

Spur and the casual racism of distant geography

 By [Jarred Cinman](#)

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The Spur rebrand is a missed opportunity to right a historical wrong.



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This last week we were greeted with the reveal of the new Spur logo and brand identity. In itself, the rebranding of a food destination for rowdy kids isn't big news.

We can probably all agree that, from a design point of view, the new logo is “fine” in the same way that a hotel shower is “fine” – it does the job while being rather tepid and lacking in force.

At odds with modern culture

Unfortunately for Spur, this is a brand whose entire thematic has ended up at odds with modern culture.

Founded in what can politely be called “a different time”, the whole setup – a pastiche of Native American culture, food and language – is inherently and innately problematic.

What must have seemed fun and harmless decades ago is now egregiously offensive to an entire population group, albeit

one that is far away and out of sight.

In light of this, it is perplexing that the company didn't grab the opportunity to spend millions of rand reinventing itself for a more enlightened time.

We were perhaps able to forgive this flagrant act of cultural shoplifting on the grounds of historical context.

As someone in the advertising business, I know that the cost and complexity of changing an entire brand identity is enormous and this is a local steak restaurant without the resources to pull that off. Or so I thought.

Having decided to throw the big bucks at a rebrand, however, what excuse now remains for polishing, rather than flushing, the turd?

The new brand is flatter, simpler and cleaner. But it perpetuates the cultural appropriation and – one may even say – makes it worse because history is no longer the culprit. This is a deliberate choice made in 2023.



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Woke gone mad?

It's easy to dismiss this criticism as woke slavishness.

Surely everyone understands that this is just a visual language for a restaurant chain and therefore harmless and fun rather than offensive and racist?

The point here can be made by imagining a scenario closer to home. Imagine a restaurant called "Shaka" situated in downtown New York or the London High Street. This restaurant draws its visual cues from Zulu culture; the waiters dress in loin cloth and carry shields and assegais; and the food has Zulu-themed names and puns.

This is not, however, a restaurant owned by Zulu people but rather an American company simply capitalising on Zulu language, visual cues and culture as a way to design their restaurant and attract customers.

For the average New Yorker or Brit, this may well seem fine because Zulu culture is far away and abstract.

But ask yourself how you, as a South African, maybe even a Zulu South African, would feel walking into that restaurant to find pasty British teenagers dressed up as Zulu warriors, grillers with blackface and kids playing in plastic kraals surrounded by stylised pictures of Shaka and Dingaan.

This is exactly what Spur represents to Native Americans. It's not only tasteless, it's also profoundly out of touch with the global nature of brands.

Native Americans are – like so many native peoples – a culture that has been colonised and abused. Like most post-colonial societies, the US continues to reckon with the consequences of stealing other people's land at gunpoint.

The point here is this is a culture that has been brutalised and subjugated – and one that therefore demands to now be treated with care and sensitivity. A lot like many South African cultures.

Just because victims are far away doesn't make transgressing against them acceptable.

Partly because the world is now porous and these transgressions travel, but also because our sensitivities are now informed by global trauma. Insult a Native American here and the message the consumer gets is that you don't care about anyone.

For a portion of the population, this may make no difference. Many people are just not fussed about casual racism, and a customer in a small town may have so little connection to Native America that they just receive this as a harmless dress-up.

But Spur exists in a country that is struggling toward a common South African identity that both acknowledges our indigenous history and faces the challenges of modernity.

Younger consumers, in particular, are sensitive to how brands treat them and their cultures.

They may not care overtly about Native Americans, but they do care about how people are regarded and when they see a brand bulldozing over someone's culture – anyone's culture – they find it triggering and upsetting. They worry about what this says about the values the brand espouses and it's a big turn-off.

Stop taking things so seriously, Jarred

It is inevitable that someone is going to say this to me in response to this article. It's a common refrain when serious issues are at stake, and no one wants to stare their prejudice in the face.

Something is only a joke if it's not at your expense. I'm not even sure that Spur intends itself as a joke. It certainly doesn't expend energy trying to make fun of Native Americans but nor does it make any sense for this to be the terrain to play on.

It feels like the theme was chosen by putting up world cultures on a wall and throwing darts at it until one stuck.

There is no origin story here that ties the brand back to Native American roots and nothing in its way of doing business that benefits or enhances Native American culture. If you are looking for a working definition of cultural appropriation that might well fit.

Building sensitivity to other people's plights and life circumstances is an urgent requirement in the world.

Right-wing populism and divisiveness are on the rise from the US to Europe and beyond, and what's needed are more empathy, more sensitivity, and more kindness. There is nothing good added into the world by treating other people as amusing objects to be employed to achieve a marketing or packaging goal.

I can accept that most people will think I am overthinking this and taking it "too seriously". But if caring for other people's culture and feelings is a fault, it's one I am happy to have. I happen to think that it is serious, and the failure to care is showing up in all kinds of scary ways online and off.

In the end, the best thing one can say about this rebrand is it doesn't make things substantially worse.

But it's mind-boggling that given the opportunity and the moment in time, no one thought a historical misstep would be better corrected than perpetuated.

Talk up nostalgia and heritage all you like, it doesn't trump the bigger issues at play. And nor should it.

Most brands have these kinds of skeletons in their closet. The difference is they have moved with the times, reckoned with their pasts, and met the consumer where they are today.

At best, this is a missed opportunity. At worst it's negligent and divisive – not good marketing or business goals in anyone's books.

ABOUT JARRED CINMAN

As the Joint CEO of VMLY&R South Africa, Jarred leads both the Johannesburg and Cape Town offices. He oversees the inner workings of the agency, managing all departments from a business, HR and operational point of view. Jarred is also the executive in charge of HR and IT. Before VMLY&R was established in 2018, Jarred served as co-chief operating officer of Y&R Africa Group, overseeing operations at Y&R South Africa and NATIVE VML.

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