The Pepsi-Jenner disaster

Translation and collaboration in global image markets

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In April 2017, Pepsi released a video commercial featuring the American celebrity Kendall Jenner that rapidly ballooned into a pop culture moment with international import. The infamous commercial begins with a soft rock backing track and a young man playing the cello against an unspecified city skyline. The next scene is a clean-cut, multi-ethnic crowd of marching young people. Smiling and fist-pumping under their fedora hats and headscarves, the students are waving signs with slogans including 'Join the conversation' and 'Peace'. As the music crescendos, the students face off in front of a silent line of police. A smiling Jenner then places a can of Pepsi in the muscled hands of a young male officer dressed in an American-style police uniform. A moment of shock. Silence. Then, inexplicably, the protesters burst forth in cheers and dancing.

The Pepsi ad controversy

Within hours of its release online, this bizarre video commercial stirred considerable outrage. African-American voices led a critical conversation on Twitter that pushed 'Pepsi' and 'Kendall' to that day's top trending topics in the US. By the time Pepsi withdrew the commercial only one day later, the commercial had become the subject of widespread curiosity and condemnation both in the US and internationally, especially among groups supportive of Black Lives Matter movements. Pepsi's heavy-handed attempt to co-opt the Black Lives Matter protests for their marketing campaign angered many critics. Several critics denounced the commercial's framing of Jenner approaching a line of police officers while being photographed, considering it a tone-deaf appropriation of the viral 2016 protest photo *Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge*.

On withdrawing the commercial, Pepsi apologized on Twitter, stating, 'Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize.' The retraction suggested that whatever their data- or debate-driven matrix, Pepsi executives had concluded that the commercial was a marketing failure, ultimately hurting rather than enhancing their brand. The vacuous silence and hasty retreat said nothing about the Black Lives Matter movements or black bodies targeted by police, and Pepsi also said nothing about the production processes that facilitated the commercial's creation.

Since then, Twitter users have cemented the commercial and US pop culture more broadly as a shared cultural touchstone for various political issues. These include police brutality, insensitivity to racial injustice and the incongruence of transnational corporations' involvement in protest movements. In subsequent years in the US, Pepsi products have referenced these same associations at protest marches. Actions include protesters throwing Pepsi cans at police lines, directly offering Pepsi bottles to police and photographing these actions as a form of social commentary.

The advertising labour market

Despite the enormity of the critical reaction by various audiences to the Pepsi-Jenner commercial, only fleeting attention is paid to the labour market that produced it. For example, *Saturday Night Live*'s popular US sketch comedy show mocked Pepsi by producing a skit that imagined a naïve white male director pushing forward to film his 'singular vision' with his all-white production team. These US-centric readings elide the global com-

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Fig. 1. *Bernice King tweets her reaction to the infamous 2017 Pepsi commercial in April 2017.*
Fig. 2. *Tweet by @XLNB questioning the creative planning of the infamous 2017 Pepsi-Jenner video commercial.*
Fig. 3 *Tweet by Taryn Finley on 5 April 2017 compares Kendall Jenner's image to that of Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge by Jonathan Bachman.*

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modity chains involved in the production of commercials. Moreover, these readings and misapprehensions suggest that the experiences and exploitation of production teams working in advertising's international commodity chains are often invisible to audiences who view their work.

To anyone working in advertising in Thailand, however, the international flavour of the commercial, and its underlying labour market, were immediately apparent. I was among those who recognized the international contribution to the commercial, owing to my research working with advertising production teams in Bangkok between 2014 and 2017. To experienced eyes, the unspecified city scene that opens the commercial is a distinct Bangkok skyline. The aesthetic and style of the ad, emotional, with pale colour palettes and washed-out lighting scheme, are also typical of a Bangkok-based production in mood and tone.

Based on my research with small production crews working in Bangkok, I argue that the Pepsi-Jenner commercial's release is a theoretically productive moment. Here, international translation and collaboration in the production and circulation of commercial images failed, exposing assumptions, exploitation and interpretive disjunctures underpinning misrecognized global labour supply chains. In this article, I hold the US and international pop-culture appropriations and critiques of the Pepsi-Jenner commercial in tension with an ethnographic perspective on the conditions under which commercials are produced. This ethnographic perspective reveals how cost-saving processes and assumptions about the race or ethnicity of labouring bodies push video production work offshore. Examining how international commercials are produced in Thailand reveals challenges surrounding interpretation and collaboration when advertising work is deemed commensurable across different social worlds.

In the ad world, Thailand is famous for its emotional 'sadvertising' style and visual styles that apply pastel colour schemes and edit skin to glow. In executing the Pepsi commercial, the Thai production crew created a clean, light-coloured colour palette, a blurred background and an overarching theme of emotional reconciliation. This aesthetic style and sentimental mood are distinctive features of advertising made in Bangkok. When Pepsi chose to produce a politically charged commercial in a foreign location with cheap Thai labour and a pale aesthetic, they accepted a working relationship threaded with a risk. It was a risk that separated corporate decision-makers and production crew regarding geography, language and culture, which cannot be accounted for commercially.

Of course, Pepsi and other international conglomerates are well positioned to absorb commercial risks – branding failures can be erased, and new marketing campaigns launched. Most internationally produced commercials are not retracted or treated as branding failures. Global corporations such as Pepsi release hundreds, if not thousands, of commercials worldwide every year. These attempts at translation and collaboration across cultural and political contexts, however, dance in lockstep with the reverberations of what Tsing (2012: 505) calls 'nonscalability', which is a form of 'worldmaking' that relies on 'the ability to expand – and expand, and expand – without rethinking basic elements'. In other words, these forms of outsourcing rely on a market logic that pursues progress but overlooks how social and political differences assert themselves within exploitative commodity chains.

Despite their corporate advantage and risk algorithms, in this case, the thorns of nonscalability continued to pierce Pepsi's brand reputation with unpredictable and penetrating punctures. The hasty retreat and the prominent criticisms of Pepsi indicated a shared view by critics and brand executives that the positive social messaging of the corporation's branding power was wounded, at least among specific audiences. These wounds, however, were not only commercial, and they must be understood in social and political terms that go beyond marketing calculations of consumer impact.

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Fig. 4. *Tweet by Pepsi, 6 April 2017.*
Fig. 5. *Tweet by YerboyPDK referring to the infamous 2017 Pepsi commercial in June 2020.*

Thailand and international advertising

Anthropological studies of advertising and marketing industries elucidate the influential role of advertising in everyday social and political life. Ethnographic research points to how advertising contributes to re-enforcing ethnic stereotypes, shaping national imaginations, provoking shared moral sentiments, assisting military confrontations and lubricating neoliberal market processes (Dávila 2008; Fattal 2018; Fedorenko 2022; Mazzarella 2003). Agha (2011) highlights what he calls 'commodity registers': shared meanings about commodities that create forms of value as they circulate in the world. In this way, rather than simply explaining the features of products, advertising shapes social worlds by attaching status, value and ideas to particular products and circulating these associations across different linguistic, political and cultural contexts. A branding failure such as the Pepsi-Jenner disaster, which attaches associations of outrage and satire to a can of Pepsi, is not therefore reducible to merely quantifiable commercial outcomes. The commercial is also a cultural touchstone, shaping people's everyday social experiences.

In much of the world, including the Asia Pacific, digital advertising has overtaken television as the largest market segment, dramatically changing how advertisers target their potential customers. A decade ago, many large corporations planned on releasing a few TV advertisements in their target national or regional markets each year. While TV and cinema advertising remains an important sector in the industry, many corporate clients plan to release a

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Fig. 6. *Montage of dark skin as portrayed in Thai video commercials.*
Fig. 7. *Thai production crew, including several young interns, set up a green screen and film late into the night in a car park in Bangkok, 2017.*
Fig. 8. *The Thai crew uses a Norwegian flag and blonde actress to film a video commercial partly set in Norway in 2017.*
Fig. 9. *Bangkok props store where props for international 'cheats' can be hired, 2017.*

new video on their social platforms every few days. As total marketing budgets have not increased, many marketing teams instead balance their books by reducing the available budget for each video. One way of producing advertising videos more cheaply is to export production labour offshore. For Bangkok's production teams, more 'emotional' and longer video products have become popular while budgets for such video advertising are slashed. One production manager at a medium-sized marketing firm described it thus,

> Seven years ago, a 30-sec. TVC [television commercial] cost 2-3 million bhat [US$60,000-US$90,000]. Now a 3-minute TVC will cost between 800 and 1.5 million bhat [US$24,000-US$45,000] … And to be viral it has to be emotional. Sad, funny, love.

Most video advertisements seen online or on TV continue to target national and niche sub-national audiences defined by gender, age, language, ethnicity and income. The creative generation of those videos is sometimes outsourced to people operating in very different linguistic, cultural and political contexts. These workers operate in a place of interpretive disjuncture – they are tasked with producing other people's creative visions and do so within a position of relative disadvantage. The international outsourcing of labour in the advertising industry introduces new creative contexts into the production process but does not afford creative autonomy nor account for the social conditions under which the work is produced.

Even when Thai production teams have the linguistic abilities to engage in detailed conversations with their overseas clients, there is usually very little time to confer carefully on the nuances of a particular brief. Small Bangkok teams often push out videos from storyboards to edited final products in weeks, and time on set for filming is typically limited to one day. Therefore, small production teams in Thailand work together to problem-solve visual expectations, taking on board client instructions to achieve what is aimed to feel intimate and authentic. Bangkok production workers rely on familiar visual styles of wardrobe, lighting, camera technique and editing to produce commercials quicker and quicker.

Thailand's cheap labour, its 'tourist-worthy' photo venues and the availability of auxiliary services such as beauty treatments, fashion and hotels make it a favoured site for outsourcing production more expensively produced in the target audience's location. International marketing teams and corporate clients appear particularly drawn to working in Thailand due to their high-quality service and emotional labour. One woman working as the producer and head of her production company explained,

> They [the client] phone you because they need someone to talk to – phone at 11 and talk until 3 a.m., because people enjoy it when you show them attention – you give them service, you give them massages, you treat them like supergod.

Thai advertising production attracts work via a global labour model in which bottom-rung workers are expected to be subservient and compliant. Thai production companies also attract work by marketing their exotic identity to overseas advertising and corporate clients. This identity conflates exotic, tourist-worthy physical locations for filming, such as mountains, rivers and hotels, with exotic bodies, food and experiences such as massages. Many working in the Thai production industry are young employees and unpaid interns in their late teens to mid-20s. While there are prominent, well-established individuals in production work, the cheap form of production labour is mainly supplied by these young people, who offer various forms of 'creative' work. The other significant labour sector is sourced from workers from Northeast Thailand, primarily men, who provide the more physically intensive labour required for heavy lighting and camera equipment.

These men also work for relatively low wages and typically live long distances from their families.

Unrepresented by unions or industry interest groups, production and equipment teams rely on workers' willingness to work long hours. Shifts of 12 to 16 hours six or seven days a week are typical. The production teams working in Bangkok are, moreover, typically small: groups of only 3-15 people, who work variously as directors, camera operators, casting and wardrobe teams, video and sound editors. As with several other sectors of the Thai economy, production work operates in both official and non-official shadow sectors. The younger, smaller teams and freelancers often work in-between the official and the shadow market, moving between official and non-taxpaying projects.

As in many Thai workplaces, both production and equipment companies usually refer to each other by kinship terms such as older brother, younger sister, uncle and auntie. This use of kinship terms takes on a particular resonance when social life and work life blur together into a long working week. Some workplaces are characterized by shared intimacy over meals, shopping trips or nightlife relaxation at bars. However, the demanding hours and work responsibilities make it difficult to sustain commitments to friends and family outside of the workplace, necessitating significant sacrifices in interpersonal relationships or pursuing other career opportunities. Young production teams and equipment crews spend long periods of their day seemingly invisible, sleeping in their seats in shared vans, mutely watching directors and camera crew capture the perfect shot, patiently waiting for celebrities to arrive on set. They effectively work long hours but spend much time stationary and silent.

As I learned working in Thailand, production crews operating on limited budgets apply creativity and committed labour to complete their projects, regardless of the language or cultural context in which the audience is based. Using innovation and experimentation, casting directors, art teams, wardrobe assistants and make-up artists manufacture commercial images that mimic local aesthetics, fashions, urban and interior designs. Using the resources available to them, production crews try to replicate landscapes, so-called 'cheats', and the clothing styles and home furnishings of foreign locations in ways that will prevent audiences from questioning the provenance of the video.

Industry shortcomings

Internet image searches were the primary means by which art directors, prop assistants and location scouts learned to mimic foreign locales. I remember long, tedious days working as an intern at a production house where seven unpaid interns, including myself, were given nothing to do but watch the team's art director scroll through Google images of different iterations of a particular red dress. At a different production house, I asked an experienced art director how she could quickly create fake locations that resemble other places. She replied,

> Usually I'll use a fast Google image search, but to know how places should look, that is my job, … whether it's the US, or Europe, here we can make it happen in Bangkok. Even if they need snow, we can do it. Our job is to make fake things real.

In giving an example, the art director explained how they created an 'African Jungle': 'We used a greenery area just outside Bangkok and some actors who were African American.'

Rarely does offshore, undervalued labour in advertising commodity chains assert its provenance and conditions of production. Using Tsing's (2012: 506) approach to nonscalability, I argue this invisibility is an example of commercial projects that deny or erase the use of nonscalable forms. Production labour in Thailand is a thriving industry because consumers in Germany, Ghana or Guatemala do not typically question if the scenes they are watching were produced beyond the borders of their national imaginary. On the ground in Bangkok, however, production crews have the task of actively managing the disjuncture created by their position of relative disadvantage in the transnational commodity chain. They work around systemic gaps with 'cheats', and while they are usually successful, their work continually holds the potential to create translation failures due to the complexity of social translation.

This ability to perform fast translations and hide evidence of offshore production is often a jagged process. The same art director who spoke to me about creating snow in Bangkok explained,

> Small things can cause problems. For example, in one ad there was a rubber duck in the corner of a room – but the Chinese copywrite team wrote back that the duck was not acceptable. We were thinking 'Duck? What duck? We don't remember any duck!', and then when we look closely we notice the small duck [in the image] that we didn't think anything of. But apparently in China the duck indicates a gigolo context so we had to get rid of it.

The use of international 'cheats' by this art director and other Bangkok production crew is not unusual in the film industry. When creating a movie, schedules that last months or even years will, by contrast, allow production teams to select, film and edit their alternative fiction carefully. Bangkok-based production teams attempt to achieve similar magic in a dramatically different time frame and with a reduced budget using not much more than blurred backgrounds, post-production manipulation and creative use of props.

When angry viewers and consumers demanded to know why Pepsi had produced its commercial with Kendall Jenner, they rightly questioned the decision by Pepsi executives to commission the commercial at all. In the criticisms circulated, however, minimal questioning was directed to the location or the labour market conditions under which this commercial was made. Examining the local conditions of production reveals how the offensiveness of the Pepsi-Jenner commercial was manufactured not only through its initial storyboard but in all steps of the production process.

In the case of the Pepsi-Jenner disaster, constrained production conditions touched and intersected with the politics of the Black Lives Matter movements, creating a pop culture political reference that has endured years after its release. This is an erratic, friction-filled set of market and creative relationships, in which relationships of cause and effect are difficult to disentangle. The Pepsi commercial's storyboard was offensive before it reached Bangkok for production. However, the advertisement's emotional and visual resonance cannot be separated from the location and labour of its production. These make themselves felt in the 'washed-out' skin tones, clean pastel outfits, vague skyline and streetscapes and the heavy use of shallow depth of field focusing on the immediate foreground.

Advertising is rightly understood as a quintessential genre of image manipulation and control. Despite tight production schedules, advertising videos are typically short in duration. Every frame of the video, every prop, every shade of the proper red dress is deliberated over as part of the overall project of tapping into the consumer's moral and political sensibilities. Nevertheless, aesthetic traces remain that point to the embedded disjunctures. A toy duck in a bathroom indexes sexual impropriety, and a young celebrity handing a Pepsi can to a police officer speaks to entrenched institutional injustice.

Consider one video advertisement I helped produce for a Ghanaian audience. Using YouTube and Google

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Fig. 10. *Thai advertising production crew members work against the backdrop of a Bangkok skyline, 2017.*

images, the wardrobe and art directors created a street scene in which Thai-style street food carts stood on one side of what was intended to represent a Ghanaian marketplace. The child actress recruited for the video had a Thai mother and a Nigerian father. The wardrobe team selected well-fitting but plain, block-colour dresses for the women and a white school shirt for the girl. Based on the repeat work that this production crew received from the same client (for audiences in the Philippines and Ghana), the production team deemed their work successful. While considered a financial win for the production team, the effects of nonscalability made themselves felt through applying a particular aesthetic of race and colour. The use of a Bangkok-style lighting and editing mix was applied according to the production team's standards of beauty and taste. Increasing the light and white quality of the video in post-production was applied to wash out dark skin tones. This editing created an alien-like contrast in skin tones, turning cheek lines bright white and leaving dark shadows obscuring the shape of the nose.

There is no clear author or site of creation in this production process. Instead, the making of a single creative product is distributed among tenuously interconnected sets of people, technologies and landscapes. Responsibility for the original idea or storyboard of the commercial lies with a select few. However, the act of creation lies not in a singular idea or moment but in a series of practices, an accumulation of values and an international labour market.

Digital and creative workers are judged in international labour markets through intersecting values of ethnicity, race and gender (Amrute 2019). In Bangkok, many international clients, expecting to be treated as 'supergods', read Thai production workers through a racialized lens as an idealized form of service-oriented emotional labour. Therefore, racial and ethnic visual representations offer an example of how nonscalable elements of the production process create friction in the commodity chain even as they simultaneously 'legitimize' Thai production labour.

Troubled translations in global image markets are thus not the result of a break or mistake in an identifiable point in the production chain. It is tempting to lay the source of the problem at the feet of 'New York creatives' or 'Thai directors who don't understand US politics'. Such criticisms hold some merit. But I argue that they do not adequately capture the horizontally elongated forms of collaboration that cut labour costs by pushing risk and precarity towards the bottom rungs of the production ladder. Worldmaking projects that traverse such forms of difference, argues Tsing (2012: 508), allow the privileged powerful to 'turn their dreams into action', asserting their plans and blueprints by removing 'elements of the social landscape … from formative social relations'. Therefore, in creating and circulating a Pepsi commercial, the issue is not one of the missing steps of cross-cultural brokerage or an individual's translation competency. The hierarchical global labour market applies a standardized approach to alienated offshore labour as a cost-saving element. The exploitative production conditions create a systemic disjuncture, a form of alienation that plays itself into creating and reshaping commodity registers.

Conclusion

My research has shown that such risky or tenuous working relationships are a regular feature of today's international advertising industry. Marketing failures on the scale of the Pepsi-Jenner disaster are rare. However, these failures reveal disjunctures in a profit-seeking enterprise that prioritizes consumer impact on stringent budgets. The Pepsi attempt to offer an air-brushed portrayal of Black Lives Matter protests applied a capitalist logic that assumed commensurability of interpretive contexts and sought cheap, service-oriented labour where it could be found.

Applying ethnographic attention to advertising production labour contributes to upending the 'dream' projects of the globe's financial elite. The ethnographic perspective of labour as it is lived in social relations attends to the experiences of Thai production workers and the aesthetic-technological nexuses that birth video commercials into the world. This approach highlights the erasure of labour operative throughout the commodity chain. Moreover, attending to nonscalability highlights how such images can provoke shock, critique and cancellation. Their troubled collaborations can catalyse political action and unexpected creative responses. ●

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