

THE USAGE OF POP CULTURE ELEMENTS IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

PRETHODNO PRIOPĆENJE / PRELIMINARY COMMUNICATION

UDK: 658.8:316.7

JEL: M31

Autori/Authors:

MARIO FRACULJ
SENIOR LECTURER
mario.fraculj@algebra.hr*

LUCIAN LEKAJ
STUDENT OF PROFESSIONAL MASTER IN DIGITAL
MARKETING
lucian.lekaj2@racunarstvo.hr

FOR ALL AUTHORS: ALGEBRA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, ZAGREB

*Corresponding author email: mario.fraculj@algebra.hr

ABSTRACT

The strong effect of marketing communications on people's personalities, opinions, preferences and decisions has so far been widely studied. If marketing can sway people's opinions and influence their character and affinities, and if pop culture is a part of those characters and affinities, it must be of interest to many to see how exactly marketing and pop culture correlate and how the general population perceives them when they are combined, for example in marketing campaigns that contain pop-cultural elements. This is explored in a quantitative study with a questionnaire that shows multiple marketing communications examples that contain pop culture elements or references and compares them to their similar versions that don't contain such elements. The goal of the research was to determine whether consumers perceive various forms of marketing communications more positively when they contain elements of popular culture, as opposed to marketing communications that do not contain or refer to such elements. This was tested through paired comparisons of six different marketing communication examples in the form of users showing preference towards one version of the example or the other, and options of equal preference or dislike available as well. In 5 out of 6 examples analyzed, consumers preferred the pop-cultural versions of marketing communications. These results, which clearly lean in favor of using elements of pop culture, can be useful to marketing strategists and practitioners when considering the inclusion of pop culture in their marketing communication efforts.

KEY WORDS: popular culture, marketing communications, ad liking, ad preference

1. INTRODUCTION

Popular culture is present in people's everyday lives, whether they are aware of it or not. It encompasses numerous aspects of their lives, from books, movies and music to brands, objects and events. Considering its impact and importance to the general population, it is only logical to assume that this meaningful cultural phenomenon will be influenced and used to a benefit, not only by individuals on various occasions but by companies as well.

Popular culture can be easily defined as a change in traditional culture or usual methods of cultural expression, in such a way that the new form creates massive public discourse and achieves mainstream status (Danesi, 2008, pp. 18-21).

As humans have always achieved satisfaction through constant progress and change, popular culture reflects that characteristic and is always adapting to new trends, events and information, to satisfy the largest possible number of people's needs when they are exposed to pop culture in whichever shape (Labaš & Mihovilović, 2011, pp. 95-100).

Sources of popular culture are numerous, with massive media and the internet, more specifically social media, being the most prevalent. Many other sources are also worthy of mention: memes, celebrities, books, music, film, television, theatre, sport, radio and video games. But it is interesting to note how popular culture can be a product of advertising itself. Proof of this are brands that have become household names, such as Gillette, Tesla or Rolex (Delaney, 2007).

A theory imposes itself: if so many aspects of a person's life can become popular culture, then popular culture can be considered subject to "exploitation" for the benefit of various business entities. This is simply so because once something becomes a part of popular culture, it satisfies the cultural needs of a very large number of people, and if a brand or its product were to "attach" itself to the phenomenon by referencing it or incorporating it into the product somehow, then the brand or product would have a positive connotation with those who strongly relate to the element of popular culture.

In-depth studies of this kind of effect that pop culture can have on marketing are lacking, as most literature out there pertains to the opposite; the effect of marketing on popular culture. The analysis of influence of popular culture on marketing world can be initialized with one elementary question: do consumers like ads and other types of marketing better if those are filled with pop-cultural elements or references?

It should be noted that attempts to infuse a brand, product or marketing campaign with pop-cultural elements will most likely not be effective in a desirable way and result in more liking by consumers if multiple other aspects of the opportunity and process are not observed and analysed. A business must follow trends on social media or news outlets and be up to date with various events that are of the majority's interest, then curate the found opportunities and see which can be moulded into the marketing strategy in such a way that it makes sense for the brand. The communication of the brand must remain suitable and identifiable, and the message conscious and relatable. The campaign that incorporates elements of pop culture needs to be sensible, timed just right, interesting and it needs to stand out from all the other brands and messages that are referencing the same pop-cultural event (Stokes, 2018).

The campaign still needs to adhere to common rules of marketing: it needs to consider the target audience, stay on budget, respect the sensitive time limit, select optimal communication channels and it must be published only after having, at least partially, examined the competition's activity on the same matter. After the campaign is done, its success will be measured through several previously defined goals and KPIs, as with any other marketing activity unrelated to pop culture (Barak, 2017).

In that respect, this study is of limited scope: it assumes correct handling of all aforementioned aspects and rather focuses on the effect the sole presence of popular culture in marketing can have on the likeability of the communicated message. The simple paired comparison allows for a direct comparison of perceived likeability of each marketing example, whereas bias by other factors has been limited, as the examples are similar to miniscule details except the very presence of pop culture elements. The results can be considered important to the industry as they help reach a consensus on whether it is useful and beneficial to marketers to go through all the trouble to incorporate pop culture references in their marketing efforts.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A study from 2016 showed that out of 345 marketing campaigns that were examined, 28% of them that referenced pop culture in some way were highly positioned when ranked by success. Those same campaigns achieve better results than those that attempted to elicit a strong emotional reaction with the targeted subject (Libert, 2016).

Another study found that, along with the perception of brand, price and quality, a brand's participation in pop culture makes up for about 25% of the effect on gaining and maintaining consumers' attention. Furthermore, it also has the same importance in influencing the consumers' very intention of making a purchase (Sharpe, 2021).

Fiberlink LLC, the company now owned by IBM, studied the performance of a marketing campaign they used to promote their webinars. This campaign was different from the others because it incorporated explicit references to Game of Thrones, one of the more popular fictional TV shows, and Guardians of The Galaxy, a box office smash hit. The marketing campaign generated 20% more leads in the form of actual webinar attendees. Web content consumption grew by 10% and newsletter and e-book subscriptions went up by 3% (Hogg, 2015).

Memes, as a form of popular culture, are an endless source of inspiration for brands. In 2017, the ever-present fashion house Gucci decided they wanted to be in on the joke and launched a meme-centred marketing campaign called "#TFWGucci", with "TFW" standing for "That face when (...)". It's a popular expression that is often accompanied by a relatable image referencing a funny situation. Along with it, they launched a "starter pack" meme campaign. On Instagram, these campaigns had a total reach of 120 million users. The engagement rate was 0,5%, which is commendable considering the reach results. Two posts from the campaigns are still their most liked posts of all time on the Instagram profile. The public discourse they provoked, especially on Twitter, is still unmatched by any of their other campaigns (Dhillon, 2017).

Franck, the Croatian food company that gets most of its revenue from selling coffee and tea, saw a marketing opportunity in 2018, during the FIFA World Cup. Croatia found itself at the centre of the world's attention after it had passed into the semi-finals of this pop-cultural event, where it would play against England, a country that notably loves tea. Franck posted a video in which they prepared a package to be sent to Prince Harry: a box of chamomile tea for him, as Franck is sure he will need it to "calm down". The rest of the job was quickly taken over by media as 53 different outlets reported on the joke. 215,000 users were reached on social media and 18,000 interactions were achieved. Franck's study claims the free publicity had a counter value of over 400,000 HRK, with 910 HRK spent on advertising (Bruketa&Žinić, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in the form of a quantitative survey using a questionnaire built in Google Forms. Formatting and adjusting the survey and its content lasted about three weeks, whereas collecting entries from respondents lasted three days. In those three days, 188 respondents filled out the final version of the questionnaire. Respondents were found by sharing the Google Forms link to the questionnaire through social media (Facebook, Instagram, Reddit) and instant messaging applications (WhatsApp, Viber, Messenger).

The first part of the survey consisted of several demographic questions: gender, age, status and income. The second part collected data about the respondents' voluntary exposure to media and its perceived effect on thoughts, wishes and intentions. The respondents were also asked to estimate how many hours daily they voluntarily expose themselves to informative or entertaining media. Furthermore, they were surveyed about their opinions on celebrities, art, memes, and their effect on consumers.

The third and the main part of the survey used images of two versions for each of the six marketing communications examples to examine the consumers' supposed preference of communication that contains elements of pop culture over the version of communication that doesn't contain such elements. For each example, the respondents were given the option to choose which version of it they like more. In these paired comparisons, the options to indicate equal preference or dislike were available as well.

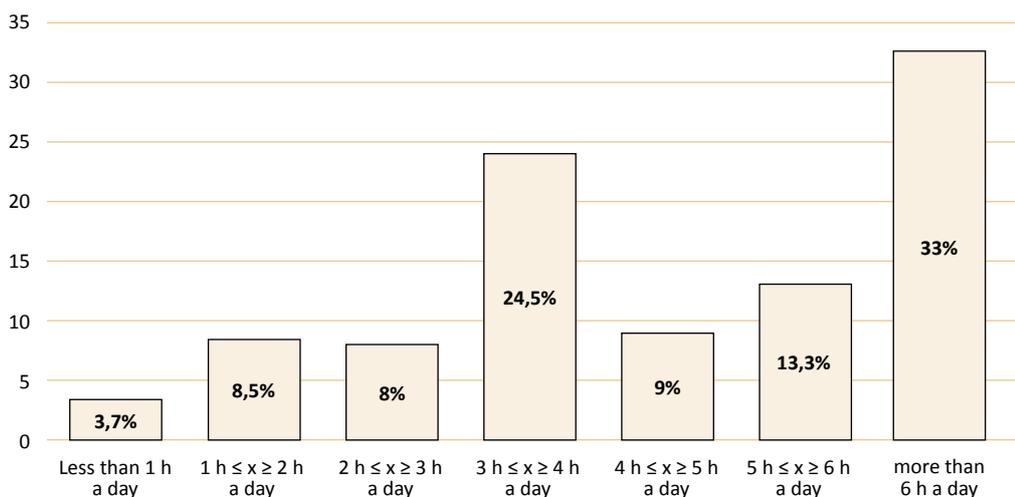
4. FINDINGS

The questionnaire was filled out by 188 respondents, of which 62.8% were men and 36.7% were women. The prevalent age group was 22-25 and it made up for 42.6% of all respondents. Next were age groups 26-29 (20.2%) and 18-21 (16%). Generally, 80.9% of respondents were under the age of 30, while the remaining 19.1% were 30 years old or more. Most respondents were employed (48.9%), whereas students made up for 36.2% of respondents. There were 6.4% of unemployed respondents and 4.8% of them were elementary school pupils. Only 3.7% of respondents chose the option "Other" or preferred not to respond to this question.

The graph below shows the extent to which respondents are voluntarily exposed to informative and entertainment media.

Graph 1. Voluntary exposure to media

By your estimate, on average, how many hours daily are you voluntarily exposed to informative or entertainment media (internet, social media, television, radio, ...)?



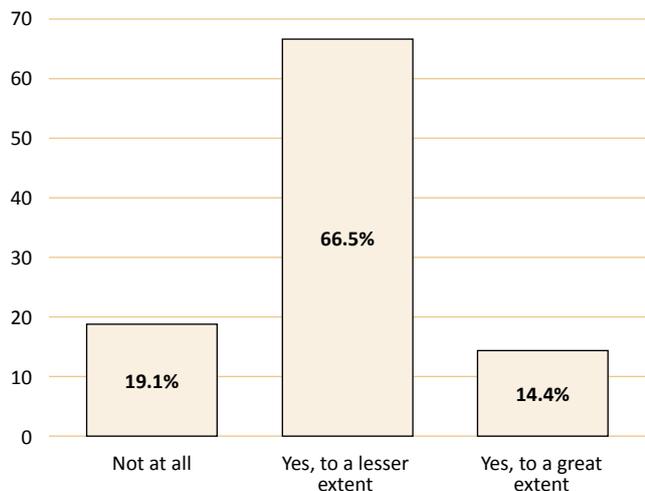
Source: Authors

An exact third of respondents (33%) said that they voluntarily expose themselves to six or more hours of media content daily. Furthermore, 79.8% of them are exposed to more than three hours of media content daily.

The next graph illustrates the perceived effect of advertising, media and popular culture on people's identity, ideas, wished, thoughts, believes and intentions.

Graph 2. Perceived effect of advertising

Do you think advertising, media and popular culture affect your identity, ideas, wishes, thoughts, beliefs or intentions?



Source: Authors

The vast majority of respondents (80.9%) are aware of marketing activities affecting their thoughts, intentions, beliefs and even identity, and most of them believe this is happening “to a lesser extent”.

Regarding the effect of marketing communications and celebrities with pop-cultural status on the intention of making a purchase, the respondents were conflicted. Just a little more than half of them (51.1%) said they are not affected in that way, whereas 48.9% admitted they are. Another notable statistic here is that 61.2% of respondents said they consider elements of pop culture they like an actual part of their identity.

The third part of the survey finally collected the respondents’ opinions on actual marketing communication examples. For each of the six examples, a preferred version of communication execution was chosen, while options of equal liking or dislike towards both versions were also available.

The order in which the versions were displayed was random to make sure it didn’t affect respondents’ liking. One half of the respondents were first shown a version of the communication without elements of pop culture, and the other half a version with elements of pop culture. It should be noted that, in the survey itself, the questions were formulated so that the respondent chose the “first” or “second” version, and not the version with or without an element of pop culture.

Table 1. Results of preference tests (Domaćica packaging, restaurant menu, Christmas post)

Choose the marketing communication version you like more.			
		I like the first version more 30 (16%)	I like the second version more 97 (51,6%)
		I like both versions equally 47 (25%)	I don't like either version 14 (7,4%)
		I like the first version more 106 (56,4%)	I like the second version more 50 (26,6%)
		I like both versions equally 25 (13,3%)	I don't like either version 7 (3,7%)

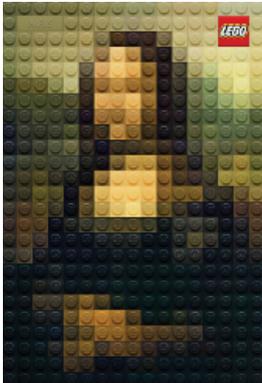
		<p>I like the first version more 56 (29,8%)</p>	<p>I like the second version more 84 (44,7%)</p>
		<p>I like both versions equally 16 (8,5%)</p>	<p>I don't like either version 32 (17%)</p>

Source: Authors

Images: <https://www.kras.hr/bih/proizvodi/keksi-vafli-i-cajna-peciva/domacica/domacica-benefit>,
<https://www.facebook.com/RestaurantKopun>, <https://twitter.com/netflix/>

Images with the light blue backgrounds are the marketing communications versions that contain pop culture elements.

Table 2. Results of preference tests (Google Doodle, LEGO ads, Axel Arigato ads)

Choose the marketing communication version you like more.			
		<p>I like the first version more 27 (14,4%)</p>	<p>I like the second version more 124 (66%)</p>
		<p>I like both versions equally 24 (12,8%)</p>	<p>I don't like either version 13 (6,9%)</p>
		<p>I like the first version more 127 (67,6%)</p>	<p>I like the second version more 8 (4,3%)</p>
		<p>I like both versions equally 34 (18,1%)</p>	<p>I don't like either version 19 (10,1%)</p>
		<p>I like the first version more 63 (33,5%)</p>	<p>I like the second version more 70 (37,2%)</p>
		<p>I like both versions equally 8 (4,3%)</p>	<p>I don't like either version 47 (25%)</p>

Source: Authors

Images: <https://www.cnet.com/news/google-doodle-scares-up-addictive-multiplayer-game-great-ghoul-duel-for-halloween/>,
<http://www.fubiz.net/2014/05/21/lego-masters-of-painting/>, <https://www.instagram.com/axelarigato/>

Images with the light blue backgrounds are the marketing communications versions that contain pop culture elements.

Even a cursory glance at the results of preference tests reveals that consumers prefer marketing communication containing elements of pop culture. The only significant deviation from this norm is the first example in which the respondents did not show positive impressions towards the version of the packaging with the photo and signature of the Croatian national team member Ivan Rakitic. The majority of respondents (51.6%) said that they still prefer packaging that does not contain his character, and only 16% of them showed a preference for packaging supported by Ivan Rakitic. A quarter of respondents were undecided, and 7.4% of respondents showed negative impressions towards both packages.

The majority of respondents (56.4%) indicated that they prefer the restaurant menu which features recognizable elements from the TV series Game of Thrones, the dragon and the logo. Only 26.6% of respondents were not so impressed by this version and chose the usual menu as their favorite, and 17% of respondents remained undecided.

In the third example, 44.7% of respondents chose the post version with the element of pop culture, Mariah Carey and her song "All I Want For Christmas Is You", and 29.8% preferred the post without Mariah. A total of 25.5% of respondents remained undecided, in a negative or neutral sense.

In the fourth and fifth examples, with the Google Doodle logo and LEGO ads with art paintings, respondents again clearly opted for the versions with elements of popular culture. Those versions of marketing communications received about two thirds of the votes.

The last example received closer results, with 37.2% of respondents preferring the ad version with Baby Yoda from the series The Mandalorian, and 33.5% choosing the ad without this element of pop culture. A quarter of respondents said they did not like either version.

5. CONCLUSION

Pop culture is a socio-psychological phenomenon that is, at least as a term, known to everyone, but maybe it is still not studied enough. By looking at the examples from previous studies and those explored in this study, it is apparent that pop culture is very widespread and that it can bring benefits to marketing efforts of advertisers across all industries.

The results of the study clearly lean towards pop culture having a potentially significant positive effect in marketing communication efforts, as respondents seem to prefer communication with pop-cultural elements in all but one of the provided examples. So, in 5 out of 6 examples, consumers have shown to be in favour of the versions of market communications that refer to pop culture or directly incorporate elements of pop culture. The paired comparison method gives insight for a clearly positive correlation between popular culture and likeability in marketing communications.

Still, the presence of a pop-cultural element in a marketing campaign, brand or product is not a guarantee of success by itself, as many other factors are at play here, such as time, tone, message content, correlation between brand identity and the pop-cultural element and so on. A set of correct decisions during the creation and launching of a product or campaign can achieve palpably better results if it refers to or incorporates pop culture in a relevant way, as demonstrated, in part, in this study.

Apart from the convenience sampling and a relatively small sample size, this study has another important limitation. It must be emphasized that the liking of marketing communications can be affected by countless other factors which have not been studied and controlled here, as that would mean going way out of the scope of this study. That is why the examples in the survey are different in form, channel of communication, product category, tone and type of pop culture being referenced, among other characteristics, to make sure no single factor affected multiple or all examples to sway the respondents' opinions one way or the other.

Several questions present themselves, given the results of this research, for example:

- If consumers dislike an advertised product, are they still more likely to perceive an ad positively if it contains or refers to pop culture phenomena?
- Which forms of pop culture references and implementations are most liked by consumers?

It would also be interesting to analyse further how much consumers liking or disliking the pop culture element affects their perception of the brand and advertised product or service. Lastly, more detailed research would be useful of pop-culture-riddled marketing communications with various other factors changing, such as design, packaging, formatting, etc., to see if and to what extent the pop culture elements themselves are a powerful factor to sway the consumers' perception and liking in one way or the other, or if it is still up to too many other factors.

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KORIŠTENJE ELEMENATA POP KULTURE U TRŽIŠNIM KOMUNIKACIJAMA

SAŽETAK

Snažan učinak tržišnih komunikacija na osobnosti, mišljenja, preferencije i odluke ljudi do sada je ekstenzivno proučavan. Ako marketing može promijeniti mišljenje ljudi i utjecati na njihov karakter i afinitete, te ako je pop kultura dio tih karaktera i afiniteta, interesantno je istražiti u kakvoj su točno korelaciji marketing i pop kultura i kako ih opća populacija percipira kada se kombiniraju, primjerice, u marketinškim kampanjama koje sadrže pop-kulturne elemente. Upravo time bavi se ova kvantitativna studija s upitnikom koji prikazuje više primjera tržišne komunikacije koji sadrže elemente pop kulture ili reference te ih uspoređuje s njihovim sličnim verzijama koje ne sadrže takve elemente. Cilj istraživanja bio je utvrditi percipiraju li potrošači različite oblike tržišnih komunikacija pozitivnije kada sadrže elemente popularne kulture, za razliku od tržišnih komunikacija koje takve elemente ne sadrže ili se na njih ne referiraju. To je testirano metodom uspoređivanja u parovima; za šest različitih primjera tržišne komunikacije ispitanici su trebali iskazati sklonost jednoj ili drugoj verziji, a bile su dostupne i opcije jednake preferencije ili nesviđanja. U pet od šest analiziranih primjera potrošači su preferirali verzije tržišnih komunikacija koje sadrže pop-kulturne elemente. Ovi rezultati, koji jasno idu u prilog korištenju elemenata pop kulture, mogu biti korisni marketinškim stratezima i praktičarima kada razmatraju uključivanje pop kulture u svoje komunikacijske napore.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: popularna kultura, tržišne komunikacije, sviđanje oglasa, preferencija oglasa