THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

THE PROJECT: FROM THE IDEA AND APPLICATION OF THE DESIGNER TO RECEPTION: A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF IMAGES ON FOOD WASTE

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ABSTRACT

Social posters and visual communication regarding concepts such as " public health", " civil responsibility", "responsible action" and practices connected to the reception of non commercial advertising images are the focus point of this article.

Designers conceptualize and produce designs hoping that these become integrated into the cultural and social practices of their receivers. In the case of posters on food waste, our questioning is as follows:

How does the designer conceptualize and create his final version? How do receivers appropriate these posters? Do these designs have the capacity to influence the receiver to a change of attitude?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we met with two French designers, Axelle Roue and Hélène Petit and we questioned them on their designs on food waste, exhibited in July, 2013 in Parisian subway stations. We interviewed them on their design process, on their first versions (rough copies) up to their final version. In parallel, we also questioned the receivers (the passers-by in the Parisian subway) on how they felt about these posters. The objective was to discover if the meaning of the image sent to the receiver was identical to what the designer had planned in his design.

Keywords: Design, Poster, Receiver, Responsible action, Behavioral change

INTRODUCTION : THE DEFINITION OF "SOCIAL ADVERTISING" ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT RESEARCHERS

In his book published in 1981, *L'autre publicité : la publicité sociétale* (citing T. Sévigny), J. Bouchard introduces the concept of "societal advertising" or "social advertising". His definition characterizes the concept as being a "*form of communication that […] aims to create awareness, to inform, educate, change attitudes, affirm or abolish habits, to convince of the legitimacy of a point of view*"[1] (Bouchard, 1981, 12). For Cossette and Daignault, social advertising can be summarized as "*a form of persuasive communication that aims to change attitudes and behaviors that are deemed prejudiced for the individual and the society*" (Cossette and Daignault, 2011, 67) in which he/she develops, for the purpose of a collective well-being. In our point of view, social advertising is a visual sign, amongst other communicational signs and tools, which in the hands

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[1] All citations have been translated by the author of the present article.

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of its agents, is used to inform the public on subjects that hold a collective interest. While not always benefiting from financial profits, social advertising offers the public simple actions and steps to take in order to adopt new rules of living in society.

The campaign of social advertising, unlike that of commercial advertising, is based on common interests. In order for it to be considered "authentically moral", there is a need for it to refrain from being based on any personal interests and egotistical orientations, but rather, on the common good for all. This type of advertising represents a lifestyle and is a type of consumption based on the culture, education and interests of its target audience.

We believe that social advertising, notably social posters, can be considered as a dominant language of culture and can bring about differences amongst individuals in regards to their behaviours, actions and ways of thinking. It can indeed be said that individuals act more or less according to their culture and the society in which they've been raised. Advertising, in the broader sense of the term, is to a great extent influenced by culture which plays a major role in providing communication norms, social models, norms of social practices and by exposing the identities of the actors (the producers, designers and receivers). A better understanding of these different cultural elements which are used in the design of advertising can provide us with the necessary tools to better understand the target audience.

THE STANDPOINT OF DESIGNERS

In order to persuade the receivers, the job of the designer is to gain their consensus with the them by "*banking on psychological elements, on cultural and symbolic baggage common to both parties*" (*Ibid*., 47). For B. Lahire (1998, 204) the public can interiorize elements "*by progressively creating interdependent social relationships with other actors or by maintaining, trough the mediation of other actors [...], relationships with multiple objects whose mode or modes of use and mode or modes of appropriation they learn*".

It is our opinion that a designer's productions and conceptions create a dynamic of co-production, co-existence and co-habitation between the object (the advert), its designer, and its receiver. Furthermore, this process takes place within the context of culture which allows for continuity in the knowledge of cultural artifacts. We agree with E. Morin (1990, 146-147) who maintains that "*We are co-producers of the object we know; we cooperate with the exterior world and it is this coproduction that allows us to be objective towards the object. We are co-producers of objectivity*".

In the present article, we hope to provide explanations for designers and graphic artists on their creations by inviting them to not only question their own professional approaches, visual habits and cultural context, but to also question the visual habits and cultural context of their receivers. We invite them to consider the integration of these critical approaches in their creations. For instance, should a graphic designer be concerned with the behaviour of individuals in a solidarity

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campaign? To what extent are such designs successful in persuading individuals to do a gesture out of solidarity?

Thanks to this approach, the social and humanitarian poster is not a motionless object. It becomes an object in action, providing a favorable situation for interaction to take place in various contexts. In this sense, the mission of designers and graphic designers is to integrate meaning in an intelligent way in their objects for "*they play an active role in promoting consumption though attaching to product and services particular meanings and "lyfestyles" with which consumers will identify*" (Gay, P. Hall, S. al., 1997, 62).

Designers are indeed the producers and detectors of meaning and signification and it is for this reason that their own knowledge on the culture of the receivers has direct impacts on the acceptance of their design. They are also mediators and "*we expect them to create social cohesion*" (Ollivier, 2007,). Furthermore, the mediation produced by these mediators, through their designs, has the dual function of "*on the one hand, establishing ties between men in the present as well as though generations; on the other hand, presenting the scope of a meaning that goes beyond the immediate relationship, to project further into the future*" (Caune, 1999, 12). It is in this context then, that social and humanitarian posters become true mediators, bearing concrete meanings and significations that invite individuals to take action.

The Standpoint of the Receiver

Based on our research on the behavior of receivers of social advertisements, the receiver questions the value that such advertisements represent and will act based on his/her perceptions and interactions with the environment, according value to objects which are also carriers of meaning. According to the naturalist Jacob von Uexküll's (1965, 1st ed. in 1956) theory of environment (*Umwelt*), humans and animals act based on their perceptions and their interactions with the environment by valorizing the carriers of signification and the "users of signification".

An individual's beliefs are indeed incorporated in his/her actions. We believe that they are set through various means: through tradition, externalism, self-conviction, a priori or through consensus. Therefore, when we study the behavior of the individual vis-à-vis social posters, it is essential to take it into consideration with its sociocultural framework and environment. According to the same theory, the "actanciel world" (*Wirkwelt*) of the receiver, or that which he/she produces, depends on his/her "perceptive world" (*Merkwelt*), or that which he/she perceives. Therefore, in order to decrypt this environment, it is necessary to decrypt these two cohabitating worlds.

In the case of social advertisements, we have noticed that the association of human and non-human agents has been completely interlinked. Thus, to analyze the actions of the actors and the value of the actants, we must enter the environment of this association as "*every object that enters the orbit of an environment is modulated and transformed until it becomes a carrier of usable signification or otherwise, it remains completely abandoned*" (Uexküll, 1956, 99). The receiver will also come to understand his/her relationships with other objects.

The receiver of social advertising then compares the causes and consequences of these acts and his/her immediate appreciation will thus be based on a moral, esthetic or intellectual sensitivity. This sensitivity "*takes shape through the acquisition of habits, or in other words, through the capacity to directly appreciate that which is admirable on an esthetic level, acceptable on an intellectual level and approved on a moral level*" (Dewey, 2011, 27).

It is therefore our opinion that the main issue in the conceptualization of humanitarian and social posters is to determine what creates meaning and signification for the receiver. This means putting the perceptions of the receiver- which contribute to constructing his/her environment- into perspective. These perceptions are significant in determining the receiver's future actions and reactions.

Posters on Food Waste: *Fruit Party*

The sketches and initial visual tests created in the design of the posters of our study show that the designers of these posters were looking to create a universe that would be recognizable to their receivers. In an interview conducted in September 2013 with the two designers, aged 21 and 22, they explained that "the idea of the posters was based on a concept that could be understood by both a younger and older audience, since food waste is something that touches everyone. We tried to find something funny, with an offbeat humor and for us; the thing that brings together several generations is TV. We thought, we'll play around with existing TV commercials and we thought of a commercial done by the company *Marcel* (an advertizing agency based in Paris and San Francisco) for *Oasis* on their product *Fruit Party- Oasis Be Fruit*, where we can see fruit being depicted as movie stars. That's where we thought, that's the idea we'll start with".

Figure 1- The source of Axelle and Hélène's inspiration, the TV commercial for Oasis © Marcel

The designers confirmed that "our idea is to help the receiver to identify him/herself with the fruit. We wouldn't like to be thrown away, so neither would fruit". The designers told us that the behaviors and reactions of the French in supermarkets caught their attention, "if someone in a supermarket sees a banana that is just a little too ripe, they won't buy it because they believe that it isn't any

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good. We didn't want to directly show this type of reaction in our posters, we preferred a more offbeat and creative approach".

Esthetically, the deformation of the fruit proved to be a real challenge for the designers as they tried to transform a flaw into a quality, "trying to show that the brown stains on fruit is nothing but sugar and not rot was quite a delicate matter because we were attacking the habits and the ways of thinking of people".

In order to better understand the design and conceptualization process of the posters of these designers, we asked them to show us their initial hand-drawn and digital sketches, as shown below.
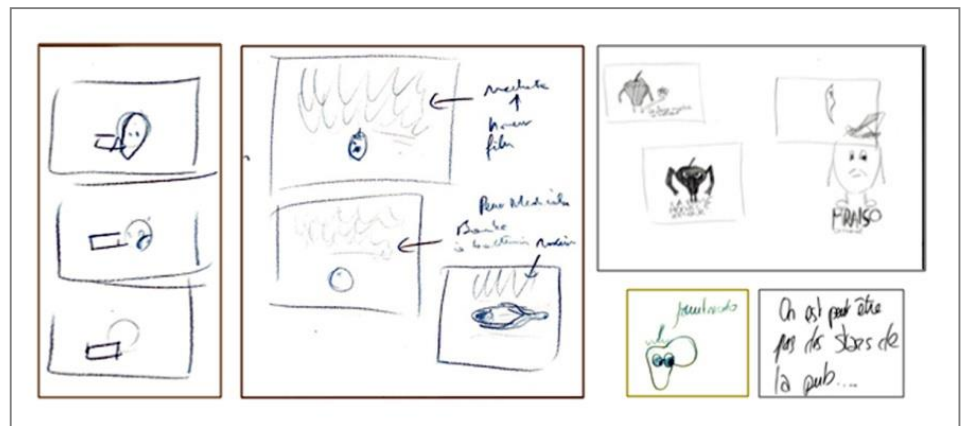

Figure 2-The hand-drawn sketches by Axelle and Hélène.

We can gather rather quickly from these first sketches, that the idea was to show a simply represented fruit in a landscape environment. As Axelle explained, "we drew several sketches and we discussed them a lot with each other. To carry out our ideas and find the right catch phrase, our first slogan was 'failed and discarded', but we thought that it wasn't communicative enough. Then we thought of 'Let's stop food waste', but well, we thought the sentence was a bit too awkward or long. It was only later that we found the right catch phrase". At the end of the interview, she concluded that "in regards to the choice of colours and shapes, we used Oasis as our reference point. We applied some changes, but we stayed faithful to the original source."

The images below show the digitally-made sketches. Here as well, we notice a design process leading to a final version, all the while maintaining the original idea. In this phase, we can also see the placement of the slogan, the font and the background colour chosen for the poster.

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Figure 3-The conception and design process of Axelle and Hélène's final versions.

Prior to the interview with the designers, we had focused our attention on the receivers. We conducted 45 interviews with individuals in a metro station where these posters were presented.

Figure 4-Axelle and Hélène's final poster in a Parisian metro station.

Following a very accelerated and rapid questioning with the passers-by who were often in a rush, we noticed early on that the individuals spoke of feeling a sort of "guilt" because they were clearly aware that they threw away too much food. Furthermore, they were aware that their actions weren't planet-friendly, but they continued throwing away food nonetheless, despite their feelings of guilt. A great

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deal of the passers-by, more than 66%, felt concerned by the issue, but not touched by the posters, 14% felt entirely concerned and touched by the images on food waste and the remaining 20% said that they were neither concerned nor touched by the posters.

It is important to keep in mind that graphic designs, such as posters, are a mix of spatial elements and discourse, symbols, visuals and language. The reception of the designs is directly linked to the knowledge and belief of the receivers on the subject being displayed. In the case of the posters in our study, this culturalist and socio-semiotic perspective explains that the circulation of meaning and signification in a public space is created based on values that the advertisement represents for the totality of the target audience. The more the subject advertised represents a value common to the concerned public, the better the message is received, appreciated and accepted amongst this public.

We therefore questioned the receivers on the visual reference of these posters, but some clearly had difficulty in responding. For some, the images of these fruit recalled something they had "already seen", but they could not pinpoint its origins. Out of the 45 individuals questioned, only 11 (7 women and 4 men) were able to recognize the reference (which was visually recognizable due to the graphic shape of the fruit) made to the *Oasis* commercials as seen on French television. This very point, which was the central theme for the designers and creators, was not *a priori* received by the receivers as they had hoped. When discussing this issue with the designers, their deception was palpable. For them, the link between the original *Oasis* idea and food waste was an obvious one, while results showed otherwise.

Of the entire population questioned, 28% believe that "it is up to each of us and each household to think of the future for our children and our planet", 58% believe that "it is up to the States to take their responsibility seriously by putting in place adequate systems to avoid food waste" and 14% believe that "it is up to companies and large food-processing corporations to take necessary measures to avoid food waste". These results show that even though individuals may feel guilt vis-à-vis food waste, they tend to justify their actions by placing the focus on the political, economical and social situation.

The synthesis of our analysis therefore reveals that as far as instantaneous behavior and attitudes of receivers is concerned, we are faced with different communities of individuals:

- A refusal to act: individuals are convinced that their individual actions towards reducing food waste are useless as long as for example, overall mentalities don't shift and/or States don't take measures in solving such issues.

- No decision made: this concerns people who remain in the phase of doubt or crisis as expressed by Darras and Belkhamsa (2009-2010). These individuals have the will to participate in improving ecological life, but they are not quite sure how to go about doing so. When seeing such images, they state that "I know that I throw out a lot, but sometimes I don't have a choice". In this case, having a lack of time or desire are used as arguments to explain their point of view.

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Partial commitment: Certain individuals have come to the understanding that "not throwing food out" is only a question of a bit of willpower and planning. For this type of individual, their commitment is occasional, but new habits sometimes lead to more significant commitment.

- A profound conviction: for this group of individuals, their actions in not wasting food are totally incorporated in their habits and have lead to a lifestyle adapted to such a belief. By seeing posters on such issues, they state in their comments that they do everything they deem useful and necessary, but that they feel they represent a minority. Individuals in this group don't hesitate to invest time and money in standing up for their convictions and their way of living. They are actively involved in actions such as recycling household waste and reducing food waste.

In consequence, the role of the designers' social posters will vary for each group- not only based on their different manners of thinking and acting, but also based on the values they each hold on the subject of food waste.

For some groups, the posters in question are overall a waste of money and aren't considered essential. For others, social advertising on sensitive subjects such as food waste is not comparable with commercial advertising because it touches our social life and speaks of the common good and future of our children. They pursue this opinion with thoughts on different means of supporting those categories of individuals who are the most sensitive. However, depending on the social values within each community of individuals, the object changes status from one group to another. Social values shape "*conduct which is considered as ideal and esteemed within a particular group*" (Mucchielli, 1992, 65). In other words, the social value is situated between individual characteristics and the culture of the person.

Generally speaking, we mustn't forget that commercial ads often promise the individual a rather instantaneous pleasure, contrary to social ads which demand an immediate deprivation in the hopes of a future pleasure. If we consider commercial ads as loudspeakers for businesses, social ads then, are megaphones for citizens who believe in altruistic values. We can see this aspect through slogans such as: "*Stop smoking and you'll live longer"* or *"Let's return hope to unrightfully condemned vegetables*" or "*If you're able to read this poster, you've been lucky enough to be able to go to school*".

In Conclusion

The designers have made an attempt at trying to change the behaviours and attitudes which would be beneficial to the receivers. In order to stimulate the receivers' motivation and provoke moral commitment, the creators and the designers need to offer a design that while highly symbolic, can still be recognized by the receivers. If the designers hope that the receivers will opt for a change in behaviour, then the individuals must foremost be able to identify themselves with the image that they are shown. People must be guided in imagining the situation, but above all, they should be given the elements showing how their actions and gestures impact environmental issues. The receiver should also be convinced that food waste is a cause that concerns him/her personally and that it's a matter that

influences his/her life. The importance of the subject matter should also be emphasized.

By interviewing the designers, we noticed that these elements encouraged the creators of the posters to construct messages and images that orient the receiver towards a desired interpretation, by multiplying the use of signs with the most obvious meanings possible. In our opinion, the creator must use known and acknowledged symbols while avoiding the design of an entirely innovative type of communication if he/she hopes to be able to enter the system. To be able to do so, the creators often try to employ symbols and sigs that have already been categorized for/by the receiver in order to leave the least possible room for chance and eventual misunderstandings.

Finally, this study proves that social posters on food waste can bring about two major effects. On one hand, they can provoke an emotional reaction from the receivers. On the other hand, this invitation to take action can remain unanswered if the habits, lifestyle and ways of acting of individuals deem food waste as an action without any particular value. An individual's *self-efficiency* (Albert Bandura, en 1986), allows us to become aware of how receivers grasp their capacity to adopt a solution suggested by social ads on food waste. If the receiver is able to detect the elements that prevent his/her own capacity to act, this facilitates the work of the creator in creating efficient public messages.

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