

For the culture or from the culture?

By [Jabulani Sigege](#), issued by [Irvine Partners](#)

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Every marketer's dream is to be able to influence pop culture or ride the wave and turn it into a thriving social campaign. If a brand can recognise the right opportunity at the right time, the effects can be immense.



Jabulani Sigege

Keep it real

Over the past decade, brands have come to realise that they can no longer talk at people – they have to talk to them. Social media has granted consumers the ability to provide instant feedback regarding advertising campaigns, with brands that recklessly jump onto the pop culture bandwagon experiencing severe backlash if they don't understand what is relevant to the audience, and why.

A prime example of a brand that received prominent backlash is the [Pepsi advertisement](#) framing a 20-year-old white supermodel (Kendall Jenner) with a can of soda (*sigh*) as a peacemaker between civil rights activists and police during the #blacklivesmatter movement. This tone-deaf idea and execution had almost everyone going “Oh no baby, what is you doin’??”

But there are also some great examples of how icons of pop culture can be used by brands to move society forward. Nike's "Dream Crazy" [ad campaign](#) is a series of ads featuring a selection of stories depicting athletes who are household names and who share a common denominator: all of them leverage the power of sport and their background stories in order to inspire people and move society forward.

Whose culture is it anyway?

That said, pop culture is not something that can just be marketed as if you are selling a can of soup. People are creators of pop culture by liking the things they see and sharing that with their friends. You can market a product, but you cannot

market the notion of pop culture. So how can marketers use something that they didn't come up with and that can't be marketed to their advantage?

Brands can harness the influence of pop culture for social good by looking at five key areas:

- Representation – encouraging diversity in pop culture both on- and off-screen
- Authenticity – supporting the profile of sincere, genuine voices
- Normalisation – inserting messages in our social circles over time that change the narrative and move society forward
- Relationships – creating points of intersection beyond and within sectors
- Novelty – tap into the zeitgeist and leverage (and not merely use) influencers

Tapping into the cultural zeitgeist can go horribly wrong if a brand forces an issue that is not aligned with its values and guided by its mission statement. A brand that certainly got it right was [Jungle Oats](#) after the season finale of the last season of *Game of Thrones*.



For the culture, from the culture

What is clear is that brands do not need teams who necessarily dip in and out of pop culture, but rather those who are already immersed in it. Pop culture must be second nature to them. But that doesn't mean the creative teams should simply jump on the bandwagon – they must have a solid understanding of the brand's strategy. When the creative team is clear about the brand's philosophy and values, it is easier for them to come up with tactical ideas that are appropriate and impactful.

The thing with pop culture is that it moves so fast, it's almost like hopping onto a moving train (*ukulathaza*, for those who grew up in Cape Town). If you try to hop onto the train in the wrong way, you are going to take a tumble. A hard one which you may struggle to recover from. But if you time it correctly and you have the right technique, you can get on and have a smooth ride with minimal effort.

Check yourself before you wreck yourself (and your brand)

So, before you jump onto the bandwagon of pop culture, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do your brand values align with what it is you want to ride? Can you join the conversation credibly?
- When you speak, do you sound authentic?
- What purpose does it serve for your brand, or do you simply want to be part of the conversation?
- Does it help you elevate that aspect of the pop culture you are talking about and amplify it in a positive way?
- Does it allow your brand to be relevant and resonate with the topical issue?

Because at the end of the day, culture will consume your brand if you don't have the capital to be part of the conversation

and you think you can manipulate it to your own end.

About Jabulani Sigege

Jabulani Sigege is Executive Creative Director at Hero, a full-service advertising agency based in Cape Town. He's picked up a few tricks while working at some of SA's most iconic agencies, and a few accolades along the way, including Cannes Lions, Loeries, Bookmarks, Pendorings, One Show and Apex awards.

Driven by the desire to make relevant and resonant work, Jabulani believes tapping into cultural capital is the way to create powerful, memorable work that connects brands to people.

Besides advertising, his other interests include all things pop culture, being a bibliophile, and trying his best to not ever run races that are more than 15km.

About Hero

Hero is a Cape Town-based full-service advertising agency whose focus is to create real work that makes a real difference – to the brand and in people's lives. The agency offers strategy, advertising, design, video content, digital, social media, activations, internal communication and CRM as part of its services.

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