Adbusters and Guerrilla Girls:

A Comparison of Culture Jamming Advertisements

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Abstract

The following thesis examines the activities and texts of two different groups of activists who use culture jamming as a tactic to challenge dominant ideologies as they advocate for progressive social, cultural, and economic change. Culture jamming, as defined in “‘Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics:’ Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming, and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy,” is the act of confronting issues of globalization, consumerism, sexism, racism in hopes of raising the critical consciousness of the public and highlighting aspects of domination and oppression in mainstream media culture. Culture jamming is created from the practices of appropriation and/or mocking of the aesthetics and language that are a part of popular culture. By exploring and comparing the works of the Guerilla Girls and of Adbusters, one can discover which types of images are more effective than others, and then identify the problematic aspects of these culture jammers through a qualitative, or subjective analysis. After conducting surveys, one will determine the effectiveness both groups’ as a counter hegemonic force in an attempt to challenge practices and offer new solutions.

Culture jamming resists hegemonic culture through the use of satire and irony. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist thinker, described cultural hegemony, as an intellectual and moral leadership. In Marxist philosophy, cultural hegemony is the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class who manipulate the culture of that society—the beliefs, explanations, perceptions, values, and mores—so that their imposed, ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 1994, p. 1215). It can be formed by cultural and political consensus through institutions such as the church, schools or media. The media perpetuates this practice of domination by focusing on the elites and their dominant ideologies, instead of including all people (Kellner, p. 1). In the case of Adbusters, the group aims to resist the dominant ideology of consumerism, while Guerrilla Girls aims to resist males as the hegemonic force within the art world.

According to Adbusters, consumerism is the source of modern society’s ills, as people try to find meaning and value in objects (adbusters.org). Consumerism is a social and economic order that encourages the acquisition of goods and services in ever-increasing amounts. This practice is traced to industrialization, when production was replaced by wage labor, creating a surplus of goods to purchase. The abundance of goods changed how consumption functioned in society, moving consumption from something primarily aimed at sustaining life to becoming a way of life. Miles (2002) explains the new economic structure:

Consumer capitalism was able to exploit a situation where the symbolic value of consumer goods was endowed with an increased social significance. It is in this sense that the ideological impact of consumerism became increasingly subtle in nature. (p. 7)

In the case of the Guerilla Girls, culture jamming is used to point out sexism in the art world, mainly in the lack of representation of art by women and minorities in museums around the world. My video essay addresses both activist groups, provides image examples, explains the ways in which they function. My goal in this research project is to determine which culture jamming images cause a more favorable reaction, why others are more easy to understand, and if some are humorous. I am looking to either validate or disprove the belief that culture jamming leads to positive effects on society. In short, does irony work when trying to spur positive and radical change? If it does not, what does work? I plan to conclude by offering up ideas for more effective ways to resist hegemonic ideals.

The following sources have a variety of insights on the subject. “‘Mixing Pop (Culture) and Politics:’ Cultural Resistance, Culture Jamming, and Anti-Consumption Activism as Critical Public Pedagogy” analyzes culture jamming and studies how Adbusters uses it as a means of resisting consumerism.

Researchers found that Adbusters engages viewers through emotions. To cause an emotional response, Adbusters transforms recognizable consumer appeals into images that shock and disturb viewers (Sandlin, 2004, p. 238). Through the analysis, it was also found that some react with anger towers the culture jammers, rather than consumerist culture. Adbusters portrays consumers as mindless sheep who follow the flock with no sense of consequences. The viewer sees the campaigns as offensive, judgmental, and oppressive. This type of culture jamming reinforces repressive myths by telling readers what to think and how to act (Sulli, 2002, p. 343).

This source offers a positive solution for Adbusters by explaining, “the work of culture jammers is most powerful when it demonstrates the pedagogical force of not dictating "the final correct answer" (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 76),” meaning that they believe culture jamming is most successful when it is seen as a doorway for conversation and healthy debate.

My second source is called "An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties." It provides information about feminist cultural resistance groups, how they use culture jamming, and specific tactics and strategies used. It also attempts to offer a solution to resist sexism through culture jamming.

The Guerrilla Girls is an anonymous group of radical feminist artists devoted to fighting sexism and racism within the art world. In New York City, the group plastered walls, kiosks, and construction fences of SoHo and the East Village with provocative posters that exposed the sexist practices of the art world. This aggressive form of culture jamming is intended to educate and inform (guerrillagirls.com).

 In a recent interview, a spokesperson for Guerilla Girls states, “Our audiences and supporters are our collaborators, too. They give us feedback, ideas, and suggestions during our performances; they help distribute our work, and they tell us their experience… We also do workshops all over the world where we help participants come up with actions and posters, which they then go out and produce.”

 While aggressive, Raizada says involving the community seems to work. Unlike Adbusters, it offers a community feel to criticism and resistance. The article concludes by saying that, “Men still own the world,” which implies that while the Guerilla Girls have had some success, there is still more work to be done (Raizada, 2007, p. 42).

I conducted a qualitative analysis to find out how people react towards culture jamming images from Adbusters and Guerilla Girls in order to find out if it is effective in informing people and spurring them to take actions of resistance. Based on the qualitative suggestions in *Media and Communication Research Methods: An Introduction*, I organized a case study of 15 college-aged students, between 19 and 24 years old (Hansen, 2013, p. 271-274). Eight were female and seven were male. They were from a variety of countries including Russia, India, Iran, and Romania, but mostly Italy and the United States.

I began by asking each person, individually, a few questions about his or her background and knowledge of the culture industry. I was looking to find out if the person had previously been educated on the subject and whether or not they had already been trained to view advertisements in a way other than the dominant way, which is accepting the marketers’ stance as pure truth. I was also looking to see if they already had formed opinions about culture jamming.

Of the 15 people, three knew what Guerilla Girls were, while only two had heard of Adbusters. I then showed each person a series of images and noted their reactions. In some cases, I showed him or her a regular advertisement. In the first case, I presented the viewer with a photo of model Kate Moss, in a perfume ad campaign called “Obsession.” I then asked people to tell me what they believed the advertisement is for. 13 out of 15 people recognized that this was a perfume ad, meaning about 13% of people, roughly, did not understand what the advertisement was even selling.

Next, I showed these people the Adbusters parody of this ad campaign. This parody included a photo of a man wearing Calvin Klein underwear, yet copying the aesthetic and rhetorical tropes of famous Calvin Klein ads. The man is peeking down into his underwear, as to symbolize that the “obsession” is his own body. After showing my survey recipients the culture jammed advertisement, I asked them to tell me whether or not this image was part of the same campaign. Three out of 15 were unsure, while three believed that it was actually part of the same campaign. This means that 60% of the people understood this was a parody.

I then showed my recipients a photo of the Starbucks logo. Six people had negative opinions to Starbucks, while two were indifferent. 47% had positive reactions. I followed this image with the Adbusters culture jammed image of the Starbucks logo which shows the green mermaid topless and says “Consumer Whore” instead of “Starbucks Coffee.”

Of the six people who reacted negatively to the regular Starbucks logo, two people also reacted negatively to the “Consumer Whore.” They remarked that this image exploits a stereotype and comes across as aggressive. In total, one in three people found this Adbusters campaign offensive. One person remarked that Adbusters should not dislike a company just because they have been wildly successful. All in all, nobody believed that the image was “telling them” to stop buying Starbucks.

I showed my recipients a few images from Guerilla Girls. The first image was of a dollar bill with the phrases, “Women in America earn only two-thirds of what men do,” and underneath this, the phrase, “Women artists earn only one-third of what men artists do.” One male remarked that he was tired of hearing about inequality. Seven people reacted with anger to the phrases, but all seven were already aware of the claim. The other six were unsure of whether or not the claim was true, but had also heard these complaints before. These same people felt the issue had been over simplified. My studies seem to indicate that this Guerilla Girls image was neither informative nor spurred any action to be taken.

In the second Guerilla Girls advertisement I used, it says, “Republicans do believe in a woman’s right to her own body,” followed photos of face lifts, nose jobs, foot binding, breast implants, and liposuction. This image uses sarcasm, and completely omits one of the more controversial debates in American politics - abortions.

I asked my recipients to describe to me how they felt after seeing this. One person said there was no connection between Republicans and, say, implants, for example. Eight people felt that it wasn’t just republicans who felt like they should control a woman’s body. One person said that it was “certain men, everywhere in the world, who seemed obsessed with women’s bodies” while another person said, “we can’t lump all republicans into the same category.” A few of the other responses included, “It’s a valid criticism, but this is definitely over exaggerated,” and, “This is just sexist and gross.”

When asked if any of the images made him or her want to take action or changed any opinions, 100% of the people said no. Overall, it seems that both the Guerilla Girls and Adbusters tends to make people angry and offended. The images do not inform people, and people question the truth behind the ads.Based on my results, the images did not make people want to resist mainstream culture and ideas.

In conclusion, perhaps culture jamming groups are not exactly doing the job that they have hoped to do. At best, this form of resistance does little to change people’s minds, while at it’s worst, it actually contributes to the dominant ideologies. One of the biggest problems is that both the Guerilla Girls and Adbusters are created by people who have college degrees, more often than not, in the liberal arts field. Not only this, but they are created by people who are up to date in pop culture and current media trends. Up to date cultural knowledge is required to recognize these critiques. Both Guerilla Girls and Adbusters take for granted the education level of the rest of society. Most people are actually not that informed about how the mass media functions. It is almost like an inside joke - nobody else gets it, unless they have the outside information which is required to understand it. Irony and humor work only if you get the joke.

If people do not recognize culture jammed ads as critiques, the more risk there is that the critique can be lost and a whole new meaning seen entirely. In my survey regarding Absolut culture jams, it is not clear to participants whether or not they were seeing advertisements. Binay (2005) suggests that there may be some credence to this line of criticism. She found that exposure to Absolut Vodka subvertisements did not have a negative effect toward the brand and, in some cases, actually increased brand loyalty (p. 35, 81-83).
 Another conclusion I came to is that “consciousness-raising” is not the same as political activism and does not always spur rebellious action. Lasn, co-founder of Adbusters Media Foundation, suggests that educating people can liberate the mind from corporate rule over culture (1999, p. 160), but he fails to see the lack of connection between a change in consciousness and a change in culture.
 My third conclusion is a critique regarding Adbusters and Guerilla Girls structure. Adbusters has a layout similar to any mainstream magazine. Adbusters issues are glossy, often with over 80 colored pages. The “anti-swoosh” campaign tries to get people to boycott Nike (adbusters.org), but, it is still a marketing idea to make us choose one product over another. To make the world a better place, we must question the entire structure in the way we produce and consume.
 Adbusters challenges the dominant ideology of consumerism, yet, they participate in some of its practices. To replace the Nike logo is to replace one logo with another. This quote suggests that the absence of a logo and of a slogan of any kind (e.g. Nike, Adbusters, Guerilla Girls, or any other brand), may have been more appropriate. Limitations to my study include the age range and demographics. Because I was using a group of college students, most have more knowledge than those who have not attended university. While I felt that I was asking these questions from an unbiased point of view, I could have not asked these questions in the right manner. Culture jamming may be a tactic best suited to maintain an activist community.

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