Lost Identity: the Disappearance of Cultural Identity

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Abstract

The focus of this paper will be on the influences of globalization on local community or vice versa regarding culture, and society particularly in design in Thailand.

National economies are more open to one another than ever before. With international trade at an unprecedented level, much of what people consume is imported and much of what they produce is exported. Technologies, artistic moving, business practices, musical trends, and fads and fashions reach all corners of the developed world almost instantaneously. Global economy and culture form a nearly seamless web in which nation boundaries are increasingly irrelevant to trade, investment, finance and other social and cultural activities.

There are no exceptions in Thailand. Thai culture has been affected by globalization through imitation of Western lifestyles. How this invasion of foreign cultures affects our culture and design approach. How can, we as a local, be able to withstand or keep our design identity with the influx of global movement.

When the big companies in the world try to create design that satisfies or influences the global market, will this result in uninspired products that will characterize this broad global market? Or are we heading to other directions such as anti-globalization, anti-design, or post 09-11 era to encounter and create even more diverse design approaches to signify the subcultures or identity of the local creating the fabric web of communication and influence between local and global or vice versa.

I believe that there will be more a variety of design approaches and niche markets to investigate in the future. We will see the crossed-over between cultures, life styles, art, and design between global and local. This will allow the flexibility for cross-cultural experiences, desires and needs. There will be a metamorphosis and mixture between local and global creating the hybridizations that allowed us to create a unique thought in order to find our own identity of design.

Keyword: Global Community, Identity Crisis, Individual expression, Reproduction society

1. Introduction

"Everyday we get closer to living in a global community. With distances between countries narrowing, we have much wisdom to gain by learning to understand other people's cultures and permitting ourselves to accept that there is more than one version of reality." (Some, M. P., 1995.)

Global Community

In the past, when big companies in the world try to create products that satisfied or influenced the global market and fashion trends, the result has been the uninspired products that characterize this broad

global market in the capitalism era. However, with the development of technologies particularly the internet, the window of cultural and geographical cross-over has been wide opened, therefore the search of the diverse design approaches to signify the subcultures or identity of the local has been developed and practiced in contemporary manner through out the world with one own design DNA.

2. Identity Crisis

2.1 Identity Crisis

Identity crisis in our consumer culture has been caused mainly by the expansion of globalization in the name of capitalism including the development of technologies particularly the internet. Ideally, capitalism supposed to be a very beneficial to human well being with the fair and equal treatment across the board. However, it has not been that way in reality. The bigger and stronger nations and multi-corporations have always had the upper hand, for the most part the international one. When one speaks about globalization one can not ignore the capitalism. It has been developed side by side as if capitalism is one of the significant tools to expand the core concept of globalization. Therefore, the senses of nation and identity of the local have been blurred and question.

2.2 Globalized identities

Looked at how hip-hop, rap music, and their related products, they have taken root in many different countries across the world. Originally, rising from the ghettoes of North America, hip-hop and rap records are now listening all over the world. It is liked the whole world listening to what happens in the south Bronx. Historically, African cultures have been dispersed by the movement of low-wage black laborers from country to country. It is through the production, distribution, and consumption of popular music that ethnic and cultural identity can be restored and expressed. Thus, a form of music with its source in a very specific region (local) has become the basis of an imaginary global community that crosses national boundaries. Moreover, it is a form of music that plunders from and mixes together a whole range of influences. For instance, many rhythms and samples can be taken from the history of American black music (e.g. jazz, soul, funk) and combined with bits and pieces borrowed from mainstream American white culture (e.g. news broadcasts, film soundtracks).

Figure 1 Thai hip-hop, Bangkok, Thailand

Figure 2 The hybridizations of global and local influence
created a unique language of self expression

2.3 The stylization of life

In this commodity era, certain social conditions have produced in people a heightened awareness of appearance and style. The making of cultural identity has become increasingly related to what we buy (or want to buy), use, or wear. We now forge our identities by using products as signals of both individuality (difference from social groups) and solidarity (a sense of belonging to other social groups).

> "As the consumer market is flexible and more dynamic than the older ways of regulating identities, much more fluidity is apparent: people can change their identities more frequently, experiment with them, select more options from a cultural supermarket with far less commitment than before."
>
> (Harris, D., 1996)
>
> David Harris, A Society of Sighs (1996)

As a result, there has been the intensification of image production as a way to identify individuality. In addition, the increasing invasion of signs and images (in media, display, advertising and so on) into the fabric of everyday life has created a dream world of ideal lifestyles for us to fantasize about and identify with, crossed culturally. For example, many commercials are more concerned to attach a sense of lifestyle and experience to the product being sold than to give details about the product itself as marketing strategies of commodity. Because of this, we get as much satisfaction from consuming the images attached to products as we do from whatever practical function the goods might serve. Furthermore with the capitalism and technology; there is the multiplication of cultural mediators which have affected on our decisions on selecting products. (Ward, G. 1997) These include:

2.3.1 The numerous pundits who populate the media to offer advice on everything from holidays and hair styling to interior design and wine tasting

2.3.2 The ever growing ranks of popular cultural commentators whose job it is to pick up on all that's new in the worlds of arts, leisure, media and fashion

2.3.3 The editors of lifestyle magazines

2.3.4 The makers of television programs about heritage, architecture, antique, etc.

2.3.5 The multiplying range of caring professions, therapists of all kinds, educationalists

So, what we need and what we buy is not really what we need or who we are, it is what they (international corporations in the name of globalization) want us to be. Why Thai teenagers have to wear jacket with hood during summer in Thailand? Why we have to use a lot of glass and revolving doors at Suvarnabhumi Airport while it is so hot and sunny sky in Thailand?

2.4 The sign

Semiology points out that human do not communicate directly, as if by means of telepathy. It is not the case that one can merely think something and have someone else understand it immediately and perfectly. Instead, human communication involves the use of one thing to stand for or represent something else. In writing, we have to use printed words to represent our thoughts in order to communicate those thoughts to the reader. And reader will have to use spoken words in order to tell all his/her friends what a wonderful article the reader has just been reading. In both cases one type of thing, the written or spoken word is being used to represent another type of thing, thoughts and opinions. Human communication, then, involves the use of signs.

For Saussure, the sign is made up of two parts. Those parts are called the "signifier" and the "signified". Saussure is concerned with language and for him "signifiers" are the physical part of signs; they are the sounds or the shapes of words. The "signified" is the mental concept to which that signifier refers. It is the meaning of the signifier. Together, they form the "sign" (Saussure, 1974). The sound that is made speaking the word "shirt" is a signifier. It stands for or represents the item of male clothing. The item of male clothing is the signified. The shapes that form the written word "shirt" also constitute a signifier. The written form "shirt" also stands for or represents the item of male clothing. And, again, the item of male clothing is the signified. Neither the spoken nor the written forms are the shirt, they do not look like or sound like the shirt, but they are used to signify, to stand for or represent, the shirt. (Barnard, 2002)

3. The Functions and Status of Product

3.1 The functions and status of Product

Products nowadays could be defined or looked at in terms of communication and culture. This article will concentrate on what products might be for, on the different functions that products might have. Another way of posing these questions would be to ask the reasons why people consume these products, why people wear hooded jacket in Thailand. It will be noted that, while it makes sense to ask these questions of universal product (the products that have been distributed and consumed internationally). For the sake of argument, we will separate the material functions of products from their cultural functions. Material functions are those connected with practical and production, and cultural functions are to do with communication and cultural hierarchy of each product. As with all such distinctions, there is a flaw here in that the material functions also have a cultural function: what a culture chooses to express itself to and the ways in which it does so with product are also ways in which that culture communicates its identity as a culture.

3.2 Cultural functions

Besides the practical functions of products to solve the difficulties in daily life, there are the new languages attached to each product as I always call it "visual language". There are also many layers of meaning have been hidden in the products metaphorically that communicates directly about social, political, technological and time. We put on clothing or using products for some of the same reasons as we speak; these are to make life easier, to "proclaim or disguise" by displaying our identity and to attract power and social attention.

3.3 Individual expression

The relation between product and the idea of individual expression is more complex than may at first appear. This section is not concerned with explaining how product expresses, but try to discuss the functions of products in term of expression by reflecting, reinforcing, disguising or creating cultural facade. Why we have to use a very expensive imported bag from Louis Vuitton? What does it communicate when you use iPhone or Apple's products? Could it be used to reflect the users' taste or social groups as a way to identify them? Where are those preference come from? How we have become more others (Global influence) as supposed to be ourselves (Local influence).

3.4 Reproduction society

So far, this article has attempted to define consumer products and has tried to explain the different functions of product as cultural phenomena, and as communicative phenomena and the ways in which different types or levels of meanings as generated and communicated in this capital society. The products have been reproduced to serve our activities and identities which have been constructed though social conditions and classes. Therefore in someway our products are the reproduction of society.

Consumer products are the mass-produced means by which individual style is constructed; somehow we believe that the shirt, or the cell phone, which both exist in their thousands of copies, is "us". Mass-produced products are used to construct what is thought of and experienced as an individual identity, a way of being different to everyone else. "That dress is so you", we say, for example, of a dress that may be worn by many hundreds of people at that very moment. In these ways, identity shades into difference and difference into identity.

In those oppositions, the meaning or value of one of the terms is only produced or generated on the basis of its containing the other within it. For example, in the construction of an individual identity, use has to be made of mass-produced items and of a socially sanctioned code. At the heart of individual identity, then, at the heart of something that is supposed to be specific to an individual, is the mass-produced, the product that exists in the form of hundreds or thousands of copies. Moreover, that identity can only be constructed according to a network of differences which are already understood and common to a whole community. (Barnard, 2002)

3.5 Capitalism

Capitalism is based on the same principle as mercantilism: the large-scale realization of a profit by acquiring goods for lower prices than one sells them. But capitalism as a practice is characterized by the following:

3.5.1 The accumulation of the means of production (materials, land, tools) as property into a few hands; this accumulated property is called "capital" and the property-owners of these means of production are called "capitalists."

3.5.2 Productive labor—the human work necessary to produce goods and distribute them—takes the form of wage labor. That is, humans work for wages rather than for product. One of the aspects of wage labor is that the laborer tends not to be invested in the product. Labor also becomes "efficient," that is, it becomes defined by its "productivity"; capitalism increases individual productivity through "the division of labor," which divides productive labor into its smallest components. The result of the division of labor is to lower the value (in terms of skill and wages) of the individual worker; this would create immense social problems in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

3.5.3 The means of production and labor is manipulated by the capitalist using rational calculation in order to realize a profit. So that capitalism as an economic activity is fundamentally teleological. (Hooker, 1999)

3.6 Globalization

Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology. This process has effects on the environment, culture, political systems, economic development and prosperity, and human physical well-being in societies around the world.

The current wave of globalization has been driven by policies that have opened economies domestically and internationally. In the years since the Second World War, and especially during the past two decades, many governments have adopted free-market economic systems, vastly increasing their own productive potential and creating myriad new opportunities for international trade and investment. Taking advantage of new opportunities in foreign markets, corporations have built foreign factories and established production and marketing arrangements with foreign partners.

Technology has been the other principal driver of globalization. Advances in information technology, in particular, have dramatically transformed economic, culture, tradition, and ways of life.

Globalization is deeply controversial, however, proponents of globalization argue that it allows poor countries and their citizens to develop economically and raise their standards of living, while opponents of globalization claim that the creation of an unfettered international free market has benefited multinational corporations in the western world at the expense of local enterprises, local cultures, and common people. Resistance to globalization has therefore taken shape both at a popular and at a governmental level as people and governments try to manage the flow of capital, labor, goods, and ideas that constitute the current wave of globalization. (The Levin Institute, 2010)

As a result, local identity has been burred from the influences as above.

3.7 Anti-globalization

Anti-globalization may occur in order to put brakes on the international transfer of people, products and ideology, particularly those determined by the organizations such as the IMF or the WTO in imposing the radical deregulation program of free market fundamentalism on local governments and populations.

There are, at least, three main varieties of globalization negativism. The most radical and most vulgar attitude is the one that claims that all evil stems from the controlled institutions such as The International Monetary Fund, The World Bank World's Bank, The International Trade Organization etc. are gradually transforming the developing regions of the world into the neo-colonial estate, in order to exploit the natural and people's resources. The other variant of anti-globalization ideology stems from the fact, that globalization is an objective process, justified by the technological advances, informational revolution, development of international industrial, trade and financial relationships. However, only highly developed western countries could benefit from this process, while the remaining countries of the world are destined to continuous lagging behind.

The third ideological paradigm of the antiglobalization is that the process itself is not only objective, but could be of benefit to all countries, though to a different degree. The developed western countries have the opportunity to utilize the globalization process entirely, while only scraps and pickings are left to others. One of the most trenchant issues, used by the entire range of antiglobalists as the primary bugbear, is the tremendous gap between the income of the wealthy countries and poor countries.

Once started, technological-economic progress has quickly acquired all the characteristics of a chain-reaction. The breach between the advanced and poor counties is increasing fast. However, under globalization conditions, the developing counties are able to skip the pathways of scientific and technological evolution of the leading countries, but simply use all the technological, management and market advances developed by them. This allows to save time and capital, skipping few steps on the ladder of scientific and technological evolution. Such "skipping" often happens not due to the initiatives of the developing countries, but also because of the objective trends in modern world economy. The fact is, that the most developed counties are not able neither economically, nor politically be totally independent, and to disregard the remaining world. In fact, such an involvement could be seen as an exploitation of the entire world by a handful of industrial countries, i.e. as neo-colonialism etc. However, this process to a larger extent is clearly beneficial to countries, lagging behind in their technological, economic, social and cultural development. (Shishkov, 2005)

3.8 Global versus local and vice versa

With the invasion of globalization, the influx of the foreign cultures, products, and lifestyle has created the drastic change in cultural and economical structure all over the world, including Thailand. The way in which multinational corporations spread their offices, outlets, advertising campaign, logos and factories all over the world. The internet continues to grow and there is an increase in "global identities" as more and more people seek work away from their home countries or their home towns. In addition, the gap between rich and poor has widening more and more, which is often living in close proximity to each other.

The new spaces of globalization feather a complicated interaction between universal and regional factors. On the one hand, there is the continuing expansion of global markets for music, product and

so on, coupled with the growth of boundary-crossing media and communication systems. On the other hand there is a heightened sensitivity to regional and particular issues. The apparent contradiction between this two aspects which we can perhaps translate as a dynamic tension between sameness and difference can be seen as one of the defining features of the landscape.

Today, global satellite and cable broadcasting systems have created a global environment which has changed the shape of national, ethnic, and cultural identities. The recent technologies of communication and transport have created new geographies based less on the physical boundaries of the land and more on the flow of information and images. In globalization, people information, images, and objects migrate around the globe. In the process they make it harder to define the limits of a community or a nation. National and even natural boundaries are still there, of course, but they do not even begin to tell story. They are constantly over-ridden and undermined by "spaces of transmission" with boundaries of their own. Thus, the old categories of national, racial and cultural identity must be balanced by the greater "symbolic boundaries of language and culture" provided by the mass media, global markets, computerization and the rest.

Although, these new geographies have brought about a crisis in the idea of the nation and identity they have at the same time create a new awareness of regional locations and activities. (Ward, 1997)

4. Conclusion

Thailand as a local and a global

There are no exceptions in Thailand. Thai culture has been affected by globalization through imitation of Western lifestyles. How this invasion of foreign cultures affects our culture and design approach. How can, we as a local, be able to withstand or keep our design identity with the flooding of global movement.

When the big companies in the world try to create design that satisfies or influences the global market as it has happened now will this result in uninspired products that will characterize this broad global market? Or are we heading to other directions such as anti-globalization, anti-design, or post 09-11 era to encounter and create even more diverse design approaches to signify the subcultures or identity of the local as it has started happening?

Through my research, Thai designers have been lacked of supports from Thai governments, corporations, and their people, as a result of the change in social structure influenced by the idea of commodity from the West. The industrial development in Thailand also has been jumped and run without learning how to walk first, so there has been a big gap between the development of design philosophy with Thai design DNA, the knowledge of art and craft and the development of industry. There has been no continuity for the development in art, craft and design. When we consider the change of world structures, Thailand has jumped from the society of craft and agriculture to industry without supporting or developing its own craft/art toward design in order to support the development of its industry with its own design identity. Thailand as a country has only been a country for production outsourcing for the West. Have one ever think why the bamboo basket makers who have been weaving bamboo basket for 50 years still weaving the same patterns and still poor? Why don't Thai designers use their knowledge and specialty to create their own design

identity by using Thai tradition, culture, and way of life as a significant resources for design, instead of doing the same way over and over again or being a manufacturing country for foreigner companies or copying foreigners' design. Thai tradition, culture and way of life are the things that many of the Western countries do not have and Thai designers could develop product based on those resources to the international level. To archive this goal, they have to pay a special attention to conceptual thinking, forms, materials and techniques with the idea that started from local to effect global. In these case Scandinavia countries, Japan and Korea are very good examples including hip-hop culture from North America as well.

One of the most significant elements to reach that goal is art and design education. The study in-depth of Thai culture and other cultures (social study) have to be studied along with design process. If Thai designers and companies can not compete with big multi-corporations in the high technology industry, why don't Thai designers and companies complete in their own game. For example, they could utilize their cultural knowledge and design to offer the world market. Instead of producing mass production, they could create limited edition, or instead of attempting to sell to big markets, they could look for niche markets, where their design products (the originality) would be appreciate at the highest level and directly serve and benefit each distinctive culture.
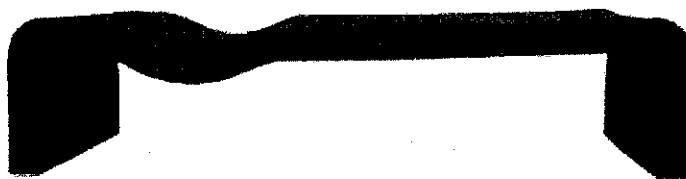

Figure 3 An example of Yothaka furniture created a unique language of the East with the emphasis on techniques+ craftsmanship+ design = product to serve global clients (i-design, 2009)

Figure 4 An example of the hybridizations of global and local (Thai culture) created a distinctive language of self expression through contemporary jewelry, Brand "α degree" by Korakoch Woramuksik (Woramuksil, 2010)

Especially now, because of the effects of globalization and capitalism with the mass produced products (They are all look the same), the idea of self identity and self expression have been emerged stronger and stronger. People want to be different. They do not want to look the same as others, so local design would be a way to offer new and unique perspectives to new development of product design and to be able to preserve their own design identity and hopefully their culture.

With the idea of Creative Thailand: A New Economic Drive to Strengthen Thailand, the Thai Government has a clear direction for including the creative economy in the 11th National Economic and Social Development Plan, 2012-2016. Although the creative economy is not part of the current 10th National Development Plan, 2007-2011, it is regarded as one of the guidelines driving a strategy for restructuring production on a balanced and sustainable basis.

According to the Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, there are 20 creative economy projects worth 3,800 million to be carried out in 2010 under the "Thailand: Investing from Strength to Strength" program. These projects are the starting point to move Thailand forward. The Government has set two goals for the Creative Thailand policy. One is to develop Thailand into a creative economy hub in ASEAN, and the other is to increase the proportion of creative economy from 10-12 percent of GDP in 2006 to 20 percent in 2012.

The Creative Thailand policy seeks to increase the value of Thai products and services from history, culture and traditions, wisdom, and innovations. This concept is in line with sustainable development and the environment-friendly economy. If creative thinking were added to its production and industry, Thailand would be able to increase enormously the value of its agricultural and industrial products, as well as services. Thai food and handicrafts are examples in which uniqueness and creativity could be used to create greater value, based on the Thai identity, rich in artistic and aesthetic traditions. (The Board of Investment of Thailand, 2009)

From design perspective, I think that, with the Creative Thailand policy, there will be more a variety of design approaches and niche markets to investigate in the future for Thai designers and industries both locally and internationally. One will see the crossed-over between cultures, life styles, art and design between global and local. This will allow the flexibility for cross-cultural experiences, desires and needs. There will be a metamorphosis and mixture between local and global creating the hybridizations that allowed Thai designers and artists to create a unique thought in order to find their own identity of design. This is a time to establish a creative society in order to achieve the goal of creative economy on a balanced and sustainable ground.

With the support of the government, it is the new era for Thai designers and artists to search for its own Thai design DNA through the development of their creative process. Thai designers and artists can offer what the capital driven products do not have such as the feeling of being a human, culture and way of life, including the sense of hand, cultural knowledge and mind working together to create products not solely depending on technology and machine. This approach will also offer the new directions of design to society. When they combine their tradition, culture, knowledge, and skills with creative design and critical thinking, Thai designers would have their own mark in this global frenzy.

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