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Express yourself

Jennifer Bazan

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Express Yourself

A Thesis Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With University Honors

Department of Visual and Performing Arts

By

Jennifer Bazan

DeKalb, Illinois

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University Honors Program

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ABSTRACT (100 - 200 WORDS):

Express Yourself is a study of the T-Shirt as a means for mass visual communication. After surveying many people as to the types and reasons that they wear T-Shirts, I came to the conclusion that people wear them in order to express a part of themselves to the public. I went about creating several different T-Shirts to express a few aspects of myself, according to the categories of T-Shirts as discussed further in the paper. Many different methods were used to create the shirts, which all started out as the same white, cotton shirt. Iron on transfers, silk screening, hand-dyeing, sewing, painting, and other methods were used to create these vehicles of communication. After showing these shirts, I concluded that they were indeed successful in communicating the various aspects of myself that they were intended to.

Jennifer Bazan

Capstone

Express Yourself

Everyone has one; perhaps it oversized and over-worn, but it is still nestled amongst the other, newer, clothes. It is a T-shirt: that cotton T-shirt that states a frame of mind, or advertises a favorite band. A T-shirt is the staple of the American wardrobe, but why is the T-shirt so popular?

Over one decade ago, a revolution occurred in the clothing industry. In 1899, a plain white cotton T-shirt was an official part of the U.S. Navy uniform. The T-shirt was worn underneath the blouse of all Navy uniforms. The plain white T-shirt quickly spread to other military outfits and to civilians. By the 1930's, plain white T-shirts "were becoming standard sporting wear at some American universities," (Walters, 8). College men wore these cotton T-shirts as uniforms for physical education classes as well as for sporting events.

The original marketing plan for the motion picture, "The Wizard of Oz," included T-shirts printed with characters from the film (8). This strategy was documented as "not popular at the time," (8). Very few of the shirts sold, thus showing that the movie-going public had little interest in wearing cotton T-shirts advertising the film. The T-shirt was not successfully used as a promotional item until the later half of the 1900's. In 1965, "Budweiser was one of the first major brands to

use T-shirts as a marketing tool,” (9). Budweiser began printing its logo on T-shirts, which the corporation then sold and gave away at promotional activates.

It was not until after World War II that the graphically printed T-shirts became popular. While serving abroad under the U.S. Army, Ed “Big Daddy” Roth noticed that it was common for people to wear T-shirts that had graphics and words printed on them. After the war, Roth “brought this tradition of printing T-shirts back to America,” (9). He first introduced this new idea to car audiences. Roth would display a shirt that had been printed with a piece of artwork and the name of the auto club at car shows. These shirts became increasingly popular, with the demand outweighing the supply. Roth’s inability to keep up with the demand led him to develop a silk screening machine (9).

The silkscreen process, also known as serigraphy, allows for quick and economic reproduction of an image onto a variety of surfaces. The machine that Roth invented to mass-produce his T-shirts was almost identical to the original silk screening process that was invented in the early 1900’s (Auvil, 4). Since its inception, “silk screening has been refined, but not essentially changed,” (4). To produce a silkscreen print on a T-shirt, a screen must first be made. A mesh fabric, or screen, is tightly stretched onto a sturdy frame, usually in the shape of a rectangle. The image that is to be reproduced onto the T-shirt is made into a stencil. The stencil is then affixed under the mesh fabric. The T-shirt is placed underneath the stencil. Paint is applied through the top of the screen, and then “forced through the mesh and open areas of the stencil,” using a squeegee (4). A squeegee helps to apply a thin, even layer of paint throughout the entire image (4). The popularity of the silkscreen quickly

grew in the second half of the 1900's due to its flexibility in artistic reproduction and its low production costs.

Despite the earlier unsuccessful plight of "The Wizard of Oz" and their printed shirts, the "London based [company] Mr. Freedom bought a sort-term license from Walt Disney," (9). This license allowed Mr. Freedom to print Disney characters, such as Minnie Mouse and Goofy, onto T-shirts. Mr. Freedom had such success with this campaign in the early 1970's that when the one-year license was up, Disney refused to renew it. Instead, Disney launched its own line of T-shirts donning the cartoon characters of Mickey and friends (9). Mr. Freedom and Disney were successful widely due to the acceptance of the T-shirt "as an everyday article of clothing," (11). During the 1930's, the T-shirt was not as popular as it was during the 1960's and 70's. It was during this later part of the century that the T-shirt rose in popularity and acceptance, allowing for companies to utilize it as a promotional material and as a marketable product.

While corporate America was first to utilize the T-shirt for its properties of communication, "artists were quick to catch onto their potential," (9). While most people enjoyed art, few people could afford it. The popular art of the time was sold in galleries and in stores owned by the artists. Only a handful of people who earned an above-average income had the luxury of buying original works of art. In an effort to spread their work into a wider public, artists began to reproduce their art onto T-shirts. Pop artist Keith Hering was a leader in this trend. In the late 1970's, he opened the Pop Shop "to sell his images on a range of clothing," (10). His work, along with the other artists who engaged in this trend, was now accessible to everyone.

Along with visual artists, the music industry “has been particularly adept at exploiting the potential of the T-shirt,” (10). An easy, and popular, promotional idea is to print the cover of a CD onto a T-shirt. Tour dates and concert titles are among the many musically inspired T-shirts. This type of design is popular with consumers as it achieves two objectives: one, it informs people that the wearer was at a particular concert, and two, it informs people that the wearer is loyal to the particular music group (9).

Not only have the printed pictures on shirts changed, but the physical shape of the T-shirt has also changed. T-shirts began as “outsize [d], unisex, baggy,” articles of clothing that fit everyone (15). In the early 1990’s, the T-shirt began to change into something that is “skimpy, tight, and sexy,” (15). T-shirts are now made specifically for men and women, with women’s shirts being the most skimpy and tight.

Other, current, styles in T-shirt design include conflicting content between the shirt and its wearer. A popular trend in Japan is to write words in English that amount to complete nonsense (15). In America, the same fascination with Asian writing is evident. While touring Japan, an American was stunned to discover that the T-shirt he was wearing with beautiful Japanese lettering on it read “fucking stupid American tourist,” (15). It is common for people to wear T-shirts that they are ignorant to their true meaning, as most people buy shirts for their aesthetic value regardless of their true literary meaning.

T-shirts can advertise a corporation or product, while some show the wearer’s loyalty to a band or cause. Still, others are purely fashionable. Mike Hicks comments in T-Shirt Design 2 that “most modern T-shirts are perilously close to falling into the

esoteric realm of high fashion.” Hicks insists that T-shirts are worn for their aesthetic appeal, not for their affiliation with a group.

While fashionable, a T-shirt does something unique; it communicates a message to a mass audience about the individual wearer. This study aims to discern why people wear the T-shirts that they wear, and what the T-shirts communicate to the public. This is a study of the T-shirt as a medium for visual communication.

To understand why people wear the T-shirts that they do, a survey was distributed. This survey catalogued T-shirts according to their content: an advertisement, a textual expression, or a graphical depiction of a state of mind. These categories were derived from Hicks, Kalkbrenner, and Walters. All three books expressed similar cataloguing of T-shirts into ones containing marketing material, text, or pictures.

The survey then goes on to discern where people wear their T-shirts. The exposure of the message is just as important as the message itself; if one only wears his T-shirt in isolation; the message is never communicated to the public. Similarly, the distribution of these shirts is important. The survey aims to identify what types of shirts are worn and for what reasons. This helps to understand how important the message is. The goal is to validate the theory that a T-shirt is a device for communication. The last few questions deal with the initiation and reception of communication based on the message of the T-shirt.

The survey asked the following questions;

1. Do you prefer T-shirts with pictures or words?
2. Please describe your favorite T-shirt.

3. Do the majority of your T-shirts
 - a. Advertise something
 - b. Make a textual statement about your state of mind
 - c. Graphically depict something
4. Where do you wear your favorite T-shirt?
5. Where do you get most of your T-shirts?
 - a. A retail location
 - b. A free promotional item
 - c. Other _____
6. Why is your favorite T-shirt your favorite?
7. If you see someone wearing a T-shirt that represents a music group you like, do you comment to the wearer of the T-shirt?
8. If you see someone wearing a T-shirt that causes you to think, do you share your thoughts with the wearer?
9. When you wear T-shirts, do you receive comments from other people about your T-shirts?

From the survey, I concluded that people wear T-shirts to express a part of themselves to the public. By wearing a T-shirt, one can send a message to anyone around him that views the shirt. The T-shirt is a potential mass medium of self-expression.

After determining what the purpose of a T-shirt is for, I created one for each of the categories developed by Hicks, Kalkbrenner, and Walters (according to their content: an advertisement, a textual expression, or a graphical depiction of a state of mind. These categories were derived from Hicks, Kalkbrenner, and Walters

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purpose, I did not make a shirt plastered with a logo. I chose to focus on the more creative aspects of T-shirt design.

For a textual phrase, I chose to place the word “shiny” on a T-shirt. This shirt began as a form fitting, white cotton T-shirt; as did all the shirts in this study. I adhered silver glitter to the entire surface, front and back, of the shirt. I then placed lowercase, size 24 pt Helvetica letters in center of the upper third of the front of the shirt.

The textual comment here is a sarcastic statement about the ability of our culture to state the obvious. A shirt covered in glitter is obviously a shiny thing. No one looking at it would need to read the text to know that it was “shiny.” By wearing this shirt, I am communicating to the public the obviousness of the object, insinuating that I do not feel that the public would be able to understand a shirt with message containing a higher meaning. This cynical message is a reflection of my disappointment at the lack individuals willing to broaden their horizons through new knowledge; from a university or otherwise.

Pictures can help to illustrate a more abstract idea, such as the one in the next T-shirt. I first applied black, purple, and blue paint to the shirt in an outward spiral pattern. A mix of dry brushing and splatter techniques were used to create a hectic pattern of dark, low contrasting colors. I then stitched a yellow rose in full bloom on the upper portion of the backside of the T-shirt.

The swirling mass of color represents an overbearing sense of chaos. The yellow rose is intended to be a calming, reassuring image; the calm in the storm. The comment that I am making here is that one needs a sense of calmness in a period of

tumultion. If there is no peaceful image to look at, the shirt has an overbearing sense of negative energy. The rose communicates the need for one to step back and focus on something positive during rough times so as not to be overcome by the chaos.

While creating these shirts, I created my own category of T-shirt; one including props. Although uncommon, T-shirts have been made that include the use of props such as chains, attached extensions of fabric that may be removed, or other various metal attachments (spikes, zippers, etc.).

I started with a fitted T-shirt, and dyed the entire surface a vivid lime green. I then created a set of wings by shaping wire into two large wing shapes, and stretching nylon over the wire frame. I dyed the nylon the same green as the shirt. I then applied a mix of white and glow in the dark glitter to the wings. The wings were then sewn to the center of the back of the shirt. The shirt, once completed, mimics the appearance of a fairy; most notably of the Disney character Tinkerbell.

The comment that I am communicating here is the use of a nickname. Since early childhood, my mother has called me "Tinkerbell," perhaps stemming from the use of a Tinkerbell costume for Halloween in the third grade. The name has stuck, continuing to be used by friends and family alike.

When any person even vaguely familiar with the Walt Disney culture views this T-shirt, it is intended that they understand the concept of Tinkerbell and apply it to the wearer. Someone unfamiliar with this Disney character would still see the shirt and understand the concept of a fairy. As Tinkerbell is a fairy, the message still works in communicating several aspects of my personality that are in common with the lighthearted, whimsical characteristics of a fairy. It is also communicating that I live

in my own world, as fairies do not exist in the “real world.” This shirt communicates many facets of my personality in a very simple way.

A T-Shirt can be an excellent way of raising awareness of something, or someone. Following the style of Keith Herring, I will make a series of T-shirts describing an artist. The series will include eleven T-shirts that create a visual identity for the graphic designer Vaughan Oliver. I chose Vaughan Oliver as I appreciate his emotive and organic style of design. Each T-shirt will contain a headline placed in the lower left hand corner of the shirt. Each shirt will be a men’s white cotton shirt. The headlines will display his biography, another will make a statement about his work, one will show examples of his work, one will list adjectives that describe Oliver, and one will list metaphors for Oliver. The last six headlines on the T-shirts will combine monograms and logotypes to describe Oliver. Each of the T-shirts will be photographed and placed on 11” x 17” posters with the corresponding information. This creates a way of visually communicating the artist’s work and attributes to the public.

All T-shirt designs will be displayed in the Waterford Greens clubhouse in Naperville, Illinois. They will be set up as a retail location would be set up. Many reproductions of the shirt will be displayed together on hangers, with each shirt having a price tag affixed to it. This asserts that the T-shirt is ultimately a T-shirt, not an original, nor a great work of art. The T-shirt is ultimately meant to be purchased and worn in order to communicate some message to the world.

A survey will be given to those who view the display. This survey will attempt to discover if the effort to create T-shirts that communicate a clear message to the

public was successful. Each design will be evaluated separately to deduce the success of one shirt over the next.

The survey included the following question for each T-shirt or series of T-shirts;

1. What does this shirt communicate to you?
2. If you saw me wearing this shirt, what would you think?
3. Do you think that this shirt effectively communicates something about me as an individual?
4. Do you think that this shirt effectively communicates the message to large sums of people?

The results of this survey showed that each T-shirt communicated what it was intended to communicate. For the most part, every person who viewed the shirts was able to discern what the message was. Those surveyed thought that each shirt very effectively conveyed aspects of myself, as is the intention of each shirt. The helpful information to better the communication was received with the last question.

Although almost every single person was able to understand the message of each shirt, not all persons were sure that the message would be understood by large sums of people. If one knows me, the message is clear. It may not be so clear to those who are not familiar with me though

The results show that the T-shirt is an effective tool for mass communication, specifically of the self. It is a successful way of self-expression to a large audience. This can lead to new ways of communicating one's messages to a visual culture.

The T-shirt may have started out as a means of corporate advertising, but over the short history of its existence, it has evolved into media for individual advertising. Both old and new techniques are used to apply images and text, and in some cases other objects, to T-shirts to allow individuals to advertise themselves and well as the various corporations of the world.

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