ESSAY

Exploring the similarities in international designers' posters: causes and recommendations for unique design

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Abstract

Posters serve as a potent medium for conveying messages and ideas to vast audiences, and though hailing from different backgrounds, graphic designers frequently produce visually similar designs. Despite the absence of direct influences, these parallels persist across international boundaries. Such convergence prompts the query: why do these resemblances occur and how can designers foster more distinctive outcomes? This research delves into the origins of similarities in global poster designs with the objective of identifying causative factors and furnishing guidelines to cultivate unique and resonant designs.

Keywords

Poster design; design patterns; cultural influences

Explorando las similitudes en los carteles de diseñadores internacionales: causas y recomendaciones para un diseño único

Resumen

Los carteles sirven como un medio potente para transmitir mensajes e ideas a amplias audiencias, y aunque provienen de diferentes contextos, los diseñadores gráficos frecuentemente producen diseños visualmente similares. A pesar de la ausencia de influencias directas, estas similitudes persisten a través de las fronteras internacionales. Esta convergencia plantea la pregunta: ¿por qué ocurren estas semejanzas y cómo pueden los diseñadores fomentar resultados más distintivos? Esta investigación profundiza en los orígenes de las similitudes en los diseños de carteles globales con el objetivo de identificar factores causantes y proporcionar pautas para cultivar diseños únicos y resonantes.

Palabras clave

Diseño de carteles; patrones de diseño; influencias culturales

Introduction

Posters are an effective tool for conveying information, ideas, and messages to a wide audience. Graphic designers worldwide create posters on various topics, including social issues, cultural events, and public services. However, it is observed that many posters designed by different designers share similar characteristics, even though the designers have not seen each other's work before. This phenomenon raises a question of why these similarities exist and what can designers do to make their work more unique. This research paper aims to explore the reasons behind the similarities in international designers' posters and provide recommendations for designers to create unique designs.

Poster design can be defined as the process of creating a visual composition that conveys information, ideas, or messages to a large audience using a combination of text and images. According to a definition provided by the Google Arts & Culture, "a poster is a temporary promotion of an idea, product, or event put up in a public space for mass consumption" (Poster, n.d.). The poster's purpose is to capture the viewer's attention and communicate a message quickly and effectively. In the words of graphic designer David Carson, "a poster is a canvas to communicate a message that hopefully, with a little luck and a lot of skill, makes people think, feel or do something" (Carson, 2017). Poster design requires a balance of creativity and technical skill to create an effective composition that achieves the desired communication goals.

Research problem and objective

The research problem is to identify the reasons for the similarities in international designers' posters. The research objective is to explore the factors that contribute to the similarities in posters and provide recommendations for designers to create more unique designs.

Literature review

Posters have been used for centuries as a means of communication and advertisement. The evolution of poster design can be traced back to ancient times, where posters were used to announce events and deliver messages to the public. In the modern era, posters have become an effective tool for advertising products and services, promoting social causes, and conveying political messages.

The history of poster design can be divided into several eras, each with its own unique style and characteristics. One of the earliest forms of poster design can be seen in the works of the ancient Egyptians, who used papyrus sheets to create posters announcing events such as festivals and religious ceremonies (Tej K. Bhatia, 2000). In medieval Europe, posters were used to promote trade fairs and other public events.

According to Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. (2023), it was not until the late 19th century that poster design as we know it today emerged. This was due in part to the development of new printing technologies, which made it possible to mass-produce posters quickly and cheaply. The French artist Jules Chéret is credited with pioneering the modern poster design in the late 1800s, using bold colors and eye-catching graphics to promote various products and events.

The Art Nouveau movement, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, also had a significant impact on poster design. This style emphasized flowing lines, organic forms, and intricate details, and was used to promote a variety of products and events. (Richman-Abdou, 2017).

The history of poster design can be divided into several eras, each with its unique style and characteristics. In the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of modernism in art and design led to a new wave of poster design. This style emphasized simplicity, clarity, and functionality, with a focus on typography and the use of bold, geometric shapes. The Swiss designer, Josef Müller-Brockmann, was a pioneer of this style and his work is still influential today (Clifford, 2013).

Since then, poster design has continued to evolve and change with the times. With the rise of digital technology, designers now have access to a vast array of tools and techniques, allowing them to create posters that are more complex and visually striking than ever before.

In addition to these factors, several other topics should be addressed to further understand the similarities in international designers' posters:

Cultural influences

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping design choices and can contribute to similarities in international posters. Shared visual language, aesthetic preferences, and socio-cultural influences all influence design decisions (Vivek Gautam and Lucienne Blessing, 2007).

Globalization and homogenization

The interconnectedness of the design community and access to global design trends through digital platforms can lead to a certain level of homogenization in poster design ("Homogenization in design: The danger of trends," 2020).

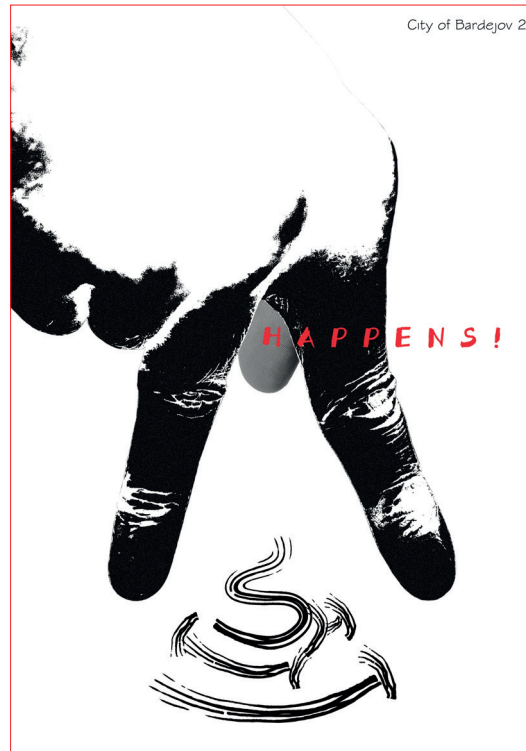Figure 1. Designer A: Qiang Gang (with permission from the designer)

Figure 2. Designer B: Siyang Chen (with permission from the designer)

Technological advances

The accessibility of design software, digital assets, and online resources can influence design practices and contribute to similarities in poster design. The use of common templates, stock images, or design techniques may be facilitated by technological advancements (Armstrong, 2009)

In conclusion, the history of poster design is a rich and complex subject, spanning centuries and encompassing a variety of styles and techniques. The similarities in international designers' posters, while a curious phenomenon, can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the influence of cultural norms and the prevalence of certain design elements and tools. Understanding these factors can help designers create more unique and impactful posters that stand out from the crowd.

Case study

As designers, we had the opportunity to participate in several international poster exhibitions, including: "The World After Poster Call" (US), "Shit Happens: City of Bardejov 2" project (Slovakia), "Fake News" - the 11th poster design competition by 4tomorrow (France), "Poster for Iran" project (France), "From the trenches" (Spain), and "Give

Peace a Chance" project (Switzerland). Throughout these exhibitions, we observed numerous similar posters that caught our attention.

For the interviews conducted with specialists, we presented them with eight sets of posters, each set containing two posters that exhibited similarities. We asked the specialists to provide insights into the factors contributing to such similarities and share their opinions on how designers could create more unique and distinct designs.

However, for the purpose of this essay and in accordance with the publishing guidelines, we will focus on two specific similar posters from the "Shit Happens: City of Bardejov 2" exhibition. We have obtained permission from their respective designers to include them in this case study.

Case study: shit happens: city of Bardejov 2 project - unraveling the similar posters (Figure 1, 2)
Introduction. The "Shit Happens: City of Bardejov 2" exhibition, a highly anticipated competition to select the best 104 printed works, captivated international designers seeking to creatively interpret themes such as "head between legs," "town hall," "mayor," "defaulter," "revenge," and "in the ass." Among the participants were two designers,

[Designer A] and [Designer B], who independently embarked on their creative journeys with no prior collaboration or knowledge of each other's work.

Concept development and key similarity. Both [Designer A, Figure 1] and [Designer B, Figure 2] were inspired by the official invitation to the exhibition, which alluded to "numerous stone sculptures" and "a little boy with his head between his legs" related to Bardejov's historical town hall. Both designers independently visualized a symbolic figure with its head positioned between its legs, reflecting the essence of the "head between legs" theme.

Poster Description. [Designer A] ingeniously illustrated the symbolic shape with two fingers pointing downwards, creating a visual metaphor reminiscent of an inverted victory sign. This unique representation paid homage to the well-known monument in the city of Bardejov. Below the open fingers (index and middle fingers), [Designer A] incorporated the phrase "Shit Happens!" with a creative twist. The artist cleverly reimagined the letter "P" in "Happens" to resemble thighs, accentuating the message. Additionally, the icon of "Shit" was thoughtfully added, further reinforcing the intended communication.

On the other hand, [Designer B], while also choosing to use a hand, opted for a different approach to deviate from the direct representation of the exhibition's theme. Under the two fingers, the word "shit" was drawn in a distinct form, complemented by the word "Happens" placed above it. The inventive arrangement creatively conveyed the message, portraying the themes in a thought-provoking manner.

Color palette and visual elements. [Designer A] utilized a black and white image of the hand, reminiscent of vintage printing methods. The white text contrasted against a dark blue background, evoking the same tone as the poster of the exhibition invitation, symbolizing the sky of Bardejov.

Conversely, [Designer B] presented their design predominantly in black and white, with the exception of the word "Happens," which stood out in red. The strategic use of color conveyed a sense of historical significance, suggesting events of the past.

Analysis and reflection. This case study of the City of Bardejov Project unveils the intriguing similarity between the posters created independently by [Designer A] and [Designer B]. Both designers astutely interpreted the themes through the symbolism of hands, showcasing their creativity and inventiveness.

Conclusion. Through this remarkable case study, we gain insight into the intriguing convergence of ideas within the City of Bardejov Project. The independent yet harmonious expressions by [Designer A] and [Designer B] exemplify the boundless potential of creativity. As this case study unfolds, it sheds light on the interconnectedness of design inspiration and the role of cultural symbols in shaping creative endeavors.

Interviews
Analyzing the interview responses provided by the designers, both qualitatively and quantitatively, conclusions can be drawn on the reasons for the similarities in international designers' posters and recommendations for creating more unique designs:

Reasons for similarity
Ideation, concept, message, subject matter, and references are dominant factors behind the similarities, with 42.86% of the designers pointing towards these reasons (Respondent 1, 5, 7).

Intellectual reasons, including bankruptcy and reliance on subject descriptions, are factors for 14.29% of the designers (Respondent 2).

42.86% of the designers stressed the influence of the internet and the temptation to imitate without adding personal creativity (Respondent 3, 4, 6).

The occurrence of similar ideas, accidental inspiration, and instances of direct copying also emerged as reasons (Respondent 4 and 6).

Use of visual clichés and absence of unique solutions were highlighted (Respondent 7).

Ways to avoid similarity
Documenting the creative process and detailed idea development were recommended by 42.86% of respondents as strategies to prevent similarity (Respondent 1, 3, 7).

57.14% emphasized the significance of personal development, encompassing developing a personal style through practice, experience, and different expression methods (Respondent 2, 4, 5, 6).

Exploring issues from unconventional perspectives and emphasizing the depth in design were other proposed strategies (Respondent 6).

The power of visual language, including its syntax, grammar, and vocabulary, was also highlighted (Respondent 7).

Influence of design method
Established design expressions and conventions were noted as influencing factors (Respondent 3).

Shared education and thought processes among designers were indicated by 14.29% (Respondents 4).

Abstracting ideas for uniqueness was spotlighted (Respondent 6).

Laziness and lack of creativity emerged as reasons for similarities for some (Respondent 7).

Coincidence and plagiarism

The thin line between coincidental similarity and plagiarism was discussed by all designers, a significant 100%. Coincidental similarities can arise from shared emotional expressions (Respondents 5 and 6).

Direct copying, minimal alteration, and intent are definitive indicators of plagiarism (Respondent 1, 2, 3, 4, 7).

In summary, similarities in international designers' posters arise from diverse factors including shared references, common themes, and visual clichés. To craft more distinctive designs, designers should focus on their own style, minimizing excessive reliance on external sources, and probing unconventional angles. Recording the design process, showing idea evolution, and promoting honesty in design are pivotal in ensuring originality and countering plagiarism.

Conclusion

From our detailed case study and insightful interviews with various designers, several overarching themes emerge regarding the causes of similarities in poster designs across international platforms:

Reasons for similarity

The design process, from ideation to final output, often converges due to shared themes, reliance on common references, and the profound influence of popular trends and cultural norms.

Ideation, concept development, and subject references often lead to unintentional parallels in designs.

The democratization of information and digital tools, while a boon, has sometimes culminated in repetitive themes and styles.

Intellectual habits, such as resorting to clichés, reflecting subject descriptions verbatim, and unintentional inspiration from peers, can compound similarities.

Role of design methods

Established design paradigms, shared educational backgrounds, and collective sensibilities among designers can sometimes result in comparable output. A routine design process, lack of risk-taking, and resistance to diverging from established norms further contribute.

Coincidence vs. plagiarism

While the landscape of design does allow for coincidental overlaps in themes or expressions, there's a thin line between accidental similarity and intentional plagiarism. Recognizing this distinction is vital for maintaining both creativity and integrity in design.

The results of our study, while offering insightful observations into the design similarities within the examined exhibitions, may have limited generalizability due to the specific scope and context of our research. We focused on particular international poster exhibitions and based our findings on a set number of designer interviews. While some of the identified reasons for design similarities, such as cultural influences or technological access, may be generalizable to broader contexts, others might be intricately tied to the themes or geographies specific to the exhibitions we studied.

Furthermore, given the rich diversity in design practices, styles, and influences across the globe, it's vital to approach our conclusions with a contextual lens. While our findings provide a valuable foundation, more expansive studies encompassing a diverse range of exhibitions and designers would be beneficial in drawing more generalizable conclusions.

Future research might consider employing broader sampling methodologies, incorporating more varied exhibitions, and perhaps implementing mixed methods to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Recommendations

Informed by our research findings, we propose the following actionable steps to usher in a new era of unique and culturally resonant poster designs:

Deepen ideation process

Designers should prioritize deeper, more intensive ideation sessions, moving beyond the immediate or most popular references to uncover unique sources of inspiration.

Diverse research and references

Embrace diverse reference materials and experiences, from different cultures, historical periods, and art forms, to broaden the range of inspirations and reduce unintentional parallels.

Educational innovations

Design institutes and educators should continually refresh curricula to integrate non-conventional design approaches, thereby reducing similarities emerging from shared educational backgrounds.

Embrace risk-taking

Challenge conventional design norms. Experimen-

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Name	Professional Affiliation	Area of Expertise
Respondent 1 (Assoc. prof. Ahamad Tarmizi Azizan)	Academician - Public University Lecturer	Art Education, Creative Technology, Mobile Application Design, Heritage
Respondent 2 (Mona Abd Elsalam)	Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University	Graphic Design
Respondent 3 (Dr. Mahima Gupta)	Freelance artist/ Curator	Fine Arts
Respondent 4 (Dominik Jakubowski)	Freelance artist	Digital and flexographic printing and hobby artist
Respondent 5 (Kye-soo Myung)	Professor Emeritus at Konkuk University	Digital creator
Respondent 6 (Faten A. Hussein)	Professor at College of Fine Arts, University of Baghdad	Designer
Respondent 7 (Elizabeth Resnick)	Professor Emerita at Massachusetts College of Art and Design	Designer/ Design Educator/ Curator/ Author

Table 1. Interview participants

tation, while risky, can often result in novel, unique designs that stand apart from the mainstream.

Digital tool mastery
While technological tools have democratized design, mastering them and using them innovatively can result in unique outputs. Harnessing advanced features, combining multiple tools, or even juxtaposing traditional and digital techniques might yield more distinct results.

Avoid design clichés
Continuous self-evaluation during the design process can help identify and avoid relying on clichés or overused concepts.

Promote originality and ethics
Designers should be educated on the importance of originality and the ethics surrounding unintentional inspiration and outright plagiarism. Acknowl-

edging inspiration sources can foster a culture of respect and creativity in the design community.

Expand design collaborations
Engaging with designers from diverse backgrounds, regions, and specializations can introduce fresh perspectives and reduce the echo chamber effect.

Feedback loops
Periodic reviews and feedback from peers, mentors, or varied audiences can provide early indications of similarities and help in refining the design.

Future research
Emphasize the importance of broad-based research in the design community, focusing on varied exhibitions, diverse cultural contexts, and innovative methodologies to achieve more generalizable insights into the world of design.

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