

In what ways could branding be said to be a benefit or a disadvantage to society?

In what ways does greenwashing counter the positive environmental impacts of green food branding?

Brands use design in specific ways to communicate an environmentally conscious green message (Sharma, 2013, pp.44-48). Brands which communicate a green image will be discussed in this essay because this type of branding reaches audiences to raise awareness of and concern for important environmental issues; such increased consciousness is shown to influence people to make consumer choices which benefit society (Alamsyah, Othman and Mohammed, 2020, pp.1961-1968.). Green branding serves to attract the socially conscious consumer to favour companies and products which promote themselves as environmentally conscious (Aibek and Ariffin, 2015). In some cases, branding of this nature is used to misdirect trust of consumers with concern for green issues, acting as a cover for socially harmful practices (Watson, 2016). This is known as “greenwashing”, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “an attempt to make people believe that your company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). This essay will discuss greenwashing as a use of branding which disadvantages society. Certain companies in the food industry can be identified as promoting a socially positive green image, of which some are accused of greenwashing. This essay will discuss Ripple Farm Organics and McDonald’s as examples of food brands which both promote positive environmental consciousness, but whose

potential impacts on society differ because of greenwashing practices associated with McDonald's (Arnold, 2019).

Environmentalism has important implications in countering harm from climate change which stands to devastate human populations and the natural world (McNutt, 2013). Reduction of environmental harm potentially benefits society in sustaining human prosperity for longer into the future (Bartelmus, 2018). Concerns pushing for environmentalism, aware of negative human-caused impacts on the environment originating from the industrial revolution, progressed through the 20th century upon increased scientific understanding (Campbell, 2019). As early as the 1960s, marketing campaigns with brand recognition on their public face responded to increased public awareness of these environmental issues, identifying this as something that could influence audience consumption intentions. They did so in adapting the messaging of their brands to promote more of a "green image" (Dobe, 2020). Language expressing concern for environmental issues in branding may be seen paired with the use of the colour green, imagery of flourishing natural spaces and protected wildlife, as common signifiers to a level of care and attention in their part to protecting the environment's natural resources (Sharma, 2013, pp.44-48; Osmanski, 2020).



Figure 1: Fiji Water Promotional Image (Ritson, 2008)

Brands communicating a green image do not always prominently use the colour green. Fiji Water (Figure 1) brands itself with bold, uppercase, centrally justified wordmark which might be interpreted as communicating a sense of truth and importance. The bottle (Figure 1) shows a pristine flower on a clear blue background, which could suggest there is a pureness to the water, which could give life to aesthetically pleasing nature such as the flower pictured. The word “Natural” (Figure 1) is seen in the tagline beneath the wordmark, supported by the presence of nature – the flower – on its bottle. Intending to be seen as a part of nature, the brand may be signalling environmental awareness. Looking to the backdrop chosen to support this branding (Figure 1), a clear blue sea surrounds a thriving dense rainforest linked to the Islands of Fiji perhaps serves to connect the bottled water to an untouched and natural location, suggesting to the audience that this brand is in harmony with prosperous nature. “Untouched” (Figure 1) may suggest that there is no process which detracts from the authenticity of this direct link from the bottled water to the rainforest landscape seen in Fiji. Taking all of this into consideration, an overall image projected by Fiji Water is one that may be interpreted by the audience as

sustainable to the environment, therefore an appropriate beverage choice for the socially conscious individual to consume (Sharma, 2013, pp.44-48).

Awareness of green issues is evident in much of the global consuming public (Watson, 2016). Studies have shown that green branding raises people's green awareness and, as a result, influences their purchasing decisions towards products which promote themselves as environmentally friendly (Alamsyah, Othman and Mohammed, 2020, pp.1961-1968.). Major companies with prominent public brands significantly contribute negatively to environmental issues, with a major example being the contributions of fossil fuel corporations to greenhouse gas emissions, as observed by Griffin in a CDP report: "Just 100 companies have been the source of more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988, according to a new report" (Griffin, 2017, p.7). Raised public awareness makes environmentalism more of a factor in consumers' preferences; brands become aware of this public opinion and commit to minimising environmental harm in order to build and maintain a positive reputation which keeps them profitable (Alamsyah, Othman and Mohammed, 2020, pp.1961-1968). By responding in this way, brands' far-reaching public images increase visibility of green issues, raising awareness of and concern for them. This is a positive impact by reducing harm to the environment and therefore society.

Companies can use the design of their public branding to project positive environmentalist intentions to meet demand for green practices in ways which may not be proportionate to their actual environmental impacts and commitment to

sustainability. This is the practice known as greenwashing, a term traced to environmentalist Jay Westerveld who described a deliberate attempt to misdirect attention away from the most impactful environmental issues that a company had a part in, towards a minor peripheral factor which is cheap for the company to address and environmentally insignificant (Watson, 2016; Dobe, 2020). Through these practices, brands can be seen to be addressing important issues on a surface level, whilst continuing to do major harm in this regard. In this way, green branding may act as a cover to enable harmful practices, by diverting attention and misleading well-intentioned consumers into supporting a brand which misrepresents its truly negative contribution to environmental issues (Acaroglu, 2019).

Fiji Water (Figure 1) has been criticised for its part in environmentally unstable business practices (Bernoville, 2020). This may be noted as antithetical to the way it displays nature in its branding to evoke an innocent sense of being harmonious with nature (Figure 1). Criticisms challenged their own claims of being carbon negative (Nastu, 2010) and more generalised criticisms stand against their part in the bottled water industry and the harm of plastic waste it produces (Bowyer, 2018). These harmful practices contradict the way that the branding of Fiji Water promotes the company, which is why this branding has been identified by some as greenwashing (Bernoville, 2020).

It can be difficult for consumers to identify the difference between a brand with genuine commitment to sustainability whose existence stands as an option for consumers which benefits society by extension of their environmental impacts,

versus a company whose green branding may be described as greenwashing, acting as a tool to enable harmful practices (Schwingle, 2020). Difficulty in identifying negative impacts behind a company's outwardly green branding limits the environmentally well-intentioned consumer's ability to only support brands which genuinely commit to societally positive working practices – meaning the positive impacts of green branding are limited to some extent.

The food industry, recognising audiences' increasing tendencies towards choosing environmentally friendly options as preferable (Fromm, 2020), has moved towards using this direct green branding in some instances. This includes food producers whose branding has projected a green image since its inception such as Ripple Farm Organics (Ripplefarmorganics, 2021), and food producers who have gone through some re-branding to project a "greener" image such as McDonald's (Dunham, 2009).



Figure 2: Website of Ripple Farm Organics (Screenshot by author. Website: Ripplefarmorganics, 2021)

One may be influenced by the branding of Ripple Farm Organics to view the farming collective as harmonious with local natural resources. Colours on the site's display keep within a range that might be found on a plant-based farmland, as is seen in how photographs of agricultural land featured on the website hold tones of green and brown not dissimilar to the brand colour palette (Figure 2). This way the brand might be seen to be positioning itself as a sustainable, well-integrated part of this agricultural land. The darker tone of brown might suggest a priority to maintain healthy soil, supported by the prominent placement of the brand's approval by the Soil Association (Figure 2). They communicate their organic practices very prominently to the audience, forming a part of their name and a key message, "100% ORGANIC" (Figure 2), suggesting confidence that this is a virtue. From this, one may infer that being organic is an environmentally positive thing, which keeps them connected with nature as their brand colours are in-keeping with agricultural land displayed. Their caption, "Sustainable growing methods in harmony with nature" (Figure 2) outlines them as such. The brand website uses a photograph of an

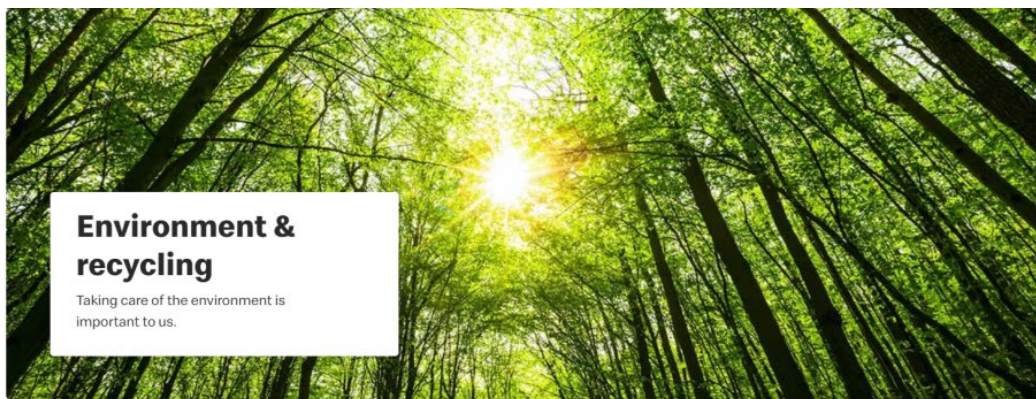
individual carrying plant-based produce, in practical clothing which suggests working in an agricultural context, with no use of machinery seen. One may find significant appeal in the image of having plants tended to by hand for the idea of attentiveness, making the image of the brand trustworthy for having a high level of human care.

Ripple Farm prides itself on commitment to using organic farm techniques since 1989 (Ripplefarmorganics, 2021) and promote themselves with this as identified. The certification can be seen as credible and strong evidence of commitment to this practice, as the Soil Organisation is an independent body established in 1946 with a highly regarded selective approach to identifying genuinely organic farming practices (Lockeretz, 1946, pp.188-198). Organic farming has been recognised as more environmentally sustainable than non-organic farming and avoids harming natural land to a greater extent, as identified by J. P. Reganold, a Professor of Soil Science & Agroecology at Washington State University:

Organic agriculture generally creates less soil and water pollution and lower greenhouse gas emissions, and is more energy efficient. Organic agriculture is also associated with greater biodiversity of plants, animals, insects and microbes as well as genetic diversity (Reganold, 2016).

Ripple Farm Organics only produce vegan foods, with vegetable boxes being their primary service (Ripplefarmorganics, 2021). Vegan-based farming is claimed to be more environmentally sustainable, contributing less to climate change than major animal product-based farming (Craig, 2018, pp.13-20). Based on this evidence in favour of society implementing organic and vegan farming, one could identify the green branding of Ripple Farm Organics as an accurate representation of what they

offer as a more environmentally sustainable food production than non-organic and non-vegan alternatives. Branding which increases people's awareness of "green" issues towards supporting this genuinely positive food production which promotes itself with a green image, can be identified as a positive societal impact in that sustaining the environment allows society to prosper further into the future (Bartelmus, 2018).



We're always working to become more sustainable

We want the best for the environment. To us that means constantly challenging ourselves to find ways in which we can use our scale and our people, to influence and drive change. By rethinking, reducing and recycling, we're minimising the impact we have on the environment. We've made big progress so far, but we know there's lots more to do.

Figure 3: Website of McDonald's (Screenshot by author. Website: McDonald's, 2021a)



Figure 4: McDonald's Restaurant, Singapore (Inhabitat, 2013)



Figure 5: McDonald's Scale For Good (Where Women Work, 2018)

McDonald's are another example of a company in the food industry which promotes commitment to green issues in their branding. This has been seen since they started to change their main brand colour from red to green in Europe in 2006 (Barriaux, 2007). Hoger Beek, the vice chairman of McDonald's Germany in 2009 clarified: "With this new appearance we want to clarify our responsibility for the preservation of natural resources. In the future we will put an even larger focus on that" (Quote from Beek provided by Dunham, 2009). McDonald's, with a darker green tone across their franchise, use branding comparable to Ripple Farm Organics. From certain examples of their branding, McDonald's can be seen to be conveying themselves as working in harmony with nature. They communicate their sustainability policies with an image of a seemingly lush, uninterrupted forest flourishing (Figure 3). Using this image may imply that McDonald's has some role in supporting this environment and keeps in touch with the natural world. The example of the Singapore restaurant (Figure 4) shows the restaurant literally built in to be a part of the natural green surroundings, perhaps priming the audience to associate McDonald's with care for the environment, which they elaborate on in their ethos, displayed with their consistent branding. One can observe a minimalist quality from McDonald's in much of its design, using the Helvetica font and only block colours, seen with solid black

text on a clear white background in Figure 3. This may be seen to convey unfiltered honesty – avoiding complexity in the design that might be thought of as hiding or obscuring something behind excessive details. This may hope to prime the audience to believe their commitment to environmentalist causes outlined in promotions such as Scale for Good (Figure 5). McDonald's has an extremely far reach being such a large franchise of 38.7 thousand restaurants globally (Lock, 2020), so with their branding supporting the idea that they commit to environmentalism, they may help to inform people that these green issues are important and reflect positively on anyone promoting it.

With green messaging from the branding of McDonald's, the company is widely criticised for greenwashing practices (Bender, 2011). Their attention to use paper straws and discontinue use of plastic straws gained wide attention from 2018 until it was identified that these straws' potential positive environmental impact was limited by the fact they could not widely be recycled (Arnold, 2019). This may be explained as greenwashing regardless of the recycling issue as it is known that plastic straws account for an exceptionally small amount of plastic waste in the ocean, and of total environmental damage attributed to McDonald's (Arnold, 2019). Publicity may have been drawn to the issue of straws as a very publicly visible waste issue associated with McDonald's which does not significantly hinder the company to amend. The concept of greenwashing includes use of misdirection to signal and demonstrate "green" commitment as a way of obscuring more significantly negative environmental impacts (Watson, 2016), and so the misdirection here would be encouraging people to focus on their commitment to changing straws and not all their other environmental impacts. The Singapore example (Figure 3) of taking extra steps to

preserve the local environment at just one location out of the thousands that McDonald's operates is another example of a very small-scale change which could attract positive publicity.

McDonald's consistently contribute significantly towards creating demand for and financially sustaining the beef industry (Schwab, 2018). Even with signs of commitment to using local beef produce (McDonald's, 2021b), the beef industry is known to be a major contributor to climate change as explained by journalist Tim Schwab:

Beef production emits more greenhouse gas than almost any other food we produce. And McDonald's is one of the largest buyers in the world, last year reporting using 1.6 billion pounds of beef, a mountain of meat that casts an enormous carbon footprint (Schwab, 2018).

These claims lead McDonald's to be labelled by some as greenwashing, as these negative contributions to the environment are not reflected in their branding – the opposite is projected on their part. Use of statistics with no unbiased third-party certification is associated with McDonald's, such as is seen in their Scale for Good scheme (Figure 5) which uses large scale quantification perhaps to exaggerate its positive environmental impacts, can be identified as a warning sign that consumers can spot as a potential indication that McDonald's brand commitment to green is greenwashing (Mendez, 2020, p. 435).

In conclusion, green branding of the food industry can increase public awareness of important issues to lead consumers to choose to support environmentally conscious

producers (Alamsyah, Othman and Mohammed, 2020, pp.1961-1968) such as Ripple Farm Organics (Ripplefarmorganics, 2021) which benefit society in the long term (Bartelmus, 2018). This positive impact of branding is however limited by issues of greenwashing in which brands' surface level display of commitment to environmentalism acts as a cover for more harmful practices (Watson, 2016), as is argued is the case for McDonald's (Bender, 2011; Arnold, 2019). Different brands' communication of commitment to environmentally positive issues can be seen to use similar techniques such as prominent use of shades of the colour green, "honest" minimalistic language and design choices and images of thriving undisturbed nature (Sharma, 2013, pp.44-48) – whether the brand faces prominent accusations of greenwashing or not. This means it may be difficult for the socially conscious consumer to make choices which benefit society based on information given by branding.

Reflection on my own design practices

Examples of McDonald's troubling business practices – such as the environmental harm of their vast contribution to harmful methane gas emissions from the cattle farming that they drive the demand for – strike me as significant things I must remain aware of. Knowing the complicit role of graphic designers working for McDonald's in helping to obscure public perception of this with a greenwashing branding strategy leads me to strive to better understand my own impacts on the world as a designer – the ethical and environmental implications of the products I use and produce going forward in the profession. With better understanding of how I may contribute harm in the world in design work I intend to minimise my harmful contributions as a socially

conscious designer, looking to be an individual who positively impacts society through the platform of spreading awareness offered by the visual medium of graphic design. I must also be aware of the ethos and business practices of potential clients or employers I associate with as I become complicit with their impacts on society by association. When informed of practices with social implications, I can make certain choices on who and what I associate with to avoid contributing design work which functions to dupe consumers into helping to sustain unethical and environmentally harmful practices. I understand that the significant role of graphic design to inform people and encourage them to act in a certain way, can be and is regularly exploited to mislead them into making a decision that is not in the best interest of themselves or the world at large – to potentially devastating impacts when the design reaches a large audience. I understand that design influences people in more than just what is literally communicated in wording; that choices of imagery, colour, style and layout all work together to send messages which may be received in a variety of ways to the varied individuals in the audience. I need to be aware of and account for the multitude of ways that design may be received by people who will respond to this, to make sure that I am not contributing harm to the world by producing a design which influences people, either under a misconception or harming people through how others who are influenced by the design interact with and influence society – for example influencing people to exclude a certain group of people. I must make choices in design which do not exclude people who may be reached by a design that I produce since it may be important that a message is communicated in a specific, socially responsible way to a range of people which is as broad as possible.

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Content word count: 3168