

The Centrifugal Sponsorship: Exploring a Globalization-Force Partnership Failure

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Abstract: This article provides support to the prioritization of cosmopolitanism ethics as an enduring principle for global organizations in three ways. First, it introduces the seven-year corporate sponsorship between Chevrolet and Manchester United as a globalization-force partnership failure. Second, it provides an overview of the theoretical nuance between definitions of globalization and cosmopolitanism as a foundation for ethical guidance. Third, it advocates for “centripetal” global partnerships built on the cosmopolitan considerations of shared qualities and mutual benefit.

Keywords: intercultural communication, marketing communication, sponsorship.

1. Introduction

The tension between globalization and cosmopolitanism has challenged intercultural communication scholars to articulate an understanding of both concepts in a functional and agreeable manner. The first, globalization, is riddled with implications of the economic and market forces that drive commerce. The second, cosmopolitanism, is imbued with connotations of humane coexistence among peoples who inhabit a singular planet. Beyond their definitional claims, however, globalization and cosmopolitanism have often overlapped within scholarly literature and organizational practice. Within the intersection, a call for examining an organization’s priority – market position or corporate citizen – is warranted to discover the role by which globalization enterprise or cosmopolitan ethics influence organizational activity.

This article explores the seven-year corporate partnership between Chevrolet and Manchester United as an example of a centrifugal sponsorship, one that fails to implement a clear cosmopolitan ethic to its global branding ambitions. It begins with a short history of the global car manufacturer, its brand identity and promotional sponsorship of Manchester United. Next, it analyzes the partnership within the contextual definitions and currents of globalization and cosmopolitanism. Lastly, it calls for international organizations to apply transnational cosmopolitan ethics before engaging in global commerce.

2. Chevrolet and Manchester United as a globalized force partnership

The Chevrolet Motor Company was born out of a partnership between Louis Chevrolet and William Durant in Detroit in 1911. Chevrolet, a successful Swiss race car driver who had lived in North America since age 22, sold his shares of the company to Durant four years later following a dispute over the car’s design. Following his establishment of a controlling stake in General Motors, Durant merged the Chevrolet brand under the GM holding company that showcased automakers including Buick, Oldsmobile, and Pontiac among others.

Despite Louis Chevrolet’s Swiss lineage and the development of a manufacturing plant in Denmark during the 1920s, Chevrolet’s identity evolved to represent an iconic American car company by the nature of its products and promotions. Long before the debut of the sporty Corvette, Chevrolet introduced its first truck in 1918 as a vehicle targeting the American

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working class. Seventeen years later, Chevrolet launched the Suburban Carylall (later referred to as the Suburban), which provided America with the first sport utility vehicle and currently holds the record for the longest-running nameplate in the automobile business.

The American associations continued with Chevrolet's appearance in popular culture and promotional campaigns that further instilled its Michigan, and not Switzerland, roots into the hearts and minds of customers. In 1956, television host Dinah Shore concluded her broadcasts with "see the USA in your Chevrolet." The Beach Boys recorded "4-0-9" in 1962, effectively embedding a Chevrolet car model into a song by one of the most recognizable American rock-and-roll artists. An advertising campaign highlighting Chevrolet's natural fit among "baseball, hot dogs and apple pie" debuted in 1975, followed by an unequivocal promotional message of Chevrolet serving as "the Heartbeat of America" in 1986. Closing out the American commercial themes of the 20th century, Chevrolet launched another advertising campaign based off the Bob Seger song "Like a Rock" in the 1990s, capitalizing on the folksy references to blue-collar values that are responsible for Chevrolet's dependability.

Entering the 2010s, GM global marketing executive Joel Ewanick aimed to spread international awareness of the Chevrolet brand by signing a \$600 million sponsorship with English Premier League football team Manchester United. Pegged as one of the world's most valuable sports teams followed by more than 650 million fans, Manchester United has displayed only five sponsorships on its famous red jerseys since its founding in 1878. Despite the alarming price tag – worth over \$5 million more per season than previous sponsor Aon – Chevrolet rationalized the investment by stating, "when you consider the core values of Chevrolet, our passionate customers around the world, and our rich 100-year history, the partnership with Manchester United is a perfect fit". The deal underscored Chevrolet's intent to leverage "the deep-seated emotion that surrounds the team everywhere it goes," and was contracted to endure through the 2014-2022 EPL seasons (Sportsmail Reporter 2012).

Although the executive soundbites articulated Chevrolet's confidence in the partnership, research examining professional football (soccer) sponsorships reveals limitations with this approach. Buhler (2004: 11) notes that football sponsorships are perceived as "discrete transactions" serving as marketing tools for the sponsored club. Rather than exploring any undercurrent of intercultural fitness, football sponsorships are "mainly limited to reports dealing with finance" (Buhler 2004: 10). Documents released by auditing firms such as Deloitte (2004) convey football club sponsorship details as simple income streams without cultural context. Unsurprisingly, the Manchester United commercial director stated as the partnership went into effect, "this is a fantastic, long-term deal for the club" (Sportsmail Reporter 2012).

3. The globalized force partnership as centrifugal sponsorship

The sponsorship intended to keep Chevrolet's global growth moving forward from its record-setting sales in 2013, a year prior to the appearance of the iconic brand logo on Manchester United's jerseys. According to the Chevrolet pressroom, Chevrolet sales across the United States, China, Brazil, Mexico and Russia were up 4%. However, a closer inspection of the numbers reveals only 174,649 units sold in the sole European country listed, Russia; and no Western European markets were noted for meaningful sales gains. Second-position China purchased less than one-third of the number of cars that the USA had purchased, a meagre figure for a country that has four times as many consumers. Concurrently, global marketing executive Joel Ewanick was ousted at General Motors for failing to "meet the expectations the company has of an employee" (Beene 2013). According to Beene, Mr. Ewanick's firing was attributed to "improper handling of the deal [with Manchester United]."

Two months later, General Motors announced that it would drop all of its Chevrolet operations in Europe by 2016; asserting the need to focus on its Opel brand, General Motors

cited a “challenging business model and a difficult economic situation” as responsible for the decision (Demandt 2013). In just a few years’ time, Chevrolet had engaged a centrifugal force sponsorship that outwardly repelled its brand from the axis of the European market. In its steady reliance on a globalized force, Chevrolet’s Swiss roots could no longer ground the company to its continent of origin after the marketing-communication strategy overshadowed the intercultural considerations necessary for a successful partnership.

4. The Chevrolet brand: Establishing an American identity within a borderless concept

Literature espousing the inevitability of multinational corporations (MNCs) calls for organizations to discover shared values, mediate social justice and shorten distances between peoples and processes of diverse backgrounds (Ghemawat 2011, Maak 2009, Garsten 2003). Given the “permeability of borders”, MNCs are free to operate globally and tasked to engage politically if their influence overshadows state governments (Zurn & de Wilde 2016). According to Ghemawat (2011: 8), “executives report that it takes at least three months to become immersed in a place and appreciate how the culture, politics and history of a region affect business there”.

The reported three months required for foreign companies comfortably to assess local cultural impact on their operations signifies the modern characteristic of efficiency as a prioritized characteristic of globalization. With MNCs serving as political institutions as well as commercial enterprises and social stewards, the short timeline for understanding and processing diverse perspectives for business to move forward may be problematic. The task of assimilation becomes more complicated when an organization has a well-established brand identity, “based on a thorough understanding of the firm’s customers, competitors and business environment” and “needs to focus on points of differentiation that offer sustainable competitive advantage to the firm”; strong brands are not simply influenced by their country of origin, but develop a “set of associations” that bring “thoughts, feelings and attitudes” of the consumer (Ghodeswar 2008: 4). Aaker (1996: 35) suggests, “one key to successful brand-building is to know what the brand stands for and effectively express that identity”. In effect, the brand identity is built from key associations and attributes, developed over time and told through a unique story resonant with targeted audiences. Established brands convey messages prior to the launch of their product manufacturing, which formulate a unique story that may fail to fit neatly into the uniformity quality of globalization.

According to Kapferer (2004), a brand represents the totality of experiences the customer has with an organization based on points of contact. Given the pervasive promotions of Chevrolet as an American car ideal, US and European customers harbor diverse perspectives on how the Chevrolet brand accommodates, or does not accommodate, the needs and desires of its audience. Chevrolet managers may have elected to invest in cultural awareness-raising programs that uncovered points of difference between American car values and those targeted by Chevrolet. Without this background work, the globalized force partnership leading to a marketing-communication sponsorship is powered by financial and industry data alone.

5. Remnants of the Chevrolet + Manchester United sponsorship

Investigating the remaining customer contact points between Chevrolet and Manchester United allows for a clearer understanding of how oversight of cultural considerations led to a centrifugal force sponsorship. First, the Chevrolet European managing director’s language choice on a YouTube video announcing the partnership reveals a lack of differentiating insight that would bridge the brand with a customer group. If Chevrolet were a self-aware brand, it would be familiar with its core identity and understand the intercultural work necessary to locate opportunities for connection with a global audience. However, this critical

linkage is lost in translation as Chevrolet amplifies an inaccurate characterization of its customers (NewsMarket 2014):

Chevy and Manchester United are a perfect fit. These are two great global brands that have both celebrated their centennial, and we think our Chevrolet customers, because we know that they absolutely love football, will find that this linkage with Manchester United will be one that we will be able to celebrate for years to come.

In addition to applying the Americanized moniker “Chevy” in a statement targeting international audiences, the message asserts that Chevrolet customers love “football” – a confusing reference to the majority of Chevrolet drivers, Americans, who would name the sport in question “soccer”. The co-opting of European sports nomenclature to promote an American car is iconoclastic at best and a violation of the Chevrolet “brand promise” at worst (Ghodeswar 2008: 5). Brand promise violations risk loss of audience trust, deteriorating the equity that Chevrolet has acquired over its 100-plus-year history.

A second customer contact point in the Chevrolet brand’s sponsorship of Manchester United is the partnership’s social media presence. A Chevrolet spokesperson encouraged fans to “become a part of the Chevrolet football experience” by visiting Facebook or Twitter to “see how we’re going to interact with Manchester United” on a video announcing the partnership (NewsMarket 2014). A basic search within Facebook in August 2019 for content related to this partnership revealed a page for Chevrolet Football Club (FC). The latest post on this page is dated 28 January 2019 and reads, “Chevrolet’s goal is to help girls everywhere CARE about their goals and DON’T CARE about anything that gets in the way”. A similar search on Twitter reveals the latest tweet dated 11 February 2019, which reads, “girls are quitting sports at 2x the rate of boys. Help girls CARE about their goals. DON’T CARE about anything that gets in the way. #BeAGoalKeeper.” Without any reference to Manchester United, the Chevrolet FC social media presence had shifted its strategy toward social responsibility before informally deactivating itself in February 2019. A second visit to the Chevrolet FC page following Week One of the English Premier League competition confirmed that no information related to Manchester United would be shared on the Facebook or Twitter platforms. Manchester United defeated Chelsea 4–0 and garnered valuable attention from its more than 650 million fans.

Despite the apparent deactivation on Facebook and Twitter, content related to the Chevrolet and Manchester United partnership is apparent within the Chevrolet FC YouTube page. Most notably, videos displaying Manchester United players adorning their Chevrolet-branded jerseys answering fan questions and engaging in pranks have received upwards of three million views: quantitatively, a high number of engagements that keep fans attuned to the team, but a substantively low, if not nonexistent, level of sentiment regarding the Chevrolet brand’s role in the videos. A call for audience coordination to “join the Chevrolet FC conversation on Facebook” and “follow us on Twitter” leads fans back to pages that managers have not updated in quite some time. Although this brand contact point may build an association between Chevrolet and Manchester United, the content is wholly centered on the personalities of the football team with no additional linkages to the Chevrolet identity.

The disappearing contact points between audience and Chevrolet + Manchester United partnership signifies the futility of a centrifugal force sponsorship construed by a globalized transactional and not a cosmopolitan transnational force. While headlines announcing the departure of Chevrolet from Europe correspond to a collapse in Chevrolet FC Facebook and Twitter activity, more surprising is the prospect of two final years of the emblematic logo emblazoned across the classic Manchester United jerseys without supplemental pathways that detail the Chevrolet story with the team. This remaining £50 million investment appears to be more of a sunken cost than a meaningful artifact serving the legacies of both the Chevrolet

and Manchester United brands. Multinational corporations seeking to avoid the same outcome as Chevrolet should turn to the theoretical origins of globalization and cosmopolitanism for ethical guidance on global expansion. First, MNCs must navigate the definitional nuances of these two concepts across intercultural, political and marketing communication currents. Next, MNCs must determine an informed course of action by understanding the context in which a cross-cultural relationship is developed. Finally, MNCs should leverage relationships toward centripetal partnerships that engender shared qualities and mutual benefit.

6. Definitional nuances between globalization and cosmopolitanism

The concepts of *globalization* and *cosmopolitanism* have entered into a range of scholarly currents including intercultural, political and marketing communication (Roberts & Arnett 2008, Zurn & de Wilde 2016, Ghemawat 2011, Garsten 2003). While the terms are often applied interchangeably, understanding the nuances between the two concepts and the contexts to which they are applied may assist multinational corporations in advancing an appropriate global expansion ethic. Roberts and Arnett (2008) consider the roles cosmopolitanism, provinciality and globalization play within intercultural communication ethics. Cosmopolitanism is characterized as a “cosmic oneness”, “the sincere and complete articulation of the dream of community grounded in the in-common” (Christians 2008: 11, Gehrke 2008: 124). Fisher (2008: 48) contends that provinciality is better served under the discussion of world citizenship and advocates for Appiah’s (2006) replacement of globalization with cosmopolitanism to eliminate the concept as a macroeconomic thesis.

Roberts (2008: 89) writes that while “globalization does concern itself with economics and the marketplace... that makes it neither pejorative nor terribly disconnected from cosmopolitanism”. Skribis, Kendall and Woodward (2004: 116) summarize the agency of cosmopolitanism within market forces by noting cosmopolitanism as “embedded in the structural conditions of modernity”. In effect, “cosmopolitanism today cannot be understood without reference to social, cultural, political and economic features of the modern globalized era” (Skribis, Kendall & Woodward 2004: 116).

Literature within the political currents of globalization and cosmopolitanism situate the former as an inevitable consequence of the rise of borderless multinational corporations and the latter as a means of taking responsibility for socioeconomic and governmental influence. Maak writes (2009: 361), “instead of being part of the problem by failing to protect human rights, corporations should ask themselves what they can proactively contribute to positive social and environmental change.” Zurn and de Wilde (2016) contend that economic systems once bounded by the borders of nation states are increasingly globalized, requiring an ethic of global justice supported by a cosmopolitanism framework. Palmer (2003) advocates for a “right of exit”, which enables individuals to freely leave an accustomed environment – not to be guaranteed a right of entry into a new territory, but to be treated humanely and without hostility should they find themselves within such a territory. Inspired by Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*, the right to exit is born of an understanding that humans have forged universal communities that should maintain universal human rights.

Marketing communication perspectives exploring the tension between globalization and cosmopolitanism assert the growth-oriented realities that illustrate the opportunities corporations can leverage for continual expansion. According to Garsten (2003: 368), “social accountability and corporate citizenship is not just do-goodism, but a strategy to survive and make money under new conditions”; emboldened by the potential for increased scale, “corporations may be seen as cosmopolitans of sorts, striving to organize world culture into some degree of coherence, while also mapping a world of distinctions, created out of business segmentation and competitive advantage motives”.

For Garsten (2003: 355), the concept of cosmopolitanism in this marketplace context is seemingly replaced with “worldism”, loosely defined as “awareness of the global nature of trade and capitalism, the associated risk scenarios, and the attempts at approaching something like a humane globalization by the setting up of ethics standards and codes of conduct”. Similarly, Ghemawat (2011) sees cosmopolitanism as a corporate attribute by suggesting, “a cosmopolitan firm thinks about how to alter internal organizational distances in response to changes in external differences”; this approach to cosmopolitanism reflects a marketing-communication perspective that contends, “the truly global company has no home base”, requiring a constant minimization of differences for the maximization of business efficacy.

7. Intercultural, political and marketing layers of globalization and cosmopolitanism

Identifying the context of globalization and cosmopolitanism allows for closer inspection of how intercultural, political and marketing currents are layered within these two concepts. Given its broad definition of exploring “cross-cultural contacts and interactions”, intercultural communication may provide the core layer of cosmopolitanism and globalization (Samovar & Porter 1998). Should the cross-cultural contacts unify into an organized community, political communication ordering relational activities may form the next layer of cosmopolitanism and globalization. Marketing communication as a specific ordered relation for commerce in the political sphere may form the outermost layer. A simple model may best convey these layers (Figure 1).

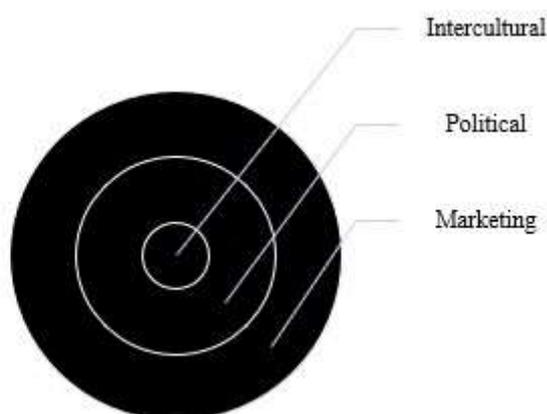


Figure 1: Intercultural, political and marketing currents.

The logic of situating intercultural, political and marketing communicative currents into a multilayered model breaks down when language is introduced that conflates globalization with cosmopolitanism. Marketing-oriented literature overlooks the dynamic interactions of diverse cultures within the description of corporate activity, such as the cosmopolitan corporation, which is saturated with market-driven details premised on a globalized society. This underscores the call by Appiah (2006), Fisher (2008) and Roberts (2008) to ensure that cosmopolitan terminology is used when referring to the ethics of interactions among people of diverse cultures prior to engaging in commercial endeavors.

8. Globalization force: The hazard of marketing cosmopolitanism

According to UNCTAD data in 2009, “of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are now global corporations, only 49 are countries” (Maak 2009: 361). This statistic ensures the role of the globalization narrative as a primary means of investigation, occupying the outer and most visible layer of the intercultural, political and marketing model presented above. Researchers

frame ideas such as citizenship and accountability not as intercultural or political constructs, but as marketplace concepts embedded in the globalized world (Garsten 2003: 368). Cosmopolitanism within this outermost layer is not an ideal, but a “position” or “strategy” that may be occupied by firms (Garsten 2003: 357; Ghemawat 2011: 5).

The implication of corporations serving as cosmopolitans reduces the importance of cross-cultural contacts and sociopolitical organization to activities in service of marketplace ends. The essence of cosmopolitanism is recast from its understanding as “a distinct ethical orientation towards selflessness, worldliness and communitarianism” into a world order of diverse peoples engaged in perpetual commerce (Skribis, Kendall & Woodward 2004: 128). Not only does this continual globalization force pressure organizations to align with the marketing communication current of cosmopolitanism, but it also assumes that positioning a firm for global success can be an effective means to scale up while harmoniously existing in cross-cultural spaces.

The globalization force responsible for Chevrolet’s partnership with Manchester United was ultimately predicated on profits, not people. Marketing communication activities thought to build bridges and reduce differences instead imposed values onto societies unfamiliar with and unwelcoming to foreign conceptions of status, belonging, and peace of mind. Once citizens exposed Chevrolet as overextending its identity onto an unfamiliar audience, the marketing communication effort receded to the political and cross-cultural layers of cosmopolitanism that produce a centrifugal counterforce to compulsory globalization. Chevrolet’s failed sponsorship with Manchester United illustrates a key example of this.

9. Conclusion: Chevrolet transitioning to centripetal-force partnerships

Chevrolet’s sponsorship with Manchester United expires after 2022, making the brand free once more to explore prospective partnerships that realize the company’s international vision. By avoiding the globalized-force pitfall that imposed its brand identity onto unsuspecting audiences, Chevrolet should advance a program of cosmopolitan considerations before signing a deal based on transactional numbers alone. Such considerations can usefully include Hennerz’s (1990) instruction to develop dynamic interdependent relationships with locals or Held’s (2002) guideline to understand areas of overlapping collective fortunes.

Unlike marketing communication currents that encourage efficiency, intercultural currents avoid a restrictive timeline that may obstruct the achievement of Gehrke’s (2008: 124) cosmopolitan “dream of the community grounded in the in-common”. Equipped with the objective of facilitating an understanding between the organizational story and its resonance with diverse audiences, Chevrolet may identify sponsorship opportunities reflective of a centripetal force that strengthens connections between the two entities in their movement toward each other based on commonality. Attentive to the layers of a cosmopolitan ethic, these partnerships can grow to encompass shared values for a meaningful relationship that is “at home in the world”, regardless of where the iconic bowtie logo may be displayed (Brennan 1997).

About the author

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