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Images and Their Influence on a Collective Cultural Identity

Images are powerful cultural devices that can be used unwittingly to influence the way in which we perceive our own collective cultural identity. Of course, images can also be actively employed as tools to influence that identity. The latter are generally referred to as advertisements and are used to influence the ways in which people respond to certain ideas or products. Clever advertisers are capable of manipulating a person's most basic and emotional responses to certain ideas by associating ideologies with products. Favorable ideologies are paired with products to be sold, and vice versa. Of course, all this manipulation of our own sense of our own culture has unintended consequences. For one, when images (and specifically advertisements) tweak the way that we perceive our own cultural identity, those images have the power to subtly modify the nature of that culture itself. In other words, images -- when used properly (or perhaps improperly) -- have the capacity to reshape the nature of a collective cultural identity. A collective cultural identity is, in essence, the shared experience that a group of individuals has of their own culture. This experience is not necessarily conscious or understood or even able to be articulated. Nevertheless, it is a powerful perception that encompasses a wide range of ideologies and beliefs and actions. It is the set of characteristics that a group shares whether or not they realize it. Images (and advertisements) are capable of playing to that collective identity and even manipulating for the sake of selling a product. This paper will examine two such advertisements (one from McDonald's and the other from Abercrombie and Fitch) and discuss the ad's presentation, intended audience, purpose, and effectiveness. Ultimately, the goal of this examination will be to determine the degree to which each advertisement is capable of impacting and influencing our cultural image and identity.

The first image is the opening page of the McDonald's web page in the United States. It is a triple image, with three distinct and separate images placed side-by-side.

On the far left is a young girl, likely between thirteen and seventeen. She is obviously excited about something. When the cursor is placed over the image, the image expands and reveals a second girl who is likewise jubilant, though possibly slightly less so. Both are young and attractive. The second part of this overall image is a central image of several teenagers in a car. When the cursor is placed over this image it also expands and reveals a greater amount of dimension and detail. Two of the individuals are laughing and joking in the back seat while the three in the front seem engrossed in some task. All are holding McDonald's food, primarily drinks. The car seems new and appears to be either an SUV or perhaps a minivan. It is very likely based on this and the limited background imagery that the teens are in a McDonald's drive thru. The final image to the far right is of four children probably between the ages of six and eleven. They are dirty and tousled and two of them seem to be wearing matching uniforms. It is apparent that they are sitting in a McDonald's restaurant based on the drinks and recognizable McDonald's tray in front of them. A caption that appears indicates that they just returned from a winning game of some sorts.

The intended audience for these images is very apparently McDonald's customers. But it is more specific than that. These collected images are not meant to appeal entirely to existing customers but instead should also reach out to new customers by reinforcing positive ideological messages. So who then is the target audience? Based on these images it seems readily apparent that the audience is middle class America, and more specifically either teenagers or young adults who have perhaps recently had children. The middle class is one of the most targeted groups in advertising as it possesses a large degree of expendable income for luxuries such as fast food. The middle class is also one of the most culturally powerful groups in the United States. It is the group that sets cultural trends. Through the middle class, American culture is largely defined. In an ideological sense, the middle class is composed of people who have embraced the American Dream and benefited from a

supposed meritocracy extant in this country. They are educated and promote education in their children. They are able to afford family cars (such as mini vans and SUVs) and often enroll their children in extracurricular sports activities such as soccer or pee-wee football. It is the socioeconomic class that the less enfranchised strive to attain and which the upper class will emulate to some degree for the sake of fashionability.

The purpose of these images is to encourage the notion that McDonald's is the place to be for middle class individuals who are interested in family values or younger people interested in enjoying their lives. In all three elements of the overall image, the individuals present are shown having a good time or else (as in the case of the young sports players) have just returned triumphant from enjoying themselves. So, naturally, then the aim of this image is to be coercive and convince individuals to change their eating habits because McDonald's apparently embodies desirable traits. The implication is that if I eat at McDonald's I will also enjoy my life and will deserve to be treated right by a clown who finally put white meat into his chicken nuggets.

But what impact does this image have on our collective cultural identity? How does McDonald's shape what it means to be a middle class American through these images? In fact, can we even say that these images have any such effect on our society's understanding of its own culture? Well, as it happens, we can easily argue just that. Because these images are interactive and actually display text messages when a cursor is passed over them, we can understand that McDonald's is not only responding to its sense of American middle class values but also creating those values by associating particular messages with these images. We have already established that these images portray our cultural identity as young, fun-loving, and family oriented. What do the text images add to the mix?

As mentioned, the image with the winning children directly connects winning with McDonald's as if they are inextricably twined. The middle image with a van full of happy teenagers advertises the new chicken nuggets that contain actual white meat. This, of

course, crafts a new value in natural food as opposed to overly processed or synthetic materials. The image responds to (but also reinforces) a growing trend in middle America that demands products that are more environmentally conscious and healthy -- or at least products that superficially seem to be so. Finally, the image to to the far left adds a smaller picture of a salad and explains that the captioned individuals are staying active and eating healthy. Again, these are values that McDonald's is responding to but also reinforcing by giving them such prominence in the images. McDonald's is helping to reinforce a cultural identity that is young, healthy, interested in "winning," and concerned with "natural" products. Except for the young and winning, this is more than little ironic -- a fast food restaurant manufacturing a cultural identity that is interested in health and natural products. Btu again, McDonald's doesn't actually have to embrace or embody these qualities; it only has to superficially appear so.

In a similar vein (not to transition too quickly here), I have examined the front page for the Abercrombie and Fitch web site. This image also reinforces certain tendencies in our perceived cultural identity all the while helping to create some of those tendencies. The image is black and white and is focused on a young man likely between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. He is young, shirtless, apparently muscular (though the image is only from the shoulders up), and has blond or light brown hair seemingly wet and disheveled. The background of the image is out of focus, but combined with his shiftlessness and the particular tones of gray involved, it would seem that the young man is standing by the ocean or perhaps a very large lake. There seems to be the smudge of foam and waves near the edge of the water and a lighter smudge on the horizon to the right of the man that could be a ship in the distance. Based on his hair, one might conclude that the man had been swimming; however, given the lack of moisture on the rest of his body that conclusion seems less likely.

The very obvious demographic for this image is young men between the ages of seventeen and thirty-four. It appeals to men who are just slightly younger than this man

and want to grow into his body but also appeals to men who have past this man's prime and wish to return to it (or the prime they never had). However, at the same time, the image can easily appeal to women of the same age demographic as the young man could appeal to them as a sex symbol. Women could be drawn to Abercrombie and Fitch and image identification much in the same way that men are drawn to beer commercials that have less to do with beer than scantily clad women.

The purpose of this image is less clear cut than the McDonald's image analyzed above. In that previous case, it was very obvious and apparent that the purpose of the image was to sell a product, specifically McDonald's fast food. In this case, it is less obvious what the image is meant to do. In fact, if we did not already know that this was an image pulled direct from the Abercrombie and Fitch web site, it might be possible to analyze this image outside the context of the commercial venture that the clothing company represents. However, once known, it is not possible (nor should it necessarily be encouraged) to divorce the image from the context in which it was created. Understanding that commercial and materialistic context can easily help us to identify the purpose of this image as well as the effect it has on our collective cultural identity.

What we have to understand is that both of these images, though perhaps this one to a more subtle extent, are selling an image not simply a product. The image then associates that image with a product that can be purchased so that consumers believe they are not only buying a product but also the image that is associated with that image. So what image is being sold here? As I described above, the image here is far from spontaneous; it is very obviously staged, to the point that the man appears to have been swimming and yet isn't at all wet. In fact, what Abercrombie and Fitch have done here is contribute to a very particular cultural trend that has been coming into greater prominence in recent decades: the objectification of the male image. Staged images such as this one help reinforce the cultural notion that the male body and image is an object to be possessed or controlled, much in the same way that the objectification of

the female form has previously occurred. Now it is appropriate to objectify the male image in the same manner. This has very profound effects on our sense of collective cultural identity.

If the male body is ripe for objectification, it means that it our own culture can establish physical (and other aspect) standards to which the rest of our own culture must adhere. Objectifying the male image in this way creates a standard for other men in our culture -- the image itself suggests that men in our culture should look like this one does. Essentially (and this may seem too much of a stretch despite the realities of the image) this image helps to establish and perpetuate an unrealistic standard of beauty for men that is almost always unattainable. Our own collective cultural sense of what it means to be a man is being changed by this image and other. This new type of image changes the emphasis of maleness to include certain characteristics: young, handsome, muscular, aloof.

Images such as the front pages for McDonald's and Abercrombie & Fitch influence our collective cultural identity by stressing different elements of that identity and forcing consumers (of which we all are) to align themselves with various elements in order to establish individual identities. As members of a materialistic and consumerist culture, we have the quirky belief that we can establish personal identities by making purchases that align our identities with cultural associations that these images (and advertisements) make. Eat at McDonald's and you can become fun-loving and family oriented. Buy your clothes from Abercrombie and you begin to embody the important aspects of being a man: good-looking and hip. Images have the incredible power to influence and reshape our cultural priorities by placing new focus on parts of that culture in order to sell products. As we change our purchasing habits in order to align ourselves with those priorities we begin to change our collective sense of what it means to be a part of this culture.

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