Storefronts and Sweatshops

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Intro - lifestyle rebranding & the corporate spectacle

In the 1980’s many companies including Nike decided to change their advertising strategy from advertising the products themselves to selling intangible goals and lifestyles that will fulfill the innate need for happiness. Success, happiness, connection, athletic abilities and social status have been associated with products as if purchasing these products will bring these intangible human needs. When the products are purchased and the initial satisfaction of the purchase fades, the “consumer” is left in a position of continuing to feed the capitalist cycle.

Replacing culture with its representation

“The spectacle is a permanent opium war...” (p20 Society of the Spectacle - DeBord )The fetishism of the commodity — the domination of society by “intangible as well as tangible things” — attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.” P18

B"y consensus, cult members speak a kind of corporate Esperanto: words and ideas sucked up from TV and advertising. We wear uniforms—not white robes but, let's say, Tommy Hilfiger jackets or Airwalk sneakers (it depends on our particular sub-sect). We have been recruited into roles and behavior patterns we did not consciously choose.” (p53 Culture Jamming – Kalle Lasn)

“We follow their lead. We let them seduce us and possess us, and from our relationship with them we derive a certain sense of security, the way prostitutes derive a sense of security from their pimps.” (p76 Culture Jamming)

Nike and many other large corporations have shifted from advertising their products to promoting dreams, social movements and lifestyles allegedly associated with their brand. At the same time, Nike has gained a reputation for using sweatshops and child labor to produce their products since the 1970’s. Advertising idealistic goals while outsourcing labor to underpaid factory workers creates a glaring contrast and a reason to examine choices consumers make. Storefronts and Sweatshops demonstrates this vast disparity by combining the aesthetics of a Nike storefront with those of its manufacturing facilities.

Commodities, especially fashionable apparel have become fetishized. The value of these items is disconnected from the cost of production and has become much more related to consumers’ perceptions about these products. “The spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity.” (p20 Guy DeBord’s Society of the Spectacle)

Surrogate relationships

One technique used as part of the larger strategy of lifestyle rebranding is the creation of surrogate relationships for the “consumer”. KFC’s Colonel Sanders, Aunt Jemima, and Dave Thomas have become...
household names with personalities that we become familiar with at an early age in the West. This is a form of DeBord’s concept of the “spectacle”, of replacing real relationships and actual elements of the culture with substitute artificial representations.

“What this means is that we’re now ripe for manipulation. We can be buzzed by logos without noticing. This is not so different from being buzzed by a laugh track. We’ve backgrounded these things and—at least consciously—tuned them out. We’ve given up mental control. To whom? To the dozens of entertainment marketing agencies in the U.S. that specialize in moving products...” (p38 Culture Jam)

“The modern consumer is indeed a Manchurian Candidate living in a trance. He has a vague notion that at some point early in his life, experiments were carried out on him, but he can’t remember much about them. While he was drugged, or too young to remember, ideas were implanted into his subconscious with a view to changing his behavior. The Manchurian Consumer has been programmed not to kill the president, but to go out and purchase things on one of a number of predetermined commands.” (p40 Culture Jam)

Disney has created an entire world of characters learned at a young age through the television. The concept of the “town square” has been artificially replaced by their private theme parks. Nike advertises qualities of hard work, success and tenacity as being somehow connected with their athletic apparel. Apple positions itself in the market as a company that thinks differently and uses Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other inspiring cultural leaders in their commercials. Starbucks depends on an image of branding themselves as a community gathering place much more than the coffee they sell. Car commercials began depicting young people riding around with their friends in cars. And Tommy Hilfiger became the first brand to advertise their brand on the outside of their clothes in the early 90s. (Naomi Klein - No Logo)

**Monopolies**

A major issue related to the bombardment of the public by advertising is the permission for monopolies by elected officials. Corporate entities are categorized as people by U.S. law, giving these corporate conglomerates the equivalent of human rights. Advertising has seeped into the most intimate settings and has come to dominate public spaces. Children are advertised to in schools from a young age. Shopping malls, which have become functionally town centers are owned by private corporations. Pizza Hut has advertised on the space shuttle. Product placement and script insertions allow advertisements to be placed in movies and tv shows. Auto wraps and billboards dominate our visual experience.

Disney has even created a privatized township called Celebration, Florida where employees live. No outside advertisements are allowed in this entire town, giving Disney exclusive advertising access to their subjects. The monopoly of Wall-Mart who intentionally puts small business out of business have also been known to censor music and books allowed in their stores, limiting free speech in the name of protecting their “family brand”.

**Nike**

Nike is by no means alone in its questionable history when it comes to labor disputes, but they are an excellent example case. Their production factories were contracted to nations with increasingly cheap production costs over the last 50 years. Public outcry really became prevalent against Nike’s labor policies when the working conditions in Southeast Asia became public in the 1980s. Since then, they
have fought unions and labor disputes. (No Logo) In 1988, Indonesia newspapers exposed Nike’s practices and in response, the government of Indonesia raised the minimum wage by more than 300% between 1988 and 1996. (P 35 Nike’s Voice Looms Large)

Nike is an excellent example of a company that amplifies the aura of their brand in order to increase their prices and profit. The company has simultaneously faced scrutiny for over 40 years in relation to their use of sweatshops and violations of child labor laws internationally. Consumers buy Nike products in response to advertisements for freedom, connection, and happiness. Recently, Nike has invested in an iconic ad campaign supporting Colin Kaepernick and advocating for the rights of people of color. While this campaign is an important first step to supporting people of color, in 2017 the company scored 20 percent by the Ethical Fashion Report in relation to providing a living wage and unionization of factory workers. If Nike is truly advocating for the rights of people of color, they should start by giving basic human rights to the people of color working in their factories.

Nike and other corporations claim to maintain corporate codes of conduct in order to regulate their offshore production facilities. This began under president Bill Clinton who created NAFTA and claimed great progress. The evidence regarding the effectiveness of corporate codes of conduct reveals the reality that they have not been effective and allow companies to continue inhumane labor practices due to a lack of outside accountability. The press has also been responsible for allowing inhumane and unethical practices to continue, despite their corporate codes of conduct. “When Clinton officials and industry spokespeople started to tout “dialogue” and corporate codes of conduct as a solution, most editors and reporters began to address the issue as one of good-faith compliance. The stories began to carry less information about strikes, firings and protesting workers.” (p34 Nike’s Voice Looms Large)

Activism

Throughout the 80s and 90s, large protests and demonstrations brought attention to inhumane labor practices and put pressure on companies like Nike to take more accountability. Student movements such as the Workers Rights Consortium created enough controversy that forced them to improve. Coach Jim Keady and Olympic athlete Kevin McMahon also “protested Nike’s advertising domination on all team apparel.” (p34 Nike’s Voice Looms Large)

Culture Jammig

Corporate domination of life in the U.S. has also provoked extremely creative counter movements like the concept of culture jamming. Kalle Lasn’s Adbusters Magazine has created the black spot sneaker campaign, “Buy Nothing Day”, “National TV Turn Off Week”, and “Occupy Wall Street”. There is also a billboard liberation movement of artists who make subtle changes to existing billboards, creating ironic parodies. Storefronts and Sweatshops is a continuation of this cultural movement by creating parody advertisements and combining the aesthetics of a Nike storefront with the reality of their labor conditions.

Conclusion

The religious-like fervor for Nike’s expensive products has created a great deal of profit for Nike executives. The question remains whether consumers are aware of Nike’s track record of underpaying their factory workers. Consumers have the freedom to choose what policies and labor standards they
support with their purchasing decisions. The aim of this project is to increase awareness among consumers and propose supporting brands that use their resources to make positive social change.

As citizens of a free and influential nation, we have the ability to help create better labor conditions for people by supporting ethical working conditions through our purchasing choices. We can also come together to put pressure on companies as groups, like the student movements did to use the leverage of the group to support change. We can also work as states and towns to band billboards, as the state of Vermont has done. And we can demonstrate and work to support the global fair trade movement.