

BUILDING CULTURAL CAPITAL:

THE POWER THAT LIES IN CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING
CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE @ IPSOS



THE POWER THAT LIES IN CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Who we are, how we dress, how we speak, what we buy, how we vote and how we interact are all shaped and informed by cultural norms and social expectations.

Even the mundane act of cleaning our home has wide cultural variation, whether it be the product smells that create memories of childhood or the varying 'standards' that people clean to. Culture is defined and experienced through a complex web knitted together by common understanding and shared expectations.

Brands, like people, are part of this cultural web. And just like people, brands need to be positioned in context, which includes the surrounding media and public discourse, politics and popular culture, history and tradition, as well as marketing and advertising. Mapping the cultural context allows us to interpret how we see the world in front of us.

The mix of all this communication shapes our habits, beliefs and aspirations – which define and characterise a specific culture (or subculture). People and brands absorb and respond to this cultural context in a mutual relationship which in turn transforms culture itself [consider the cultural connotations of pink and blue clothing], affecting how brands and content are received.

In a media-saturated, high-speed consumer culture where attention spans are shrinking, it is ever more important that brands communicate quickly and effectively. Understanding the role that culture plays in our lives has never been more important for anyone interested in explaining, making sense of, or engaging with, people.



CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE @ IPSOS

Cultural intelligence is key for any business, brand or institution that wants to communicate and engage effectively with its audience.

Cultural intelligence at Ipsos works across sectors, industries and categories to identify and make sense of cultural landscapes around the world, working with cultural experts and utilising a combination of methodologies.

As cultural experts, we can provide, for brands, companies and institutions, a deeper understanding of the cultural landscape they inhabit. The accompanying zines elaborate on some of our most effective methods to identify core cultural insights. They are:

1

SEMIOTICS

Looking at the power of semiotic cues (signs and symbols) to position your brand within a category or territory, or to create cultural relevance

2

ETHNOGRAPHY

Creating an unfiltered view of reality through observing behaviour, and using empathy to understand people

3

APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

Using academic knowledge for business insight

MAPPING CULTURAL CHANGE

The cultural landscape is always shifting, adapting and transforming, almost imperceptibly, and with increasing speed and fragmentation, making it both difficult to keep track of, but simultaneously more important to identify and make sense of.

Media, brands and social policy work within a shifting cultural landscape through their attempts to change behaviour. Yet, many brand or political initiatives are not intended to create a change in culture; they are simply responding to a particular need or problem (think of the cultural consequences of the recent Brexit referendum in the UK). Mapping the direction in which these shifts are headed is key to staying relevant.

Our Cultural Intelligence approach at Ipsos ensures we get to the nub of what is going on in the culture. We examine various activities, events, objects and social phenomena, from brands to demographics or social problems, in order to understand how culture is affecting behaviour, outlook and attitudes. We can then turn that understanding and insight, into a relevant, culturally-engaging solution.



**EXAMPLE:
FROM LAGER LOUT TO THE IPA POUT**

By mapping culture, we can see how it changes. This involves analysing how culture on one topic manifests itself in numerous places at the same time – through online studies, new pack and product comms, and with ‘leading edge’ consumers – to see how consumer understanding and expectation is changing.

This type of detailed cultural analysis could have helped beer brands stay relevant in the late 1990s. A study of beer drinkers during that period would have shown a saturation of mainstream lager brands appealing predominantly to a ‘laddish’ culture, which represented the mainstream (dominant) male identity. But a shift was occurring, and the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’ meant that the ‘alpha male’ model was losing relevance in society, as men were increasingly allowed to express with a softer side.

In response, the early 2000s saw the emergence of hipsters, tattoos and big beards as a way of re-asserting Alpha masculinity – and with it came craft beer, which became the contemporary cultural expression.

It is endlessly interesting to cultural commentators how a relatively small group of so called ‘hipsters’ in urban environments have transformed the importance of local ‘craft’ and brought it to the mainstream.



CULTURAL TENSIONS

Understanding and explaining cultural context is the first step, identifying where the cultural tensions might lie can then help brands understand how best to respond.

Cultural tensions exist where deeply embedded cultural norms become challenged by emergent attitudes and outlooks. They are everywhere, and when brands, content providers or institutions ignore them, they run the risk of being deemed irrelevant and out of touch; from the gentrification of inner city boroughs, to the backlash against gendered clothing, cultural tensions represent an opportunity to engage, whether that be through marketing, advertising, social policy, or organisational change.

Cultural Intelligence isn't just about painting an insightful picture; it can tell you how to position your brand or service within the cultural web of social norms and shared expectations.



BUILDING CULTURAL CAPITAL

Whether part of the cultural mainstream or sitting out at the periphery, it is crucial for brand and policy initiatives to understand the context in which they operate.

Culture can help or hinder the success of any initiative, and creating greater cultural capital will mean that consumers are more naturally aligned to the initiative.

Cultural capital is the magic that any brand is looking for - an unquantifiable driver for return on investment - that can be controlled and adapted through using cultural intelligence.



TO UNDERSTAND OUR CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

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