the practice of using friendship groups is discouraged in market research literature (e.g., Krueger, 1988), it seems unjustified here. First of all, friends, schoolmates, and dorm mates are those with whom the youth frequent the net-bar and naturally discuss the topic. Observing conversation among these people allows the researcher “to tap into *fragments* of interaction which approximated to ‘naturally occurring’ data” (Kitzinger, 1994, original emphasis), avoiding too conflicted and/or scattered information and

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<sup>4</sup> See a more explicit review on Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson K. (2001). *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage Publications.



insufficient depth result from too heterogeneous groups (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). An additional advantage is that familiar participants would relate each other's comments to actual experience and incidents and may challenge each other on discrepancies between expressed beliefs and actual behaviors, which generally promote discussion and debate. This phenomenon occurred frequently in the ongoing process of the discussion, and introduced some unexpected bonuses to me (e.g., "Don't you remember you've stolen someone's weapons in revenge for being stolen?" or "What about the boy who threatened his mom that he would jump into the sea if she prevented him from playing in net-bar?", personal interview, February, 2013). Finally, practically, the peer group design also reduces the difficulty to recruit participants (i.e., by acquainting with a contact person then snowballing), lowers the cost of time and money, further protects participant anonymity (i.e., avoid the necessity to disclose names or contact information, as they are familiar with each other), and minimizes the effect of moderator's intrusion to the discussion.<sup>5</sup>

## **1. Reaching the target population and setting up**

Hong Kong has a population of over 7 million people, of which 875,234 (12.38%) are young people aged between 15 to 24 (Census and Statistics Department, 2012a). As

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<sup>5</sup> Hong Kong people are generally consciously aware of their privacy, and their public utterances and behaviors. During the discussion, sometimes when some of the participants brought about something which related to personal information (i.e., calling other participant's real name or nickname) and/or behaved improperly (e.g., saying dirty words and sex jokes), others would kindly remind him that what he said would be tape-recorded. This brought some disturbance for the conversation. In this situation, I would reassure them the anonymity and encourage them to say what they wanted to share.

mentioned before, I have a non-probability snowball sampling instead of a probability sampling frame. This is because the population of net-bar youth is scarcely approachable. Within limited resources in time, money and social networking, I sent out invitation letters to my colleagues, schoolmates, students, and other acquaintances to ask for help to recruit the target participants. Then I got three contact persons who were immersed in net-bar playing themselves. I asked them to help arrange a group of 5-10 peers who were also net-bar goers.

Actually I preferred to conduct small-size group discussion, which would render more flexibility of time and space, as well as encourage participants to explore into depth and detail about their experience and perspectives. However, the first group gathered nine people and the information flooded in during the discussion. Notwithstanding it took longer time to transcript the data, many perspectives and ideas sparkled the whole study. In the latter groups, there were six and five participants, respectively, and the conversation went on well with that everybody's talking was elucidated and well-documented.

All the participants were students at the time of data collection. So the discussion site was chosen in/near schools along the MTR lines. Finally, two of the discussions were conducted in the common room of Humanity Building in the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which sets aside the University Station, and another discussion was operated in a small meeting room in the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, through which the Hung Hom Station crossed. Both places were accommodated with round tables and comfortable

swivel chairs. Participants met in a circle to discuss.

I typically arrived half an hour ahead of the scheduled beginning time for discussion, arranging the settings to make sure it was comfortable and relax for peer conversation. When participants came, they were asked to fill out a short questionnaire in advance of the discussion. After that, I debriefed to them about the purpose and procedure of the research. I also prepared stimulus materials which were news clippings covering net-bar issues to show to them and trigger discussion.<sup>6</sup> All the focus group discussed the topic about net-bar experience for around one and a half hours.

## **2. Net-bar youth profile**

I conducted three focus groups among 20 participates. The following profile is based on information they provided in a questionnaire filled out before the conversation began. They were homogeneous in gender: all males. They were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three. All of them were students: fourteen in universities or colleges, one in post-secondary college, and the other five in high schools.

Geographically, these participants came from different districts distributing in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and New Territories: one in Eastern, two in Southern, two in Kowloon City, one in Yau Tsim Mong, two in Wong Tai Sin, two in Tuen Mun, three in Tsuen Wan, two in Yuen Long, one in Tai Po, and four in Sha Tin. The average number of

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<sup>6</sup> I searched news with keyword “net-bar” in WiseNews information portal, limited the news clipping in years between 2002 and 2012, which reported in local newspapers. Then the news clippings were chosen by using a stratified sampling frame. Finally I got seven pieces of net-bar news clippings, covering topics of pornography, piracy, delinquency, violence, murder, gangster, smoking, and parental-child relationship.

their family members was four, and only one in twenty was single parenting. The participants' average family income was between HKD\$20,000 and 29,999.<sup>7</sup>

People participated in the research come from a diverse geographical background but are identical in their gender and occupation. It is understandable that all participants are single-gendered since net-bar goers are overwhelmingly men, whilst young adolescents prefer grouping to play computer/online games, and students are prominent figures in net-bar settings, which facts are consistent with findings in local net-bar survey (Fung, 2012b). Thus, the sample of this research merits a certain representativeness and typicality.

### **3. Participants assessment**

While peer groups have many advantages over this study aim, it is not to say that they are definitely successful. A potential threat is over-disclosure, in which some participants impart more information, subsequently leading to uncomfortableness and uneasiness of other participants about revealing (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Another weakness of the method would be that in some situation one/some of the participants tend(s) to be over-active and dominate the discussion, resulting in weak/silent voice of others or forced agreement due to peer pressure.

After the discussion, I asked for feedbacks from the participants. All of them

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<sup>7</sup> In 2011, the average Hong Kong domestic households' income is HKD20,500. See the Census and Statistics Department, 2011, *2011 Population Census – Summary Results*, p. 68. Retrieved from: <http://www.census2011.gov.hk/pdf/summary-results.pdf>.

expressed positive feelings toward the discussion. They would rarely communicate with other non-net-bar-goers but their peers about the topic. They were generally satisfied with such a conversation with friends. I provided my contact information to them and told them to feel free to inquire if any uncertainties after the discussion. Yet, I got no inquiries hitherto.

### **Chapter 3 Soft labels of net-bar youth: Articulation and negotiation strategies**

Net-bar has different uses and functions in different parts of the world. Traditionally, Internet cafés or cyber cafés were referring to those places, which provided Internet access as well as drinks and snacks. However, as the development of technology, the demand of Internet cafés has been gradually dismissed by higher Internet penetrations in both home and public places. In the West, Internet cafés are no longer distinct from common cafés since many of which offer both food and drink and Internet access. Meanwhile, the fast evolution of network and accelerated upgrade of mobile devices facilitate the accessibility of Internet. Many Internet cafés existed today in Asia mainly serve as places for gaming, especially in countries/regions such as South Korea, Japan, Mainland China, and Taiwan, where video games are traditionally played in public sphere titled as PC bangs (Korean), net cafés (Japanese), Wangka (Taiwanese) and net-bars (Chinese). In Hong Kong, game culture has boomed and evolved from 1980s. Since the first introduction of console and parallel games, such as GameBoy, Famicom, *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, *Super Mario*, etc., a variety of game magazines were emerging. While in the turn of the century, arcade/game centers and net-bars have gained highly popularity among game fans. Many fashionable youths treated it as the most *in* activity to play inside, showing off their skills and identities as trendy (Tin, 2012).

Yet, the vogue of gameplay in game centers and net-bars has become a large concern

in the eyes of moral entrepreneurs, who advocate that public game places are quite a mixed bag and over-gaming is harmful hence youth should be kept away from such complicated area in order to be protected.<sup>8</sup> Even the name of “net-bar” in Chinese/Cantonese language has implicit denotation. Traditionally, “bar” involves some negative annotations in Chinese context, thus net-bar contains passive tones when people refer to.<sup>9</sup> And the same goes for people who play in the net-bar: they are unconventional to others, being treated as deviants against social norms and designated labels when they are related to the behavior of gaming in the net-bars.

In *Outsider*, Howard Becker (1963) analyzed a deviant group of the dance musician to demonstrate that deviant behavior is not always proscribed by law, but can be linked to the culture and way of life that “are sufficiently bizarre and unconventional for them to be labeled as outsiders by more conventional members of the community” (p. 79).

In this case, the net-bar youth is acting out a way of life that is scarcely meeting the social imagination and cultural construction of youth.<sup>10</sup> It is common in Hong Kong, when people in a younger age between 15-19, that the general expectation for them is to study hard and get into colleges. This kind of expectation partly results in the prevalence of cram schools and private tutors in town (Ng, 2011). However, in another regard, the

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<sup>8</sup> Of course other regions of Asia generate similar discourse over the negativeness of net-bars. For example, it is reported that Japanese net cafés are a refugee camps of scum and villainy (Ashcraft, 2012). And in both China and South Korea, reports about people who are gaming to death in a net-bar are not rare (e.g., Johnstone, 2013; Moran, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> “Bar” in the Chinese context would refer to places such as night clubs where people indulge themselves, buy drunk, provoke quarrels, cause troubles, make sex deals, and do other things contrary to social norms.

<sup>10</sup> Youth emerged as a social category during 1920s in sociological and ethnographic studies on deviance. See more explicit in a review: Abowitz & Rees, (n.d.). *What is a teenager?* Retrieved January 11, 2013, from Miami University website, [http://www.units.muohio.edu/eduleadership/courses/334/334\\_What\\_is\\_teenager.html](http://www.units.muohio.edu/eduleadership/courses/334/334_What_is_teenager.html).

labels tagged to the net-bar youth are far from official or authorized designations. Instead, their connotation could be negotiable over time, in which the ill effect of net-bar is played down for those who have already get into the college/university. In other words, contrasting to those legal, psychological, or pathological “hard” labels such as marijuana users or HIV carriers, we could say the labels are quite “soft”, in a sense that social audience and the net-bar youth have large space to communicate, interact, construct and interpret the meanings among the site of net-bar and the behavior of playing inside. Here, “soft label” is used as a loose term to describe those informal/unofficial labels circulating among the society, where the meanings are open to quest and re-construction.

It is important and necessary to understand the culture and way of life of a certain group in the society, if we want to understand how they develop a distinctive identity through their behavior, and how people react to their behavior correspondently. We can simply define the net-bar youth as young people who are aged 15 to 24 and frequent the net-bars for game and fun. This chapter is devoted to their culture/subculture in a way to articulate the shared experience in a group that face common perceptions and problems from the outside world, as well as their response/strategies to deal with such perceptions and designations.

Below I will focus on two parts. In the first part, I articulate the soft labels of net-bar youth, that is, analyze the tags that other people put on the net-bar youth. People might perceive net-bar youth as Dokuos, and the place they frequently visit is dangerous and unhealthy, where usually links to gangster, violence, sex, smoking, drug, and vulgar



languages. The second part will be devoted to articulate how the youth develop their strategies to deal with the conflicts of identity, that is, for who they are and whom others think they are. The strategies of avoidance, normalization, neutralization, professionalization, and quitting are primary concerns in this part.

### **Soft labels on net-bar youth**

Sara: Will people believe that net-bar is an unhealthy place?

Lance: Many people think so because they have never been to the place.

Honda: They think it a very complex place.

Xander: Some small pieces of news would make them think so.

Ben: Perhaps people in the previous generation would think in this way.

Spencer: And they only “think”.

Frank: If they have ever been there, they would know it is not like what they think.

(personal interview, February 2013)

In all the discussion around the topic of net-bar and its goers, participants expressed their feelings about how others consider what the net-bar is and who they are: they reach the consensus that people who do not go to the net-bar and play games would think the net-bar goers were different groups of people. The frequently occurred labels are: Dokuos, MK boys and gangsters, smokers and drug users, people highly exposed to

sex/pornography and vulgar languages.

## **1. Dokuo**

Last year, when I acted as a teaching assistant in an undergraduate course, we were once discussing a topic on video games. In one of the tutorial groups (about 8-14 people per group), many students strongly opposed playing in net-bar, and some expressed their dislikes toward net-bar goers, calling them “Dokuo”. It was the first time I’ve learned the word.

The idea of Dokuo originally came from a Japanese TV drama broadcasting in 2004 called *Densha Otoko*, literally meaning a man in the train. In the drama, the leading male character is single, usually stay at home and surf online. The term Dokuo is describing single men who are lack of confidence in dealing with outside world and women. Later, the HK Golden Forum borrowed it to refer to Hong Kong young people. The meaning thus changed a lot and was attached more negativeness. In Cantonese, Dokuo, that is, Du Nan (毒男), indicates a person who is poisonous obsessed in anime and video games narrowly.

Dokuo as a subcultural term is prevailing in Hong Kong in recent years. It is used as a noun and an adjective, denoting a kind of person and describing a quality of behavior. Many netizen and even the mass media have overused the term to refer to different persons and kinds of behaviors. In many spats in online forums and social networks, Dokuo is widely extended to refer to, including but not limited to, who have never dated

with someone, who fall in love with the Internet, who are introvert, who have average look, who are enthusiastic for computer programs or electronic devices or other personal interests, who are in the lower social class, who are poor, who are crazy for anime, who criticize “Hong Kong girls”, so on and so forth.<sup>1112</sup> In 2007, a netizen from Golden Forum posted a Dokuo grading sheet, listing 23 items to represent Dokuo’s physical appearance and daily behaviors.<sup>13</sup> The base is 1000 grades, and meeting one of the criteria would reduce 200 grades. Once a person gets a grade of negative 3000, he would be categorized as super-Dokuo. And people who look like or behavior in Dokuo way are also included into the criteria of Dokuo. *Apple Daily* online, *NextMedia*, has reproduced the grading sheet into a news report, accelerating further distribution and bigger cognition of Dokuo among Hong Kong people.

## 2. MK boys and gangsters

Through the conversation, the name MK boys enjoyed a high presence. According to the informants, MK boys refer to young people who wander around Mong Kok, dressing up

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<sup>11</sup> More information on Dokuo please see <http://evchk.wikia.com/wiki/%E6%AF%92%E7%94%B7>

<sup>12</sup> The term “Hong Kong girls” is a very negative word used in online forums. See [http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B8%AF%E5%A5%B3\\_\(%E7%B6%B2%E7%B5%A1%E7%94%A8%E8%AA%9E\)](http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B8%AF%E5%A5%B3_(%E7%B6%B2%E7%B5%A1%E7%94%A8%E8%AA%9E))

<sup>13</sup> The items are: 1) often wear same T-shirt in two consecutive days; 2) use MP3 that is produced domestically; 3) do not obtain an associate degree or above; 4) walk bow-backed and slumped; 5) afraid of entering luxury stores alone; 6) fond of participating virtual meetings; 7) ACG fan; 8) shorter than 160cm; 9) the topic of conversation between friends is always about computer techniques; 10) consider buying clothes is a waste of money and only purchase computer items; 11) flirt with women online but afraid of having social contacts with women in reality; 12) often imagine women would appreciate one’s “inner beauty”; 13) rather easy to favor those women with whom he has more exchanges; 14) have only one bag with every kinds of clothes; 15) lack of confidence to date with women; 16) carry old water bottle; 17) dress up crappy to go out; 18) mother purchases clothes for him or accompanies him to purchase; 19) never have a date before 18; 20) almost all friends are met online; 21) celebrate birthday alone every year; 22) unemployed or unschooled over three months; and 23) monthly income is lower than 6K.

in a pompous way. They are seen as punks, Ah Feis (teddy boys), hooligans, and perhaps have some connection with gangster, and they usually have their hair dyed gold. “Sometimes you’ll see girls accompanying boys to net-bar, and those (boys) are MK boys” (Spencer, personal interview, February 2013), because girls are the rare species in the net-bar environment. The MK boys play in the net-bar, but they usually come out at night. Thus some of the informants were only aware of their existence but had no interaction with them directly, since the youth lessly frequented the net-bar late at night.

Lester: I’ve only seen them once. We usually go to the net-bar after school.

Quentin: Usually we go to play in the afternoon, but they sleep at that time and only wake up late around 5 or 6pm.

Max: I think they are coming and gathering after 9 or 10 at night.

Zach: Come on, they often come out around midnight.

Quentin: Have a look at the nightlife in Mong Kok, you’ll see.

Steve: There’s no time difference: they show up at any time in a day! (personal interview, February 2013)

The MK boys are seen to be very rude and fierce. One of the informants Carl (personal interview, February 2013) shared his experience of meeting up MK boys in the net-bar: “Once I’ve fought in game against an MK boy next to me and I killed him many times. Then he stood up and stared at me, a very sinister look... In another situation, my

friend and I went to play *1942XXX*. In a fierce battle, my friend was super excited and cried out, ‘Fire, fire! Almost there! Come on, kill him!’ It was already 3am in the morning and few people were in the net-bar. We had no idea how loud our voices were and how noisy we were, until a really big guy, an MK boy with gold hair, shouted out several dirty words toward us. Immediately, the whole world was quiet.”

### **3. Sex-related issues**

Generally speaking, the youth have seldom experienced sex-affairs in the net-bar. When they talked about and read the news clips on sex net-bars, they appeared to have different levels of knowledge. Most of them considered this kind of special net-bars operated not in Hong Kong but in Mainland China. Or, they only exist in a certain area where the sex-related business takes place, as Quentin (personal interview, February 2013) put it, “I’ve really never heard of this kind of stuff. It’s so crazy. I bet it must be the net-bars in Temple Street.<sup>14</sup> It must be.” The youth also acknowledged that some special private net-bars would do this kind of business, like what Max (personal interview, February 2013) shared, “I think what you say only happens in some private net-bars. We often go to big chains, and there are more than one person guarded there. Thus if you do those business, they soon will learn.” Another informants Honda (personal interview, February 2013) also claimed that those net-bars only existed in old times by saying that “Perhaps it existed a decade ago. Back in the old days, there was a film called *Men Suddenly in Black*.

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<sup>14</sup> It is a place where is famous for prostitutes and sex trades.

And there was a scene when a girl accompanied you to surf the Internet in the net-bar.”

Only two to three informants did know something about the sex-related business in net-bar and they also explained what it was to other participants in the discussion. They regarded the girls who touted sex services in net-bar as “Internet instructors”, who ostensibly “provided instruction on how to surf the Internet” as a guise (Frederick, personal interview, February 2013). My informants Isle (personal interview, February 2013) further explained it by referring to “fish ball stand” and that “the Internet instructor is updated version of a fish ball girl”.<sup>15</sup>

Willy: Sex net-bars are rare.

Frederick: We students only go to common net-bars. And I think even if they have sex services, they won't sell to students.

Yana: We've heard of that kind of net-bar. But you won't think you'll go.

Carl: We were so young at that time, and didn't know much about that.

Bob: Even if you knew, you wouldn't dare to go.

Carl: That's true. (personal interview, February 2013)

When net-bar first became popular in Hong Kong, the sex-business was involved in. Many sex-related net-bars were established, touting Internet instructors who were to

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<sup>15</sup> Here fish ball stand is not a street stand that sell fish ball as a kind of typical Hong Kong food. Instead, it is a place that provides sex services. It is very popular in 80s and 90s in Hong Kong. Girls that sell sex in it are mostly adolescents who are still growing. And people compare their breasts to fish balls, thus giving a nickname to this kind of place. And the girls inside are called fish ball girls.

provide one-to-one instruction on Internet surfing, but actually offer any kinds of sex services. This kind of net-bar was targeting middle class men, inducing many young girls to act as Internet instructors for money (Lo, 2002). In the beginning of the century, Hong Kong government made effort to ban the sex business in net-bars. In 2003, Hong Kong police reported that they arrested 82 underage girls between 14 to 17 years old, who worked in sex net-bars. The police was swiping sex-business, particular in entertainment places and targeting underage sex trades, since 2004; after that, sex net-bars were dying down (Huangfu, 2004; Yip, Tse, & Tang, n.d.).

However, though many youth did not aware of sex net-bar and related services, they did recognize that people would search for pornography in the net-bar, most of whom were middle-aged men. Sometime they would probably behave improperly. As Dominic's story went: "I happen to see that a middle-aged man in the net-bar asked the manager to help him download some pornographic films. At that time, it was very popular to transfer films into PSP. So those people went to net-bar downloading and transferring. Perhaps they don't know how to do it at home? No idea... However, when they transferred the film, they would play it simultaneously on the computer. It was my second or third year in secondary school and we would not openly watch this kind of stuff, especially in public place! But his computer was on, playing the porn-things, and many people played games around came to have a look! They gathered a crowd. It was really a spectacular scene." (personal interview, February 2013).

Steve also shared another story: "So many people watch porn in net-bars! Someone

even made the sofa all white! It's real. One day I went to a net-bar early in the morning. A guy watched pornography there, and then slept on the sofa. He didn't go and the manager called the police. When the police came, he was still reluctant to stand up. And after he stood up, we saw the sofa was all white!"<sup>16</sup> (personal interview, February 2013).

#### **4. Smoking, drug usage, and vulgar languages**

Smoking is considerably a big issue for net-bar youth. In many people's view, net-bar is a place messed up with smokes, which impression is reinforced by the mass media.

Hong Kong has amended the Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance in October 19, 2006, and enacted it in January 1, 2007. Net-bar is one of the public places that smoking is banned. This regulatory enactment brings a better and more environmental-friendly afterschool amusement place for the youth to go. But it is not a guaranteed life vest to save the youth from passive smoking and smelly.

Lester: There are fewer people smoking.

Zach: Now it is banned. That's why so many people hiding in the washroom to smoke.

Quentin: One day I went to a net-bar in Golden Era Plaza to play CS, and a guy next to me was smoking. It was only 11am, and I was so frustrated.

Max: It has happened to me, too.

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<sup>16</sup> The guy was masturbating while watching porn videos.



Steve: It is different from before, when there was so many smoking in the air. But they can still smoke. The question is that who can smoke is really depends. Those who manage the net-bar are certainly privileged to smoke. But if he thinks you are annoying, he would probably not let you do so.

Quentin: Many middle-aged men will smoke in net-bars. (personal interview, February 2013)

In addition to smoking, drug dealing and usage also occur to people's mind when talking about net-bar. Sometimes, the youth would perceive that MK boys probably take drugs in net-bar. Nonetheless, for most youth, drugging was only a news report or hearsay. The youth simply overlooked it by saying "It's really none of my business. I only go for playing games." (Quentin, personal interview, February 2013). Again, similar to their attitude on sex issues in net-bar, the youth also emphasized that smoking or drug taking is a very personal matter. They directed blames of net-bar to individuals who acted in bad ways.

Ben: Some of my friends who are not smoking at first but learn to smoke in the net-bar.

Spencer: Smoking is not evil.

Frank: But it is a bad behavior.

Lance: Yes, it hurts your lungs.

Honda: Totally agree. Back to the point, I never see anybody take drugs there.

Xander: I think the worst effect of playing in net-bar is to smoke.

Ben: (to other participants) What other bad things can you think out?

Lance: I think it is not a problem of the net-bar. Whoever takes drugs or something else, it is his own business, not an issue of the place. Some people will also go to cinema to drugging. It has nothing to do with the place!

Honda: I agree. I think if a place is darker enough, people will hide inside and play evil. I don't think it can be linked to the net-bar. The discourse of "contamination" has nothing to do with net-bar.

Ben: But the smokes make me uncomfortable. (personal interview, February 2013)

Finally, my informants also expressed their concern over vulgar languages used and spread in the net-bar. Since the net-bar is viewed by the society as a very complex place, learning and uttering vulgar expressions and dirty words is one of the bad ways that the youth would probably be led to. Through the discussion, the youth considered that the primary school students seemed to be more easily to contaminate with bad habits in the net-bar. One vivid example was speaking F-words.

Lester: Many primary school students talk dirty. They "fuck" every time when they lost the games, and everybody seems to want a real fight.

Zach: Yeah, they "fuck" anytime anywhere. When they win the game, they fuck;

when they lose, they fuck; when they kill someone, they fuck; and when they are chased away, they also fuck. For them, it is so easy to fuck something.

Max: I heard many primary school students cried out dirty. The secondary school students, on the contrary, speak rather politely.

Quentin: Yes, now we are quick calm and really focus on the games.

Zach: Once I went to play *Nobunaga's Ambition* and beat a primary school student in the game. He ripped out with a curse. I thought he was insane, better not come to play. Then I stabbed his avatar in the game severely again and again. Ha! (personal interview, February 2013)

### **Negotiating identity: Strategies to deal with labels**

The discussion with net-bar youth has revealed a contradiction: when the outside world considers that net-bar and net-bar goers are different from ordinary people in their behaviors, the youth themselves see no big differences between them and non-goers. From the viewpoint of the society, the net-bar youth are conventional rule-breakers. They go to a place seemingly full of dangerous and contamination, focus more on playing rather than studying, and sometimes even act badly to a certain extent, such as talking dirty, smoking, watching pornography, quarreling and fighting. This kind of discourse appears frequently from diverse sources: news media, parents, government officers, the police, school regulators, social workers, non-governmental organizations, and so on.

On the other hand, the youth have their own justifications toward these labels. They tend to highly emphasize on individual inclination and personal interest on acting out unconventionally. They admit the stereotypical view towards net-bar goers has its rationale and the bad situation really exist in net-bar: youth will indeed have the potential to follow a deviant track. However, the rejection of those soft labels is strongly stated. They always charge the outsiders not being in the net-bar and experiencing what it is, hence contributing to the lack of first-hand knowledge about what really goes on and what the culture is in the net-bar. In response to negative social designation and negotiate their identities, the youth have adopted several strategies.

### **1. Avoidance**

For the net-bar youth, an intuitive response to social labels is to avoid conversation about the net-bar with the outsiders who do not participate into the activity. Avoidance works well for that it relates to the category of secret deviants (Becker, 1963), and the fact that people without knowledge about the deviant identity of a deviant would alleviate negative impression and social consequences toward the net-bar youth.

An example of this strategy is in the case of net-bar smoking. Before the forbidden of smoking in the net-bar and other entertainment places in Hong Kong, it was often problematic for the youth to play insider, because that they not only concern about their health, but also are afraid of being revealed of participating in the net-bar by their parents.

During the discussion, the youth have said that, in the old days, the air in the net-bar was messed up all day long with people “boiling tobacco”.<sup>17</sup> They usually went to play in net-bar without telling the family and didn’t want them to find out what they actually do after school.

Yana: Smoking was not forbidden then, you guys won’t be afraid of bad smells on your school suit?

Dominic: No, I did some tricks. When I came back home, usually 6pm, my mom was not back from work and the house was empty. I quickly threw the suit into the washing machine.

Jack: Cool. (personal interview, February 2013)

This kind of strategies would help the youth to manage their identities to the extent that they would not need to take the social consequences of negative tags, such as punishment by their parents, casting out by their peers, etc. We will return to this point in next chapter when discussing the social control mechanism over net-bar youth, especially the moral controls from parents and peers, in which the youth frequently act out the strategy of avoidance.

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<sup>17</sup> In Cantonese, boiling tobacco (煲烟) means smoking. It is the lively analogy to describe the scene when people smoke and the smokes wind around.

## **2. Normalization**

Avoiding being revealed as a deviant takes the risk of exposure. Thus, many youth would underscore the commonness of net-bar activities, in order to provide normalized justification for their behavior. This is vividly demonstrated in how the net-bar youth react confronting with the designation of Dokuo.

The net-bar youth expressed their concern about being labeled as Dokuo or in Dokuo-style. Most of them seemed not to be in favor of the Dokuo title, but also less strongly opposed it. From their physical appearance, they were hardly categorized as Dokuo. Nonetheless, sometimes they would even claim that, “we are all good boys, though also Dokuos” (Honda, personal interview, February 2013). This acknowledgement is a kind of self-mockery humor. But once other people learned that they were game fans and frequented the net-bars, Dokuo was then attached to them as marking an unwelcome behavior or inclination. Expressions like “girls think those boys who go to the net-bar everyday are very Dokuo” (Carl, personal interview, February 2013) and “those who don’t go to the net-bar would say we are so Dokuo” (Zach, personal interview, February 2013) were common.

In one of the conversation, a group of secondary school students heatedly discussed the term that applied to them, trying to negotiate the conflicts between the tag and their real situation, and justify their position and behavior.

Lester: People say you are a Dokuo if you play video games!

Max: But I think those who don't go to the net-bar are more Dokuo.

Lester: Do you know who play games at home? You don't know, right? Whether you go to the net-bar or not, other people would just say you are Dokuo, if they know you are playing video games, whatever. They don't care about how often you frequent the net-bar; you are a Dokuo, definitely.

Max: At least I'm going out of my home!<sup>18</sup>

Lester: Yeah, you can make money out of it, eh?<sup>19</sup>

Zach: XXX is a good student and also a game fan, but nobody called him a Dokuo.

Max: Gaming is only a way of leisure, why can't good students play?

Sara: What's wrong of being labeled as a Dokuo?

Max: People will cast you out.

Quentin: ...not an outcast. But people will just make fun of you.

Lester: Everybody is a Dokuo in nowadays...

Steve: The word is overused now.

Lester: According to the origin of the word, it referred to Otaku. But now? If you take out an electronic device and push a button, people would say, "Oh, you are so Dokuo!"

Quentin: Not exactly. Dokuo originally refers to those people who only stay at home

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<sup>18</sup> Since a Dokuo has some similar characteristics pertinent to an Otaku, such as staying away from general social life, here Max infer that people who play games at home are lack of social interaction than those who go to net-bar with friends.

<sup>19</sup> Max opens different accounts to develop avatars in game, and sells the accounts out if the avatars reach certain high levels and/or get excellent equipment. He is a gold farmer in games, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

and watch anime or something else. Now even when you are playing computer games, you will be considered as a Dokuo.

Max: Yes, it is really easier to be labeled as a Dokuo now than ever before. Basically, everything related to electronic devices, and the devices would make you happy after playing, and people will think you are a Dokuo if you play.

Lester: ...don't even be happy...you are happy when be defeated (in games)?

Zach: ...as long as you hold the device, you are labeled.

Max: You bring a PSP to watch a movie, but people think you are playing games, then you are considered to be a Dokuo. It is really unreasonable and unfair.

Sara: So you all won't think of yourselves as Dokuos?

Quentin: No.

Max: Because playing games is only a way to relax, only if you are not addicted to it. Everybody has his own way to refresh, some jogging, some ball-playing, some listening to music, and some sleeping. That's it. How can I say that somebody who plays soccer is a Dokuo?

Sara: Have you heard that someone is unwelcome by his/her peers because s/he is a game fan?

All: No.

Lester: Seldom. I estimate that over half of my classmates would go to net-bars and play games.

Zach: I think people won't welcome gamers just because they are not one of them.



But if you are a good student and get high scores in your study, people won't say you are a Dokuo.

Quentin: That's right. People only consider you are excellent.

Steve: If your school performance is poor but playing games, you are a Dokuo.

Max: Being labeled as a Dokuo really depends. (personal interview, February 2013)

The net-bar youth would not consider themselves as Dokuo, and they were against the bias from other people, through emphasizing the characteristics of group activity, which would enhance social contacts and relations among people. In another approach, they juxtaposed playing at net-bars and other leisure activities such as jogging, attempting to normalize the behavior and, therefore, providing justification of net-bar youth unequal to Dokuos. As the conversation revealed, Dokuo as a negative label is not applicable to every net-bar youth but limited to those who do not conform to the social expectation for a student, say, be good at school and get high grades.

By emphasizing the commonness of playing in the net-bar, the youth also admitted the potential dangers they would face. Due to MK boys' flamboyance appearance and intimidating behaviors, not only the outsiders but also the net-bar youth themselves disgusted them. When talking about that people related net-bar goes to drug takers and criminals, Dominic (personal interview, February 2013) quickly added, "They are MK boys!" And other informants nodded heads and agreed, "I've seen once. Usually in the net-bar the computer case is locked in case that people would steal it. Once I saw a guy

plug some drugs into the case... Of course they wouldn't take it immediately. But you will see them gathering together... Once there was a 'famous' net-bar... many MK boys would go. The smokes in the air would get you choked, and many people grouped near the door to do something... It was in Tsuan Wan but now closed." (Carl, personal interview, February 2013).

Actually, Carl didn't see people take drugs but he believed that they really had the drugs and were ready to take it, judging through their appearance and behavior, and perhaps also from some hearsay. MK boys also have something to do with the gangster: the informants agreed that the fact that people say there are more quarrels and fights in net-bars of Mong Kok "because there are many MK boys and people with gangster background in it" (Steve, personal interview, February 2013), notwithstanding there is only some overlap between the two. Those people are seen as tending to stir up troubles and violence, such as quarrels and fights. On this regard, the manager of the net-bar is supposed to be stand out and regulate the issue. However, my informant Lester (personal interview, February 2013) put it in this way, "It really depends. If he the manager finds out that several students, instead of some vicious faces, have quarrels, he would ask them to fight outside. But if some gangsters are quarreling, he would probably turn away and leave." As long as the potential of troubles contained in the entertainment place, it is no longer easy to operate business. Hence, strategies like hiring a guard or paying protection fees to local gangsters were adopted, just as Steve (personal interview, February 2013) mentioned, "Usually the net-bar would hire a guard. Almost every net-bar has one. He

comes from a gang, to whom the net-bar manager will pay periodically. And he will help to keep away those who are troublesome.”

It seems that the net-bar with MK boys and gangsters in is a dangerous place, part of which concern comes from the “widely-recognized” fact that net-bar goers would be dragged into the gang if they have enough exposure and catch up the gangsters’ attention. However, my informants didn’t see it as dangerous as it was considered to be, because the disturbing factors only disturb those who seem to want to be disturbed.

Max: The gangsters usually bully those who come alone to the net-bar. But if we go together with friends, seldom would we catch up their attention.

Lester: Yes! The gang means people gather together and bully others; and only when they have nothing to do, they’d like to bully for fun.

Quentin: ...others will link gangster to the net-bar, and consider we will follow bad examples and join them...

Max: But the truth is: if you are not going to the net-bar alone at midnight, when there are so many MK boys and gangsters, you definitely have no chance to be “invited” to join in the gang. Even if you’ve heard that, you won’t consider you will learn an evil lesson and try to be bad. (personal interview, February 2013)

Clearly, these conversations demonstrate that the net-bar youth have similar impression toward socially abased MK boys and gangsters, reflected in their awareness

of the danger of the place they are in. However, they also claimed it was not as dangerous and contaminated as that in outsiders' perception, and they know exactly how to protect themselves far from involving into disputes, that is, under no circumstances would they be one of the MK boys or gangsters.

In a similar note, the youth would argue that the sex-related issue would probably happen in the net-bar. Though they claimed they've never seen the sex business with their own eyes, they did have suspicious on some net-bars. One of the informants Dominic (personal interview, February 2013) told, "When I still lived in my previous house – we now move in a new one – there was a net-bar downstairs. It was an Msystem, and was a two-storey net-bar. The upper floor was separated into several VIP rooms, tagging very expensive price. I've never been upstairs. Sometimes there were some girls going up. But I had no idea what they would do inside. However I really thought it might have some tricky things. Now it has closed, because some legal issue related to the police? I'm not sure. Before it closed, when you entered the net-bar, the manager would ask you whether to go to the upper floor. The individual room was expensive. I usually played with a lot of friends. And I've heard that the VIP room would provide special services. I'm not sure. Perhaps my first impression was wrong."

Notwithstanding they knew it or not, they consented that sex net-bars were special and different from common net-bars, which usually opened around schools and housing estates. And they only went to net-bar for playing games. Even if the business existed, they considered they would not happen to be sold to and have a try. In this regard, what

happens in the net-bar is not different from what happens in other parts of the society. With this commonness assumption, though the net-bar youth recognized the dangerous and contaminated factors in the environment of net-bar, they claimed that the negative influences or consequences would be offset by grouping together and self-protection.

### **3. Neutralization**

Another strategy employed by the youth to manage the images of them is adding social desirable elements into their identities. This strategy has profound influences in neutralizing people's perceptions toward the soft labels on net-bar youth.

One of the elements that the society desires is higher education. Compared with the secondary school group, the participants in the two college groups were less serious about being labeled as Dokuo due to their net-bar going and playing behavior. Several factors should be considered. First of all, unlike in secondary school, the college students have more autonomy. They have wider and diverse social networks, are offered more choices and opportunities, and possess more independence from family and school. In a word, they are moving from small groups in secondary school into a complex modern society, which thus reduce the effects of labeling: they are less confused and stuck with being called Dokuo. Second, some groups of the society, such as college students, undoubtedly enjoy favoritism over others due to the double standards the society often employs. College often means people step into next level of life, approaching a complex adult world. The behavior of playing in the net-bar is seen to be acceptable or can be easily

overlooked in college students, partly due to that they are considered to be able to take responsibility of their behavior; meanwhile, for the same audience, secondary school students should be kept away from it. During the conversation, it was revealed that college students, especially those in big-name universities such as HKU, CUHK, STU, etc., are regarded as deviants by the outsiders to a lesser extent or even no deviance at all. Incorporating social desirable identities helps to reduce the negative perceptions on net-bar goers, alleviate the effects of social labeling, and neutralize the once deviant behaviors over time.

Interestingly, sometimes the society takes the role to neutralize net-bar images. The very evidence could be the improvement in management and regulation in the net-bar. Previously, the youth mentioned about people watching pornography in the net-bar and their suspicions of net-bar touting sex business. Yet, on the other hand, the youth would also see the improvement in arrangement and management, which provided more comfortable and healthy environment for playing games. The youth claimed that “fewer people would stay in the net-bar to watch pornography nowadays” (Zach, personal interview, February 2013), and the arrangement of computers was better, since the managers would put them together and in the center of the room. Besides, the managers would probably “walking around to check what you are doing” (Xander, personal interview, February 2013). As one of the informants Honda (personal interview, February 2013) said, “The manager in the net-bar is very nice. If he finds out that someone is hiding to watch this kind of things, he will shut down the computer.”

After all, the youth did realize sex-related issues happened in the net-bars. Nevertheless, they argued that the improvement on regulation actually helped to create healthy net-bars, which provided them justification to go to play. In regard to smoking, the youth also provided similar argument that government intervention helps to clean the environment, and the net-bar is no longer as it was stereotyped before.

#### **4. Professionalization**

It is not a common strategy for the youth to deal with their conflicted identity as a net-bar goer. However, as indicated through the conversation, some of the youth articulated their interests and orientation to develop the gaming experience into a career that could make a living. A very prominent example of this resides in one of my informant's profession: gold farming.

Max was in his final year of secondary schooling. Usually students at that time would face great pressure from Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). But his peers said that his principal business was playing video games, and study was just an avocation with him. He saw no objection whatsoever. He was stepping into the world of gold farming, where gold farmers play hard to acquire in-game currency and exchange real-world money with other players. Though the gold farming industry is not a new trick, Max was just about to start up his business. He opened many accounts in different online games, spent lots of time to gather good equipments and develop high-level avatars, and, then, sold those accounts to people who needed them and could

afford the money.

Max: Some trades are really crazy! A trick for thousands of dollars! I surely do it everyday!

Lester: The parents spoil the chick-chicks<sup>20</sup>. They give them so much money.

Steve: That's what Max can take advantage of.

Max: I'm just fine with the situation. Sometimes I buy in a piece of 200-dollar equipment then sell it with 700 dollars.

Lester: How much time do you spend to work on the equipment?

Max: Two weeks, more or less.

Lester: So you get your job! Playing games!

Max: Well, I can earn around 4 to 5,000 RMB per month now. And it's true, that's my principle business. But I think those who spend huge money on exchanging virtual goods are really stupid. Many people spend over one thousand dollars to buy virtual goods per week! Can you believe it? Aren't they crazy? (personal interview, February 2013)

Max now has played less in the net-bar for the sake of virtual property security ("I only

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<sup>20</sup> My informants called the childish primary school students as "Primary School Chicks". This word stems from Cantonese slang, originally referring to primary school kids without irony. In recent year, it is popularized on the Internet, negatively designating those who think and act in a childish way, and often ask for trouble. When talking about the younger generation in the net-bar, the informants showed a depreciated manner towards them. From their point of view, the primary school chicks in the net-bar are spoiled children, who probably come from middle-class families. Their parents give them much pocket money and they spend it lavishly.



open ‘poor’ accounts in net-bar and play.”, Max, Private interview, 2013). I’m not sure how long this job will last for him; or it simply takes a very short time in his life. But he and his peers expressed, at least from their conversation and interaction I can tell, less inclination to continue education into the college. By professionalize their playing, the youth again try to negotiate their identity, and justify their positions. The efforts are inputting, without knowing the effects; after all, it is an unconventional approach to dealing with the label of unconventionality toward the net-bar youth.

## **5. Quitting**

For net-bar youth, an easiest and cheapest way to adjust other people’s perception toward them might be simply quitting. This is especially effortless for those who have already entered colleges and universities. As mentioned before, entering college grants the youth more autonomy and opportunities to choose what kind of life they want to have. And it would lead to some people turn to other interests out of gaming in the net-bar. For those who are not developing a career out of gaming, their game team and friendship are facing highly mobility than ever before.

Ben: We call each other and gather together to play in the old-day net-bar now.

Lance: We are secondary school mates but now in different colleges.

Honda: Playing in the net-bar is actually a reunion, contacting each other and cherishing the wonderful young times. That’s our secondary-school memories, so

young! Hahaha!

Xander: That's what ties us up for so a long time.

Frank: When we are out to the net-bar, we usually play over 4 to 5 hours.

Xander: It takes almost an hour on bus to go out to visit them. So there is no sense for just playing for a while and dismissing.

Ben: We all want to play longer; by the way, the longer, the cheaper. (personal interview, February 2013)

Their conversation came up with a feeling of nostalgia. After graduated from secondary school, they usually gathered once a month. But not everyone was presented every time. And sometimes the meeting would be canceled due to different kinds of reasons. Entering colleges or universities reduces the youth's time to spend with old friends playing in the net-bar (unless they are in the same colleges/departments but also has no guarantee). Besides, the youth are growing to have their own plans for their life, which can become a trigger on their motivation to leave the group and put an end to the net-bar career.

Ben: One of our old friends is very disciplined.

Xander: He behaved quite rational. When somebody said adding another hour (to play), we all, except him, immediately agreed.

Ben: He's not a friend, anyway.

Spencer: He always left upon midnight.

Lance: He didn't treat us as a friend! Always leave early.

Honda: You know? That's why he's working at i-Bank and we are still sitting in i-One.

Xander: He went to HKU. He's quite successful now.

Frank: Midnight is the baseline.

Spencer: Every time after playing nightlong, we all regret not to leave with him.

Honda: He is successful.

Xander: He's leaving.

Spencer: He's no longer your research object.

Lance: Perhaps he is the object of another research, ha!

Frank: He's no longer one of us. (personal interview, February 2013)

Exiting the group and ending up the career is only a personal choice, a choice that is pertinent to a person's life path and social mobility. However, to the whole group of net-bar youth, it leaves an impression that individuals should not remain in the place and participate in this kind of activity if they want a success accorded with conventional standards. Once a person enters into a higher social class through education and work opportunities, he'd probably draw a clear line from net-bar, a place inevitably unsuitable to his social status.

## **Conclusion on net-bar youth labels and negotiation strategies**

The youth claimed themselves with self-control ability and they could tell right from wrong. They seemed to set a baseline of behaviors, limiting themselves to try some, though not widely acceptable, deviant but not harmful things, such as, talking dirty. They had consensus that many people in the net-bar have a dirty tongue, no matter the managers, MK boys or gangsters, or, common net-bar goers. According to them, even the police, who are in charge of this area, came into the net-bar and used vulgar languages. And the gamers were more frequently talking dirty even saying curses, especially when their emotions were stimulated by the games as the story in game went on.

But when I say they set a baseline of the behavior, I also mean that they know the time and place to act in this way. When Carl (personal interview, February 2013) in the discussion provided an example to explain how the net-bar goers talked dirty (“When I shot down a guy’s avatar in game, he jumped up and howled ‘Fuck!’.”), he unavoidably used the F-word, no matter with or without consciousness. In the meantime, other participants immediately reminded him about proper behavior in the conversation by tapping his shoulders and saying, “Hey, pay attention. No dirty words!”, “Why talk dirty!”, and, “Cautious, cautious. Be polite.”

When this group of people seemed to be very cautious on managing their images in the conversation, or, in front of the researcher, another group simply put it aside. They had no worries about speaking vulgar words in the conversation with their peers. They

treated this kind of communication as a way of self-expression. And this self-expression could be only accomplished while playing video games in the net-bar.

Zach: What? I don't want to play at home because it will be awful if I say dirty words at home! Once I played games at home and the avatar was killed by no reason. I couldn't help but cried out "What the fuck!". My mom heard it and shouted back, "Black sheep you are! Dare to say again?"

Quentin: My parents won't allow me to say that. They will kill me! They are strictly forbidding me to say dirty words, otherwise I won't live to see tomorrow's sunrise.

Steve: Haha, you shocked your mom.

Zach: And another time, I played *League of Legends* and rushed out some F-words without consciousness. My parent rushed to slap me and said, "You, dirty talking!!"

Max: Dirty words and games are inseparable companions!

Lester: You have to say some bad words when playing games, or you are not playing!

Steve: Can't agree more.

Zach: But you know? Finch has a dirty tongue, and he deliberately talks in that way.

Quentin: Finch teaches us how to talk dirty in net-bar. He swears in every game.

Max: It's a habit.

Lester: Sometimes when he's really high, say like a large group of zombies running toward you in *the Call of Duty*, he jumps up and cries: "Fuck, fuck, fuck...more

bullets!! Fuck you!!” (personal interview, February 2013)

By presenting the rationalizations and justifications the net-bar youth offer for doing things as they do, I'm not taking sides in the youth to accuse the conventional society who charges them deviants by fault. Rather, I'm trying to present the reality that created by the youth's interpretation of their experience, engaging them into the understanding of this social phenomenon. Labeling is an ongoing process with interaction between the labelers and the labeled. To the youth, designation of deviants is actually negotiable over time, and the deviant career is largely engaged into their life cycles and will have different directions for different people. Along the road to develop a deviant identity, a crucial influencing factor is the social control mechanism operated within a society, which make every effort to bring things back on the right track. In next chapter, I will discuss this issue in detail. We can see that the strategies, which net-bar youth employed to negotiate the soft labels tagged on them, are repeated again and again when they encountered different social control agents.

## **Chapter 4 Social control mechanism:**

### **Industrial development, rules and enforcement, and moral entrepreneurs**

As the interactionist approach towards deviance suggested, the social reaction to a certain behavior defines what deviance is. When a deviant behavior is defined, there will be some breakdowns in social controls, which are set to maintain conventional social rules and norms of behavior. According to Becker (1963), Social controls affect people's behavior through the use of power and application of sanctions, which influence people's perception towards the controlled behavior and possibility to engage in it. In the process of constructing net-bar youth as a social problem, various kinds of social control mechanisms take action to progressively prevent the problem exploded.

Here in this chapter, I try to answer three questions. First of all, who make and enforce rules and norms that the net-bar youth fail to conform? It is pertinent to the power structure and imbalance in a society where members of some groups enjoy privilege to set norms that members in other groups have to conform. Second, what kinds of social controls are involved into regulating the problem? When playing in the net-bar is conceived as a dangerous and unhealthy activity, different parts of the society are participated into the process, practicing on various aspects to deal with the problem as defined. However, the rule to control will not be automatically enforced until

explanations of the enforcement are provided. And these explanations lead to the final question: to which extent do these controls remain effective? And to which extent are they ineffective? Factors like initiators, initiating situation, advantages taken out of control, and complexities in social situation and cultural context are premises that affect the effectiveness of social control.

The following analysis is organized into three major parts: 1) industrial development of net-bar and games, which represent the control over the net-bar economy, including the accessibility, availability/supply, and alternatives to net-bar; 2) organizational regulation of net-bar youth, representing the control through institutional rule-making and enforcing process; and, 3) moral entrepreneurs, the control by attributing morality to the behavior and defining it as immoral.

## **Industrial development**

### **1. Technological infrastructure advancement**

Personal computers (PCs) are prevalent in Hong Kong. According to the report by Census and Statistics Department (2012b), in 2010, 77.9% of all households had PCs at home, among which the proportion of connecting to the Internet went up to 76.4% from 48.7% in 2001. There were 191 licensed Internet service providers (ISPs) up to March 2013 (OFCA, 2013). In the fourth quarter of 2012, Hong Kong's average Internet connection speed was 9.3 Mbps, ranking third globally and only being a little behind South Korea



and Japan, where the average connection speed were 14 and 10.8 Mbps, respectively (Akamai, 2012). Thanks to the popularity of broadband service and fast connection speed, Internet usage has been rising in the past decade. With a 86% broadband penetration rate, there were over 2.26 million people, around 32% of the whole population in Hong Kong, were fixed broadband Internet subscribers up to January 2013 (OFCA, 2013).

My informants also pointed out the advancement of infrastructure which provides faster Internet connection. My informant Yana (personal interview, February 2013) said, “When I was a little child, the network connection at home was freaky bad!” Some other informants considered the birth of Hong Kong Broadband Network, a local ISP, as the new chapter of network in Hong Kong, which has largely raised the speed and improved the quality of web surfing as well as other online activities such as gaming. The technological infrastructure advancement is part of the development of the information and communication technologies in a modern society. As the hardware and Internet accessibility/speed are primary barriers for playing games at home and also the advantages that net-bars have to attract customers, nowadays situation are certainly affecting the demand and supply of the net-bar industry. As the informant Bob (personal interview, February 2013) put it, “Now everybody can get access to the Internet faster than ever before. This reduces the demand of net-bar.”

## **2. Changes in net-bar industry structure: Availability/Supply**

In the heyday of net-bar more than a decade ago, there were many private businesses that

opened around housing estates and offered convenience for people in the neighborhood to have Internet access. Yet, as a result of decrease in demand and market competition, some businesses were outstanding others to gain market power. An unknown, but probably quite large, number of net-bars opened and closed in the past years, among which several ones with big capitals survived and expanded into chain stores. i-One, Msystem and G-Force are examples. These net-bars have evolved into enterprises and have highest popularity among my informants. The big-three manage over 60 net-bars in the town, with 28 of i-One, 24 of Msystem, and 8 of G-Force. The youth have experienced the process in which some net-bars have gained the ability to exclude competitors.

For them, small private net-bars offering business to neighborhood are winding up since “net-bar enterprises monopolize the market today” (Lance, personal interview, February 2013), larger due to that they offer cheaper deals and better services. In Dominic’s (personal interview, February 2013) opinion, “At least people inside are no longer that much unmannerly. In the past, it was over-demand. When I was in secondary school, like year 1 or 2, net-bar managers were never worried about business. You entered and talked to them, but they were always reluctant to answer, and focused on their own computers inside the counter. Only if you shouted loudly to them several times did they answer in ‘Coming soon’, and opened a computer for you. But, look at now. The counter boys in i-One provide fast service.... Now you only need to click a button in the main menu on the computer screen, they will provide you food and drinks and serve them to your desk. No longer need to stop playing and get them by ourselves.”

As a matter of fact, the existing private net-bars are changing strategies to target specific groups of customers as to differentiate markets. For that most big chain net-bars offer fast Internet access and high quality computers for gamers to play, small net-bars equip with high-resolution webcam and professional headset with microphone for foreign domestic helpers, mostly Filipino maids in Hong Kong, to make family connection through video chatting. My informants laughed out when talking about Pin-pins (Filipino maids) who “blow water” inside those net-bars.<sup>21</sup> They tended not to treat them as part of the net-bar youth culture since “It is usually in particular area and in the small private net-bars that many Pin-pins are present. If you talk about big chain net-bars, they are not common customers.” (Max, personal interview, February 2013).

This phenomenon has little influences on the youth who still frequent the net-bar. The changes in the supply of net-bar, on the contrary, gave them some reasonable grounds to go there and play: they interpreted the place as a better-serviced entertainment site specifically designed for game fans, that is, them. And in fact, big chains are actually touting gaming as a prior selling point over others, which is partly seen from the designs of their websites.

### **3. Alternatives to the net-bar**

Since people go to net-bar are mostly for playing games, along with the development in technology, there are increasing alternatives to the place and the platform to play games.

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<sup>21</sup> “Blow water” in Cantonese means that people bombastically gossiped.

One of the possibilities to replace net-bar is the school laboratory. Many secondary schools, even primary schools, have their computer labs. And for colleges and universities, different departments always have their own labs, which are usually equipped with high quality hardware and provided fast speed Internet access. In the discussion, one group of college students suggested that they have moved their battlefield from the net-bar to college labs.

Carl: I don't need to go to the net-bar no longer. My department has some labs and I usually play games there. A lab is like a free net-bar.

Xenos: College students don't need net-bars. The labs are enough.

Carl: So we have so many net-bars in CUHK.

Isle: Many computers in the lab are installed many games. That's a really, really cool thing!

Frederick: To tell the truth, I know that the lab of statistic department is fully installed with *League of Legends*. So does the lab of engineering.

Isle: The lecturer's computer in the lab is turned on all day, and we can install games on it.

Willy: There are some better ways. Some games are portable. You only need to plug in the USB drive, which contains games into the computer and you can play without installment. (personal interview, February 2013)

One of the consequences resulted from the prevalence of personal computers and (super)broadband is probably capturing much of people's time to stay at home and online. They can play video games comfortably with very little delay over the network, plus communicating with friends through improved video-audio system. Mobile phone, social networks, and free IM and video calls services facilitate the communication with friends through the Internet, which is hardly realized in old-day homeplay, as Xenos (personal interview, February 2013) claimed that "When I play *League of Legends* at home, I usually equip myself with professional headset with microphone. I can communicate with them (friends) clearly without delay."

The concept of "on the go" also immerse into our everyday life in a modern society. The creation and unprecedented proliferation of mobile devices are unimaginable decades ago. PSP, NDS, iPhone, Android phone, etc. are available almost everywhere in town with cheap or reasonable contract price. The industry of console and mobile games is increasingly expanding. Games on the go is becoming a very common phenomenon as we can see in the metros, in school buses, in the waiting seats outside restaurants, and in every leftover spare time people can make use of. Thus, gaming is no longer trapped in a certain time and space, so do gamers.

In addition to the possibility of place and platform substitution, there are also alternatives to the youth entertainment. Perhaps the game center is a big player here. Game center in Hong Kong is very different from net-bar, since the former only provides arcades, sometime with some gambling machines, without any computer equipped and

computer games installed.

Willy: When we grow older, we'd probably go to game center.

Bob: There's a legal age to game center. And it's more expensive to play there.

Besides, don't you think there are more MK boys inside? Many conflicts.

Isle: It does more expensive than the net-bar!

Xenos: When we reach 16, we are allowed to enter game centers.

Dominic: There are two types of games inside: one is the real game, and the other is gambling.

Bob: Some middle-aged men play those gambling games, turning the place into a casino.

Willy: I guess somebody change the token into real money to gamble. Even white-collar people will play in the game center.

Jack: By the way, it is much easier to get to know girls in the game center.

Isle: If you play a game very well, girls will think you are cool.

Jack: And we have interaction. Usually you put a token on the arcade meaning that you are waiting for next round. And if girls play the previous round, they often watch you play the next. And if you do really cool, sometimes they will talk to you and ask you to teach them how to play good. (personal interview, February 2013)

For the youth, game center as another gaming place has some limitation on age,

uniform, game titles and price. My informants Lance and Ben (personal interview, February 2013) agreed on each other's viewpoints, articulating that "We could not enter the game center with out school suits on. And 2 dollars, you can play an hour in the net-bar but only several rounds in the game center." But it has its selling points. Similarly, KTV, bowling center, billiards room, and the like are all possibly alternatives to the net-bar as places of youth entertainment.

## **Rules and enforcement**

### **1. Government: laws and regulation**

It is, in fact, few rules and regulations issued by the government that can apply to manage particularly the net-bar: no clear ordinances of net-bar, no responsible institution, no limitation of net-bar's location, no additional opening conditions, no rules on computer and equipment specifications, no restriction on youth in net-bar, no censorship on Internet usage, and no monitoring system (Legislative Council, 2002; Chan, 2009).

The Smoking (Public Health) Ordinance is perhaps one among the few rules that are targeting the net-bar. It was first enacted in 1982, and the latest amendment was passed on October 2006 and enacted on January 1, 2007, which extended the no smoking areas to cover game centers and net-bars. As the government declared, "In order to reduce illegal smoking in Internet cafes and amusement game centres, the TCO has been working closely with the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority... Since the

Ordinance came into effect, the management staff of Internet cafes and amusement game centres have been fairly cooperative. However, if there is a worsening trend of illegal smoking in such establishments, we will not rule out tightening up the relevant legislation having regard to the experience of other advanced economies.” (Legislative Council, 2009).

In 2011, the Home Affairs Bureau proposed to introduce a statutory licensing scheme for net-bars. Under the license, children under 16 cannot be allowed to play in the net-bar from midnight till 8am; and the net-bar managers should make sure to filter pornographic or violent Internet content. The bureau said that it would consult professional and public opinion on the proposal and gave the result on the next year (Home Affairs Bureau, 2011). However, no news follows up until now. It seems that the government does not have much interests in the net-bar issue, despite the fact that many social organizations call for public attention (Caritas YCS, 2002; Chan, 2011).

## **2. The police monitoring net-bar**

The net-bar youth had the experience to see how the police monitoring the net-bar. Max (personal interview, February 2013) said that “it’s common.... the police will check out all the entertainment places.” In the discussion, the youth showed that they were aware of that the police didn’t target them but regularly checking and making sure that no troubles happened. Usually, the police would require the net-bar goers show their ID cards, and it was because “perhaps they were working on a case” (Lance, personal interview, February



2013).

Lester: It reminds me that I went to a net-bar three years ago, and it was just the final day of a year, December 31. We, a lot of friends, were playing games. Suddenly somebody shouted, “Three, two, one! The police are coming!” Then all of the computers were shut down all of a sudden.

Zach: I bet the police must think that something bad happened inside.

Lester: Then the police came in and check ID card one by one.

Zach: I have similar experience, checking by the police in Msystem. Later the net-bar made up an hour for us. (personal interview, February 2013)

Frederick was a member of the Hong Kong Auxiliary Police Force (HKAPF).<sup>22</sup>

When talking about the police monitoring net-bar, all his peers pointed to him. To his knowledge, unless the police get a tip-off, they seldom randomly check the net-bar and people inside. A tip-off often is complaints towards the net-bar. The police also know that most net-bar goers are students. So they go to have a check only if they are informed that people will stir up troubles inside.

Dominic: I happened to be checked by a policeman in the net-bar and he asked me some questions. But if you dressed up like an MK boy, he would ask you to show

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<sup>22</sup> More information see: [http://www.police.gov.hk/ppp\\_en/11\\_useful\\_info/aux\\_police/intro.html](http://www.police.gov.hk/ppp_en/11_useful_info/aux_police/intro.html)

your ID card.

Frederick: Maybe in the past, net-bar is as dangerous as the soccer field of decades ago.... so the police concern that gangsters would force people to join them...Many decades ago, parents feared that their children would be “kick” into the gangsters if they went to play soccer in open field, because there were many hooligans wandered around. How people perceive net-bars now is just like how they perceive soccer field in the old days.

Yana: If you look unpleasant to him, he will ask you to show him.

Carl: No way. If they check the game center, everybody needs to show the ID card.

Frederick: Come on, it depends on whether the police do it for real or for show. If they take it serious, they’ll check everyone. But if they are pretending, then they just choose someone to check.

Willy: That’s true, man.

Carl: But I was checked by the police when I was playing in the game center. And I was not 16 years old yet. So I was really nervous. But later he returned me my ID card and nothing happened.

Frederick: They usually monitor the game center in a more serious manner. (personal interview, February 2013)

As a regulatory force, the police have the responsibility to guarantee the social order through enforcing the rules. However, since the net-bar is doing legal business, and the

youth are legitimated to play inside, the police have no right to exclude them from acting the behavior, because they could not provide explanations for it. It is actually how this kind of social control mechanism works: they have often involved a detached and objective view of the job to enforce the rule. The professions as a whole have no interest in the content of the rules they need to enforce, but accept them without questions to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate behaviors.

Nonetheless, Zach (personal interview, February 2013) told a different story: “Once I went to KTV with my friends and the police happened to come in. We stopped singing and I smiled to one of the policemen. He smiled to me, too and asked us to show our ID cards. Later he wanted to know why I smiled to the police and asked me not to smile to the police afterwards. It’s so wired. Just a smile!” His peer Quentin (personal interview, February 2013) said that the police tended to check those who they considered “way off common”.

Becker (1963) gave very detail analysis on how the rule enforcers operate in the society. To execute their duty, the police need to justify their position and win the respect of people they deal with. Since they usually handle deviance, justification of their existence is the premise of this kind of social control. Put another way, they need to show to people that the problems exist and their work to solve them are effective. Many news reports and media releases focusing on net-bar would give some words to the police on their successfully “cleanup” of the entertainment places where violence, sex trades, drug deals and other deviance are reportedly filled in. On the other hand, people’s respect to

them help to guarantee their feelings of security in the job. Therefore, many ostensibly enforcement acts (“...it depends on whether the police do it for real or for show”) by the police are only to coerce respect from people. Thus, when the informants considered that policemen would check your ID card when you look like a deviant, they are actually pointing out a fact that deviance is labeled not by actual breaking of rules but seemingly disrespect to the rule enforcers.

In addition, the social situation is always complicated. When a behavior is not illegal, the police cannot punish it with justification. However, stereotypes and fixed impression are unavoidable to every single person. Thus, though the policemen cannot enforce legal accusation in some cases, they can still offer moral judgment out of their professionalism. My informants illustrated this point by giving an example of that people call the police when they get things lost in the net-bar. Frederick (personal interview, February 2013) continued, “The police will come and check around, asking ‘do anybody see it/them’. If the answers are negative, they’ll leave. Just do it for show.” The youth demonstrated a consensus of that the police “have a first impression that those net-bar goers are usually not good” (Yana, personal interview, February 2013), thus they “often blame those who lose things in the net-bar” (Carl, personal interview, February 2013).

The police as a social control force are effective in dealing with illegal business and punishing illegitimated behaviors. However, they are also participating into the deviance defining process through enforcement to net-bar youth.

## **Moral entrepreneurs**

### **1. Media and moral crusades toward net-bar youth**

It must be emphasized that media play a crucial role in deviance defining process. The media have special characteristics in doing so. On the threshold, they consider themselves as the fourth estate to pillar the polity and strengthen civil society. Thus they have the responsibility to sustain the society, taking the initiatives to spread general values and criticize the culprit. Second, the media is a public platform that can call up attention from the public to infraction to the norms and values. Publicity is an important effect once the media enforce rules and values onto a certain social group. Third, they see some advantages in taking action. These advantages can be their consciousness to fight against typical urban attitude as Georg Simmel called emotional reserve (Paetzold, 2000) by drawing attention to the social problem, or self-fulfillment through establishing a reliable and responsible position and winning respect of the public, or something else. In a word, they have an interest to be served. Finally, different social situations and cultural contexts condition the social controlling means and ends of the media.

The media strategically project morality as the justification of their position, in which “Disapproval of deviants and confirmation of moral boundaries remains a staple function of the press.” (Crtcher, 2003, p. 147). Media often focus on several themes pertinent to the net-bar youth: 1) net-bar goers are Internet/game addicts and behave in deviant ways, such as playing to death; 2) net-bar goers are related to general terms of

non-engaged youth (the Neet), marginal youth, or young night drifters who are causing social problems; 3) net-bar goers are easily involved into violence and gangsters, as well as illegal sex-trades in a young age, which are strictly regulated by the government and the police. The overtone of the media directs to its concerns of social deviance and interests on catching eyeballs and distributing moral standards against the net-bar youth.

What the media demonstrated have conflicted with those my net-bar informants described. As previous mentioned, many youth have learned about drug issue in the net-bar from the media but never seen it by themselves. Also, they've heard of news on violence, crime and delinquency, Internet and game addiction, sex trades and so on from newspapers, television, etc.. They felt that the media tended to report some extreme examples to catch up attention, but rarely focused on ordinary daily life, which might not pertain news values.

Lester: I believe what reported in the media is true. However, I don't believe that the net-bar is a dangerous place as reported.

Zach: Come on, if you are addicted to the Internet, you won't bother to go to the net-bar. Some addicts even become crazy. If you have addiction, you are an addict even when you surf the Internet at home.

Max: I don't believe the dangers hidden in the net-bar as reported, unless I see them with my own eyes.

Steve: The news is exaggeration. (personal interview, February 2013)

Ben: I seldom read news, not to say those about the net-bars. If you know nothing really happened inside, you might probably feel it is a dangerous place. But if you have some experience, you will know it has no danger at all.

Xander: You have no idea how safe it is if you haven't been there.

Lance: News reports are always talking about bad things, blaming the net-bars.

Xander: (pointing to Frank) The media won't report a net-bar goer finally got admission from UST.

Ben: He is a genius. The news won't talk about that, only focusing on those who play games inside and forget oneself until die. (personal interview, February 2013)

Through the conversation, the youth articulated their views on media reports towards the net-bar and usually considered the media over-stated what was going on, thus affecting people's perception of the reality. In a constructionism sense, the reality is constructed. For the net-bar news, the media neither reflect nor create the truth or public opinion; rather, they construct them. Citing Astroff and Nyberg, Critcher (2003) argued that a "discourse *of* the people is discourse *about* not *by* the people. Their viewpoint is frequently assumed while they remain absent" (Astroff and Nyberg 1992, p. 10, original emphases). Taking the enforcement of social standards as an enterprising act, the media justify their use of power as moral crusaders policing the crisis on youth and technology.

## **2. School control over the net-bar youth**

As part of the social controls, school usually acts as a connecting port to multiple parties. They might set its own rules to limit the students to net-bar, cooperate with the government or the police to have youth education and publicity, share information with the parents about the student's situation. Usually, schools rule out the possibility for students to play in the net-bar through sending out teachers (usually the director of discipline) to catch students in the net-bar.

The informants had very similar experience encountering the school regulation when “In the morning meeting the director of discipline often emphasized that we were not allowed to go to the net-bar” (Spencer, personal interview, February 2013). But the very interesting thing is the “catch-students” trick operated mostly by the director of discipline in secondary schools. Lester (personal interview, February 2013) recalled that “Last time in G-Force, I’ve seen a group of secondary school students playing games with dirty talks. Suddenly their teacher came in and called their names behind, snapping at them ‘Standing up!’ All of them stood up and followed their teacher, going out of the net-bar without words.” When being caught up in the net-bar, some of the teachers “might not take you back immediately but took down your names and caught you out back in school the other day” which makes “you left a bad record in school” (Isle, personal interview, February 2013). In order to avoid being caught, the youth came with ideas, such as that going “to somewhere far from the school to play” (Bob, personal interview, February 2013) or visiting “some secret places next to the some private garage, where some



net-bars open with only a dozen of computers” where “is not easy for the director to find out his students” (Isle, personal interview, February 2013). Yet, some informants also acknowledged that “nowadays few teachers will go to grab students in the net-bars” (Max, personal interview, February 2013).

In addition, the youth also mentioned that though no rules or laws prohibited students with school suits to enter the net-bar, there was a conventional consensus on it, at least in the past, partly because teachers would easily identify the school uniform in the net-bars and effectively find out their students. In order to prevent the case, “sometimes the managers required you to take off your ties, or badges; Or you can just put up a coat to cover your suit.” (Quentin, personal interview, February 2013).

### **3. Parents and peers**

Parents and peers are people who care about the net-bar youth and/or have influences on their deviant behaviors. Parents have duties and rights to subject their children to discipline. When they are surrounded by the negative information about net-bar, they therefore tend to not allow the kids to go to the place. As my informant Lance (personal interview, February 2013) said, “They parents think net-bar is a drugging place, and are really fear of that.” Thereafter, “Parents won’t allow us to play when we are in primary or secondary schools.” (Frederick, personal interview, February 2013). If the youth’s parents asked about their whereabouts, small lies were uttered and shared between net-bar peers: “ I said I played basketball.” (Dominic, personal interview, February 2013); “My excuse

was doing projects, so many projects.” (Isle, personal interview, February 2013); “I said I was asked to stay by the teacher.” (Willy, personal interview, February 2013); or “I told them I just hanged out with friends.” (Xander, personal interview, February 2013) appeared as excuses of high-frequency usage.

But there is a slightly generational difference. When the college informants didn’t feel like letting their parents know about their experience in the net-bar, the current secondary students would probably not afraid of telling the truth and even share interesting things happened in the net-bar with their parents.

Max: I have no idea whether my parents know I’m playing in the net-bar or not.

Lester: Oh, they know and seem don’t care about it, only telling me not to come home too late at night.

Max: Sometimes I’ll share my experience in the net-bar with my mom. You know, sometimes you’ll learn some interesting words when playing, not dirty words, but interesting ones. I’ll talk with my mom.

Zach: It is not to say they hate my visit to the net-bar. But they will ask me not to go if unnecessary.

Steve: My father also plays games. He stays at home and I’ll go to play in the net-bar. He buys point cards for the game, and will buy some for me, too. (personal interview, February 2013)

This is partly due to the very open-mindedness of the parents and their real experience and knowledge toward games and net-bar. For most of the youth, they were not allowed to go to the net-bar because their parents would consider they would follow bad examples inside and/or get addiction to games. The informants had witnessed several times when a parent got into the net-bar to drag the kid back home, in which Dominic (personal interview, February 2013) brought about a lively story: “One time my friend was playing with me in the net-bar, and his mom suddenly appeared and dragged him out of the net-bar. It was really funny. He sat next to the front door, and suddenly his mom came in and saw him immediately. My friend was really shocked by her show-up. Then she shouted at him and took him away. I didn’t follow up the story. The only thing I knew was that he went to play with me in another net-bar the other day.”

In another focus group interview, one informant recalled a scene, which triggered all the others’ memory of one of their classmates. The young boy was a net-bar goer and big game fan, who once threatened his mother by pretending to jump into the sea, in order to get permission to play in the net-bar.

Frank: An old mate in secondary school once went to the net-bar, and his mom followed, attempting to take him home. And he ran away.

Honda: Oh, yes, the sea-jumping guy.

Xander: He threatened his mom, saying, “If you don’t allow me to play games, I’ll jump into the sea.”

Spencer: Haha, right. He told his mom that if she came to bother him again, he would jump into the sea.

Ben: But actually he didn't do it.

Honda: He just hid. But his mom could find him and thought he jumped into the sea.

Spencer: Then his mom called the police and got him out. The TV had reported it.

Frank: He appeared in the first page of the newspaper, as the headline. And his picture was so big, covering half of the page!

Honda: Parents usually don't like the kids to play in the net-bar, afraid of them turning bad.

Spencer: They think that we only concern about play and fun but do not study well.

(personal interview, February 2013)

Most of the informants expressed that their parents had bias or misunderstanding towards net-bar and their mere knowledge was only from newspapers or hearsay, which usually contained negative information. But they did realize the double standards the society usually inclines to: if they are good students, their parents would say little about what they do, or overlook the problems pertained to the behavior. As Xander (personal interview, February 2013) put it, "Parents will seldom ask what you do if you get good scores at school. If you are good at study, they think you can handle your study and entertainment. So they employ less control over you." To some extent, "even you are

telling lies when you say you are studying outside but actually going to the net-bar, your parents will not ask where you go” (Ben, personal interview, February 2013).

Besides the parents, the youth’s peers would also bring pressure onto their performing the behavior. I’ve listened to some girls who expressed their dislikes toward net-bar boys, considering that the place was complicated and game addiction was bad. One girl even stated clear that she would never find a boyfriend who frequented the net-bar. According to my informants, girls scarcely came to net-bar, and they were seldom play games (that’s partly the reason why all my informants are boys). Previous we are talking about the Dukuo label that tag on net-bar goers. The youth felt like their peers who were not net-bar goers tended to consider them different from ordinary people. Therefore, they seldom talked about net-bar or games with whom were not part of their group. When outside the group, the youth tended to hide their identity as a net-bar goer, though not consciously, and conversed other common issues with people. But peer pressure is never big enough to force them to change their perception towards net-bar and gaming.

### **Conclusion on social control mechanism**

Unlike in Mainland China, where moral panics of the net-bar youth is prevalent (Szablewicz, 2010), the moral crusades are hardly evolved into moral panics toward net-bar youth in Hong Kong, who are attacked under a soft lable, since a contingent

alliance of various interests is difficult to develop. If several competing groups are involved in the deviance defining process and rule enforcement, the situation will become complicated because more interests must be served and harder will it reach compromises and agreement. The more complex social changes also have something to do with the unsustainable moral crusades toward the net-bar youth: the explosion in new media and popular culture; greater pluralism and diversity of both moral and cultural values; decline in social and political tensions between classes; and greater heterogeneity in the social composition and lifestyles of the population (Boethius, 1994, p. 50-52).

In the Hong Kong case, fast developing capitalism and technological infrastructure provided hotbed to the game community in the consumer society, which many parties can access huge profit from the business. The government serves various interests and appears to be less responsive to the situation of net-bar youth. The police are responsible to the government and generally objective, holding a detached manner toward the net-bar issue. And media as moral crusaders usually get support from other less motivated moral entrepreneurs, such as the school and the parents. However, the media is lack of the actual rule-enforcing power. They can construct public opinion toward the issue but they are no long influential in affecting people's perception toward it, especially in a society with rapid changes and different interests to serve. Some news reports today begin to expand the range of topics by discussing game cultures in a pretty positive, at least neutral, way (e.g., Sing Tao Daily, 2012).

By looking into how the net-bar youth deal with social labels designated them as

deviants, and interplay between the youth and different social control agents, I will turn to interpret implications out of this case of labeling net-bar youth in the next chapter, on the basis of societal reaction theory from a constructionist and interactionist perspective.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion and implication**

This study aims to explore the Hong Kong net-bar youth and their culture from the societal reaction perspective. It has found out that net-bar youth were deviants simply when the social audience considered them as so, hence tags of Dokuo, gangsters, violence, smoking, sex trades, dangers, and contamination were designated to them to define their deviance. The youth adopted different strategies to deal with the labels. One of the prominent characteristics of their group expression was that they saw themselves as common as those non-goers to net-bar. By identifying their commonness, they charged the society of its disregard and underplaying of personal interests and individual choices of youth lifestyles. To them, playing in the net-bar was collective activity; even being labeled as deviants comprised in their shared experience that were memorable. Though they played down the significant influence of the labels within the net-bar groups, they would avoid conversation with outsiders about their behavior, in regard of being revealed in a deviant identity. And this is the contradictory illustration going through the whole discussion among all the focus groups. By talking about their encounters with other social players involved in the labeling process, the youth faced pressures and contestation from different social control agency. The government, the police, the school, the media, and the family all participated in defining net-bar deviants and mediating youth identity; yet they came with different purposes and interests which hardly reached compromises on consolidated and consistent enforcement of social standards and norms on the youth.



The dynamic of labeling net-bar youth is revealed in different levels. On the individual level, meanings are re/produced out of social interaction and daily experience as the youth converse and interpret their net-bar behaviors and practices. The micro level of analysis of youth personal expression then leads to the formation of a culture form of net-bar gaming, which enlarges the scope of this study to investigate the cultural positions of the youth and other social players. The vertical structure in the society maintains the power hierarchy that largely affects who can label, what to label, who are labeled, and how to label. Nevertheless, rapid social/global changes in politics, economy, culture and ideology as well contribute to the uncertainty and dissolved power in a social context, which makes the labeling process more complex and bewildering. Bridging the gap between interpersonal communication and social power analysis, this study relocates the societal reaction theory in the contemporary society to revitalize the perspective. More implications are discussed as following.

### **The politics of deviance**

Labeling perspective, while very much symbolically-interactionist, also incorporates elements from social conflict perspective toward deviance, especially in the areas of power conflicts among different social players. In the previous chapter, I have already introduced and discussed the means and ends of how social power attempts to define deviance, enforces rules and standards, sanctions the infraction, and redefines and

re-enforces social values according to social changes. The problematic is that, when different social groups meet together, there is not a harmonious negotiating process toward a certain social issue; instead, the society is characterized by conflicts and struggles between various social groups whose interests are, in many situations, conflicting with each other. Closely tied to the Marx's conflict theory, in a structured society, the powerful group/class is usually dominating the subordinate ones, even though members of different groups pursue their own needs.

If we treat the net-bar youth as the subordinate group, those who label them as deviants therefore are dominating ones, say, the government, the police, schools, parents, social workers, and so on. They enjoy the power to decide what is deviant and acceptable, defining and applying the labels toward net-bar youth, and enforcing them to conform the rules or sanctioning their behaviors in different ways. Here, several concerns should be brought into the politics of deviance.

First of all, conflicts are not only between the net-bar youth and the other dominant groups, but also among the dominant groups because they are also structured in a society where power struggles are everywhere. For example, in economic realm, net-bar owners, game publishers, and other interest groups might express opposition to the government and the police if the government tend to tighten the operational rules on net-bar, hinder the youth to net-bar, and reduce their revenue and benefits. They are less in favor of defining net-bar youth as deviants. Political parties might be on behalf of big businesses and hesitate to issue rules or laws on regulating net-bar youth, as called on by moral

entrepreneurs of media, schools and parents. In addition, groups with different purposes may respond differently to the deviance and require different enforcement. Some social organizations pay attention to the improvement of legal system, some religious groups focus on morality, and some others point to wholesome education.

Second, the power relation is never one-way journey but reciprocal projection. Articulation and application of deviance are both important and essential for the interactionist view on constructing deviance, in which a specific behavior must be labeled and a specific group of people must be envisioned as act so. Only when the net-bar youth apply the deviant labels from other people's perceptions onto themselves do they really become deviants, and the stronger the perceptions out there, the greater they realize their deviance. The process of acquiring a deviant identity is full of resistance, since the label is "soft" and the net-bar youth aggressively express their uneasiness and disagreement toward the labels. There are many approaches for them to voice over, through the online forum to discussion among family members and peers to lifestyle changing in generation, in order to manage their images and re-cast the labels. And the popularity of youth culture in a consumerist society also facilitates the dis-label of certain behaviors and groups of people, such as that the popular culture has adopted elements from punk, which was tagged deviance in last century, turning it into heated popular icon. That is, the meaning of the label can be negotiated over time and place.

Third, the consequence of the conflicts and struggles among different social players are varied in accordance to social situation. Political values, prevalent ideologies,

economic development, civilization, social norms and traditions are all affecting the result of competition of different interest groups. A vivid example is the attitude and social intervention on net-bar between Mainland China and Hong Kong. China has strong legal and social control over net-bar operation through top-down channels like the various governmental organization, police system, party media, and social services. In 2002, the State Council issued the Regulation for the Administration of Business Sites of Internet Access Services, stating clearly that young people under 18-year-old are forbidden to enter into net-bars. National media have helped to promote propagandas on provoking the moral panics about Internet addiction, further stirring the anti-emotions toward youth going to net-bar. The media-driven moral panics of Internet addiction and youth crisis (Szablewicz, 2010) often incorporated the discourse about loss of cultural autonomy and traditions confronting Westernization. The centralized political system has greater power over other social players; thus, in regardless of the actual effectiveness, the central government of China can utilize a combination of policies and strategies to directly and indirectly supervise the net-bar industry as well as the youth. Though the central power system is under attack frequently in recent years as the civil society is gaining power, it is still dominating most areas of social life since it also adapts to the environment. Hence, the situation is contrasting that of in Hong Kong mostly due to different political system and structures of power.

## **Consequence of being labeled**

A salient fact is that the labeling does bring several consequences to both the labeler and the labeled. Simply put it, to the former, they maintain some stereotypes toward certain attitudes, behaviors and conditions, which are opposed to their belief system and social situation. And they accuse those who act so as deviants and treat them differently from ordinary public. To the latter, people who acquire the deviant identity usually carry a stigma, but the effectiveness and duration are depending on the situation.

### **1. Defense and self-image management**

As labeling theorists suggest, primary deviance will turn into secondary deviance when a person begins to engage in deviant behavior as adjustment to the problem created by society's reaction to him/her, which triggers a self-fulfilling prophesy where people subsequently become more deviant. In the case of net-bar youth, they are committing deviance labeled by the outsiders but refuse to embrace deviant social roles: they think they are no difference with people who engage in other leisure activities such as jogging, playing football or bowling. Even they claim so, they tend to not talk about the experience in front of the family, teachers, friends who are not net-bar goers.

It is their defense to the social reaction toward their behavior. Of course, in a social environment, people might falsely identify or misrepresent other people, attributing to them characteristics which they do not have and making them live with stigma, such as

individuals who are wrongly accused as criminals and put into prisons. The youth refusing a deviant identity and/or avoiding being clearly identified as deviants indicates both stigmatized features in the labels and their awareness of them. Since playing in the net-bar is Dukuo, associated with gangster, sex, drugging and delinquency, the youth strategically manage their images and neutralize the behavior to prevent personal and social loss by being detected as a net-bar goer. For example, they would lie to their parents when go to play in the net-bar, choose a net-bar out of the scope of school's monitoring, avoid conversation about net-bar with outsiders, or only select stories about friendship and hot-blooded games happened in net-bar to narrate.

## **2. Resistance through social power**

In another account, the self-defense strategies and self-image management can be seen as resistance to the labels endorsed by the society. Yet it is clear that not every youth has similar opportunities to mitigate the consequences of being labeled. As mentioned before, the society would employ double standards when applying the label. The youth who study good at school enjoy favoritism: they play in the net-bar as much as others but seldom are accused as deviants. Their behavior is acceptable, and they are praised by their ability in handling both study and play. On the other hand, other young people cannot be easily overlooked by the same audience in the society. They are troublesome, or potential troublemakers. The fact that these people going to net-bar induces an alarming social issue, which should be paid attention to and dealt with.

Herein, perhaps Chambliss (2009) has provided an explanation. When described the Saints and the Roughnecks engaged in delinquent acts, he pointed out that social class was powerful in operating and facilitating groups' resistance of deviant labels. "Selective perception and labeling – finding, processing and punishing some kinds of criminality and not others – means that visible, poor, nonmobile, outspoken, undiplomatic 'tough' kids will be noticed, whether their actions are seriously delinquent or not. Other kids, who have established a reputation for being bright (even though underachieving), disciplined and involved in respectable activities, who are mobile and monied, will be invisible when they deviate from sanctioned activities." (p. 231)

I'm not suggesting that it is social class that differentiates the perspective toward same behavior on two groups of net-bar youth, which is also out of the scope of the study. But the potential to apply a social power perspective onto societal reaction tradition allows us to extend the analysis with concrete evidence, if we believe that power relation conditions social reaction even in a society occupied with high mobility, fluid values and bewildering array of ideas. Good students gain good reputation from parents, teachers, and, somehow, peers; they are perceived as smart and disciplined with bright future. These perceptions contain great social power into those youth's background, enabling the definition of their behavior as socially normative. Ordinary people would just overlook their deviance as net-bar youth, or less associate negative labels to them when know they go to the net-bar and play games.

### **3. Life trajectory/life circle**

From the perspective of the net-bar youth, the more successful resistance to be labeled and carry on the deviant identity is to acquire more social power and gain higher social status. The difference between college and secondary school net-bar youth can provide evidence to this argument. The secondary school kids are obviously more sensitive to social control and the negative effects of being labeled. As entering into the college, the net-bar youth, especially those in top universities, seem to have proved that they are good students with high reputation and respectable activities. They have more bargain power in going to net-bar, being considered as normality.

Further, college environment would probably provide a turning point for the net-bar youth to shift away from the net-bar groups, usually accompanying with the exit of net-bar culture consequently. When the youth eventually feel that the drawbacks associated with net-bar culture is exceeding the pleasure or rewards, they begin to find ways to quit. Unlike rehabilitating from drugs or quitting smoking, exiting the net-bar group is not a painful and protracted war. A person broken up with the deviant label as net-bar youth costs little. As the youth grow up, the individualization and globalization process grant them with broaden social circles and increasing social mobility. It is more and more difficult to maintain the old life binary of playing and schooling. And for those who have already gained advantages in people's selective perception and labeling, moving onto a higher social class might be more attractive than taking risks of being caught up of deviant behaviors as net-bar youth. Putting an end to the deviant career



seems appropriate.

### **Decentering the authority**

Labeling theorists scarcely answer the question of origins of the label, which seems as “the chicken or the eggs” question. It is also a very common criticism toward this perspective, concerning which, the label or the behavior, comes first. But it is actually the contribution that labeling perspective brings about in contrast to previous structural functionalist view on deviance, which argues that an authority issues labels and focuses on psychological and etiological origins to define social problems like drugging, delinquency, homosexuality, so on and so forth. Societal reaction theorists tend to direct the attention to the interaction between the two sides of the labeler and the labeled during the labeling process. There is no presupposed authority that labels a behavior as deviance, but labels have already existed and there are ongoing struggles over the power to define and resist. To put it another way, an absolute authority, such as the medical institutions that define mental illness, which can guide the labeling process is decentered; instead, different parties participated into the game and strive for resources, expertise, distributing channels, audience and influences.

Moving onto a society where information is overabundant and crisis are unprecedentedly pervasive, it is more difficult for one side to have predominant power over the other. The society may label the youth in a period of time on a certain behavior

they act out, however the label is quite temporal and situated to change over time and place. The term net-bar youth can refer to those who addict to the Internet and behave bizarre; while at the same time, they can also point to those who play as professional gamers, search for business opportunities, develop friendship and sense of belongings in peer groups, and create romantic relationship within the net-bars. The normative desirability of the society is changing all the time, where the boundaries between normality and deviance, and good and evil have become blurred. People are highly individualized and globalized, meaning that they feel insecurity but hardly unite to fight against such “minor” and soft issue of net-bar deviance, since their social mobility are increasing and there are much more serious and urgent problems calling for their attention. The reflexivity also emerges when the youth realize their struggle over the label and make efforts to response to it, for example denying the negativeness, grouping together to reduce the social pressure, diversify the life choices, and even exiting from the culture.

The origin of the label can be related to another concern that is about formal labels, such as those emanating from medical/health professionals, police, and government officials, and informal labels, such as those stemming from peers, friends, parents, and coworkers. Formal labels are issued from an authority, addressing widely social concerns about certain behaviors and people, which can be regarded as hard labels opposed to soft ones analyzed in this study. It is more frequently studied and discussed (e.g., Berlin, 2002; Bernstein, Kelly, & Doyle, 1977; Chiricos, Barrick & Bales, 2007). On the other side,

sometimes the labeling process may come from within, from those who we are close to and/or care about. It is a more micro-perspective to look into deviance, in which informal/soft labels take effects onto the labeled and bring them consequences in daily social life before formal/hard labels, which sometimes might not even appear.

A rapid change in the situation is that some labels are derived from popular culture, which is hardly differentiated as formal or informal, echoing the discussion of the dissolving powerful authority. Many heated-discussed words/phrases in nowadays belong to this kind. Dukuo, for example, is originated from a Japanese drama and transplanted into Hong Kong through online forum. As a popular term, Dukuo is utilized very frequently and common among young people, and the media even borrow it to make satiric indication of a group of people. There is no official labeling as a Dukuo accepted by the authorities such as the government and reputable social organizations. But if we maintain it as an informal label, Dukuo generates much more influences to the society, affecting people's attitudes and perceptions toward some behaviors, which originally are not under spotlight. The media's role in defining deviance and spreading risks never can be neglected and overlooked. In more and more cases, media take the responsibility to impose rules and values, label deviants, sanction infractions, and keep social order, operating them as ways to justify their right to process, exert and maintain the power. Yet, back to the preceding examples, Dukuo is scarcely a media-driven evil. The active participation of various parts in the society is again defeating any self-claimed authority in the labeling process.

## **Shortcomings of the study**

The situation is that, we have no way to avoid the influence of our social positioning onto our study of the deviance, and all other social issues. There are no higher realities out there, nor can we objectively describe and reflect them in the study. The position of the researcher his/herself is part of the study, which affects the design, the procedure, and the outcome of any research, let alone mine.

### **1. Taking sides**

Since the study is focusing on the net-bar youth and other people's reaction toward their behavior, it is problematic to choose a side and describe "what's going on" on one group of people involved in, while silence the voice of the other group. Becker (1963) called it the moral problems in studying deviance, which "is part of the general problem of what viewpoint one ought to take toward his subject of study, of how one shall evaluate things conventionally regarded as evil, of where one's sympathies lie" (p. 171). In this case, the net-bar youth argue their non-deviated characteristics and misrepresentation by others. Yet, it is possible that when I interview some people from the government, social services, school regulatory board and parents representatives, they might see things on the contrary way that the youth participation in net-bar are highly affected by the dangerous environment, and some of whom even lead to a more deviant and anti-social life. And

that is another way to phrase the labeling process. Each side can provide argument, details, and examples to support their viewpoints. While it is possible to illustrate the situation on both sides, it cannot be done simultaneously to produce a piece of work that makes sense to both parties involved in the labeling process and is consistent within their attitudes and perspectives to a full range, though we should give enough weight to the differences between these perspectives.

Given the practical consideration of accessibility, time and place, this study begins with the conversation among youth, inviting them to narrate their perspectives and interpretation of the net-bar youth labels. But the deficiency in this way is that the study might overlook the opinions of the other side, which might or might not have very distinct difference from the youth. The net-bar youth are feeling that those labels of Dokuo, delinquency, sex trades, gangsters and smoking are quite wrong, and bad things only happen to those who are already evils but never to them. Perhaps some parents would agree this point of view to a certain extent, since they see good students also enter net-bar and play as well as go to top universities. Their expectation of dangers in the net-bar might not be as high as rigorous moral entrepreneurs who provoke risks in the net-bar. On the other hand, some youth can communicate with their parents and teachers about the games that they play in the net-bar, based on their shared experience, though not in the net-bar, in gaming, which bridge the gap of different generations as well shorten the differences in their attitudes toward the net-bar youth.

In a word, the diversity and fluidity in socioeconomic, cultural and familial

relationships is reconstructing people's perspectives to the same issue, in one time, exaggerating and splitting social actors into conflicting groups, and in other times, integrating and converging differences and creating consensus. Thus, a follow-up study on the social control agencies, who designate net-bar youth as deviants, is helpful to fully understand the labeling process.

## **2. Sampling problems**

It is in the very nature of gender in this study that it will be difficult to depict the full-range of youth net-bar culture. Like most traditional deviance studies, this study is presenting young boys' narrative over their experience in the net-bar and their responses to social labels. Though recruiting net-bar girls is practically difficult due to their quantity and visibility in the net-bar, possible influence of the factor of gender exists. For example, the social expectation toward men and women are different, which might result in the different views on different gender in the net-bar. Girls would be perceived to be in a more dangerous situation when going to net-bar than that of boys. And the labels may lead to more dramatic consequences to girls, such as casting out of peer groups, irritating parents and destroying familial bonds, and so on. Yet, on the other side, the net-bar boys also demonstrated that the number of girls who visit net-bar is growing, though slightly, during the past several years. What the girls' presence in the net-bar means, how they develop the identity in the net-bar culture, how they perceive the labels designated to them, and whether they feel the same pressure and use the same strategies as boys do are

questions that need to be answered, in order to unfold and introduce more insights in the study of deviance and societal reactions.

As same as the factor of gender, the sample's occupation contains bias in the study. All the participants are students, excluding the experience articulated by people as a blue collar, a waiter, a salesman, a driver, and, particularly, a jobless MK boy, a drug dealer, a gangster, or a prostitute. The latter kinds of people are those exactly of whom the society stereotypical imagines that would go to the net-bar and behave strictly unconventionally. If we believe that the labels are not groundless hearsay, those people are the ones that meet the deviant profile and their experience could contribute to our knowledge on the net-bar culture from a typical "deviant" insider's perspective. Above are some limitations that the current study is stuck in. There is no a perfect solution to the obstacles in the exploration of culture of deviance, nor can we present an absolute object explanation that fully meshes with the picture of youth; however, we could work close to the people we study to try to understand them without getting conclusions in extreme.

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