CULTIVATING
CULTURE
BLOSSOMS:

WHY CULTURE MATTERS IN MARKETING AND WHERE?

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CULTURE AND MARKETING MAKE US HUMAN. WITHOUT CULTURE, CAN THERE BE ANY SUCH THING AS MARKETING? WITHOUT MARKETING, DOES CULTURE SURVIVE? IN THE WIDEST SENSE, WE ARE ALL PRODUCERS, CONSUMERS, AND MARKETERS OF CULTURE. AT THE TIME OF WRITING THIS ARTICLE, THE CHERRY BLOSSOM BLOOMING OUTSIDE OF MY WINDOW GAVE ME INSPIRATION. LIKE CULTURE, CHERRY BLOSSOM EPITOMIZES BOTH TRANSIENCE AND SYMBOLIC TRANSCENDENCE, GOVERNED BY ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS - WITH THE PETALS SYMBOLIZING THE CONNECTED AND OVERLAPPING LEVELS AT WHICH CULTURE EXISTS. FURTHERMORE, IN ASIAN CULTURE, THE CHERRY BLOSSOM MARRIES POWER (MOST NOTABLY BY THE SAMURAI), AND FEMININITY. MY MESSAGE AND ALLEGORY IS SIMPLE: C.H.E.R.R.Y. – CULTURE HAS ENVIRONMENTAL RELIANCE RELEVANCE & YIELD. CULTURE WILL BLOSSOM IN THE RIGHT CONDITIONS - IT IS HARDY, WHILST ALSO BEING DELICATE. HOWEVER, IT BEGINS TO HAVE VALUE BEYOND ITS FUNCTIONALITY AND THE POTENTIAL TO SPREAD AND GROW WHEN IT IS OWNED, CULTIVATED AND USED.

MORE SO NOW than ever, we have become cultural hybrids and surrogates – where traditional classifiers such as ethnicity, nationality and class say less about us than our possessions, language and social networks. Also, looking at the rise of Muslim world and Asian influence, are we moving away from a world of Mad Men towards one of Ahmad Men? In the face of these changes, what new Eastern-centric approaches can we use to reinterpret realities? Furthermore, much of our cultural understanding and study in business is rooted in Western notions and constructs of nation, society, gender, obligation, spiritualism, collectivism, and context. But, in the Middle East and Asia, if we investigate Western notions of masculinity and femininity for example, they can mean very different things. So much so, that perhaps these variables make comparisons difficult. For example, I'm sure that you have seen bearded men from the East, greeting each other with kisses, wearing sweet fragrances, kohl around their eyes, sarongs, and jewelled rings, for centuries; or businessmen with brightly coloured cute charms hanging from their smart phones. And yet, 'they' too are cultural chameleons that can change according to their environment.

These behaviours remind me of the story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. People are seamlessly travelling between worlds and changing their identities in a way that is veiled and concealed from those uninformed and in the dark. Think of the Asian international student who travels to the West, to a different reality, and then returns home, only to hide some of their life-changing experiences. Hail the dawning of a more Eastern, feminine, softer and sociocultural approach to marketing.
Putting

others first and fulfilling their needs is the pathway to self-fulfilment. Welcome to globalization and a world of cultural complexity.

As you've probably worked out by now, I'm fascinated culture. I've spent most of my life trying to understand all of these 'things', issues and interactions that we attribute and attach to that word, *Culture*. I've often found that many people express how important culture is; but fewer are able to articulate these feelings in a strategic and structured manner; and even fewer can do so with any depth across several cultures, to the same degree. This article will hopefully give you food for thought; suggestions of ways that you can investigate culture in its various forms; and also a selection of cultural building blocks, which will allow you to break cultural ideas and concepts down in such a way that they're easier to explain to others.

So what do we mean by culture in a marketing context? Looking at existing literature on culture of relevance to marketers, these varying perspectives can be grouped into three approaches:
1. Business and Management
2. Socio-anthropological
3. Consumption-based.

BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT PARADIGMS

Business and management literature has sought to define culture according to systems and more particularly those inside and outside an organisation - in a competitive environment, and that govern commercial success. Hofstede[1] choses to focus on levels of human endeavour, grouping culture according to:
1. National level
2. Regional and or/ethnic and/or religious level and/or linguistic affiliation level
3. Gender level
4. Generation level
5. Social class level
6. Organisational or corporate level, according to socialisation by their work (assuming that they are employed)

More recently Hofstede's work has faced some opposition. McSweeney[2] challenges the notion of each nation having a distinctive, influential and describable culture. Fiske[3] critiques Oyserman, Coon and Kemmelmeir's[4] analysis of national and ethnic differences in individualism and collectivism, which revisited Hofstede's approach - where nations are treated as cultures, and culture is a continuous quantitative variable. Fiske argues that such approaches lead to

conflations. These conflations he judges ignore a contextuality specific in norms and values; and reduces culture to explicit, abstract verbal knowledge.

Following a different tack, Smith and Bond[5] raise interrogative principles designed to underpin cultural understanding. They consider whether:

- There is one best way to run an organisation?
- A native speaker of English communicates *effectively* to a non-native speaker of English
- Increasing contact between cultures improves intercultural relations?
- Human societies eventually merge into one global mega-society?

These it is argued encapsulate key battlegrounds when attempting successful marketing in the face of culture(s).

Rohner[6] notes that for many parts of the world concepts of *society* have become synonymous with those of a *nation*. Rohner goes further in asserting that the concept of a *nation* is a *Western* one, originating from circa the nineteenth century – where boundary setting has become more about political expediency, rather than to separate neighbouring societies. Therefore, I argue that analysing separable sub-cultures linked to national identity, rather than simply nationality, becomes of more significance when attempting to understand culture, and especially those outside of the West.

Holden[7] comments on the fact that definitions of culture have only continued to increase, rather than generating a polarisation in thought. Over sixty years ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn[8] registered 164 different definitions of culture. From these, they find that the *essence* of culture is present where:

- Members of a system share a set of ideas and especially values
- These are transmitted (particularly through generations) by symbols
- Culture is produced by the past actions of a group and its members
- Culture is learned
- Culture shapes behaviour and influences our perceptions of the world
- Language is the mediator

Of the many attempts to define culture, I like Herskovits's[9] definition, which is simply that culture *"is the man-made part of the environment"*. Smith and Bond explain that cultural definitions should include both material objects and social institutions – which points towards a tangible/intangible paradigm, manifest in: implicit, explicit and tacit nodes. Similarly, Schein[10], as a social psychologist, makes a distinction between *visible* and *invisible* culture. From this he creates three categories:

1. Assumptions: which are taken for granted and invisible
2. Values: where there is a greater level of awareness
3. Artefacts: the visible face of culture, which is not necessarily decipherable, and often therefore misunderstood. Here, it consists of three manifestations:
a. Physical
b. Behavioural
c. Verbal

However, these offer little guidance towards helping us decide what conceptual units allow for making the best cross-cultural comparisons. Because, values, norms, and practices may originate from different principles and assumptions – which may then limit the number of abstractions and generalisations possible. This is perhaps why defining culture beyond what could be seen as truisms or basic principles, continues to yield further definitions. However, I argue that it is should not be so much about defining culture according to a 'what is', but rather a '*how does*'?

SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the face of these challenges, some marketers have explored anthropological perspectives. Ember and Ember[11] suggest that the everyday usage of the term *culture* refers to a desirable quality, which is acquired. However in contrast, Linton[12][13] argues that culture is the total way of life, rather than those parts, which are regarded by society as being higher and most desirable. Similarly, Usunier[14] views culture as a *collective fingerprint,* where:

• Culture is the domain of pure quality
• Culture is a set of *coherent* elements
• Culture is entirely qualitative
• There are no 'good' and 'bad' elements of a particular group
• And therefore can be no *globally* superior or inferior cultures

They signal a departure of more cultural approaches to marketing away from quantifiable hard-factors, which seek to rank and classify culture, or judge it according to good and bad. Rather it is argued that marketers should look for commercial fertile soil, battlegrounds and fallow fields of:

• Inclusion and Exclusion
• Consensus and Contention
• Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy
• Evolution and Revolution

…which they embrace, rather than constrict. Harris and Johnson[15] point to culture being governed by socially acquired lifestyle traditions, patterns and repetition. In addition, they go onto assert that culture is governed by both *society* [organised groups, who depend on each other] and *subcultures* [members who share certain cultural features that are significantly different from the rest of society]. So perhaps it's no surprise that with the advent of social media, social anthropology has come into vogue, and units of analysis have become smaller. Macro and micro factors are not enough. Now there is also the Mezzo and the Nano; vertical and horizontal integration are possible at the same time. Cultural networks driven by technology are the conduits, and big data is revealing new patterns.

CONSUMPTION-BASED PERSPECTIVE

So, culture is social. And as we socialise, how are we socialising, and what with? Culture is linked to consumption and objects. Objects can be both physical and symbolic. Baudrillard[16] seeks to understand objects not by their functions or categories, but rather by analysing the process where people relate to them, and subsequently the systems of human behaviour and relationships. This supports the socio-anthropological analysis of cultural 'artefacts'. Derrida[17] writes that relationships are best understood through considering the politics of friendships. I extend the definition of an 'object' to brands; and frame the system of human behaviour and relationships to meaning *culture.* Baudrillard states that traditionally, technology views objects as having *essential* and *inessential* structures and functions. In addition, he suggests that objects have a 'language' and 'speech' of sorts.

More than ever, objects are being synthesised to transcend both essential and inessential spheres – and so the separation of these structures is becoming progressively indistinguishable. An example which Baudrillard considers, is the car engine. Functionally, an engine has to serve a purpose. However, engines are tuned according to acoustics, which evoke psychological feelings of 'sportiness'. Also, furniture and interior decorations comparably fulfil emotional values, which are termed *presence*. These examples champion the importance of culture in creations; from their inception to consumption – *the man made part of the environment*.

Baudrillard also goes further, in considering *gadgets* - arguing that in the strictest sense, whilst they are objects of desire for many, they actually often fail to fulfil meaningful and sustained functional value. Objects, from Baudrillard's perspective have a primary function of personifying human relationships, *"to fill the space that they share between them, and to be inhabited by the soul"*. Therefore, I also ague that brands are designed in the same manner as objects and or gadgets, and are being cultured to fulfil wider-ranging cultural obligations.

When examining culture and consumption, McCracken[18] broadens definitions further; to include the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought and sold. McCracken[19] asserts that,

"the social sciences have been slow to see this relationship, [between culture and consumption], and slower still to take stock of its significance. They have generally failed to see that consumption is a thoroughly cultural phenomenon…consumption is shaped, driven, and constrained at every point by cultural considerations. The consumer goods on which the consumer lavishes time, attention, and income are charged with cultural meaning. Consumers use this meaning to entirely cultural purposes".

McCracken also cites the postmodern phenomenon of *Diderot effect[20]*, which asserts that cultural consistencies exist when a collection of consumer goods are ascribed a characteristic meaning. An example, which McCracken provides, is of 'yuppies' that consume *BMW, Burberry,* and Burgundy wine. More recently, McCracken[21] observes that in a postmodern society culture is founded in transformational activities:

"It is possible we are witnessing the creation of a global self and an expansionary individualism…Individuals claim many identities and a certain fluidity of self – this much is accepted by postmodern theory. (We now accept that identity has less and less to do with things that remain identical)".

Gilmore and Pine II[22], ascribe this movement in business, which is consumer-driven, to the pursuit of *authenticity*. With such informed and individualistic consumers and stakeholders, McCracken[23] also argues that living, breathing corporations can maintain success, relevance and control through appointing *Chief Cultural Officers*. In McCracken's thesis he highlights that cultural understanding is of the utmost importance to brands; and that if understood fully, brands will resonate so strongly that they become part of the cultural fabric of society.

Therefore, the work of cultural anthropologists and philosophers are highlighting that cultural insight can be unearthed through observing participants' consumption of commodities (physical and symbolic), and most notably now, brands. Furthermore they appear to support a point made by de Mooij[24] that,

"Instead of causing homogenization, globalization is the reason for the revival of local cultural identities in different parts of the world." For example, it would also appear that with branded denim being sold at a high price tag - whilst looking old, worn and distressed (an approach championed by *Diesel*), indicates that brands and commodities are attempting to embed themselves seamlessly within existing cultural usage, whilst also commanding a premium for the privilege[25]. It is this embedding process which is helping to support the argument that brands are

orchestrating many aspects of modern culture, as opposed to 'hitting notes' in pre-existing cultural musical scores.

ESTABLISHING A CULTURAL LENS FOR MARKETERS

Summarising all of the points raised, they outline that culture is acquired or created - and is transmitted subsequently through teaching and learning. It exists on multiple levels of abstraction. The most significant aspects of which are tacit - and therefore are understood best by those who are the most active in that collaborative process. Culture is a living breathing language, both verbal and non-verbal; and is symbolic – it is preserved whilst being rooted in the here and now. It joins participants together and presents anchors of understanding.

Having presented these differing approaches and perspectives, my recommendation is that, in a given scenario, culture should be analysed and understood on different interconnected levels – and the best way to do this is to participate. The following model offers guidance as to how these levels can be categorised, and how they relate to each other.

FIGURE 1:
"THE PETALS OF CULTURE"
(AUTHOR'S OWN MODEL)

Culture acts as an empty container for many 'things' - the things created by humans. Culture is shaped by space, time and context – with porous and elastic boundaries. These are equally transient and transcend. Understanding the lenses that we use to make sense of reality is crucial. These are the culture(s) of Culture(s), culturing, and being cultured. Or in other words, understanding the who, where, how, and why? And, the prepositions that apply to and link culture, like: of, from, by, with, beneath, despite, across, alongside etc.

The diagram should be viewed as a Venn diagram model with 7 variables. In some situations, only one cultural frame of reference may predominate, for example local customs. However, in other instances, several variables may work in tandem or against each other. There may be a subculture, which draws from local customs; or a departmental culture, which clashes with organizational culture. So don't think of culture of one thing; and remember that to possess culture necessitates being cultured.

As stated earlier, my message and allegory is simple: C.H.E.R.R.Y. – **C**ulture **H**as **E**nvironmental **R**eliance **R**elevance & **Y**ield. Culture will blossom in the right conditions - it is hardy, whilst also being delicate. However,
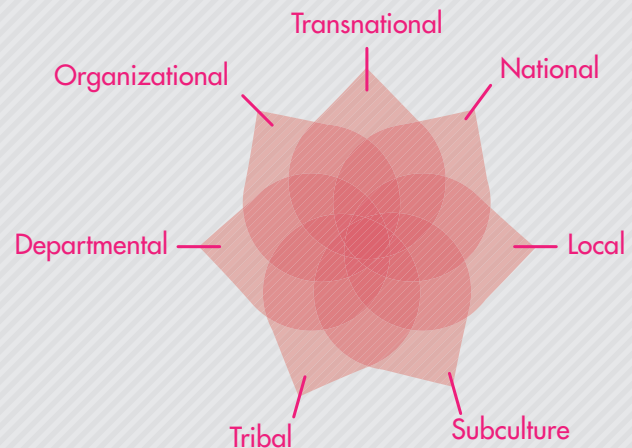
it begins to have value beyond its functionality and the potential to spread and grow when it is owned, cultivated and used. Marketers should see where different levels of culture: conflict, join, cancel each other out, enhance, and govern activities. This is an organic, human and communal process. Just like the samurai revered cherry blossom: culture can be the symbol of power, victory, inspiration and feminine beauty. But, whilst every cherry blossom may look similar, they are different, occupy a different space, and are short lived – so too is culture.

So, embrace culture… seek it out wherever you can… nurture it… admire its beauty… share your experiences… keep its memories alive… and plant its seeds - so that it will blossom again when the seasons change.

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