

Marcus Collins Transcript

Marcus: I believe that I was put on this earth to serve. It's like all of us put on this earth to serve. In my lens, serve God and serve each other. That's what I'm here to do. And I think that the way I do that is by helping people realize their highest fidelity possible.

Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape brands must move at an ever increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now and how you can keep up. Welcome to The Speed of Culture. Up today we have our first returning guest on The Speed of Culture podcast. So excited to have Dr. Marcus Collins back, an award winning marketer and cultural translator with one foot in the world of practice, serving as the Chief Strategy Officer at Wieden+Kennedy New York and one foot in the world of academia as a marketing professor at the Ross School of Business. And most importantly, Marcus has a new book out called For the Culture that we're going to talk about today. Mark, it's so great to see you. Thanks so much for joining our first repeat guest on The Speed of Culture.

Marcus: I feel so honored. I feel like this is like the Saturday Night Live return host sort of thing. I feel so honored. Look at me.

Matt: This is the first time.

Marcus: Absolutely. Happy to speed the culture.

Matt: It's happening right now. We have to say the last time we were on the pod, I really didn't want it to end. And when I said I wanted to have you back after the book was out, I meant it. And here we are. The book comes out May 2nd, if I'm correct.

Marcus: That's right. That's right. May 2nd. This is what they say. Promises made, promises kept. Here we go.

Matt: Your new book, Florida Culture, it's now out. Tell us about the book and what the impetus behind Florida Culture was.

Marcus: Yeah, so the book's out in the world and the book has a very clear provocation. It's that there's no force, no external force more influential to human behavior than culture, full stop. And now when you hear that, people go, yeah, I buy that. They nod their head. But if you ask five people to define culture, you get 25 different answers. That's a problem. If we don't have clear language, a good Rosetta Stone to describe a thing, we can never operationalize it. If we don't have a company for a marketer, a leader, institution, organization, politician, activist, we can never really harness the power of culture without good language. So the book sort of unpacks what is culture and then why does it have this impact on us and how do we leverage it in our daily lives or in our practice? And it was really brought to bear by two things. One is from a practical perspective and the other one is personal. Practically I thought, oh man, as a marketer, our job is to influence behavior. And if culture is the most influential force on human behavior, then this is the biggest cheat code, understanding culture. We can find a better way to describe it and to harness its power than we could be more powerful in using it. Awesome. From a personal level, I thought about this because I didn't have language to describe culture, but I was very much affected by it, by most of us. So I'm

from Detroit, born and raised, and did well in math and science. And in those days, the 90s, if you did well in math and science and you're a black, you're going to be an engineer, full stop.

Matt: Right.

Marcus: So that's why I studied. I studied engineering because that's what you were supposed to do. Those were the expectations of people like me. So I went to school and studied engineering at the University of Michigan, studied material science engineering, realized it wasn't for me, but kept doing it because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. I was getting social pressures from my family, from my parents, from my peers even, that this is what people like us do. I did it begrudgingly, finished it and went into a career I really wanted to do music and had to fight to make that happen too. And when I realized 20 some odd years later is that because I didn't know what was happening to me, that I was experiencing the forces of culture telling me to be normal, I didn't have very much agency to navigate it. And having written this book or written this book, I think to myself, wow, like not only does this help me as a better practitioner, but also help me as a better human to make better decisions because I have agency to identify what's happening to me so I can now respond to it accordingly.

Matt: Absolutely. And writing a book about culture, as you mentioned, it's such a big topic and it really is the driving force of brand building and so much of what happens in the business world. Where do you start in terms of because it's such a broad topic? How are you in terms of the process of writing a book, which maybe we'll give our listeners a little idea in terms of what goes on inside your brain? How do you frame that topic into actually a form factor of a book?

Marcus: It was pretty difficult, actually. So I knew I wanted to write about culture and the impact that it has on us as human beings, as consumers and the like. So when I started writing the book, I just kind of put everything on paper that I knew about culture and how I've leveraged it in my work. And I realized that I didn't have that much to say, you know, like 5000 words, which a book is more like 75 to 90,000 words only had 5000 words written about it. And I was like, oh man, I'm kind of tapped out here. I thought to myself, well, I can write about this, I can write about that. But that's well-worn territory. Like people a thousand times smarter than me have already written that. What do I have to contribute uniquely? So I thought about, so how I see the world? Like who am I as an individual and how does that inform how I think about culture? And I thought about how culture was first studied by the social scientists in sociology, like Durkheim, Weber, Marx, they observed religion to study culture. And I'm a church boy for sure. I grew up in a church and I was like, oh, that's a point of view that is uniquely mine. So I started looking at culture through that lens, but through a contemporary version of the things I listened to, the cultural product that I take in. And it's that intersection of practice, academia, some sort of like religion, if you will, and the cultural product that I take in as far as like film, literature, music, Et cetera, and finding the convergence to talk about culture through that lens, the work that I've done, the research that I've done as an academic, as a scholar, that has created a new way for me to talk about it. And I started hearing from people like Doug Holt, who is a monster in my field, studies culture and strategy for marketers. He was like, you created a new lane for this thing. And I was like, thank you, Lord. So getting there, it was a challenge, but it's that introspection of who I am and how I see the world that allowed me to add something new to the discourse about culture and its impact on consumption.

Matt: Yeah, and culture is something that's really ever-changing, right? And as somebody who wrote a book 10 years ago, and I'm about to go in and actually write a post about some of the predictions I made 10 years later in terms of what was right and wrong.

Marcus: But hold up.

Matt: Yeah, exactly, I think I did okay. But, you know, ultimately, since culture is changing so quickly and a book is a static form factor, did that drive your thought in terms of, hmm, if I put this in the book, is it gonna be irrelevant in a year or so? And in that regard, what in the book do you think will be true 10 years from now? And what do you worry might be, or even five years from now, what do you worry might be dated?

Marcus: Yeah, I think, so when it comes to the temporality, the femoral-ity of the things that are written in the book, I used examples that were from my work. And those things for me are evergreen because it's my work and it's that practice.

Matt: Okay, so what's impacting those? What is evergreen?

Marcus: Right, so human behavior, right? Technology changes really, really, really, really, really fast. Culture can change quickly. At least fast culture can change very quickly.

Matt: Trends, things like that.

Marcus: Exactly, but people change very, very, very, very, very slowly, very slowly. Like we're still using the same hardware from our Sub-Saharan African days, right? Like the software may update, but the hardware is still very much the same. So if people change slowly and trends and technology change quickly, then let's focus on people. So when I talk about the impact of culture, I look at the underlying physics that govern us as humanity and then use these examples from work that I've done, work before me as well, as context of how these things play out to actually say, hey, the things that work back with like World of War, worlds, same thing that worked with Blair Witch Project, the same thing that worked today with like the Chris Paul campaign, the Cliff Paul campaign for State Farm, that these things are evergreen because humanity doesn't change that quickly. And if we understand humanity, then we can leverage those things. So what does the future bring? Or what is the future if I were to be a clairvoyant, which I'm not? I would say that like, it's what Marshall McLuhan said, that technology will always extend human behavior, but it's gonna be bound by human behavior. So while TikTok will be a thing 10 years from now, who knows? Twitter doesn't look good. But people will still be people. And if we understand people, the things that are happening beneath the surface, not just things that we observe, then we can leverage those understandings to inform and impact what happens on the surface. This is why I talk to students and clients about the idea of trendspotting. Trendspotting can be powerful. We're looking at how people consume, what are they doing, what are they taking on, what perceptions and attitudes about a particular thing today. But those things change quickly.

Matt: It's ephemeral, right? Yeah.

Marcus: What I'm more concerned about is what are the underlying things that are informing that? What are the implicit meanings that don't change as quickly that informs why they want to demonstrate themselves as such? It's like flying over New York City. I can see the patterns. I can see this is Central Park. Here's Times Square. Here's Meatpacking. Here's Murray Hill. I don't know why I thought of Murray Hill. Here are these different places, but you don't know the city until you walk the streets, until you talk to people. You really don't know the city until you know how it moves, the subway system. What is the system for humanity? It's culture, the things that happen beneath the surface. I think that for the future, prayerfully, the book holds up because it's about people.

Matt: Right. You're going to love her deeper. It's interesting. I was walking around New York City last night and the Knicks had won a big game. A huge game. A huge game. Who knows by the time this podcast comes out if it will have mattered in the course of NBA history or not. What was really interesting was that a friend of mine and myself were walking back to his car and we were walking by Penn Station. There were probably 400 people celebrating and chanting the fact that the Knicks won the first round of the playoff game. The friend I was with asked me, why are they here? What I told him is everybody wants to feel like they're a part of something bigger than themselves. That's right. They just want to belong. That's right. You're one of the core drivers of culture. You'd mentioned how a brand has moved from a love mark to a trust mark to something that you feel like you're a part of, not to butcher your words. I imagine that's an example. Is that an example? What are some others that you think are the evergreen human behavioral aspects that drive

Marcus: Culture? That is probably the most salient thing in all of us is that we, as Aristotle says, we are by nature social animals. Anthropologists were arguing that the reason why we were able to evolve as a species was our ability to cooperate, to socialize, to come together. It's deep in our brain stem to be connected. All we want to do is to connect, to belong, to find people like ourselves, to find community. It's in our DNA to be communal, to belong. That thing will never, never change. Interestingly, as you and your friend walked down the street and saw this happening, they were like, what's going on here? They're celebrating. That's what you observe. What's happening beneath the surface? They want to belong. But also for a Knicks fan, it's been a long time since you've been there.

Matt: A struggle.

Marcus: That's a struggle. Exactly. We haven't had that kind of celebration since Linsanity. Right. Ten years ago. So these things have meaning beneath the surface. And that's the other part. We want to be in tribes, in community, in community. And the way we do that is by the way we collectively make meaning, the way we see the world, the way we translate the world. Because everything that we see around us is inherently meaningless. Means nothing. Like everything that we're looking at right now has no meaning inherently to it. We give it meaning. For instance, red. What is red? One would say it's a color. One may say it's a wavelength that activates your eyes to see a color. But if you're driving down the street and you approach a red light, red means stop.

Matt: Yeah.

Marcus: Does red inherently mean stop? No. But we have negotiated and constructed that red means stop. Just like green means go and yellow means hurry up. These things don't inherently mean these things. We give it that meaning. Red means passionate. It means hot. It means sexy. It means angry.

Matt: But some things are, I guess, espoused onto you and other things you know right away. For example, we both have small children. When we ask our two and three year olds what color and they say red, they're probably just looking at it in terms of the definition of red. But over time, as we get older through our experiences, we know that red means stop makes you feel young or whatever emotion the color brings out within you. But that changes over time. I would imagine culture has a big impact on that definition over time.

Marcus: We interpolate on our children what meaning is through folklore, through stories that we tell, through music that we hear. This is all a cultural product to socialize with people like us. You go

back to religion. If you're anywhere, any monocle of religion you've had, you learn it by stories. We tell stories through folklore to our young so they know how to be good citizens, how to be like us. What happens is that we get introduced to new ideas and we start to develop new meaning. We go, I don't know if I see it like that anymore. Then we say, I don't like hanging out with my family because we don't mean the same thing. We have a different cultural lens by which we see the world. We want to belong and how we belong is by having a shared point of view, a shared way of seeing the world. If you think about culture as this system of conventions and expectations, it's anchored in our identity. Like, I'm a Collins or we're New Yorkers, for those who live in New York. I'm Collins. We have a set of-

Matt: Or a political affiliation.

Marcus: Or I'm a Republican. I'm a Democrat. I'm at Wieden+Kennedy. I'm a Michigan Wolverine. Whatever our identity sets in, I am this. And because I self-identify by this collective, especially when I subscribe to my identity, not ascribe. Like, our children are ascribed their identity. They are Collins because they were born in the Collins family. But our subscriptions are, I choose to join this company. I choose to join this fraternity. I choose to go to this school.

Matt: I choose to purchase this brand. Exactly.

Marcus: And I ascribe my identity to it. So because I am this thing, there are a set of beliefs and ideologies that are expected of people like us. So to be a good standing citizen in this community that we so desperately in our DNA want to be a part of, I adhere to the beliefs and ideologies, the truths and the stories I tell myself about being a part of this community. And because I see the world a certain way, I show up in the world a certain way. I dress a certain way. Like, New Yorkers wear black. We're all wearing black in this room. New Yorkers wear black. I behave a certain way. There are certain norms or expectations. There's language that we use, vernacular that we use. Like, we have a shared way of living. So I know that you're one of us. I know how you talk, that you're one of us. By what you wear, I go, oh, you must be X, Y, and Z.

Matt: People walk fast. They don't always hold open a door for you. It's a little different than this in different parts of the country.

Marcus: Exactly. Like, if I'm talking to someone and they're like, oh, what's happening, son? I'm like, you're from New York. Totally. But if I meet someone, they go, what up, Delves? Like, oh, you're from Detroit. Or if someone goes, man, that John, oh, you're from Philly. Right? That language signals where you're from. And people subscribe to their identity to where they're from. Or they say, I'm from this little town in X, Y, and Z, but that's not who I am. My identity is now here. I subscribe to my identity elsewhere. And because of our identity, we share our same way of seeing the world, our same way of life. And then we have a shared expression of being that. The music we listen to, the art we take in, the literature that we read, the music, the movies that we watch, the television that we watch, and the brands and branded products that we consume. True.

Matt: But here's the thing I struggle with with that is like Nike, sure. Adidas, sure. They are brands that fit so well into culture. Femdom care products, you know, bottled water. Where do they fit in with culture? And how do brands that aren't the cool brands approach culture as a driver for their business? So what makes a brand cool?

Marcus: Makes a brand cool is that it's something I aspire to or something that is aligned with who I am. Sure. I mean, talking about Nike, like, they're sneakers. Like, there's a commodity. But they still look cool.

Matt: They still have the swoosh. Like, a feminine care product is not something that people would aspire to. But what makes something look cool?

Marcus: For instance, when I first saw the Yeezys, I was like, these shoes are terrible. They just look ugly as all get out. And people are like, they're so comfortable. Like, they look like moths on your feet. They're not cool. I own four pairs of them. Why? Yeah. Because people like me do something like this. We collectively make meaning. Why is this kind of music good versus that? Why is that style cool and that not? Like, we collectively legitimated through the discourse that we take in, the conversations that we have. So a commodity that is meaningless has meaning. But what about a low-bombing category? What about toothpaste?

Matt: What about shampoo?

Marcus: So let's go to something a little less sexy in nature, right? Or less consensual. Or less conspicuous. Yes. Right? Like, let's talk about water. I don't think anything could be more commoditized than water, at least in the Western world. Right? We have access, tremendous access to clean water, depending on where you are. There's Aquafina. There's Dasani. There's Fiji. Voss.

Matt: Voss. Yeah, all these brands.

Marcus: It's all water, H₂O, right? But we pay a premium because of what it means in our minds. What's a cool water brand? Liquid Death. Liquid Death has a point of view about the world, right? That they want to kill plastic and they want to murder your thirst. Instead of being in a plastic bottle, it's in a tall boy can. And having a tall boy can say nothing about me, that I am distinctive, that I am ironic. I went to the gym and I got a tall boy. People are like, what are you doing? Right, I think that the VP of marketing once said that like, we want to be the SNL of marketing. Like we're bringing in these sorts of, these pokes and prods that really kind of takes the piss out of what we consider to be the status quo. And as a result, H₂O in this can from this brand has a different meaning. And if I rock a shirt that says Liquid Death, it says something about who I am. Just like back in the day, if you rocked a shirt that said Red Bull, it says something about who you are. Dove sells hand soap, conditioner, body wash, these inconspicuous things. But we share things from Dove because what Dove believes, how it sees the world, its ideology and its cultural characteristics are aligned with us. We believe in encouraging, empowering self-esteem, right? And so to share a video from Dove is like, I agree with this thing, not because of what Dove is, but because of who I am. And we use these brands as identity marks. And as we use them as identity marks, we go, Matt, I was thinking the exact same thing when I saw that. Oh my goodness. And it brings us together. So sharing these cultural products, whether it's products, good product services from brands or marketing communications, there are ways by which we communicate who we are to go find people like us. Always feminine hygiene, right? Very inconspicuous in its usage. And traditional feminine hygiene products communicate themselves as such. Here's ours, here's the competitor. Here's red water in ours, here's blue water in theirs. Ours absorbed more by ours.

Matt: Right, you need a selling proposition, yep.

Marcus: Value proposition based, totally. But always goes, well, what do we believe as a company, as a brand, right? We believe that women are awesome, right? And what they saw in the literature is that by adolescents, both boys and girls, their self-esteem plummets. But then boys' self-esteem jumps right back up. And girls just kind of peter up over time. And always says, that's ridiculous. Why is that a thing? So well, because of the rhetoric that we use when we talk about girls. Doing things like a girl. You run like a girl, you fight like a girl, you hit like a girl, as if being a girl is something to be diminished. As if that's something that's not to be celebrated. So what did it always do? They did a campaign that kind of poked at these cultural norms, this rhetoric, this language that we use in our society that's actually taking a punch, and giving a black eye to women. This is ridiculous. So they made this film, people shared it massively, not because of its products, but because of what the brand believes is aligned with what they believe. And excels went up for a product that is commoditized.

Matt: Right, and we talked about this during the last pod, but like the Toyota Camry would be looked at as a technological marvel 20 years ago, and get you from New York to California comfortably, safely, Et cetera. So we're at the point in so many categories where the unique selling propositions are almost at parity. So what's gonna differentiate you? It's brand, what drives brand culture?

Marcus: Think of water, water is H₂O. We'll say it has electrolytes, fam, it's water. Or like Salt, Salt has the therapeutic index of sodium chloride, it's NaCl, that's what Salt is. But then, but there is-

Matt: It's coconut water, there's a lot of products, they're just that, it is what it is.

Marcus: So product-wise, side by side, they're often parity. But what allows it to transcend the value propositions of the product?

Matt: So what's the premium in many instances? Because-

Marcus: Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Et cetera. I see myself in it, right? It is an identity project for me. It's a strategy by which I signal to the world who I am, so I can find people who are just like me. There's nothing more satisfying for me than when I travel, and I see someone with a Michigan paraphernalia on, and I go, Go Blue, and they go, Go Blue. And I feel like I'm connected, even when I'm overseas. And they say, Go Blue, and I go, Go Blue. Man, I got someone everywhere. In my brain, it triggers that you are safe, because there's people in this world to which you are connected to, even if you don't know it.

Matt: Yeah, I walk by people with an Eagles hat or shirt, and I'm like, go birds, go birds, give them a fist bump. Exactly. No idea who they are. Strangers.

Marcus: Now here's the interesting part. When I'm on Michigan's campus, where I teach, I don't say, Go Blue, everybody's wearing the gear. Even though we're all wearing Michigan paraphernalia on the campus, we don't do that when we're there, we do that when we're away. These signals are a way that we tell people in this world where everyone's different.

Matt: When you're outside of that one community, we belong in this big world. There's something that we have in common.

Marcus: And that's all we really want.

Matt: What's interesting is that brands, when you talk about unique selling proposition, 30% more absorbent, 350 horsepower, whatever it may be, that was in a world where brands marketed by cookie cutter demographics, 18 to 24, 34 to 49, because they thought that people of a certain, maybe gender or income level or age, actually were all the same. And what I'm hearing from you, when you talk about Go Blue, that's Psychographics, that's not demographics. So is that how it's all one way?

Marcus: I would take it one step higher, its identity, which is the anchor of culture.

Matt: People don't identify by their age though, they identify by their passions.

Marcus: Listen, we look at demography and we use that all the time to describe people and it is efficient, but terribly inaccurate. So take my demography. At the time of this recording, I'm 44 years old, I'm black, from Detroit, born and raised, and went to public schools my entire life. If a marketer saw that in a brief, they'll go, oh, he must walk like this, talk like this, hang out with those kinds of people because that's just what those kinds of people do. And that sounds crazy racist for me to say out loud, but that's what we do.

Matt: It's the easy thing. All the time. Cookie cutter, it's easy.

Marcus: We put people in boxes, not because it's real, but because it's easy. Deborah drives a minivan. Does Deborah have kids? Yep. Deborah, are there kids who play sports? Yep. What sport do they play? Soccer. Where does she live? The suburbs. One data point about Deborah, we map out our entire life. We do this all the time, not because it's real, but because it's easy. While I am 44, I am black, I am from Detroit. I did go to pub schools my entire life. I also played jazz growing up and I swam competitively. And I studied engineering and I love the monkeys as much as I love A Tribe Called Quest. These things shape how I see the world. My truth and ideologies about the world and therefore I show up in the world a certain way and therefore I consume a certain way. So when we think about it from that perspective, we go, oh, demography is trash, trash. But we look at people based on their cultural subscription, not only is it more accurate to describe them because they self-identified by it, but also there's probably some predictive outcomes that happen because of what people like us do. I mean, I tell my students this all the time. It's like, you know, we say all women love to shop. That's not true, right? Or MBA students go, you know, all guys are dogs. They go, no, your boyfriend's a dog. All guys are dogs, right? It's like, you know, all black people do something to fill in the blank racist. Like it's ridiculous, but we say just because you were born in a 20 year period, you're the same. That is nonsensical, but we do it all the time and we bet the farm on it. Not because it's real, but because it's easy.

Matt: It's so true, I mean, you know, I spent 20 years in the advertising industry. I can't tell you how many times a CMO would say, our ICP, ideal customer profile is Jane. Jane is 34 years old. She lives in Minneapolis. Her household income is blank. And this is what Jane likes. Jane watches this stuff. So we're gonna put these ads on, Et cetera. It's like, that is not differentiating, right? Is that where brands go wrong in terms of trying to ingratiate in the culture and build a brand in this new era?

Marcus: Brands go wrong because we don't understand people. And the paradox is that we have more data than ever before, but we don't know who people truly are because we mistake information for intimacy. We have to understand people. W.E.D. Du Bois puts it this way, that herein lies the tragedy age. Not that men are poor because we all know something about poverty. Not that men are wicked because what is good? Not that men are liars because what is the truth? Nay, that

we know so little of mankind. We don't know people outside ourselves. So it requires us to be much more empathetic, taking off our lens of how we make meaning through our cultural meaning-making system that is the way we see the world and see the world through other people's eyes. Not to agree, but to understand. I'm not a Republican, but I'll look at Fox News and I go, I get why they feel the way they feel. I don't agree. I don't think it's right, but I get it. And I manage a team of people and I'll hear someone complain about a thing and I go, well, that's not what I said, but I understand why they feel that way. It's just about understanding. The better we understand people, the more likely we are to activate them. The more likely we are to connect with them in meaningful ways that not only get them to move, but also get them to evangelize on our behalf with people who are just like them. And people trust people more than any form of marketing communications. Like I watch shows because someone was like, yo, there's a show on Paramount Plus you've got to watch, Marcus. I go, oh, what is it? I was called Yellowstone. And I'm like, oh, I saw that commercial. It's like a country, like Western. Put it in the box. Like that's not me, I don't do that. And they go, no, no, dude, let me tell you. Like it's this, that, and the third, and it's this. Oh, sweet, I watched it not because of the ad, but because someone told me. And like I said, I put it in the box. I'm like, I'm not that person. There are more people who watch Game of Thrones than people who subscribe as sci-fi fans. Why? Because those people who are hardcore Game of Thrones fans went to go preach the gospel. That's what we got to do as marketers. Find people who see the world the way we do and they tell people about us, not because of what it is, but because of who they are. The brand becomes an identity mark, a receipt of their identity. And they share with people within their subculture and people within that community act, not because of what it is, but because of who they are.

Matt: Absolutely. It's interesting, because I'm thinking as you talk about the ad world and just the go-to-market strategy, being a little bit of a barbell, because what you're talking about is essentially brand building. And at the same time, there's a lot of performance marketing, which is you have to get customer acquisition costs at a certain number, and it's like the math behind business. When you're looking at the math behind business, sometimes it's easy to throw all that out the window and say, I'm just going to focus on discounts, deals, offers. So where does that fit in? Because it's a completely different approach.

Marcus: It's a false binary that we create. It's like, I either have to think about right now or the future. And why do those things have to be at odds? That's a false bifurcation. What we know from the literature, when we look at B'Naian Field's IPA work, is that strong brands build when we think about the sales activation today, the short term, and the brand building for tomorrow. Professor Bass and Professor Rock said, it takes two to make a thing go right. Rob Bass, DJ EJ Rock, takes two to make a thing go right. You need the short term and the long term. And I think that as brands, stewards, we don't think in that way. There's some perverse incentives for us to think about right now. I like to make my numbers by the end of the quarter or I'll lose my job or whatever. We're chasing our stock price as a way of a metric of how we're performing. But ultimately, we're in the business of getting people to move. And when we think about our activities, they should all perform. The brand should perform. The brand work should perform just like the quote unquote performance marketing should perform. They just happen at different time horizons. Right, like, if I meet someone, say I meet a girl on the street and I say, hey, you know, I'd love to take you for coffee. Right, I'm not like, I'm paying for coffee right now so that this happens next. Like, no, I'm making an investment for what might be the future. And this is what we do with brand building. We are establishing relationships. We are trying to construct meaning in the minds of people so that they move over time. When we're doing discounts, we are activating the prefrontal cortex, the dopamine

shots to help people move right now. But doing the two together gets us both a long-term view and a short-term view that's better for the business.

Matt: It lets people act with confidence. They might act instantly, but they're acting with confidence because they have a preconceived notion or feeling about the brand that they have an emotional connection to.

Marcus: I mean, a brand, by definition, is a signifier. It means something. It's an identifiable signifier that conjures up thoughts and feelings in the minds or hearts of people relative to a product, a company, Institution, organization, or person. Or a person. Exactly, or person. That's what a brand is. It means something. So when I see the brand mark, I'm flooded with cognitions and affects. My mind is flooded with thoughts and my emotions are overflowing when it's a strong brand. But when I see it, I go, oh, that's just 25% more flow out of my toothpaste, not a strong brand.

Matt: It's so interesting because I, in many instances of my career, struggle with having to evolve what my company was known for. For example, I first started my company as Mr. Youth and we did college tours.

Marcus: Oh yeah, I know Mr. Youth.

Matt: Yeah, exactly. And what I realized is, oh, we're just a vendor. We need to get more upstream. We need to get the CMO. And over time, I had to shed people's preconceived notions about what my business did. And it could be strategic. And over time, we ended up renaming it as MRI. We had to shift positioning. And now even with Suzy, when we first started, we were like an on-demand quick research tool. But then we wanted to be more sophisticated. So we hired more people in. But there are still some people that look to us as who we were, not who we are. So it's hard to change, in terms of first impressions of people, how do brands go about evolving their identity if it's such a process to get there?

Marcus: So let's take you for instance. So from your time at Mr. Youth all the way to today at Suzy, I would say those things that you have done, it's what you've done in these different incarnations and it's presented itself differently. But why you've done it has always remained the same. In my mind, this is me outside looking in. I think about the meaning of who that is, that you've always been curious about people, observing people and understanding the things that make them tick. And as Mr. Youth, you created campaigns that activated them because you were so close to them in proximity. And now you have a platform that gets close to people through market research. You are activating at the same ideological level, just different executions. Take a person, a different person, Beyonce. She's an artist. The way Beyonce sang and the music she made with Destiny's Child is different from the way she sings and the music she makes today. But Beyonce believes in women's empowerment. And she's been that way since she told us, no, no, no, no, pay my bills, survivor to the left, who runs the world, girls, get in formation, you're gonna break my soul. She has been consistent in her ideology. She just manifested differently over time. Nike, at least today's wide, I'm kidding you, that's all I know, is that Nike believed that every human body is an athlete. It believes that every human body is an athlete, big, small, short, tall, you're an athlete. The sneakers that they made have changed over time. The way it communicated itself has changed over time. The context changes, but the ideology, the belief remains the same. And I think that's why we have to transcend the value propositions of what we do to think about why we do it, in the words of Simon Sinek. It's our ideology that allows us to connect. When people see the world the way we do, we go, oh, that's my people. I trust them. They have meaning in my mind beyond what they do. And because of why

they exist, why they show up in the world, their ideology, their conviction, they can do whatever they wanna do. They're not confined by category, as long as they are demonstrating their conviction, their ideology. Right.

Matt: You said something earlier in this conversation about how the world around people is changing quicker than humanity itself, and that sometimes, even though you see things differently externally, people are still people. I guess what I would challenge on that is that, that is generally true, but we've had these huge waves throughout society of technological innovation, whether it be the printing press, aviation, the telephone, the internet, new media, and now artificial intelligence. To me, I see this as the next big technological wave. Totally. When those waves happen, from where I sit, I actually have seen human change, because if you look at the Arab Spring, or you look at the insurrection that happened, those things that happened would not have happened without social media. So they, by nature, have changed the way people have acted. So how do you reckon that, and how do you see this new change of AI impacting the way humans change in a lot of the things that we're talking about?

Marcus: It goes back to Marshall McLuhan. Technology merely extends human behavior. Right. It's the extension of what we've always done, and that extension has different implications.

Matt: Or accelerates, too.

Marcus: Right, exactly, exactly. So I think about it, I went to my two-year high school reunion a few years back, and when I went to the reunion, I thought this was gonna be like everything I've seen on television. I'm gonna go to my reunion, people will be like, Marcus, my goodness, I haven't seen you since forever. What have you been up to? Blah, blah, blah, fill me in. Because every show, every movie I've watched when people went back to their high school reunion, that's what it was like. I'm gonna go to impress everybody, because I haven't seen everybody in forever. That's not how my reunion was, because we had Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. So when I showed up to my high school reunion with my wife and my eldest son. You were just in Florida, right?

Matt: Exactly.

Marcus: Tell me about your vacation. I just saw the pictures, they looked amazing. Oh my goodness, Georgia, you look just like you look in the photos. It extends human behavior. Years ago, we wouldn't be that connected, because there'll be a decay. There's a natural decay in relationships where you're not physically close to each other, or constantly in contact. But these technologies extend that. So therefore, our behavior is different. So technologies do that, just like the wheel extensions of the foot allow us to go further. And because of that, we were able to make bikes, which turned into vehicles, which gave us highways, it got us big box retail and suburbs. There are implications because of this extension, but it's all based on a fundamental human thing. Glasses are extensions of the eyes, clothes are extensions of the skin, cameras are extensions of the memory, computers are extensions of the brain. And in the same way, social networking platforms are extensions of our real life social networks. So these technologies, they move us forward, but they're still grounded in the humanity that is us.

Matt: What about AI, which is creating, and some people believe it's a new version of humanity. How do you think AI is gonna impact society? And if we're talking a year from now, which I think you'll probably be our first three time guest on the podcast, what do you think we'll be saying about it a year from now in terms of AI's impact on culture specifically?

Marcus: So I'm not clairvoyant, I don't have a crystal ball, but I do think that we may be inflating AI just a little bit. And we can do this, we can hype up things more.

Matt: Blockchain, we had it happen last year.

Marcus: We just destroyed NFTs. NFTs could actually have been a cool thing, but we destroyed it by inflating what it was as opposed to just appreciating what it is right now. AI has some promise that could be helpful. I mean, it's helpful right now. If I wanna write something, I don't wanna stay on a blank page, AI gives me a little bit of inspiration, ChatGPT gives me a little bit of inspiration. I don't do that, but I can see one doing that very thing. If I wanna get quickly studied on a topic, ChatGPT, AI can give you a good understanding of that. But AI isn't great right now. I mean, I don't know if you've seen photos of people. It's cool they can take those photos of people who are not real, but when you look closer, they have like 85 teeth. Six fingers. Seven fingers. Like it's not great right now.

Matt: But it could be great in three months. The rate of change, yeah.

Marcus: It could be. It totally could be. So overextend its possibilities I think is unfair to what it could be. So I'd say right now it's an interesting technology. And I think that what we should do, like we do with all things that are exogenous shocks to the system, is to engage it. Let's see what it does. Let's kick the tires. And it's gonna suck today. And it's gonna be better tomorrow. And better a year out. Will it be all that it could be? Maybe not. I mean, the internet wasn't that. When the internet first came out in the 90s, people were like, what is this thing?

Matt: And then we had the big bust with pets.com and all that.

Marcus: Why would I ever need to go online? I just go on my own, to the store, blah, blah, blah. It didn't make any sense. Then people rushed to it. Big balloon. It bursts. And then people are like, I told you this was a dud. Now here we are 30 years later, the internet is so much part of our lives.

Matt: Well, it's a classic kind of innovation cycle where everybody jumps on it, the press talks about it, it's on the front page of the USA today, and then all of a sudden there becomes a bus cycle, and then the real work begins. Exactly. And then ultimately it becomes, because you need consumer behavior to catch up, you need the applications to really be something that consumers want to adopt. And then when society's finally ready, then it becomes...

Marcus: I mean, this goes back to the idea of culture, that it's the meaning that we ascribe to it. When the internet first came out, the people who were in the press, the journalists who were writing about it, they were giving meaning to it because we didn't know what it was. Yeah. And the meaning they gave to it was somewhat superficial. It was somewhat...

Matt: Well, the meaning they gave to it helped them sell papers.

Marcus: Exactly, exactly.

Matt: That's why you see a lot of fear. AI is gonna take over the world because it drives fear. And that fear will make people, it's clickbait basically.

Marcus: You said it better than I ever could, 1000%. Like when the meaning is owned by someone who is not the original sort of creator of it, the meaning begins to shift away. I mean, this is what we would call cultural appropriation in a lot of ways. Yeah, yeah. That we take the meaning from the makers of the thing, the people who create these markers of their cultural subscription and give it new meaning.

Matt: Well, we've seen that happen with Black Lives Matter, right? It was...

Marcus: Wokeness. Yeah. The idea of woke, it goes far back, it's like Marcus Garvey, right? He wrote a paper about, like, wake up Jamaica, right? This is about returning black people to our homeland, to Africa. He was very much a proponent of that. And wokeness had been a part of dominant black culture for years. Spike Lee told us, wake up. And a couple years back, Childish Gambino said, now stay woke. Like everything was about waking up. That was a part of our lexicon. But then the Fox News of the world conquered that language and gave it new meaning. And now it's like, oh, wokeness, oh, wokeness. But that's not what it was. So when meaning gets co-opted and gets perverted, that is a form of cultural appropriation in many, many ways.

Matt: Especially when it's done by those with a megaphone that can shift the popular opinion of something.

Marcus: Or said differently when it's come by with people who have power. Cultural appropriation is not about race. It's about power. People with power take the cultural markers from a marginalized community mostly and then give it meaning.

Matt: It's so interesting because before there was Spotify or YouTube, that happened with music, where they would take a young female singer and they would say, you know what? We're going to sell sex through this. So we're going to basically take your look and actually morph it for a way where we can get you on heavy rotation, top 40, clear channel. And we're going to take away your real meaning behind music. And the artist doesn't have a choice because it's the only way to get out there. But now with Spotify, YouTube, all these tools, SoundCloud, people can be more real and authentic.

Marcus: And there's technology extending human behavior. We want to be ourselves. We connect with people when we are authentic selves.

Matt: It unlocked our true selves. It allowed people to be authentic.

Marcus: This is actually the power of social networking platforms. So my research on the academic side, I study cultural contagion, how things spread within a cultural context, and how we make meaning. So meaning making, cultural contagion is where I spend a lot of my time studying. And for the large part of my research, I use social listening. I observe people in their cultural contexts practicing their cultural subscription.

Matt: Where? Where do you do?

Marcus: Reddit. I can't think of a place online.

Matt: And then she says Reddit's just notoriously anonymous.

Marcus: But that's the power that because people can act in anonymity, they're more likely to be sort of themselves. And the most beautiful part...

Matt: They're not going to get fired for their job or something.

Marcus: That's right. And the beautiful part about Reddit is that Reddit is a community of communities. And it's this huge front door made up of many, many communities. And as a researcher, it's the perfect place because you have moderators cleaning the data for you. So if you post things that are outside of the cultural characteristics, the conventions, the expectations of that subreddit, it gets taken off. Or you, as a member of that subreddit, get kicked out. So someone's cleaning the data for you. So as a researcher, I go in and I'm looking at the discourse that's happening between people who subscribe, their identity to a cultural community. And so I'm observing people's cultural practice in action, much like I was of our ethnographer going in the field, going to Comic Con to watch people who do Cosplay. It's unbelievably powerful. So I'm watching people make meaning, how they construct and negotiate meaning when these exogenous shocks to the system happen. New technologies, new products, new music, new headlines. So when it happens out in the world, they go to these platforms, they talk to people like themselves and go, what do you think about this? And this is how we decide what is acceptable. The literature refers to this as legitimation. The social process by which we decide what products, what behaviors, what ideas are acceptable for people like us. Yeah. It happens through the discourse. So observing the discourse, you can see how people are constructing meaning. Like you could see a mile away that NFTs are going to have a problem because of how people were talking about NFTs sparked by what was happening in.

Matt: You know what a great example is? So marijuana is legalized in New York City now, and that is a change in behavior. It used to be illegal. People used to go to jail for it. Now it's legal. So you have very few legally regulated marijuana shops. But then you see all these other places popping up. You see some people say, you know what? I'm going to smoke a joint in the middle of the street. Other people are like, no, there's still a taboo to it. So seeing that dissonance with the public in terms of how they evolve towards this new legal standard is fascinating.

Marcus: I write about this in the book. Take the Oscars last year. So Will Smith slaps Chris Rock. And we as a society, as a country go, whoa, what did we just see? Because that is not a normal thing for us.

Matt: And the media appropriated that right away talking about clickbait.

Marcus: So we observe and we go, wow. I mean, some of us were like, did that even happen? Was it really? It was such a foreign thing to what is normal that we had to actually get our minds around what just happened. So then the media starts to replay the thing for us, replay the evidence of what just took place. And then producers, writers start to write think pieces about it. And then we people start to jump into the discourse through social networking platforms, Twitter, Reddit, the like, discussing what it meant. Does it, some people said, look, it was just a joke. Will Smith and Laura take a joke. People said like, you should never hit anybody. Violence is never okay. So people were like, look, my husband better protect me if someone talks about me that way. And as a researcher, I'm watching this saying, this is amazing because I'm watching the country make meaning. And ultimately what we were doing as we were weighing in our two cents, whether it was a joke via a meme or a very serious statement, like that's happened to me before, whatever the case may be, we were weighing in to decide, is this acceptable for us? Because culture moves forward on the

basis of one simple question. Do people like me do something like this? The answer is yes, I do it. The answer is no, I don't. We make the decision hundreds, if not thousands of times a day, whether we're conscious of it or not. So these platforms, we observe people doing this thing, these discourse and the rhetoric in which they enter the discourse, we're getting an understanding of how they see the world and collectively, how they'll choose to navigate through the world. And as a marketer, unbelievably powerful because they do the same thing with your products. Hey, I saw this ad for X, Y, and Z. Well, what's it mean? Is this cool? Is this hip? Do we do this? No, are we still listening to R. Kelly? Do we listen to the baby still? Is he canceled? These things are being negotiated through the discourse that we have and observing that for a marketer, there's nothing more powerful than that. That's how we get to the intimacy that we need.

Matt: So fascinating. Well, we're running out of time here. I cannot wait to dig deeper into the book. Just to wrap up here, what's next for you? So you wrote a book. What strikes me is that many people write a book because they wouldn't be opportunistic at the moment. This seems like it's the thesis of everything you've been working on for so long. And I'm just so happy for you that you've been able to get it out in such a permanent form because a book is something that's gonna be there that your kids are gonna be able to show their kids one day. And that's the great thing about a book. What's next for you? What are you focused on next? And what do you hope people take away from the book that they can really get value from?

Marcus: Ultimately, this is just about scaling the impact. I believe my why, why I exist, my ideology. I believe that I was put on this earth to serve. I feel like all of us put in this earth to serve. In my lens, serve God and serve each other. That's what I'm here to do. And I think that the way I do that is by helping people realize their highest fidelity possible. And this book helps me scale that. So maybe you're not at the University of Michigan, you can't be in my classroom. Maybe you're not a client at Wieden+Kennedy or maybe you're not at a conference where I'm giving a talk, but you can buy a book. And the hope is that the things I've learned, the mistakes that I've made, the provocations that I have struggled with and the epiphanies that I've had will help you make better decisions than I did. So you'd be far better ahead, far better at this than I've been. And if I could do that, I feel like then my living has not been in vain.

Matt: Absolutely. And for those of you who are still listening, which I hope you are to this amazing podcast, if you go to Suzy.com slash for the culture, the first hundred people that register there will get a free copy of Marcus's new book, Compliments of Suzy. So please be sure to do that as well. The first hundred people. So I wanna wrap it with Marcus, this has been amazing. I love having you on. I learned something new every single time and hope to have you back again and best of luck with the book. I'm sure it'll be a tremendous success.

Marcus: Thank you so much, my friend.

Matt: Absolutely, absolutely. So on behalf of Suzy and the AdWeek team, thanks again to Dr. Marcus Collins, author of the book For the Culture, available anywhere books are sold. Be sure to check it out and grab a copy. And again, the first hundred people that go to Suzy.com slash for the culture, will get a free copy, Compliments of Suzy. So thanks again for joining. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review the speed of culture podcasts on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time, see you soon everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the AdWeek Podcast Network and A-Guest Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all AdWeek's podcasts by visiting adweek.com/slash/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for the Speed of Culture at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts

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