The Value of Cultural Influences in Media Imagery

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A photo is worth a thousand words, but a symbol is worth a million. A symbol stands for an entire concept, and an image that uses the right symbols can evoke memories, emotions, principals, and even revolution. In a modern society inundated with images, cultural influences have the power to mold the subconscious through symbolism and imagery in unprecedented ways.

When cultures melt together in a pot of conflicting ideologies and lifestyles, yet where virtually universal digital accessibility provides access to endless photos, videos, and articles, images can normalize diversity or demonize it, build bridges or divisions, and promote symbols of freedom and love or hate and despair. Whether in the form of art, advertising, or propaganda, imagery is a powerful tool in both spreading and honoring various cultural influences.

Cultural Influence in Media

The media has seen a new birth in the past few decades as millennials are known to immerse themselves in it at least three hours per day according to a recent study. That's 45 days annually spent using television, social media, gaming consoles, etc. *per person*. But even more bafflingly, today's teens are known to consume media nine hours per day. Though these studies predict the modern world will reach a saturation point in coming years, where exposure to media becomes about as high as it can possibly be (after all, there are only so many hours in the day), it's been climbing steadily since the dawn of portable digital devices, because as access has become more convenient, so has the level of exposure.

One of the biggest contributing factors of media expansion has been the birth and growth of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. With over 1.75 billion active users, which would make it the most populous nation on the planet were it a sovereign state, Facebook has provided users a one-stop-shop for wanted information—the word "wanted" being operative, as Facebook's algorithms are designed to curate users' content toward what they're most likely to enjoy and interact with. Links to articles, videos, and images can go "viral" in a matter of moments, spreading around the world like fire. News, both real and fake, succumbs to mass opinion as the "share" button is clicked over and over again.

This is exactly where imagery holds its power: online content is visual, and images accompany stories and essays to provoke engagement and memory. A story that's shared with an intriguing image is far more likely to make an impact and become memorable than plain text, and media sources have seized the opportunity by attaching images to their information to grab an audience. And it works. Symbolism and imagery are obvious in every kind of visual media, as women are

objectified by photoshop to symbolize the ultimate forms of beauty, and certain demographics and cultural norms are pushed to the forefront in an attempt to sale information, content, and "likes". Because media is such a broad term encompassing advertising, propaganda, and entertainment, and more, let's take a closer look at how valuable cultural influences can be in some of these types of media imagery.

Cultural Influence in Advertising

Advertising campaigns are created by infusing a combination of consumer studies with market trends and the seller's goals. For example, if Axe decided to prompt prepubescent boys to shower more often, which would boost their sales, they'd consult marketing and advertisement firms to formulate a plan to promote the goal. Researched and proven techniques of imagery, symbolism, and repetition can be strategically combined to create a bandwagon effect. Axe will create a series of images or videos that use various cultural symbols to paint a different picture for each of a number of demographics.

To use the same company in a real-life example, Axe is among the hundreds of companies who've harnessed the power of digital media in collaborating with influencers who promote products to their niche demographics. Axe has combined forces with thirty male social media personalities in an initiative to increase the number of men who style their hair using Axe products. Less than one third of all men report using products to style their hair, so Axe and its influencers will create inspirational videos urging men to style and giving them practical tips in doing so.

Social media is the new cultural norm, and companies are able to spread their imagery (the symbol of feeling more confident with styled hair or by being freshly showered) to key demographics by choosing trusted influencers with very specific audiences. This unprecedented move toward engaging audiences is influenced by culture in more ways than any method before, as each influencer's message will contain symbols specific to his or her own following.

Cultural Influence in Entertainment

While advertising is used in entertainment for a plethora of reasons, entertainment mediums themselves have been strongly influenced by cultures in their imagery. One hot-button topic of entertainment imagery involves cultural appropriation on various levels, which Cato institute scholar Jonathan Blanks identifies as "when aspects of a culture—or perceived aspects of a culture—are adopted, co-opted, bastardized, or lampooned by white Americans, collectively or individually." In fact, the entertainment industry has been in hot water with both industry professionals and progressive liberals as it continues to adopt and romanticize aspects of African American culture, Native American culture, and other cultures.

Kim Kardashian, an American entertainment star and a symbol herself of overt American sexuality, is a prime example. When her spread in Paper Magazine was published, numerous websites attacked the magazine for its spread's shocking resemblance to a photo by Jean-Paul Gaude in his book titled Jungle Fever (yes, "*Jungle Fever*"), which fetishizes the African female body and culture. This isn't the only time, however, that a celebrity has been accused of romanticizing and monetizing from black features and culture through published entertainment imagery.

Miley Cyrus, who is now better known for her twerking antics and dressing like a unicorn than her stint with Disney as Hannah Montana, was cited by many publications for accessorizing not only with notably African American styles, but with African American people themselves. The music video for her song "We Can't Stop" features Cyrus wearing gold chains and a grill in her mouth (both symbols of low-income African American culture) while "twerking" (a dance that symbolizes the hyper-sexualization of black women) with African American dancers in the background.

While wearing appreciating styles and emulating African American culture isn't innately wrong—there are many beautiful and admiral traits in every culture—the imagery used in entertainment has true power to break down cultural barriers for many marginalized people groups. Some entertainers and artists appropriate culture for popularity, fame, and profits, but others use their influence to display other cultures as unique, beautiful, and vibrant. Entertainment that uses imagery to pay homage to ideas and styles from other cultures plays a big part in stabilizing intercultural harmony. Publications and artists that are known for acknowledging the origins of cultural artistry and ideas have allowed cultural influences to shape the entertainment and imagery we enjoy on a daily basis.

Cultural Influences in Propaganda

Because images hold immense power over knowledge, culture, and society at large, it's no wonder governments have used the rise in imagery media to propagate ideas and principals into the masses. While any information or media that spreads a political agenda is considered propaganda, great propaganda uses cultural influence to create a memorable campaign for a particular philosophy or action.

One of the most unforgettable examples of such media can be seen in the famous "Rosie the Riveter" image that's become a symbol for feminism to date. During World War II, Western culture began to see a shift toward main-stream feminism and women entered the workforce en masse. The world war separated countless men from their jobs, and industries had no choice but to extend jobs to women who would otherwise be culturally excluded from working. This began a national initiative to bring women to work, and the United States government enlisted Rosie the Riveter to inspire millions of women to earn an income for their families and keep America's industries afloat.

During challenging periods in world history, like during World War II, entire nations look to images for hope, change, and inspiration. There's an inherent quality in human nature that demands acceptance, so propaganda that displays images or symbols of hope, positive change, and inspiration for a marginalized people group can pick up traction and influence entire populations. Another example of this can be found in President Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

During a time of economic unrest, at the height of the the housing collapse and Wall Street crisis, Barack Obama harnessed the image of hope America needed and strapped it into his entire campaign. Hope was such a much-needed quality in the 2008 presidential election that when Shepard Fairey created the iconic "HOPE" poster, using simple techniques, calm patriotic color tones, a portrait of the Democratic party's chosen leader, and the word "hope" to symbolize everything the contemporary climate of American politics was in desperate need of: a leader that promised positive change. Even the posture Obama takes in the poster suggests strong leadership

and a vision for the future. Fairey's poster captured contemporary American culture and ideals so perfectly that it came to officially represent the 2008 Barack Obama presidential campaign.

Effective propaganda is capable of harnessing a cultural climate and infusing it into a campaign that steers a population's values and principals, and this kind of power is intimidating at best. But culture influences all types of media, as advertising is dependent upon infusing the culture of each demographic into advertisements, and entertainment and art are inevitably shaped by the cultures of creators and their influences. Cultural influence can either be appropriated or honored in imagery, but it's always most valuable in shaping the evolution of images and symbolism in media.