

222.453

VCD RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

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07056885

WORKING PAPER FORMATIVE
Social Responsibility

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17/05/2010

Word Count: 2,520

Milton Glaser asserts that, “good design is good citizenship” (Heller & Vienne, 2003, p. ix). In the current social and economic climate this perspective is more crucial than ever. Contemporary designers must be aware of the impact their visual communication can have on the individual and collective mindset. This project will discuss the role of the designer within the practices of advertising, and their moral responsibility in designing images and messages. Through the analysis of Rousseau’s social contract we understand the role that culture and social norms play in governing our behaviour and our perceptions of individual and collective responsibility. The theory of Situationism will be examined to understand the impacts of environmental, social and political factors on behaviour and decisions, and how this further limits ultimate free will and the accountability for our actions. Alain de Botton and James Solomon argue that our physical environment can be a vehicle to carry meaning, speaking to us through semiotics and encoded signs to change our behaviour (de Botton, 2006). Situationist theory will be applied through the medium of transformational advertising to influence the collective’s mindsets and ignite their desire for social change.

In 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau published a book entitled *The Social Contract and Discourses*. It opens with the following statement that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau, 1973, p. 181). In this work Rousseau addresses the problem of how individuals can live together without succumbing to the coercion of others. He proposes to resolve the issue by coming together as free and equal people, to submit our individual wills to a general will which is for the common good of society. Thus the foundation of society is collectively created through the establishment of a sovereign. The sovereign (the equivalent in contemporary society would be our democratic government) is committed to the good of the individuals who constitute it, and each individual is likewise obligated to the good of the whole (Rousseau, 1973). As the foundation of society, a social contract provides a framework for outlining behaviour that is socially acceptable, thus resulting in an unproblematic and effortless society (Wade & Tavris, 2006). For the social contract to work effectively, the citizens and the sovereign must honour its codes unanimously or else suffer juridical, physical or social consequences.

How do citizens react when the social contract is no longer honoured or followed by the sovereign? How are citizens to honour the agreements and values embedded in the social contract when they witness the sovereign’s laxity in disciplining corporations dishonest activities such as green-washing, economic monopoly and the unethical treatment of workers (Klein, 2002). A moral disorientation is occurring as society

transitions from the falsehood of postmodernism towards critical realism. Traditional ethical standards are in a state of flux as the bonds between civil and moral laws are stretched (Klein, 2002)(Cunningham, 1970). The consequences of these issues have led to deindividuation, and the diffusion of responsibility within society. Deindividuation describes the process where “people lose their sense of socialised individual identity and engage in unsocialised, often antisocial, behaviour” (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008, p. 421). This development tends to occur in larger groups as people feel more anonymous and therefore act more uninhibited as they do not feel the need to conform under usual social controls (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008). The occurrence of deindividuation results in a loss of identity and reduced concern for the consequences of their actions (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008). Diffusion of responsibility describes individuals who tend to avoid taking action, because they assume others will take responsibility. It is particularly evident in a group, as individuals lose their sense of moral responsibility (Wade & Tavis, 2006). I feel that in today’s society we have become familiar with the act of avoiding responsibility, even if that means compromising our personal moral codes. We have become quite adept at putting the blame on someone else, or making excuses for why we didn’t act.

If Rousseau’s social contract states the rules we must follow to be good citizens, then the theory of Situationism explores how these social norms are abided and upheld. Situationism is a division of social psychology that examines the influential power of cultural, environmental and societal conditions on the actions and behaviour of groups and individuals (Wade & Tavis, 2006). It also seeks to explain people’s reactions when they conform or rebel to attitudes and social roles (Wade & Tavis, 2006). Social psychologist Stanley Milgram claims that, “we are all fragile creatures entwined in a cobweb of social constraints” (Wade & Tavis, 2006, p. 263). Milgram investigated this idea through his renowned obedience experiment initially conducted in the 1960s. The participants in the study thought they were part of an experiment that monitored the impact of punishment on learning. What Milgram wanted to research was the effect an authoritative figure would have on these participants, and their compliance to violate their ethical standards (French, Wettstein, & Fischer, 2005). The findings defied predictions and were very surprising. Every single research participant was willing to administer electric shocks to the ‘learner’. Moreover they obeyed when told to continue, despite their reluctance and the ‘learner’ shouting out in pain. The results

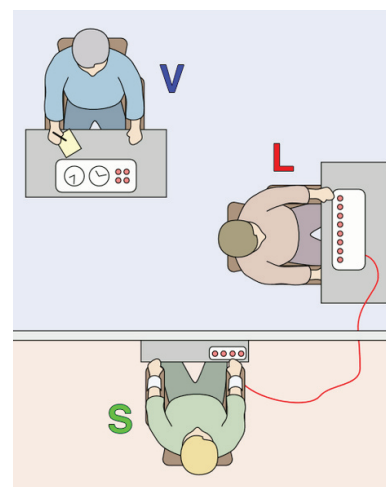


Fig. 1. Illustration of the Milgram experiment. (V) Experimenter, (L) Subject, (S) Actor/Learner.

show that the behaviour of the participant differed if certain variables of the situation were changed. For example, the participant was more likely to disobey if the authority figure left the room, the learner was in the room with the participant, or there was another participant willing to rebel. Milgram's experiment thus demonstrates the power of situational influences on an individual's behaviour and decisions.

George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson first coined the 'broken window' theory in 1982. The metaphor was used to explain how neighbourhoods might decay into crime and disorder if a broken window is not fixed and the maintenance upheld. For example if a window is broken and not immediately fixed, a passerby could presume that no one cares about the window and would therefore be more encouraged to vandalize the property further. Once the building appears to be in a state of disrepair, this feeling imprints itself on the street, attracting criminals and the reckless and repelling citizens (Kelling & Coles, 1997, p. xv). What is most interesting about this theory is that people react to the unsavoury conditions by assuming that crime is on the rise even though this may not be true. At a fundamental level, "disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence" (McLaughlin, Muncie, & Hughes, 2003, p. 402).

James Solomon also analyses the semiotics of our physical environment and the impact this has on our social and emotional wellbeing. One of the themes in his writing is the discussion of private, public and transitional space and our personal territorial control in these areas. Transitional space could be a front lawn or driveway, and is private and public whilst also belonging to the neighbourhood. For example although you legally own your front lawn, the community will also be forever looking at it. Therefore, "to design a yard that is so uncompromisingly 'me' as to disrupt the public 'we' of the neighbourhood can be read as a sign of territorial withdrawal, a refusal to contribute to the kind of community semiotic code that solidifies a neighbourhood into a mutually beneficial territory – a place that is 'home' just as much as the house in which you live" (Solomon, 1988, p. 108). When human beings are denied control over their private space, such as in jail or in state housing projects, their desire to respect the social contract and behavioural codes expires (Solomon, 1988). This is exemplified in the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis, Missouri. Designed in the face of utility and cost effectiveness, the concrete slabs and dark alleys failed to generate any sense of neighbourhood identity with its



Fig. 2. Image of a vandalised Pruitt-Igoe corridor, Missouri, USA

residents. The lack of communal and transitional space allowed no sense of communal responsibility and as a result was thoroughly vandalized. In situations such as this, “the inhabitants have no alternative psychological resources, and the usual result is social anarchy” (Solomon, 1988, p. 108). By the request of its inhabitants the Pruitt-Igoe housing project was demolished in 1972. This case study communicates the power our physical environment can have on well being, and the importance of fostering a sense of community for the benefit of society.

The ideas and issues surrounding the social contract and Situationism are important because they have established that people can be influenced by implicit and explicit attitudes, social constraints, and external environmental factors. Designers have to be crucially aware of this issue as our responsibility as visual communicators is anchored in the reality of social consequences (Heller & Vienne, 2003). For this reason, everything that is designed must keep in mind the dialogue that will be created between the communicator and the audience. Milton Glaser believes that “design has a social role; it has an effect on people. And people in this practice (of design) should think seriously of the ideas that they are transmitting to others” (Holland, 2001, p. 120). This issue was confronted by the First Things First Manifesto 2000. Originally from 1964, it was revised in 2000 and published in *Adbusters*. It was signed by designers who were disillusioned with the industry and frustrated by the lack of ethics shown in current design practice (Holland, 2001). They wanted to move away from the dominant force of consumer capitalism and recall the significance of meaning in design by incorporating social responsibility and addressing issues that could benefit from a designer’s attention (Saville, 2007).

Contemporary society is in the midst of a paradigm shift where we are moving away from the falsity of postmodernism, towards a more authentic, realist and critical epoch. Currently there is a move away from a goods and services economy, to an experience and transformational economy as a result of the paradigm shift in our society. During the transformation experience, an experience is customised specifically to an individual, thereby turning the process automatically into a transformation (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Pine and Gilmore (1999) state that the movement from service and experience to transformation economies is driven by the constant need for brand differentiation and improving customer relationships. A recent example of this is the recent advertising



Fig. 3. Metro Station, (2010), Paris, IKEA

undertaken by IKEA. Collections of couches and lounge suites were displayed in high-traffic Metro stations in Paris during the month of March (see Fig. 2). This gave potential customers a chance to interact with the brand by checking out the products, and completely changed the feel and atmosphere of the public railway station. Hence I maintain that the medium of transformational advertising would work well within the realm of Situationism.

I will look at the impact of our physical environment and the influence this has on our moods, decisions and actions. Alain de Botton (2006) discusses how architecture can be the vehicle to carry meaning, and how buildings can speak to us through semiotics and encoded signs. He discusses, “belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places – and on the conviction that it is architecture’s talk to render vivid to us who we might ideally be” (de Botton, 2006, p. 13). This concept was illustrated out in a state housing apartment block in Berlin. Morale in the complex was quite low, as a young girl had just been stabbed. To banish the negative feelings in the building, and make it a happier place to live, street artists were commissioned to paint murals on the open concrete walls of the ground floor (see Fig. 3 and 4). They painted inspirational figures such as Gandhi, Michael Jackson and Jimmy Hendrix. They succeeded in changing the environment to a happier one, instilling a sense of hope and motivation for the children playing there.



Fig. 4 and 5. 50 Faces Project, Berlin

At this stage my research investigation is preliminary and speculative. However, I believe I could create a strong visual rhetoric by analyzing the theory and psychology behind Situationism, and applying that to the discipline of advertising. I will utilize this approach for the benefit of society, to achieve social good and inspire my audience to reconnect with their moral centres. If social, attitudinal and environmental issues can influence individuals, I will look towards transformational advertising to alter people’s behaviour and encourage them to reclaim their moral responsibility. A successful example of transformational design is the viral ‘initiative’ undertaken by Volkswagen called ‘The Fun Theory’ (www.thefuntheory.com). It is a series of experiments testing if you can change people’s behaviour by making the world more fun. For example, to encourage people to use the stairs of a train station they were turned into a real life piano. The result was a 66 percent success rate and over one million views of the

video on YouTube. This case study is an excellent example of how Situationism can be applied to transformational advertising to bring about positive social change.



Fig. 6. The Piano Staircase, The Fun Theory, Stockholm.

Analyzing the 2008 quality of life survey, I discovered that Wellington is considered to be one of the best places to live in terms of accessibility, safety and development. People rate their quality of life exceptionally high, especially in comparison to other areas of New Zealand. However, when I examined the statistics from the Lambton Ward (Thorndon to Mount Victoria, and Pipitea to Brooklyn), I noticed a few areas in which I could target with my research project. Out of the five wards, the Lambton ward had the least sense of community, and lowest belief in the importance of a community in society. It had the highest percentage of people employed full time (67%), and therefore the largest percentage of individuals feeling stressed ‘most of the time’. 43% of the participants interviewed perceived the lack of safety in their area as a result of dangerous people lurking around. As a resident of Wellington and the Lambton ward for the past three years since I began university, this specific area holds a lot of memories and emotional attachments for me. As it is located within or close by the Central Business District, there is a lot of people living in a small amount of space and without the traditional neighbourhood protocol found in the outer suburbs. Inner city Wellington suburbs do not tend to have transitional space such as front lawns or driveways (Solomon, 1988), so where do we communicate our sense of community and pride in our neighbourhood? Wellington is unique in the fact that it houses such extreme economic and ethnic diversities very close together. For example, the street where I live has students, travelers, professionals, and families. I propose to create a sense of community in inner city Wellington suburbs to ultimately improve the wellbeing of individuals. This project would be beneficial to people who are unable to change their environments and are therefore more disadvantaged.

Situationism is a very exciting and interesting psychological path to investigate. In contemporary life we have forgotten the importance of the social contract and our set of moral codes. As designers it is essential that we communicate with moral responsibility at the forefront of our consciousness. We also have the opportunity to inspire these feelings within our audience, to create social change for the common good of society. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates wisely said, “Living well and beautifully and justly are all one thing”. This demonstrates the inter-connectness of our lives, and how easily our environments can imprint on our wellbeing.

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