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Culture jamming and the global brand *a satirical response to ubiquitous corporate identities*

Does graphic design always have a positive impact, or does it contribute to some of the problems of contemporary culture? Are the values of consumer culture being unduly promoted around the world through the design of global brands? If so, what is the responsibility of the graphic designer in this process? Can a designer practice their profession in harmony with their personal ethics?

Graphic designers working in identity design and branding quickly realize that anything can be effectively branded and marketed through the power of graphic design. But with this power comes responsibility. This realization provides an opportunity to examine ethical questions: Are designers partly responsible for the export of consumer culture? Does every commercial enterprise deserve a great graphic identity? Is it possible to put a pretty face on a client you find repulsive?

In fact, one can even ask if branding is a form of cultural imperialism, which is defined as "...promoting, distinguishing, and artificially injecting of the culture of one nation on another." Whether the receiving culture considers this 'injection' an opportunity or a threat, the fact is that our increasingly global economy has facilitated this process like never before.

How is this cultural influence manifested in the design of global brands? Are the values of America's consumer culture being promoted around the world through the design of corporate identity? If so, what is the responsibility of the graphic designer in this process?

This paper presents a graphic design studio assignment during which students explore these questions by juxtaposing two contradictory learning objectives:

- learning basic principles of identity design and branding
- critically examining the role of branding in the exportation of American culture

In this studio project, students create satirical identity campaigns for reprehensible clients as a way to explore the power of graphic identity in the global market.

The project has 4 steps:

1. Begin by considering some of the problems of contemporary American culture, and the role of branding in promoting these problems.
2. Select a contemporary problem that is upsetting or repugnant to you. Who is responsible for perpetuating this problem? How much worse could this problem get?
3. Invent an absurd and atrocious corporation that exploits or exacerbates that problem.
4. Create a satirical branding campaign for your invented company, successfully employing your understanding of the principles of graphic identity.

Results of these student projects will be shown and discussed. Their invented companies promote such dubious American values as:

- the desire for eternal youth
- the expectation that all desires can be satisfied through consumer goods
- the obsession with celebrity
- the obsession with quick fixes (plastic surgery, medications)
- micro-management of all aspects of life
- exploitation of the environment for material gain