Starbucks Refreshers—Cultural Appropriation or Appreciation?

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At the start of Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month, Starbucks announced its summer release of new fruit drinks: bright blue Starbucks Refreshers with raspberry-flavored “pearls” at the bottom of the cup. The brand says it drew “inspiration from drinks around the world, especially East Asian beverages with boba or pearls that have been popular for decades.”

And Starbucks isn’t the first brand to draw inspiration from boba tea. Sonic and Dunkin’ both introduced boba tea, calling them “bursting bubbles” and “popping bubbles,” respectively.

But for marketers, where’s the line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation? When there’s increased pressure for marketers to innovate and create during heritage months, it’s a delicate balance to ensure that we honor and respect the communities we are trying to serve. Here are three watch-outs to avoid cultural appropriation.

Avoid playing catch-up

The pressure for brands to participate in cultural heritage months can be intense. Don’t race to check the box during these months in order to pretend to show up for a community. Instead, do the work to show that you want to be an ally and serve a community that needs your support, otherwise sit it out this time around and choose not to participate. Don’t fall into the trap of cultural appropriation.

The line between cultural appreciation and appropriation can become blurred. Remember: When we appreciate a culture that’s different from our own, we must start with positive intentions and admire, learn and enjoy experiences that we have never had before. Someone’s culture is not a hobby or an item to collect; it is part of their life, community and identity.

Cultural appropriation is defined as “the act of copying or using the customs and traditions of a particular group or culture, by somebody from a more dominant (powerful) group in society.” Appropriation can lead to stealing or treating something from another culture as a trend. When we are culturally appropriating as marketers, we can sometimes erase the memory and history of where the tradition or idea came from.

Marketers, this is a reminder to not engage in cultural appropriation, especially in a rushed attempt to show up for a heritage month.

Give credit where credit is due

Starbucks is under intense pressure; it lowered expectations for its full-year-2024 sales after a challenging quarter with in-store visits slowed globally. CEO Laxman Narasimhan said the company will try to boost U.S. store traffic this summer with new drinks. He referred to this new Starbucks Refreshers launch as its “first texture innovation” and hinted that more

of these types of innovations would launch in the coming years.

However, Starbucks choosing the name “pearls” for its launch is a missed opportunity. It avoids the connection with boba tea culture and avoids creating a stronger connection with AAPI Heritage Month. The first iterations of the boba tea are said to have emerged in Taiwan’s traditional tea shops in the 1980s. Whether the brand meant to or not, it erases the history of boba drinks by not acknowledging it in-store and online.

When we learn from other cultures and are inspired, it’s important to give credit, especially if that inspiration leads to the launch of a new product or new content. Remember, when overseeing a large brand with a big platform, it’s also an opportunity to teach our consumers about history, culture and traditions that they have yet to be exposed to. It’s our responsibility as marketers to show cultural appreciation and role-model what that looks like in the greater marketplace.

Partner with challenger brands that are doing the work

Starbucks has been on a journey to be a more inclusive brand. The brand has bolstered inclusion on paid media, with 15% of its paid media budget in diverse owned, created and targeted media groups. The brand committed to spending $1.5 billion annually with diverse suppliers by 2030. As of fiscal year 2022, $882 million had been spent with diverse suppliers.

And its Artist Collaboration Series highlights artists from the Latin American, LGBTQ+ and Black communities and more through partnering on designs for their drinkware collection. In fact, for AAPI month, Monyee Chau’s art is featured on the latest collection of Starbucks drinkware.

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This was a moment for Starbucks to embrace cultural appreciation by partnering with a smaller brand, instead of launching a boba copycat or boba-adjacent product during AAPI Heritage Month.

BOBABAM launched its authentic Taiwanese at-home boba kits three years ago, available at retailers like Sprouts and Target. Bob Yau, the company's Taiwanese-born founder and chairman, came home after a frustrating experience to get boba for his kids. He built the brand to find a better way to enjoy boba at home. It is now the instant boba category leader, with over 32 million drinks sold to date.

BOBABAM uses authentic tapioca boba in its product line and, according to the brand, "boba is a springy, chewy tapioca ball derived from the cassava root. With a bouncy, chewy texture known as QQ, these little black tapioca balls take your mouth on a joyride."

There was an opportunity here for Starbucks to create a new line of flavors with BOBABAM, crafting the beverage in its store, while giving credit to its partner and sharing the history of boba tea. It could have also carried BOBABAM kits in its stores, magnifying the story of their partnership in social media channels and in the greater marketplace. This could have been another moment for Starbucks to have amplified and lifted an AAPI founder.

When brands like Starbucks that are committed to being more inclusive make mistakes, it's a reminder for all of us. The line between cultural appreciation and appropriation can get blurred.

When in doubt, partner with those brands that can help you authentically honor and serve traditions and cultures you are working hard to represent. Just say no to cultural appropriation.

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