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WHAT IS CULTURE?

INSIGHTS INTO A KEY DRIVER OF BEHAVIOUR

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CULTURE IS ALSO A CONSCIOUS AND INTIMATE DETERMINANT OF WHO WE ARE



While there are many elements of our culture that subconsciously affect our life experiences and actions, there are also many other aspects of our culture that we can more easily recognise and relate to. In this section, we are going to look at the importance of accurate and sensitive representation of different cultures in the media and how this can create a bond with the target culture if done right as well as the dangers of getting it wrong.

Chris Arning, Founder and Creative Strategist at Creative Semiotics Ltd shares his insight.

‘Culture’ is an overused buzzword in colloquial discourse. People often take it as a synonym for the high Arts or national identity. Semiotics offers a perspective on culture based on a set of inter-locking codes (systems of signs) that have meaning for people in a particular culture.

Codes can be visual (like a certain aesthetic), narrative (like certain stories), linguistic (like slang), or behavioural (like modes of behaviour). These codes bind people together in shared cultural norms and can be used by brands as shortcuts to convey mass meanings. To give a couple of examples, British humour can be used as a broad-based code, or forms of ‘cuteness’ in Japan.

Mainstream codes often express ideologies (or underlying sets of beliefs and values about the world and how it should be) in the way ideas, people and places are represented. This notion of ‘representation’ is bound up with the idea of constructivism – that the truths of the world are not there to be discovered but are effectively constructed by language and image.

Stuart Hall, the British pioneer of Cultural Studies, developed a model of cultural consumption involving both mainstream and marginal codes and argues that, depending on the audience, there are three modes of reading: receptive, negotiated and oppositional.



He states: “When the viewer takes the connoted meaning, from, say a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code.”

But this does not always happen. When consumers of such content have cultural minority identities within a society, their codes of reading and interpretation are sensitised to the ways in which people who look and talk like them are represented.

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So what happens when the representation of a culture in the media doesn't align with how members of this culture self-identify? Although this may not be intentional, it shows a clear misunderstanding and misrepresentation of different cultural groups.

This is of particular note for brands. If seeking to represent diverse cultures authentically, it is vital to conduct proper market research to understand the target culture, as well as sense-checking with the local community represented.

Take for example US-based multi-national food and drink brand Pepsi. In 2017 they launched an ad as part of their "Live for Now – Moments" campaign, starring 21-year-old supermodel Kendall Jenner. We first see the star being part of a photoshoot, then jumping in with Black Lives Matter protestors, and finally stepping up to the cops and handing them a can of Pepsi.

millennial-friendly brand with a socially unifying and relevant message, the ad was heavily criticised for its insensitivity to historic and current events, inappropriate choice of protagonist, suggested co-opting of protest movements for commercial gain, and various other reasons.

Not only did this cause a short-term PR nightmare, it resulted in the lowest perception levels the brand has seen in over eight years.

Although the brand appeared to have the best intentions at heart, this example demonstrates that representations of culture, and cultural events, cannot be rushed. Your own culture, and how others approach and present your culture, can be an incredibly sensitive matter.

So, how can we make culture more influential while avoiding the pitfalls of cultural bias?



CULTURE IS THE FINAL PIECE OF THE GLOBAL STRATEGY JIGSAW



Increasing our understanding of different cultures and sub-cultures, provides an eye-opening insight into different people's conscious and sub-conscious perspectives, decisions, actions and experiences. We should never stop learning about cultures, they are as ever-evolving, multi-dimensional, and extraordinary as the world we live in today.

So, how can we begin to understand different cultures? Our simple model can be used across all industries to understand different target cultures:

- **Explore:** We deem that each individual culture can only truly be understood and represented by those living and breathing it, at any particular time. We therefore seek the expertise of in-market specialists around the world to unearth cultural differences and insights and convert them into opportunity.
- **Enhance:** With cultural insights uncovered by in-market specialists, we consolidate our findings and work with brands to create the most appropriate content. Whether in conception, execution or post-rollout stages, we use these cultural insights to inform and enhance each campaign, making it as engaging as possible for the local target audience.
- **Engage:** Our role is to allow all local stakeholders to have a say in the process whether they are internal or external to the organisation. An inclusive and collaborative framework with open communication channels is the only way to truly benefit from what cultures have to offer.





Conclusion

DIVERSITY CREATES OPPORTUNITY

Despite the rapid globalisation of the last decade, and particularly the last year, we are reminded daily that we all see the world very much through our own cultural prism and make decisions based on this perspective, whether consciously or subconsciously. It has now become critical to put culture and human interactions, back at the centre of the conversation.

While AI and digitisation may represent a large proportion of our future, we should also not take our finger off the pulse of culture. Culture remains a profoundly human identity component and determinant, and as such, a strong and heartfelt differentiator for products, services, brands and organisations. And it is only with culturally-sensitive human intelligence that you'll be able to make sense of the "why" and go beyond the tip of the iceberg.



CREATIVE CULTURE

195–197 Victoria Street

London SW1E 5NE, UK

E info@creativecultureint.com

W creativecultureint.com

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