Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a quick and informative analysis of today's top issues from University of Michigan faculty.

Erica Colaianne:

Thank you so much for joining Michigan Minds. I am so excited to talk with you today and for all of our listeners to hear what you have to say. So, can you go ahead and introduce yourself and tell us about your role at the University of Michigan?

Marcus Collins:

Sure thing. My name is Marcus Collins. I'm a Detroit native. I've always start with that stuff like I'm a product of the city. I'm a marketing professor here at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, but I'm also the Head of Strategy at an advertising agency called Wieden+Kennedy. And I feel like my job at its core is to bridge the academic practitioner gap, seeing those things that we rigorously look at, interrogate as scholars and as academics, but think about how do we apply that to the real world, the so what of it all. And I get to be a part of the research that uncovers new learnings about the world, new knowledge about the world, disseminate it through scholarship, but also apply it through things that we put in the world.

Erica Colaianne:

And in what areas does your specific research focus?

Marcus Collins:

So, I sit inside of a field called Consumer Culture Theory, which is the convergence of anthropology, psychology, sociology in the marketing literature. And Consumer Culture Theory is focused on one specific question with tons of implications. It's that what are the governing mechanisms that move people to consume in a collective fashion, but they're not bound just by what they buy, but they are bound by why they buy. The effects, the cognition, the beliefs, the ideologies, the cultural conventions and expectations that govern their behavior. People who don't just buy a motorcycle, they buy a hog, the Harley Davis and owner group, right? People who don't just watch a sci-fi, they're a part of Game of Thrones. They don't just listen to K-Pop, they are BTS fans. They don't just listen to pop music, they're Swifties, right? They are bound more than just their consumption, but they're bound by communal connections that are facilitated through the cultural characteristics that govern what people like them do.

Erica Colaianne:

And there was an article that you were quoted in for Ad Age, where you were explaining how brand purpose gives meaning to an item or to service. So, can you talk a little bit about how brand purpose or this brand ideology allows companies to then connect with their consumers and how that influences their buying?

Marcus Collins:

Absolutely. Well, brands at their core are identifiable signifiers that conjure up thoughts and feelings, and the hearts of minds of people relative to products, companies, institutions, organizations, and people, right? They're signifiers, they're vessels of meaning that evokes emotions and cognitions. And because of those emotions and cognitions we're more inclined to buy. Why is that? Because emotions, these feelings that we have are associated in the part of the brain that's also associated with behavioral adoption, right? So, we leverage the meaning that brands hold in an effort to get people to adopt behavior. But here's where things get really interesting. Well, what determines meaning? Our culture, the beliefs that we hold, the ideologies that translate the world for us, the conventions and expectations of people like us. So, much so that I would say that consumption is a cultural act. What we buy, what we drive, what we wear, how we adorn our hair, if you have it.

Where you go to school, if you go to school, who you marry, if you marry, where you vacation, what you eat, where you bury the dead, if you bury the dead, all these things are byproducts of our cultural subscription. Daily living is governed by our cultural subscription, and the more conspicuous our behaviors and consumptions are, the more inclined they are to be influenced by our culture. There is no external force more influentially human behavior than culture full stop. And the better we understand that, the more likely we are to leverage its way.

Erica Colaianne:

Can you expand on that, leveraging it a little bit? How do marketers use this in their strategy, knowing that customers do build this relationship with brands or they create their own identity with a product or with a service, like you were saying with Swifties? And how is that used then strategically?

Marcus Collins:

Absolutely. Well, the job of marketing is to get people to adopt behavior, that is the core function of our job. Don't drink this, drink that. Don't go here, go there. Don't buy his shoes, buy my shoes. Don't vote for him, vote for her. Wear a mask, get a shot. Recycle, everything we do as marketers to get people to adopt behavior. And since culture is so influential to behavior, that becomes the biggest cheat code for marketers. In fact, I would say anyone with a vested interest of getting people to move, whether you're a marketer, a leader, an entrepreneur, a manager, an activist, a politician, clergy, or just plain old Jane Joe, if you have a best interest in getting people to move, culture is the most powerful way to do that. Well, how is that done? Well, we benefit from culture by contributing to it, by contributing to the social facts that govern the cultural characteristics of a group of people, whether it's language, like 'Just Do It,' whether it's artifacts like Beats by Dre headphones that we wear around our neck, even not listen to music.

It's an accessory, it's like jewelry if you will, to signal our identity. And this is really what we're after. We are social animals by nature, humans are social animals by nature. We do everything we can to crash into each other. Evolutionary anthropologists would argue that the reason why we were able to evolve was our ability to cooperate, to socialize, and our consumption behaviors become ways by which we signal to the world like a peacock who we are, and to find people who are just like us. I mean, that's why I wear Michigan gear anytime I travel, because the coolest thing happens. Even if I'm going to another country, I wear a Michigan hat and someone sees my hat and goes, "Go blue." And I go, "Go blue." And in that moment, in that instance, I feel like I'm connected. I feel like I'm not on this continent by myself.

Professor John Branch and I, another professor in the business school at Ross, who's a marketing professor as well. We were in Dubai of all places, in Dubai, sitting in the Delta lounge and someone walks by us and "Go blue." And we go "Go blue." And he is like, yeah, I was in the executive NBA years ago. And in that moment, John and I felt like we were connected, and this is all we want as humans is to feel connected, to belong to something. And in this way, consumption becomes a way by which we make our cultural subscription material, to make it tangible. So for marketers, for leaders, for entrepreneurs, the idea is we can harness that power by contributing to the cultural characteristics of that community that helps them connect with other people. That is, we facilitate the connections within communities, and we've known this for over a century now. The idea is that we have technologies today to help us do that better than we ever had before.

Erica Colaianne:

It is such an incredible feeling anytime that you feel like even briefly, that you're a part of one of those communities. And so, that was really wonderful to hear you explain it with so much of your expertise behind it. So, thank you. And you have also turned all of this knowledge into a newly published book, For The Culture. And instead of me going through and reading off what the book is about, could you go ahead and tell us all about For The Culture?

Marcus Collins:

Absolutely. So, For The Culture is my first book, and it raises a question that probably doesn't feel provocative on the surface. It argues that there's no force more influential human behavior than culture. And when you hear that, most people nod their heads go, "Yeah, totally, great." And then I say, "Cool, define culture." And you get a bunch of blank stares, right? If you ask five people to define culture, you get 25 different answers. And that's a problem, especially if we have a vested interest in getting people to move. We can't leverage the power of culture without actually having a Rosetta Stone to describe it, to understand the mechanisms that make it go. So, the book provides some language that allows us to collectively describe culture by identifying the underlying physics, the system that is culture, and then it unpacks the ways by which we can leverage, harness its power to get people to adopt behavior.

So, I leverage the theory, the research, the empirical data that we have about humanity, and then I leverage my years, decades of practice, so we can look at how do we apply them to get people to move. So, I leverage my time running digital strategy for Beyonce, working with State Farm, working with Google, with Apple, and working with Nike, all these different brands that we herald as these brands are the pinnacle of branding. Well, how do they get there? They contribute to culture, they thrive in contemporary culture, and people consume these brands not because of what they are, but because who they are.

Erica Colaianne:

And was your inspiration to do this, that question and that seeking that definition, or can you tell us about that process, and how you got to creating this wonderful product?

Marcus Collins:

Yeah, it was twofold. On one end, I just found this anemia in our industry as marketers, in advertising that we talk about getting our ideas out in the culture. We need to be informed by culture, what's happening in culture, culture, culture, culture, culture, culture, right? Just a part of our normal vernacular, but we didn't have good language for it. So, from a practical perspective, the idea was like, well, let's define it, so we can operationalize it. We have a Rosetta Stone that we can actually operationalize. But then going through that process, that was kind of the driving impetus for the book. But once I started writing, I realized that there was a personal driver here too. I grew up born and raised in Detroit, and I graduated from high school in the nineties. And in those days, if you did well in math and science and you were Black, you were going to be an engineer.

So, that's what I did. I got a pension from math and science. I'm Black, and I was from Detroit, so I went into engineering. And after my first year, we here at Michigan, go blue. I remember my first year I said, "Oh man, I don't know if I want to be an engineer anymore." And my mom and dad, my mom's an academic, she says, "Just wait until you get into your major. You'll love it." My dad's like, "Yeah, your mom's right." Okay. So, I go back my second year in my major and I really don't love it. It's fascinating, it's interesting, but I didn't see myself doing this for the rest of my life. So, I started taking some music theory courses to offset my shameful GPA. And while doing this, I fell in love with major seventh, and I go, this is what I want to do.

I want to be a songwriter. So, I go home the summer after my sophomore year, I said, "Mom and dad, I know what I want to do. I want to be a songwriter." They said, "Oh, no, you don't. That is not true. You do not want to be a songwriter and you ain't going to be a songwriter. You are going to go back up to Ann Arbor and you're going to finish that engineering degree," which is what I did. And when I left undergrad, I went into the music industry. But what I realized is that I was being interpolated by the cultural characteristics of what it means to be me. My earliest decisions as an adult, if you want to call an 18-year-old, an adult, my earliest decisions were being informed by these social forces that were pushed on me, the conventions and expectations of what people like me ought to do.

And when I realized that since I didn't have the language, took me 20 plus years to get that language, since I didn't have the language to describe what was happening, I didn't have very much agency to navigate it. All I could say was that, "Oh, my parents are tripping. Oh, my parents are coming down on me." But truthfully, my parents were also being interpolated by what was expected of being a good parent to push your children towards a career that they thought was going to be beneficial for them. That we all, both my parents and myself were being pushed by these forces that we know as culture. And because we didn't have good language to describe it, at least I didn't, I couldn't do very much about it.

I had some slight eyes from my friends when I was going to music, like why would you do that? That's so hard. Why would you do that? Doesn't make any sense. And that sense, quote unquote is it didn't feel normal. And that's what culture does, it is a measurement of normality. And when I realized while writing the book from a practical level, I figured that I can help people at a personal level too. If they have a better way of describing what's happening to them, then they'll be able to navigate it better. They'll have agency to subvert it. And that, for me, just felt really rewarding. So, I guess I'm writing this for 18 year old Marcus as well.

Erica Colaianne:

That was a really wonderful personal narrative to help convey that the book is not intended just for marketers, or not intended for a particular audience, but really for anyone, because we're all going on this individual journey of our own to identify where we are, and where we fit in and what cultures we identify with. And so, that was really enlightening to hear you describe it that way, and that you use that as part of your process. So, what do you hope that readers in general, and I know it's a very vague question, but what do you hope that readers take away after they finish the book?

Marcus Collins:

I hope the book itself serves as cultural product, that it becomes text, it becomes literature that people refer to, to describe the world around them. That they use this as a way to express who they are. If you're a practitioner, you go, oh, I learned about culture, how to navigate culture through this guy at this school called University of Michigan named Marcus, right? And that the language that we use our industry is the language that is impregnated into this book. And I suppose at a higher level, I hope that people walk out of their time reading the book with more agency to navigate culture, whether they are on the receiving end of marketing communications, that they can make better decisions, or they're designing marketing communications on behalf of brands to find congruence. Because ultimately, I would argue that the best marketers, they find congruence because they understand people, not consumers, not machines that eat messages and crap cash, but real life human beings.

And because they look at people as humans, they don't think about, how do I shove messages and product down their throat? They think, how do I help them? How do I serve them? And when we get to that place as marketers, I think that the discipline of marketing, large becomes a lot more valuable. And I think that as humans, when we get to a place of understanding that people live and navigate the world through different meaning frames culture, then we probably become a little bit more civil. Then we go, okay, Erica, I don't believe what you believe, but I see how you got there because of your belief system. And therefore I get it. So long as your ideologies, your cultural characteristics don't infringe or oppress me, all good. And I think that ultimately, if the book can help people be a little bit more civil in their practice, in their day day lives, then I think that I would've probably done something meaningful here.

Erica Colaianne:

Absolutely, that impact will be immense without a doubt. What has the process been like? You're a very profound speaker, you have this really accomplished career so far. What has the process been like for writing a book and now marketing a book, compared to some of the other work and the research that you've done throughout your career to this point?

Marcus Collins:

It's been a lonely process. I mean, I thought that the academic research is lonely and it can be, but typically you're bouncing ideas off of your peers or in my doctoral program, my advisor. But I feel like there are much more stimuli that I get in doing the research part because it's so iterative along the way. But a book just felt like so isolating. I had my editor, which was great, but even she was like, no, just go write a bunch of chapters and then let me look at some stuff. So, I just feel like kind of alone in the process. So, then when it comes to promoting the book, you want the book in people's hands. So, I'm trying to get people excited about the book to get it, but now I'm feeling a little insecure. I'm like, so what do you think? And the book just came out May 2nd, so people haven't had that much time to dig into it.

So, I'm like people are like, "Got the book." I'm like, "What do you think?" They're like, "Can I read it first, Marcus? Can you give me a chance to read it?" So, it went from being a lonely place to a bit of an insecure place. But I will say though, all that said, I'm really, really proud of this work, and I feel like it is a great distillation of the work that I've done as an academic, as a scholar, and the work that I've done as a practitioner. But even more so it's framed by my lived experiences as a human, as a Collins, as a Christian, as a wolverine, as a Black man navigating this world. And I feel like it's a special piece of text because it's seen through all those different lenses, and hopefully it creates a frame that people haven't seen before, and they can see the world a little bit differently.

Erica Colaianne:

Thank you for giving us that perspective, and I know we are at our time, so is there anything else that you want to share about For The Culture or just about this process, or your research and expertise in general?

Marcus Collins:

Yes. I want people to know that this is not a marketing book, it's a people book. I happen to be a marketer, so I put a marketing lens on it. But this book is all about people. And I would argue that marketing is all about people, so it's kind of one and the same. But at the core, this isn't about teaching you to be a better marketer, it's teaching you to be a better student of humanity. And I would argue that the best marketers are students of humanity, and the best people, our students of humanity as well.

Erica Colaianne:

That's amazing. Thank you so much, Marcus. We greatly appreciate the time that you have given Michigan Minds today, and I'm really excited to finish reading the book.

Marcus Collins:

Thank you so much.

Speaker 4:

Thank you for listening to the Michigan Minds Podcast, a production of the University of Michigan. Join the conversation on social media with hashtag UMich impact.