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America's Place in Globalization: A retrospective

To say our world is shrinking might be the greatest understatement of the century. Virtually all corners of the world now have some evidence of a homogenized culture that can be linked back to western civilization. Chicago Bulls shirts worn by children in Africa, McDonalds available in China, and the wide spread popularity of musicians like Katy Perry do not just point to a shrinking world but also allude to a disintegration of cultures. Globalization is perhaps one of the greatest phenomenon to happen in the modern age. Living during this time is both terrifying and exciting because change seems to be waiting behind every proverbial corner. America has played a large role in both creating globalization and developing systems that rapidly accelerate the process. Globalization has the potential to be an incredibly destructive force and as human beings move forward careful measures must be made to ensure the preservation multiple value systems. To understand just how widespread globalization has become and to also understand America's specific role in the matter, one can look to the following examples of how culture has intertwined with consumerism.

Personal identity is matter taken very seriously in America. We define ourselves by the objects that we own, the events that we attend, and the food that we eat. Personal possessions are chosen based on the culture that you identify with the most building a symbiotic relationship between what we are consuming and who we are. The need for culture stems from our deep

sense of wanting to belong, to be part of something, and to matter. Corporations are no longer just selling you a product; they are giving you an identity. Take for example Hello Kitty. In her book *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific*, Christine R. Yano carefully examines the relationship between Sanrio, the company that produces Hello Kitty goods, and its customers. Throughout the book Yano weighs the question of if wearing Hello Kitty goods is an act of visual rebellion or is the consummation of the product a result of being a slave to a culture. The answer is complicated and points to the longing all human beings have to be a part of something much larger than their own self. By wearing and purchasing Hello Kitty products you, the consumer, are part of a uniting global culture, a collective that had come together to make a statement. Hello Kitty was created in Japan and Yano argues that the country now largely holds resentment to the expressionless cat and the culture that surrounds it because it makes the country not be taken seriously. What is interesting is that America fully embraces both the product and the fact that it comes from Japan. While the consumers of Hello Kitty could have honest intentions of wanting to belong to Japan's "cute culture" it could also be argued that America corporations embrace the product *because* it makes Japan seem weak while making America (and by proxy its corporations) appear to be stronger and more serious. This is a cautionary tale of what can happen when culture develops because of strategic marketing rather than organically through social interaction and common interest.

Just how does a toy from Japan become a full blown culture in America? Situations like this stem from the fact that America is still a relatively young country formed largely by immigrants. In its own way America started the trend of globalization long ago when people from a variety of different cultures came together and inevitably formed one solitary country. This process, of course, took hundreds of years to accomplish and often times lacked the

foresight of what would be ideal for future generations. This sentiment is somewhat forgivable considering that when America as we know it was being developed; advances in both social reform and technology were slower to come when compared to today's pace. With the concept of merging culture being relatively new to those who were thrust into it, American immigrants struggled to find a balance between retaining the culture of their former country and developing ideals that were now more applicable to their new home. It is at this point where America's true identity crisis begins. In 2015 you will rarely hear anyone openly identifying as an American, even if they were born and lived here all their life. Generally speaking Americans go about identifying themselves by what country their ancestors came from, even if that ancestry is hundreds of years in the past with no present ties to the country in question. Initially this speaks to the vanity of the culture in that most people feel it is looked down upon to identify as simply American given our self-perceived unpopular opinion of what other parts of the world might think of the country. There is also an almost inherited instinct to lump oneself into a larger grouping for protection, a trait perhaps left over from our hunter-gatherer days. What all of these things amount to is a culture that is eager to absorb other cultures and will pick and choose values from other populations as it sees fit. Those in the field of marketing understood America's identity crisis early on and began to merge culture with consumerism to the point where now the two are almost inseparable.

Consumerism has not only become a way of life in America it also serves as the center of our interactions with one another, social media being the greatest of examples. According to an emarketer.com report, nearly one in four people worldwide use some type of social media. While at first glance social media may not seem to be tied into consumerism, a closer inspection shows that most major corporations, clothing brands and celebrities all use social media to promote

themselves. New social media products are developed daily to enhance new electronic devices to encourage consumers to upgrade. For example, oursocialtimes.com reported that Instagram, a social photo sharing platform, increased its users by 50% between March and December of 2014. This free application can only be used by smart phones or tablets, thus creating an artificial need for a consumer. In order to communicate with friends and catch up the latest culture trends, the consumer must purchase a device that supports the platform. This practice is not exclusive to America. Because of the great influence America has over the rest of the world, other countries struggle to keep up with American consumerism so they won't be left out on social trends, political happenings, and general interactions.

Why is America at the forefront of influence in today's global culture? In *Globalization & American Popular Culture* author Lane Crothers concludes that "The end of the Cold War and the emergence of new technologies like the internet, cellular phones and small-dish satellite television systems allowed American popular culture access to an even bigger global market" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010). It is safe to deduce that this mass exposure to American culture has created a shared global desire in products and attitudes. These desires do create conflict amongst people who would like to retain their own cultural identity and those who would like to assimilate into a culture that functions virtually everywhere. Entities such as restaurant franchisees, Hollywood, and beverage distribution like Coca Cola help to secure America's place in the global economy bringing homogenized American culture with it.

In *The Anthropology of Globalization* Ted C. Lewellen argues that self-identity changes depending on the context that person finds themselves involved in. Because of this Lewellen believes that culture itself is diminishing with globalization while personal identities are in fact increasing. When compared to the historic reaction of Americans seeking to identify as

individuals rather than with their country you can see how this logic applies to a globalized world that is highly influenced by America. As cultures start to disappear, concepts of language and country will follow. The things that once held a community together will become antiquated as people turn inwards for a sense of security. Humans have achieved a great deal in their evolution; from learning to harness the power of fire to creating a space ship, there are few things left to uncover in technology. The next part of human evolution will encompass our own inner self and how we communicate with those around us.

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