



Visual Communication and Design's Role Drives Branding Innovation and Social Responsibility

Stephen T.F. Poon

Taylor's University, No.1, Jalan SS15/8,
47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: stephentfpoon@aol.com

Abstract. In this paper, the aim of research is to analyse the theoretical principles of traditional and newer forms of branding design, and to review the visual communicator's roles as constructed through traditional, social and postmodernist perspectives. Where designers traditionally direct their course in the branding process to solving clients' problems through the production of symbolic icons and images, this study will place their responsibility towards understanding society's attitudinal and behavioural change at the forefront. This paper uses case study and qualitative inquiry methods to challenge the design fraternity to see beyond the bread-and-butter work behind conceptual design development, and to find a stronger relational understanding between their life experiences, changing consumer perceptions of the world, and businesses' ultimate goals of profit. Research shows that as the dynamics of ethical business and social purpose continue to affect the production and consumption of goods, the visual communicator's role is to both define and empower cultural consumption as the core brand purpose of today's organisations - five decades since Ken Garland's manifesto; "First Things First" was proclaimed. Lastly, it shall be argued for every designer to evaluate their social responsibility in the branding execution of marketed consumer brands beyond symbolic meaning construction.

Keywords: *design; postmodern branding; social innovation; social purpose.*

1 Introduction

In 1964, British designer Ken Garland wrote a manifesto named "First Things First" (Figure 1). It was intended to awaken the design community to reflect on the dispensable ideas targeted at serving advertisers and corporations' greed rather than society's needs, and to urge for a "trade reflex":

"We think that there are other things more worth using our skills and experience on. (...) We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising ... nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life. But we are proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication ..." [1]

"We" referred to the group of 22 visual communicators who aspired to change

the practice of design created to fit marketers' needs. The contextual influences of Western consumption culture were re-examined, and an ethical discussion arose to remind designers and communicators of the larger ethical purposes: namely, to use visual aesthetics and the language of commerce for consumer and community engagement. Thirty-six years later, the issue was re-embedded into highly-circulated design journals including *Adbusters* and *Eye* [2], with a declaration by 33 contemporary designers, art directors and visual communicators urging fellow practitioners to take action for real and lasting social change [3].

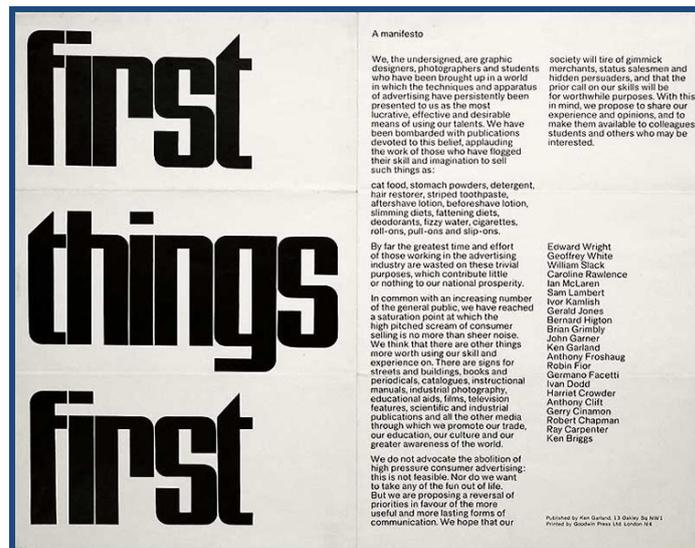


Figure 1 Ken Garland's "First Things First" manifesto, 1964 [1].

The two versions of manifesto share a simple yet constructive aim – to consider the professional role of a designer, more specifically, those in the field of visual communication, and the moral approach implicit in the transfer of skills, knowledge and experiences of a design professional.

The research considers: *What are the visual communicator's responses in their role as crafter, interpreter and shaper of messages for organisational brands in traditional, social and postmodern contexts?* Secondly, *how should contemporary brand design methods ensure ethical practices in the creative process to enhance organisational brand image as a serious social change agent?*

The following literature review will explore branding definitions using a range

of theoretical approaches. The research questions posed will be discussed around the fundamental branding principles in its traditional, social and postmodern contexts; their significance for visual communicators will then be mapped by reviewing a case study of Nike, Inc., which in the 1990s faced intense public vitriol over their flouting of production and labour standards in the manufacture of athletic footwear.

2 Review of Literature

Blackett [4] defines the term 'brand' simply as an "indelible impression". Adapting from the Oxford American Dictionary, Blackett's definition of brand as the application of a label or trade-mark usefully pointed out its etymological beginnings from the Norse word *brandr* which distinguishes the quality and reputation of products in agrarian and industrialised Europe [4].

2.1 Branding in the Traditional Context

Branding in today's context has enlarged its functions considerably. Communication of modern brands is through configurations of visual languages, including "... name, letters, numbers, a symbol, a signature, a shape, a slogan, a colour, a particular typeface ... the intrinsic, constantly used elements that provides the product an outstanding reference point" [4]. When the visual or symbolic components are designed specifically to ensure "products are received in the market-place" [5], the final result, as traditionally perceived, is the fulfilment of the designer's responsibility, who starts the task momentum in line with an organisation's ultimate objective - to show profitable results. Visual communicators today must clearly ply their expertise while working in sync with the corporate emphasis on bottom-line profitability [6].

Discovering the purpose of brands has long been at the heart of marketing science discussions as a key determinant for well-conceived business image [7]. The clarity of brand purpose is over and above the "breathing of air" or the taken-for-granted profit motives of any business to exist [7]. As strategic brand expert Deborah Bowker [4] puts it, a brand's core purpose consists of the search and concern for the set of belief and values that frame appropriate organisational culture that can and will deliver on brand promises, and how these are communicated within the organisation and with external stakeholders within the branding process reinforces the credibility of the organisation [4].

Purpose is essential, yet branding without a measure of effective and memorable design elements will not fully communicate core organisational objectives and missions. A number of systems thinking theories correspond with the rationales

for effective brand strategy [8].

From consumers' perspective, a well-designed brand core concept provide appealing, interactive elements such as character, image, values and market leadership that enable differentiation of product while communicating their individual choices. Although branding design is revealed in various permutations of forms such as advertisements, multimedia, websites, commercials, merchandise and media campaigns, all serve the same function to represent and augment the brand, or as Aaker and Biel [9] once posited, user image and brand personality correspond mutually under the overall brand strategy employed [8].

Hence, design communication is strategically aligned within the branding process. Armed with a creative breadth of skills, visual branding experts aim to stimulate cultural transformation, emotional bonds and the establishment of new norms, which places designers in the role of social change agents. In researching for commercial design, the contextual experiences of social and cultural attitudes are vital for understanding people's lived experiences and attitudinal differences [10].

The myth of brands is weighted against consumer savvy and as such, the design fraternity is viewed traditionally as a channel of consumption manipulation, as people have developed an ironic "anti-brand sensibility" [11]. This often frustrates visual communicators when they encounter cynics who call brand design and brand marketing strategies mere "cosmetic" styling's; an expenditure that can neither be quantifiable as an economic contributor nor taken seriously [4].

2.2 Branding in the Social Context

In 2003, Steven Heller and Veronique Vienne in *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility* [12] collected more than thirty essays to produce four developmental accounts of (largely American) consumer culture, and the design methodologies that have driven American creative communities' participation in the service of business and social obligations. The themes of "social responsibility", "professional responsibility", "artistic responsibility" and "rants and rave" touch on conscience in the practices of design professionals [12]. The essence of these early 21st-century brand marketing standards is to shed light on why good businesses must not only craft low-cost, high quality goods and services, but to allow social and political forces to shape consumption behaviour or attitudes, and gradually directing their decisions in serving these consumer segments.

For organisations, Heller and Vienne [12] argue that branding in its true nature is a system that provides the cause for satisfying consumers' multiple needs. Functional branding affects the process of innovation, and this bears positively on social outcomes. But how much have businesses understood about environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility – both as a motivational force that attracts and retains employees, and to ensure stronger competitive positioning? Chris Riley [13] calls businesses that have estranged from stakeholders as 'autistic', directed by growth and expansion goals instead of shared human experiences [12]. Hence, social pressure is necessary in urging organisations and enterprises for innovate branding approaches in ways that would communicate the message of quality, and to make the right decision in the growing concern and interest in corporate ethics.

According to Nicholas Ind [14], brands are attitudinal frames that represent the totality of consumers' experience. A mutual sense of organisation-public trust derives from the consumer intention to support organisations that emphasise on social mission and purpose. Similar to every individual having their set of emotional and social experiences, an organisation plays a key public role as a social contributor, as consumers engage with the organisation's philosophy that aligns to their emotional and social needs. It seems obvious that the process of innovation looks to guidance from a larger social vision, and identification of social cause and cultural contexts enables evaluation of the outcomes of successful, engaging branding practices. An entire branding or design process which helps to create social context requires communicators' expertise to shape the brand purpose *ethically*, for example, by conducting material cost analysis to seek environmentally-friendly resources, promote sustainable manufacturing practices, waste and energy reduction [15,12].

In sum, to improve understanding about perception differences towards brands, the promotion of positive business practices such as transparency of operations and adherence to code of ethics is a brand design initiative helps companies today express their determination to be corporate social change leaders.

2.3 Postmodern Branding for Social Innovation

Postmodernists tend to view the personal interpretation processes with as much vigour and estimation as they discuss the development of collective perceptions in brand-consumer interactions [8]. The regard or disregard for product and service quality are perceived as variously important in the consumer's mental and attitudinal dimensions. Geursen [16,8] who studies chaos and change theories found for example, that the physical form of products is not necessarily salient for attitudinal and behavioural change; if the brand image already

resonates itself as the ‘idea’, it precedes product feature and attributes the key determinant of decision making and choice. (In other words, *what the product is*, is not as important as *what we think it means*).

Shifting perspective to a post-industrial, globalised era, other practitioners suggest that before businesses even start investing in their economic future, they must prove their direct stake in communities by navigating self-interest and sail towards social interest [11]. Kevin Roberts, the Executive Chairman of Saatchi & Saatchi advertising agency, has promoted *lovemarks* as the next branding concept. Products and services are fundamentally situated in people’s emotional and relational connections, and ‘love’ for organisations should involve appeals such as intimacy, mystery and sensuality [11]. Hence, the creation of visibility for companies signifies quality and discernment, which helps businesses thrive on customers’ goodwill, respect and love [11]. The fact that strong brands are a result of emotional investment by the stakeholder places brand storytelling in the hands of visual communicators who must juggle between ‘manufacturing’ corporate identities and making sense out of the images they create:

As design (moves) from the specialist pages to mainstream platforms, usually focusing on logos and costs, design also (becomes) controversial: All that money and that fancy talk, and the result (is) to finesse a squiggle! How ... could you spend millions on that? [17].

Visual communication design activities are essentially a human-centred social activity [18], aimed at constructing and sustaining relationships with audiences, even as campaigns are developed and organised to reshape advertisers’ positioning and thus enables businesses to interact socially over time to establish their brands. Nevertheless, as branding takes on a wider role, the cultural factors that necessitates designation of name, trademark or creative symbolisms and their significance, have to be re-evaluated. Since it’s inevitable that societies in urbanised economies understand and accept the commercial advertiser’s proposition is delivered with a “knowing wink” [19], organisations have long practiced to appropriate the signs of culture in understanding social progress and the indomitable human spirit.

Moral leadership then becomes the next level of attainment: the symbolic presence of the brand, its ethos, key actors and messages being grounds for designers to craft metanarratives and subtexts that celebrate culture and preach the finer spirit of hope and solution to society’s ills and conditions [19]. Ind [14], sharing insights on the tribal nature of ethical brands enthuses it this way; “putting principle before profit means the corporate culture is against consumption for its own sake”.

Organisational success today is redefined to include many factors: above and beyond the ability to deliver brand promise through innovative and quality products, consistent storytelling is a key evaluator of trust, leading to engagement and participation from within and without. Branding without a measure of effective and memorable design elements cannot fully communicate core organisational objectives and missions. Brand stories well told are prime factors in the relational aspect of organisation brand-building strategies; its efficacy is instrumental in reinforcing organisational credibility. Design educator Anne Bush [20,12] points out,

“Responsibility (...) is not just the willingness to act, but also the ability to understand one’s actions ... (designers) can contribute by making citizens understand the ramifications of action and inaction, yet ultimately (giving them) the option to choose.”

Branding based on social innovation - in the words of Wally Olins, brand pioneer who thrust the concept into British consciousness in the 1960s - must integrate a broader, strategic vision in the heart of the organisation’s brand story [6]. Today, this involves redefining the organisational culture itself with internal narratives [21]. Yet, complex operational and supply chain management issues for global consumer product giants like Nike and Apple have resulted in the decisive shift of focus on corporate social responsibility and sustainability, while traditional discussions on core competencies have moved to new heights: for instance, how should brands synthesise product design and improvement into branding innovation, expenditure on marketing public relations aside [22]? In demonstration of concern towards overcoming social issues, corporations are moving to provide the positive remedial measures. However, the overlapping causes would also lead to competition. Would small enterprises lose to large corporations?

Apparently not companies big and small are showing growing sensitivity towards social issues: communities stricken by diseases; marginalised groups, economic victims; corruption, conflicts and measuring social progress through education, nutrition and medical aid.

Roberts [11] conclude that since consumers are demanding successful companies act to demonstrate the attributes of care, commitment, optimism and inspiration, this shift in the brand-consumer participation has developed a level playing field among larger and smaller, entrepreneurial brands to work with social causes. Branding design in the postmodern millennium, as such, must extract the organisation’s distinctiveness and set it off from the competitors by working to fulfil communal purposes, reduce resource exploitation, or sponsor

social causes. Conceptually, this shifts back to consumers' social construction of their own brand experiences [23].

Studies on postmodern ambiguity [10] have also found that with increasing media literacy, sophistication and fragmentation, consumer attitudes today are key factors that disrupts strategic orientation in the consumer marketing sector, and designers as visual message communicators must address the question of primary versus secondary consumption motives. A confusion of roles may happen at the intersection where consumers' secondary motives (of charitable giving or cause support) mean more than their primary role as consumers. Addressing the organisation's core values through branding is thus a form of regulated public trust. In the climate of 'clever advertising' versus 'smart consumer', cynical and suspicious consumers have become "moving targets" for commercial persuaders [24,10] and brands seeking to establish association with worthy social causes or campaigns would need to invest research to understand the operant factors.

In the 21st-century, branding methodologies are often embedded with social promises, embracing a range of practical (but also often idealistic) issues, with varying outcomes. Ken Garland's manifesto shifted brand communication away from marketing and advertising, urging designers to enhance communities, effect lasting changes and to think of greater social good [25]. In the age of fragmentation of media, consumers intuitively respond by reimagining ideological worlds and by engaging in intertextual forms like advertising parodies, celebrity endorsements and gender issues [10].

3 Research Methodology

To review the progress of visual communication in branding organisations' social purpose, this paper will discuss the social responsibility in branding and also re-examining *The Swoosh* campaign. The researcher sets out to demonstrate the important of innovating social brands and reviewing visual communication in branding fifty years after "First Things First". In view of foregoing assumptions, the objective behind this research is to study of how visual communication and design drives branding innovation and social responsibility effectively beyond symbolic meaning construction. In this study, the researcher will employ a qualitative descriptive approach, uses case study and critical inquiry methods to challenge the design fraternity to see beyond the bread-and-butter work behind conceptual design development, and to find a stronger relational understanding between their life experiences, changing consumer perceptions of the world, and businesses' ultimate goals of profit. Significantly, discuss the appropriateness of the research reviews and assurances. The following of this study, where will be examined and assessed.

4 Research Findings: Analysis and Discussions

In 1997, Nike was charged with abusing factory labour by placing them in harmful working conditions called “sweatshops” [26]. Before Vietnam, similar cases had been exposed in Thailand, Pakistan and India (Figure 2). The Vietnamese Labour Watch became the key organisation that triggered the shoe manufacturer’s responsibility over labour rights and environmental concern. Workers in its *Tae Kwang Vina Factory* were reportedly paid below minimum wages, abused physically, working overtime illegally, exposed to toxics and using machinery without proper safety precautions [27,28]. These accusations of exploitation caused the business to downslide and many refused to purchase “sweatshop” factory products [29].

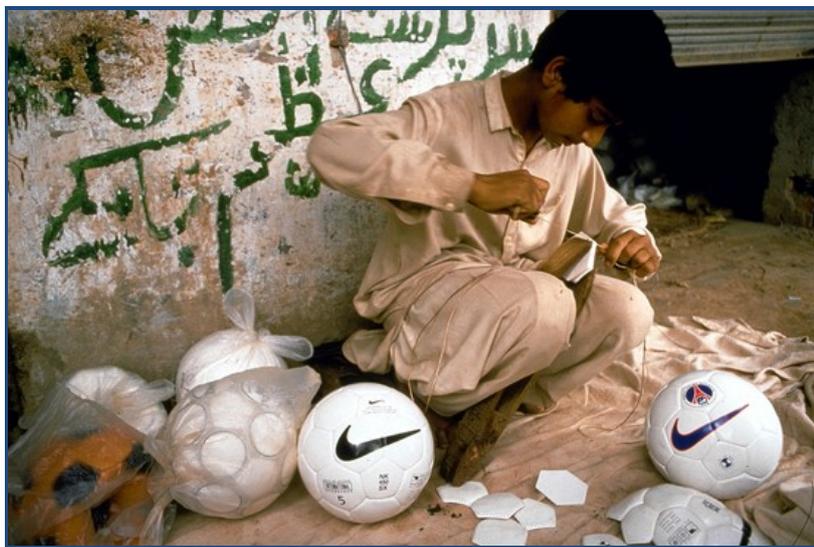


Figure 2 Pakistan sweatshop producing Nike soccer balls, 1996 [30].

4.1 In Retrospect: The Case of Nike Inc.

As social activists and labour organisations mounted pressure on Nike, it allowed the Vietnamese Labour Watch, a non-profit organisation to externally monitor factory working conditions [26]. In 1998, Nike increased their advertising and promotion budget, spending \$1.13 billion US dollars in rebranding campaigns; a sum that far outran other companies [4].

To avoid legal suits and foreign divestments, Nike took a series of actions to improve its labour practices and factory conditions [26]. Nike was advised to offer education and business loan to the workers [29], while a corporate Code of Conduct was developed internally [31]. In the process, other than monitoring,

Vietnamese Labour Watch responded as a coordinator in their business crisis. Over the course of two decades, critics found the implementation of renewed focus on social responsibility helpful in re-establishing Nike's brand as a name embedded with a social purpose [32], an organisation trusted to lead its competitors with its capacity to reach wider audiences, regain their confidence, and more pertinently, to sustain its brand reputation and avert malpractice allegations.

4.2 Re-evaluation of Social Purpose of Branding and Design

Design professionals, states Ken Garland [1] in his manifesto, with multitude expertise, techniques and apparatus, have different social roles and ways to "promote their trade"; however, their position as social change agent is arbitrary if skills and imagination flogging trivial commodities are inconsequential to "national prosperity". If, as the late Body Shop founder Anita Roddick [29] argues, corporations realise the need to humanise the economy with ethical and sustainable responses, then this must start from the branding processes constructed by visual communicators. Franzen and Moriarty [8] found the integration principle of *Gesamtkunstwerk* at work when designers socially contribute by abstracting a central idea, "externally manifesting their inner thoughts to assist the brand system express a coherent and appealing whole" that enables participation of the audience or community.

Communicating corporate responsibility objectives to target audiences using various mediums is challenging, and more so, the designer's trajectory of creating emotional and psychological connections with audiences is difficult to evaluate from ethical, economic and pragmatic standpoints.

Nevertheless, being the mediator of consumer dialogue [20,12], design communicators need to understand cultural realities before applying creativity artfully and pragmatically. As stated earlier, branding underscores the essential trust relationship between organisations and their publics. Nike, aside from cooperating with top athletes to engineer "the best sporting shoes and fitness articles in the world" [8], engenders trust and credibility by partnering with institutions such as non-governmental and non-profit organisations, enabling it to communicate its stance as a socially-responsible corporate brand through demonstrating empathy towards social issues. These have opened up opportunities for NGOs to work closely with private sector on cooperative branding and CSR programmes to reap mutual benefits.

One far-reaching social responsibility branding initiative by Nike Foundation and several non-profit partners is *The Girl Effect* (Figure 3) a movement lobbying to empower and educate adolescent girls at local, community and

international levels through investments in economic, education and health programmes [33]. It is questioned whether the company is merely role-playing as the proverbial 'knight in shining armour', since the campaign has faced pressure for a more holistic and inclusive attitudinal change in men's perspectives. It does provide an example of contemporary brand design practice accepting the challenge to innovate for social change. Retrospectively, the lessons of "anti-sweatshop campaigns" may not have fully alleviated the dented brand or miraculously solved malpractice issues within the complex manufacturing and supply chain systems, yet Nike can prove through this corporate responsibility rebranding strategy that it has gone a substantial way to re-engage loyal consumers instead of "hoping (the problem) will go away" [32].

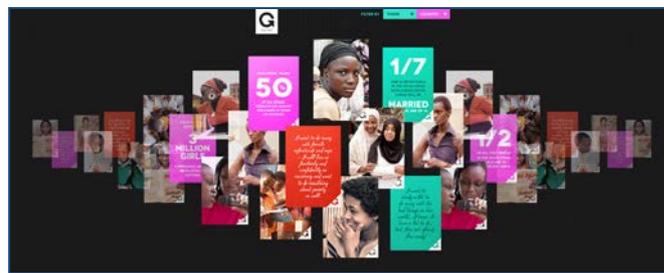


Figure 3 Nike 'The Girl Effect' Campaign, 2014 [34].

The nature of social innovation, according to Ind [14], comes from the need for communities to seek meaning, and in Nike's case, this falls under the ideological personality of "irreverence" [14]. The communicator's role involves creating imaginative content and in essence identifying the particular social roles of those who subscribe to this personality. Symbolic design translates these roles into an expression of consumer loyalty and participation, recognising the brand's intrinsic value for the community, and branding effectually begins here. Newsletters, books, merchandising, promotional posters, advertisements, fundraising campaigns and events are perceived points of seduction in post-industrial society, as corporate responsibility agendas and headlines are used to persuade consumers to memorialise their charitable causes [6]. Organisations need to develop a cultural breadth of knowledge to be perceived as not exploiting stakeholders while communicating with them [6].

Businesses in the digital era must also tap into social media marketing and real-time consumer analytics to align brand objectives and purpose in the short and long terms. As branding, public relations and marketing communication practices shift to digital media, social branding platforms are keenly experimented, and where the goal of branding is to present "appropriate and

effective image among a variety of stakeholders which over time creates a reputation for the organisation” [14], social branding models must capture the essence of its image and identity seamlessly via technology platforms. Social media evangelist Jed Hallam [35] reminds us that:

Everything is changing all the time: trends, market needs, cultural zeitgeist, stock prices, employees, politics [p.50] ... the most important aspect of business (is delivering) the products and services that people want, then wrap around the beautiful narrative [p.60].

5 Conclusion

The consumer’s quest for authenticity comes from a sense of personal or social identification with brands and goods, whose links with consumer lifestyles are strongly dependent on the visual design component. Increasing awareness of the potency of visual communication must lead designers to become aware of their innate responsibilities to develop ideas which harnesses that power; ignoring personal convictions, self-censoring content or acting as mere economic servants for corporate masters is both harmful and unsatisfying [36,12].

Fifty years ago, the “First Things First” manifesto challenged designers to consider the place for ethics in professional practice. In visual communication, they carry another significant burden, which is to reposition businesses in social change capacities. The discussion of branding design as an essential social change agent proves the responsibility which exists among visual communicators, as research reveals a positive connection between ethical bottom lines and social benefit through organisations’ adoption of social causes. Brand stories, mythologies and interactions are emblems of our fundamental desire to come together with others, to belong in cultural ‘tribes’, and—in spite of different socio-political climates—to talk to each other. This paper has defined brand design as a language of communication, and furthered the idea that such language unites consumers powerfully, for mutual benefit [6].

In the years ahead, the late Wally Olins is convinced about the vast branding opportunities for businesses and institutions, though this poses the question whether visual communicators, designers, advertising professionals, photographers, and etc. fully understand the impact of their work that appeal consumers to spend money for personal or emotional satisfaction, with the movement of cultural goods transcending geographical and ethnic barriers [17], while simultaneously telling brand stories imbued with a sense of community and social belonging. This triple duty underscores expectations of designers taking up the role as social change arbiters in the branding process. It is

encouraging that with appropriate mediums, visual communicators are capable to deliver social benefits. Businesses and brands that are honest and responsible attain cultural influence [13,12], as such, the arguments and case study in this paper has proved that Ken Garland's pragmatic principles are visibly advocated in the cause of branding for social purposes today. Through design, new forms of consumer aestheticism emerge by taking advantage of society's willingness to embrace a broad scope of social values and in developing more educated, inclusive and responsible consumption environments.

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