

Cultural Imperialism and Globalization in Pepsi Marketing

The increased speed and flow of information brought about by technology has influenced a massive global culture shift. Two consequences of this increased information exchange are cultural imperialism and globalization. Cultural imperialism is a heavily debated concept that “refers to how an ideology, a politics, or a way of life is exported into other territories through the export of cultural products” (Struken and Cartwright 397). The related concept of globalization “describes the progression of forces that have accelerated the interdependence of peoples to the point at which we can speak of a true world community” (Struken and Cartwright 405). A driving force of both cultural imperialism and globalization are major corporations, many of which are based in the United States. Brands like Pepsi are now known worldwide and not simply confined to one particular country or the western sphere. These global brands can be viewed “as homogenizing forces, selling the same tastes and styles throughout diverse cultures” (Stuken and Cartwright 402). Conversely, viewers in other countries are free to “appropriate what they see to make new meanings, meanings that may be not just different from but even oppositional to the ideologies” of these global advertising campaigns. By analyzing three recent aspects of Pepsi’s “Live for Now” global campaign, I will examine their relationship to cultural imperialism and globalization, as well as show how the use of an interactive website accounts for a multitude of factors to become the most effective aspect of the campaign.

The Global Branding of Pepsi Advertising

Pepsi cola was created in United States in the 1890s and originally sold as medicine (The Soda Museum). Since that time, Pepsi has grown into an enormous soft drink corporation with “Products found in over 200 countries; \$43.3 billion revenue, and [over] 198,000 employees” (Schwartz).

In order to address global markets effectively, Pepsi launched its first global campaign on May 7, 2012, which debuted in the United States. The “Live for Now” campaign is “the result of intense consumer research carried out across a variety of markets over the past nine months” (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). Pepsi hopes that the “campaign and tagline will more clearly define what Pepsi represents and inextricably link the brand with entertainment globally” (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). In addition to television, print, and internet ads, Pepsi has launched a new webpage in order to allow internet users to share their experiences and interact with one another. Pepsi CEO, Massimo d’Amore, believes that “Technology, both social networks and mobile platforms, have created this global generation. We really want to connect our global brands with the global generation, and the best way to do that is with global management”(Zmuda “Pepsi Beverage Guru”). The new advertisements prominently link images of entertainment and fun to the Pepsi “Live for Now” slogan (see Figures 1 and 2).

The advertisement for the Pepsi “Live for Now” campaign features a variety of summer activities, which depict participants having an enjoyable and exciting time (Figure 1). In this advertisement, a conscious choice is made to include both male and female participants with a mix of ethnicities.



Figure 1. Pepsi “Live for Now” Advertisement, Pepsi Corporation

Source: http://www.csnews.com/userfiles/image/PEPS_X1987_E3973_M_38_v4_EG3.jpg

Figure 2 shows the interface for the Pepsi “Live for Now” website. Pepsi’s desire to “amplify[y] their pop-culture relevance” is clear from the myriad of entertainment and celebrity links on the homepage (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). In addition, the Pepsi interface asks viewers to use the social networking site Twitter to share their “Now” moments, thus making users a vital advertisement for Pepsi.



Figure 2. Pepsi “Live for Now” Interactive Site, Pepsi Corporation

Source: <http://nationalnewstrack.com/2012/04/30/pepsi-puts-a-pop-culture-cheat-sheet-at-the-heart-of-its-new-campaign>

Pepsi also unveiled new limited edition cans featuring deceased singer and American icon, Michael Jackson (Figure 3). Jackson has been involved in previous Pepsi campaigns, and carries immense international appeal. A recent CNN poll found that “readers of CNN have voted him as the number one music icon of all times, ahead of The Beatles, Elvis Presley and Madonna” (Gorgan). The cans coincide with the desire of the campaign to link Pepsi with entertainment icons.



Figure 3. Limited Edition can for Pepsi “Live for Now” campaign, Pepsi Corporation

Source:<http://wac.450f.edgecastcdn.net/80450F/popcrush.com/files/2012/05/MichaelJacksonPepsiCan.jpg>

These three aspects of Pepsi’s “Live for Now” campaign attempt to brand Pepsi as youthful, exciting, and synonymous with entertainment and music icons. This style choice is made in order to create a focused global image for Pepsi products.

Cultural imperialism of Pepsi advertising

Cultural imperialism refers to the exportation of the culture of one country to others. Technology has allowed the spread of information and has “invaded the cultural and ideological space of a country with images and messages in place of an all-out military invasion” (Struken and Cartwright 397). Cultural imperialism is proposed as a one-way flow of information; the dominant, usually western countries disseminate information to receiving countries. However, recent changes in technology have prompted a re-evaluation of the concept. Some theorists argue, “Advanced media, that are becoming widely available in the form of telecommunications, computers, and satellite technology, provide for greater interaction between sender and receiver than has ever before been possible” (White). The advertisements for Pepsi contain elements of cultural imperialism through their exportation of American culture.

Though “Live for Now” marks Pepsi’s first coordinated global marketing campaign, Pepsi products have been sold internationally for decades. However, without focused international marketing, Pepsi campaigns were simply translated into other languages. An example includes the mid 1960s campaign that featured the slogan “Come Alive! You’re in the Pepsi Generation.” When the “Come Alive with Pepsi” campaign was translated into Chinese, “the way they translated “come alive” led many Chinese to interpret this as a promise that Pepsi would somehow bring back their dead ancestors” (Churchhill). Errors in translation represent the idea that earlier marketing to other countries represented a far less conscious and focused effort. By exporting an American phrase with no regard to translation or cultural reception, Pepsi was unable to account for Chinese viewer reception. This example shows that “it is feasible to suggest that the dynamics of global transmission, televisual and cultural, are far more complex than the simple one way model of cultural imperialism” that has been previously suggested (Struken and Cartwright 399).

In addition to the limited addition cans, initial television advertisements for the “Live for Now” campaign also featured deceased pop superstar Michael Jackson. Jackson carries immense international popularity, which “immediately gains transmedia access across all channels and demographics for Pepsi as a brand, not just as a product” (Crutchfield). The “Live for Now” campaign is predicated heavily around Pepsi partnering “with emerging entertainers or artists from a variety of disciplines, from music to sports,” all of which are American (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). These celebrity choices such as Jackson are chosen because “with the campaign’s intended focus on Asia, it could be hugely successful in key target markets like China” (Crutchfield). It is not surprising that Pepsi would focus on American icons as “the climb to dominance of the U.S. entertainment industry worldwide, they propose, has had the effect of shrinking national production in other parts of the world” (Struken and Cartwright 400). The deliberate choice to place Jackson on limited edition cans further emphasizes Pepsi’s desire to converge with international markets

using American culture. By exporting American cultural icons, the Pepsi “Live for Now” campaign engages in cultural imperialism.

In addition, the interactive aspect of Pepsi’s campaign creates a “platform [which] is meant to be a Pepsi-curated ‘dashboard of pop culture’ ranking tweets, pictures and news items from the world of entertainment by popularity” (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). This real-time interaction between Pepsi consumers allows for a global exchange of information, primarily oriented around “pop-culture topics and using that to drive the ranking of what the biggest things are in pop culture” (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). The interactive web interface of Pepsi’s “Live for Now” campaign spreads American culture, yet it also facilitates an exchange of worldwide opinions.

Though there are elements of cultural imperialism evident in Pepsi’s advertising campaigns, there is still the factor of audience reception that cannot be controlled. As demonstrated in the Chinese reception to Pepsi’s “Come Alive” campaign, audience reaction and cultural differences can change the campaign’s intended meaning. Though the online interface of the “Live for Now” campaign is supposed to look similar, some specific content will vary by country. Chief Creative Officer Brad Jakeman explains “The identical piece of advertising running everywhere, that’s an old-fashioned way of global marketing. In global brand management, you get stars for efficacy, not consistency. I’m not going to comb the world checking to make sure everyone is using identical pieces of advertising” (Zmuda “Pepsi Debuts First Global Campaign”). Therefore, even in the seemingly cultural imperialist example of Pepsi’s global campaign, the opinions and culture of the receiving country are accounted for. Though the dominant American culture is invading other countries, the consumers of these products and culture determine their preferences and influence future marketing.

Globalization and Pepsi advertising

Globalization is an increasingly relevant concept that is facilitated through increased information flow due to technology. The globalized world is considered to be “shrinking” due to increases in the speed of communication and reach of powerful corporations. Pepsi chose to market internationally because “North American soft drink market saturated, both Coke and Pepsi are focusing now on other areas to grow their businesses” (Costello). Pepsi is the 137th largest company in the world and employs over 285,000 people domestically and internationally (PepsiCo). Expanded advertising campaigns and global distribution generates the need for international expansion and job opportunities in other countries.

In order to maintain a positive global image, Pepsi attempts to increase diversity, environmental sustainability, and worker’s rights. Currently, “Seven out of thirteen of Pepsi’s board members are women or ethnic minorities” (Schwartz). Pepsi makes public their recognition “for our diversity and inclusion initiatives around the world by many organizations and publications” (PepsiCo). As of 2011, Pepsi was “ranked No. 29 in a list of ‘Best Global Green Brands’ produced by Interbrand” for the corporation’s success in regard to environmental awareness and sustainability (PepsiCo).

Pepsi attempts to create an image of social consciousness “by trading on its image of sensitivity to local politics and environmental concerns” (Struken and Cartwright 403). Because Pepsi is so focused on marketing to younger demographics, it is important to create a global brand that embodies the concerns of their audience. Pepsi’s global advertising campaigns like “Live for Now” force the corporation to take steps in embodying the image they project. Therefore, the impacts of international marketing campaigns create positive global effects, due to a need for corporations to maintain positive public perception in the markets in which they hope to integrate.

Effectiveness

Though the Pepsi “Live for Now” campaign is in its initial stages, it can already be considered more successful than previous global efforts. The aforementioned translation error of the “Come Alive” campaign highlights the increased need for corporations to employ targeted marketing to the countries and cultures that

they are attempting to reach. Pepsi's "Live for Now" campaign is an example of a corporation intent on using technological advances and new media to reach a changing consumer base.

Pepsi was recently "selected by *U.S. News* as one of America's Most Connected Companies for its ambitious social media strategy" (Hatch). So far, the "Live for Now" online interface ensures "the content is light, entertainment based, and/or has a human interest aspect" which "goal is to curate an uplifting experience" (Wakefield). The use of social media in conjunction with the "Live for Now" campaign is critical in that "social media provides a treasure trove of statistics about the age, gender, demographics, interests, and reactions of consumers" (Hatch). The immense amount of consumer data that Pepsi is able to generate by employing an interactive website explains the success and effectiveness of the "Live for Now" campaign. While commercial advertisement and limited edition products are useful in reaching audiences, a new focus on social media and internet use appears to be the future of advertising and most effective way to understand consumers. Though the campaign is still in its initial stages, Pepsi appears to have found an ability to reach worldwide consumers more effectively, and therefore better understand a changing global marketplace.

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