

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter includes five subchapters which belong to introduction; they are background of study, research questions, objectives of study, significance of study, as well as scope and limitation.

1.1 Background of the Study

Ever since humans were born, they have carried with them something known as identity. Whether they are born as a boy or a girl, white or black, and how they will be recognized by others. Barker (2000) agrees that “To explore identity is to enquire: how do we see ourselves and how others see us?” (p. 165).

Identity, to begin with, is a somehow tricky concept and cannot actually be clearly defined. Even though we may response towards the question of “what is one’s identity?” by explaining what one is like, Hall (1996) argued that identity is a concept that operates between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old simple way. On the other hand, regardless of how complicated identity might seem, it can be articulated and expressed in a particular definitive way. It can as well be formed through several ways and by certain media, adaptive from time to time. “Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (Hall, Held, & Thompson, 1996, p. 277).

In today's society where people simply judge each other based on what appears and is visible on the outside, identity emerges as one crucial aspect. Not only is it able to reveal the individual's 'self', it also conveys one's identity in order to distinguish their class and social prestige among society. This idea is undeniable to communities from almost all social backgrounds, especially the rich, those who come from an established environment and with a high class status. As a result, they will undoubtedly be more selective and choosy about what is going to be seen by other people. It includes many aspects, such as what fashion items and brands they wear, where they live, in what social club they belong, and how excessively they spend their money.

Rich individuals are very much aware that every single thing they do and every particular goods they own represent their ability of money spending, visualize who they are as a person, and point out to which social category they belong, which will consequently accentuate their social status in society. Alexander et al., cited in Turner and Oakes (1986), believed that the perception of others matter as an appropriate determinant for social comparison.

Another supporting idea is confirmed by Chua (2000) in a section of his book, *Consuming Asians: Ideas and Issues*, who assured that identity can be formed by examining the individual's objects of consumption and their lifestyle. Mass or excessive consumerism in various sectors of industries is seen as an instrument of one's success and social prestige. As well as their lifestyle on a daily basis.

From the perspective of sociologists, individuals as social beings are believed to have the nature to engage in various daily interactions. Thus they usually belong in a certain community group in which they acknowledge themselves as having the same identity as the other members in the group. Tajfel & Turner (1986) mentioned that individuals will not interact as individuals, on the basis of their individual characteristics, but as members of their groups standing in certain defined relationship. The same phenomenon is depicted among the upper class in *Crazy Rich Asians* in order to express themselves and confirm their social status. As an exquisitely rich person, these individuals distinguish their social class from the lower class community by making social gatherings that can only be entered by those who obtain the same social class. They own various memberships of elite social clubs and attend activities which are only common among its upper class members.

In accordance to several aspects of expressing social identity being mentioned previously, the same exact phenomenon is also portrayed in the source of data this study uses, *Crazy Rich Asians*. Most of the characters in the novel are dominated by rich people who are mostly Chinese and Chinese Diaspora; people of Chinese birth who live outside of the Republic of China. Their social identity as an extremely wealthy individual is revealed through various ways, similar to what has been stated previously, such as; wearing expensive dresses made exclusively by famous designers, living in a house as big as a palace, vacationing to other countries and continents, entering certain elite social clubs, and other possessions of luxury goods. By finally figuring out the similarity, the writer believes that this

particular source of data is suitable to be analyzed using the social identity approach because of its dominant phenomenon regarding the expressions of social identity of rich individuals in society. Several other considerations as to why the writer chose *Crazy Rich Asians* as the source of data are as follows:

Firstly, the author of *Crazy Rich Asians*, Kevin Kwan, had his childhood in Singapore, where the setting of the novel takes place. Not only does this give a touch of realness and genuine description of the setting, Kwan who originally comes from an established family, also added his own personal experiences that he had back in Singapore as an inspiration to the novel. He stated that the novel characters were loosely based on real people he knew.

Secondly, the breath-taking and vivid description of luxurious fashion brands, huge mansions, antique pricey furniture, as well as all the wealth that common people can't even count, give an astonishing yet clear idea of how rich people actually live their lives and where their money are spent on. Moreover, Kwan realized that ordinary people may not be aware of some aspects about the rich that he was trying to portray in the novel. Thus, the novel emerges as an alternative to a newly fresh perspective about the rich and their wealth seen from the eye of a middle-class Asian-American character, Rachel Chu.

Finally, Kwan rose all the way to the top list of remarkable authors as his masterpiece, *Crazy Rich Asians*, was claimed as both a national and international bestselling book. TIME Magazine placed Kwan's name in the 2018 TIME 100, its annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world by. Looking back at the

book he had written, the writer sees Kwan as one worthy author to receive such appreciation.

Regarding all of the above considerations, *Crazy Rich Asians* is one potential novel which portrays the issue of social identity expressions that matches the theory of identity by Stuart Hall. Hall (1996) claimed that identity is formed in the 'interaction' between self and society. The subject still has an inner core or essence that is 'the real me', but this is formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offer.

Crazy Rich Asians which mostly deals with how upper class rich people make themselves appeal to their surroundings carry the issue of social identity. Several forms of expression that distinguish social class such as fashion, patterns of consumption, and social club membership will be discussed further and more precisely in chapter four.

1.2 Research Problems

Linking back to the background of the study, there will be one issue the writer is going to bring up: How does the super rich community convey their social identity in the novel *Crazy Rich Asians*?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Regarding the question mentions in research problems, this study aims to depict: The expressions of social identity by the super rich community in *Crazy Rich Asians*

1.4 Significance of the Study

There are two significances of this study:

Theoretically, this research is expected to give a contribution towards the upcoming development regarding the issue of identity in cultural studies. By analyzing the expressions of social identity that are portrayed in a particular literary work, the writer wishes positive influence of ideas towards the theory of identity proposed by Stuart Hall.

Practically, the writer hopes that this study can be a potential reference for the upcoming research. Whilst reading this thesis, readers in general are as well expected to have a better understanding on the issue of social identity.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

The study applies the theory of identity by Stuart Hall. To support the main theory, the writer also uses other supporting theories by some of the well-known social science scholars.

In satisfying the objectives of the research, the writer limits this study only on the characters' utterances and author's narrations which are related to the expressions of social identity by super rich people depicted in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*.