

Research article

Tourist Souvenirs: Learning Cultural Identity Representation Through Design

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Fátima Rocha: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1494-6086>**Abstract.**

The massification and standardization of souvenirs offered in major tourist destinations around the world seem to compromise the authenticity and representation of the cultural identity that these products intend to evoke. Although the tourist souvenir is a product widely addressed by academic studies in tourism and other social areas, there is a gap in design studies about the value this object has as a representative of unique cultural expressions. In this article, we observe the potential offered by souvenirs as a subject for teaching design, in a didactic exercise focused on valuing cultural identity. In 2009, the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was preparing itself to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the Rio2016 Olympic Games. From 2009 to 2011, three hundred students of the Methods and Processes in Design course, from the Fashion Design degree of SENAI-CETIQT – Chemical and Textile Industry Technology Centre of the National Service for Industrial Learning, were encouraged to develop an innovative souvenir that could represent the local culture. It was possible to notice the relevance of cultural aspects as a determinant factor of differentiation and authenticity in the souvenir design project, in addition to bringing to the students a greater awareness of the role of the designer in creating non-verbal messages about the cultural identity of a nation or locality.

Keywords: souvenir design, cultural identity, design education

1. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever seen an adaptation of the famous “I love NY” image that designer Milton Glaser created in 1977 for a tourist campaign in New York, USA? Scattered around the world, several versions of that same image attract the eyes of an international public used to the so-called good design. Quoting Borges [1]: “The Ulm School professed the ideas of “good shape” or “good design” and the international language. If “form follows function”, it is not necessary to pay attention to local cultures because, obtained an “adequate” form, it could repeat itself indefinitely and independently of time and place”.

However, Papanek [2] warns us, referring to products created specifically for tourists, that “Often, these souvenirs [...] are copies of copies of copies that never evolved and will never evolve”. So, what can design do to break this paradigm? In this article, the

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reader is invited to realize the value of a product that has not been quite often analyzed by design studies: the tourist souvenir. More than just rekindling trip memories, tourist souvenirs have the ability to represent and sustain a cultural identity, and it is not rare for them to preserve traditions that could be forgotten in contemporary life.

In the first part of the article, it is briefly presented the investigation that gave rise to the interest in the subject of the representation of cultural identity through design — author's master studies. In the conclusions of the study, it was possible to identify that design not only reflects social phenomena, but also creates or drives them.

Next, the article presents the author's experience teaching methods and processes in design at a fashion design school. The importance of cultural factors to be considered in a fashion design project was so evident that, later, it has inspired a new proposal to the final assessment of the discipline: the creation of souvenirs for the city of Rio de Janeiro, which embodied innovation and authenticity.

Analyzing the project reports of the discipline sparked the desire to deepen studies on tourist souvenirs from the perspective of strategic design, and encouraged the development of a research proposal at the doctoral level. A brief introduction to this new research, currently underway at the University of Lisbon, is presented in the last part of this article, before the conclusions and final comments.

2. DESIGN AND SOCIAL PHENOMENA, A BRAZILIAN CASE STUDY

In the 1990s, Brazil lived a period of stabilization of democracy, after 21 years of a military dictatorship that was in power until 1985. In this scenario, the Brazilian flag, previously restricted to official uses, started to inspire the creation of visual identities, advertising campaigns and various other products. This visual discourse seemed to express an emergent patriotism, as opposed to a derogatory popular oral discourse about the country itself. From this observation was born a master's research proposal aimed to find out if those images and products were expressing a patriotic wave in the country.

For 2 years, from 2001 to 2003, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Luiz Antônio Coelho and at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, the researcher [3] gathered data from interviews with Brazilian designers, politicians, authors and other citizens, as well as a literature review that chose the Roland Barthes semiology as a theoretical framework.

A comparative analysis between national flags identified that graphic attributes of the Brazilian flag make it legible even when important visual elements are suppressed (Figure 1). This versatility turned out to be one of the main reasons for the use of the national flag in the creation of logos and other graphic products. The second reason found by the research was that, in a country with continental dimensions, the large number of regional cultural traditions made it difficult to perceive the country as a unit. The national flag was the only common presence throughout the territory and, therefore, it inspired the creation of images, meeting a wide range of semantic demands. Those creations were not clearly a patriotic speech, after all. They were communicating different messages, but always helping to build a sense of identity, belonging and national unity for the Brazilian people. The study's findings revealed that graphic design had become an instrument of recognition for the nation as a whole. In other words, design not only reflected social transformations, it also caused them. Taking the Brazilian case as an example, it became very clear that there was a relationship between design and the representation of a social, cultural or national identity and social phenomena.



Figure 1: On the left, three of the graphic analyzes about the Brazilian flag and, on the right, examples of logos, prints and advertisements related to the Brazilian identity through the national flag (2003).

3. LEARNING CULTURAL IDENTITY REPRESENTATION THROUGH DESIGN

3.1. Cultural identity in a discipline about methods and process in design

Always keeping in mind the relationship between design and social phenomena, from 2005 to 2011, the author taught several subjects at the Fashion Design course of SENAI-CETIQT - Chemical and Textile Industry Technology Center of the National Service for Industrial Learning, located in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. One of the most important theoretical disciplines in the first year curriculum was Methods and Processes in Design.

The course content included a comparative analysis of seven classic design definitions. From this analysis, the physical and psychological needs of a user or group

of users were discussed, already introducing the value of social aspects in a project. To attract the interest of fashion students, uniforms of some Brazilian airline companies were taken as examples of products that demand extreme attention to the functional and semantic aspects they involve. Not only the ergonomic needs of users were analyzed, but also the differences between the profiles of customers and destinations operated by those companies and how those uniforms represented their business cultures.

The next step was to look at the extensive collection of Cliff Musket [4], who currently has 1701 different uniforms from 586 airlines around the world. Now, the functional and semantic values of those clothes were analyzed with emphasis on the representation of the cultural identity of the countries of these companies. It was possible to observe that many airlines, such as Garuda Indonesia, in addition to incorporating cultural traditions into their clothing, have different compositions of clothing adapted to the costumers' local costumes, depending on the route they serve (Figure 2).

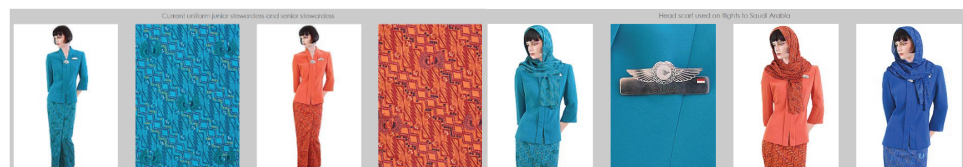


Figure 2: Garuda Indonesia's current uniforms for junior and senior stewardess (left) and with a head scarf used only on flights to Saudi Arabia. (2021) .

Thus, national cultural representations were already incorporated into the content of the discipline. Other examples of general interest, such as the uniforms that athletes' delegations wore in parades at the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games or Pan American Games, were a pretext for studying methodological proposals for the development of projects. These clothes, above all, are created to represent and show off the culture of each country before others. Therefore, deepening the development of this semantic narrative is very important for the project's success.

Renowned design authors, namely Gui Bonsiepe, Bruce Archer, Christopher Jones, Morris Assimow, Bernhard E. Burdek and Siegfried Maser, had their design methodology proposals compared to each other, serving as a theoretical basis for a practical analysis of those uniforms. The author, at the time of those classes, was also an athlete in the Brazilian Archery team and had competed in 4 Pan American Games until 2011. Knowing closely, as a user, the complexity of developing uniforms for hundreds of athletes, this personal experience was taken to the classroom. The students were invited to wear and examine the uniforms for the opening ceremonies of those events, in order to understand that, in each edition of the games, those clothes represented the Brazilian

culture with different values and goals. This opportunity gave students the chance to deal with tangible aspects of a theoretical discipline and to reflect on their own personal experiences with the use of uniforms — whether at school, in sports teams or in other situations — to, only then, begin to develop projects of uniforms for the assessment of the discipline. A total of approximately 600 students had this experience over 4 and a half years.

3.2. From uniforms to souvenirs

Just as the use of uniforms is very common in our societies, another type of object is also frequently present in our lives: the tourist souvenir. Everyone has brought a souvenir from a trip or has received a souvenir as a gift from someone else. Souvenirs have very important social and cultural functions and, as stated by Nyffenegger and Steffen [5], they are still neglected by design studies despite being a “messenger of meanings”. In 2009, the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was already preparing itself to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the Rio2016 Olympic Games. Those events were taken as a motivation for 300 students of the Methods and Processes in Design discipline, from 2009 to 2011, divided into teams of 3 to 6 members, to develop souvenir projects among fashion products of their choice.

3.3. Developing souvenirs from Rio de Janeiro as a learning tool.

Faced with the complex challenge of reconciling methodology, physical, psychological and social needs of the consumer (national and/or foreigner) and the representation of the cultural identity of the city of Rio de Janeiro, the outcomes were assorted, but the vast majority (87,5%) used local landmark images as inspiration.

Observing the development reports of 16 of those projects (random sample of one class from 2010 and another from 2011), 14 teams developed utilitarian souvenirs such as clothes, backpacks and bags and only 2 selected for personal ornaments. Only 4 groups carried out extensive user research to establish the project goals, and 6 projects had a high rate of innovation. Analyzing the totality of the sample, the main elements of cultural identity represented were music, street art, street carnival, local characters and everyday popular experiences.

One of the most interesting projects developed was a small collection of 4 t-shirts, in 2010 (Figure 3). The team remained attentive to the creation of a product considering from the materials to the production processes and the final cost to the consumer,

going through an in-depth study on authenticity. This group of students identified that, for tourists, everyday experiences with the local population created a sense of intimacy and belonging that they had translated into authenticity. For example, consuming some foods and beverages that are sold exclusively on the city's beaches was a surprising experience, as it was not mentioned in travel guides about the city.



Figure 3: Prototypes of the collection of 4 t-shirts developed by students from the 2010 class.

3.4. The next step: a doctoral research on souvenir and strategic design

Having the tourist souvenir as an object of study since 2009, a deepening of the theme and its relationship with design became inevitable for the author. Having observed souvenirs more recurrently in Portugal over the years, this country turned out to be the best place to develop a doctoral research in the subject. Therefore, it is taking place at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon, with support from the Portuguese government's FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology.

The research, started only 10 months ago, in October 2020, is driven by the main question "How can strategic design principles contribute to improving aspects related to cultural representation, authenticity and consumption of the Portuguese tourist souvenir?" The researcher will directly observe the souvenir consumption behavior and conduct interviews with designers, tourists, politicians and national citizens. Once again using Barthes' semiology as a theoretical framework, the researcher intends to carry out a comparative analysis of souvenirs and local products acquired as souvenirs in order to find knowledge applicable not only to the Portuguese case, but a model to approach the topic that could be useful for other countries.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Design is always inserted in social and, consequently, cultural contexts. In its various forms of presence in society, design can relate to culture in a passive or active way, validating and enhancing the perception of a group's cultural values. Whether in visual identity projects, advertising, uniforms or souvenirs, the development of objects, as a theme for academic assignment, can be a good tool in design education to raise students' awareness of their own cultural identity.

Any object has functional and semantic values to be considered and requires a broad awareness of the messages to be communicated and to whom they are intended. However, as it is a type of object with its own characteristics, the complexity involved in the development of tourist souvenirs places a strong emphasis on the cultural aspects of a group of people, their authenticity and representation, and gives the student greater awareness of the role of the designer in creating non-verbal messages about the cultural identity of a nation, a city or even other kind of organization. Indeed, the issues raised in the development of a souvenir project provide an opportunity for us, as designers or teachers, to reflect on the effect of our work on our societies. Therefore, it is suggested that multiplying exercises on souvenirs at design courses around the world may effectively increase the volume of design studies on the theme of cultural identity.

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