Towards a Global Design Taxonomy

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Abstract
Global design is a recent phenomenon that can be understood as design targeted at a global audience, which aims to be exhibited and consumed by different cultures. Hence, a key question is: how can graphic designers globalize graphic design in an ethical manner without giving rise to breakdowns in communication and threatening cultural diversity? I conducted a pilot study to address this question in which I used an interpretative analysis of global design images, combined with interviews, questionnaires and statistical data. My pilot study addressed these issues through a cross-disciplinary approach, which was grounded in graphic design but embraced the subject areas of anthropology, marketing, philosophy, cultural studies and politics. Although some authors argue that it is just not possible to globalize graphic design, it is improbable that globalization and global design will vanish. Therefore, we are not facing a question of whether or not to produce global design, but of how we should carry out global design in a professional and ethical manner. Overall, this paper advances a conceptual understanding of global design and the different forms and categories it embodies: standard, multicultural and localization. Finally, it concludes by suggesting possible approaches graphic designers might pursue in acting globally, aiming to define future directions for more professional and ethical global graphic design practice.

Keywords

Introduction
This paper defines global design as design targeted at a global audience, which can be displayed to and consumed by different cultures across the world. While this seems to be a good solution for companies and organisations with a global presence, it is not clear whether it brings similar benefits to society as a whole. Global design is still a new concept. Jason (2004) states that issues of globalisation and design are just now reaching us. Global design has generated polarised opinions: while some are eager to point out the importance of cultural differences and that global design goes against that (Glaser, 1994), others seem to assume that global design is the future and that the way to tackle global challenges is to globalize design (Olins, 2004). As we will see, a possible option would be to globalize by means of localisation: aiming at the world by highlighting cultural specificities (as opposed to a sort of cultural levelling down approach).

Most designers interviewed in my research study had an idea of what the term entails; where that was not the case, I introduced the notion in order to enable them to express their point of view on the topic. Despite the divergence of opinions in interviews and questionnaires, they seemed to find it inevitable that, in the same way that globalization is unlikely to go away, the same holds true for global design. On the practical side designers do not know in which shape or form global design takes place. Questions like what makes a design global or is colour choice a relevant factor
when designing for a global audience, reveal that global design is still very much an unknown topic in the design field.

The problem faced by global design is essentially that of visually communicating information to a multicultural audience on a global scale. The relationship between design and culture only recently sparked interest in the design profession. This trend is growing for essentially two reasons. Firstly, intercultural communications is a topic of interest in other fields, such as in business and law, as it represents more and more opportunities for business. Secondly, there are many examples of design globalisation failures that are starting to create awareness in the design profession. The interviews and surveys I conducted show more what designers do not know about global design than what they know. Most designers expressed their general opinion on the topic with neither applicable knowledge of the subject nor of guidelines to conduct a global design programme.

David Sless was more skeptical about the feasibility of conducting a global design programme. He stated that he does not believe in global design because “you have to design in context” and in this scenario “there is no place for a global design that is effective by changing and improving peoples” lives (Sless, David, personal communication, September 2003). He argues “when you look at the issue of globalisation from the perspective of the people on the ground rather than from the perspective of the design studio, it looks quite different. It is not the main game in town, it is very lined up” (Ibid). He also suggests that the problem of globalisation and design should not be looked at as if it were a design problem, but rather “a thing in itself as a symptom of actually what is a much longer term issue in terms of the design profession” (Ibid).

From the literature, I found that global design is a subject new to the design discipline and that knowledge and theory are needed to prepare and equip designers with information on how to deal with new subjects such as global and ethical designs. Designers are starting to understand that global design is in demand by clients but there is not sufficient information from within the design discipline to guide designers in how to deal with this issue. The design discipline can benefit from theory and practical knowledge in a subject like global design. This knowledge can also be used by other disciplines. In the same way that anthropology, particularly cross-cultural studies, was relevant to this pilot study, so design theory and research might prove to be significant to other disciplines.

There are two elements of global design that are implied in the designer’s responsibility towards the audience, as well as towards the client: the communicative and ethical elements of global design. The ethical element calls particular attention to the designer's responsibilities towards the audience, respecting their cultural specificities, and therefore looking at them as subjects, not merely as objects of the design work. The same is the case with the communicative element, since no communication can seriously be undertaken without showing a genuine concern for the target audience's interests and standing. On the other hand, the communicative element also calls particular attention to the designer's duties towards the client, requiring that she will carry out the research necessary to communicate effectively with the audience; in other words, that she will do the work well, that she will make it work. In this sense, since unethical global design works do not tend to achieve their advertising purposes, it does also constitute a failure regarding the designer’s responsibility towards the client.

When discussing the global designer’s responsibility throughout this paper, I will
mention several examples: undertake cross-cultural research; avoid breakdowns in communication; avoid offensiveness by neglecting, misjudging or disrespected culture-specific values or elements; abide by the cultural sustainability concern and steer clear of the danger of leveling down cultures; avoid stereotyping other cultures.

In producing global design, the designer will have to face some moral dilemmas. One is a possible moral conflict between the designer’s ethical responsibility to the client and her ethical responsibility towards the audience or society as a whole. Another moral conflict will arise between respecting culture-specific values and abiding by ethical standards believed to be universally right. Some of these dilemmas are not straightforwardly solvable, but this is very much a feature of human interaction in design as elsewhere.

**The Methods**

My pilot study was concerned with obtaining greater insight and more in-depth knowledge of this new subject of global design and ethical implications. The literature review provided aspects of the issues that have arisen, together with an analysis of designers and their work by means of the research methodology. The foremost motive for choosing an ethnographic method is the fact that global design and its ethical implications are sensitive and relatively new subjects emerging in design. The view that these two aspects (new and sensitive subjects) are features of a qualitative paradigm is maintained by Denzin (2000) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). While the latter makes the point that sensitive subjects (emotions, morality and responsibility) and multiple realities is one of the main objectives of a qualitative approach, the former claims that qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known, as is the case in the design field.

The decision to undertake ethnographic research geared towards global design was underpinned by the desire to adopt a critical research model that would afford insight into current design practice and the attitudes of designers with reference to global and ethical practices. The literature review argued that global design is becoming recognised as a reality in the design sphere and that the emerging ethical concerns for a more cultural-specific design (McCoy and McCoy, 1996) represent a significant development in this regard. The choice of a visual ethnography, quite apart from its appropriateness to the topic of research, entails a number of advantages and disadvantages. It was necessary to identify and be aware of these factors to safeguard the study against possible pitfalls. The following points are a selection of the central arguments found in favour of and against the chosen method:

1. One common concern about qualitative methods is the subjectivity of the evaluator. This brings to mind Patton’s suggestion that “subjective data imply opinion rather than fact, intuition rather than logic, impression rather than confirmation” (1990: 479). While science plays a great value in objectivity, qualitative methods reject the idea of ‘one truth.’ Denzin (2000) argues that value free interpretative research is impossible. Undoubtedly, other researchers carrying out similar research would achieve different results. Nevertheless, an explicit methodology (of my work) will aid other researchers to follow the various steps while carrying out similar research projects, so as to understand the results. Understanding the results however does not mean that other researchers will achieve the same results. Having said this, the fact that different researchers carrying out the same research do not achieve the same results does not invalidate the initial original project, and as noted by Wright “any of these viewings is not truer or more accurate than another, but they have triggered different thought trains” (1999: 110).
2. One great advantage of using visual and tape recording methods is that the data can be accessed at any time during the research. I believe that reading through them at different points of my pilot study brings new light to areas that might not at first have seemed relevant.

3. On a more personal level, I believe that working with images is an advantage for my work because it is a subject I feel at ease with in both the personal and public spheres of my life. As a graphic designer it has been my job to construct images, invest objects with feelings through images and their compositional layout and colours and this is a factor that helps me to deconstruct the images I am analysing. In addition, I experienced creating global designs in two different continents and cultures, South China (Macau) and the UK. I agree with Rose (2001) that successful interpretation depends on a passionate engagement with what you see. As noted by Strauss and Corbin (1990) the researcher’s skill and readiness to attempt a qualitative inquiry comes from a number of sources, including professional literature, professional experience, and personal experience.

Regarding the following limitations of the chosen methods, I decided not only to identify them but also try to understand the best way to guard against them:

1. The issue of the researchers’ subjectivity also raises questions about the validity of the research. The use of additional methods is a means of ensuring the validity of this pilot study via the triangulation of methods.

2. The choice of an ethnographic methodology has as a disadvantage the bias on the part of the researcher, because of his or her involvement with the objects of the research. This, as Ferrarotti points out, can be avoided by means of “critical reflection” (1983: 90).

3. According to Emmison and Smith (2000: 63) “there are those who maintain that visual data are inherently qualitative: a domain of genres, narratives and codes. For others, visual information can be readily quantified through content analysis procedures.” However, this quantifiable account of image research is also (Emmison and Smith, 2000:1) “generally outside the scope of an individual student project” (Ibid).

4. Patton (1990) argues that there are limitations to data collected in writing and questionnaires. These limitations relate to the writing skills of the interviewees, the impossibility of probing or extending responses, and the effort required of the person completing the questionnaire.

5. Visual anthropology is a relatively new field within anthropology; it was only around the early twentieth century that visuals acquired the status of evidence. Burke (2001) argues that what William Mitchell calls a “pictorial turn” took place only in the 1980s. At present there is a relatively good amount of literature on the subject, but, as pointed out by Banks, “insight is [however] scattered or confined to quite specific areas such as the production of ethnographic film” (2001:2).
Visual Ethnography

My pilot study analyzed seven research images, following a visual ethnographic method (Banks, 2001). These graphic images were chosen because of their global nature. As pointed out by Collier, visual analysis is a decoding or translation process.

“It frees the photographs from their limitation as documents or illustration and allows them to become the basis for systematic knowledge” (1986: 170). The analysis started by justifying the choice of each image, followed by an analysis of its content (internal narrative) and context (external narrative).

Given that this is image-based research, the choice of images for this pilot study was a key factor. Two criteria underline the choice of images in this pilot study:

1. The seven global design images chosen for this research belong to the following brands: Apple, Levi Strauss, Darkie, Coca-Cola, HSBC, United Nations and Benetton. All seven images were chosen following mainly a global design criterion, in other words because these images are recognised examples of global design, not so much in view of the companies to which the design works belong. As a result of this choice most of these images belong to companies that have some history and experience in global markets and global design. Although company criterion was not a key concern in the selection of images this factor assists in the analyses of images because these companies have a vast record of other global design applications (websites, packaging, other campaigns, etc…) that allow comparison between global designs, which is a feature of visual ethnographic methods. It is the intention of this research to analyze established examples of global design and its ethical implications (from a
graphic design viewpoint). Hence, the fact that these images belong to well established companies could be helpful as they have long established experience of cross-cultural communication, and have experienced ethical blunders provoked by their designs in other cultures, as less well-established companies might not. These brands’ longevity in experiencing intercultural communication problems is assumed to be greater than that of a recently launched company. Additionally, it is relevant to work with images belonging to known brands because I can assess perceptions of the brand other than my own, which works as a kind of validation of my assessments and broadens my knowledge of the image, in other words, it provides me with a bigger picture of my image. The fact that I chose these images does not mean that I agree or disagree with their global design. This investigation aims to understand the present status quo of global design so as to be able, later, to suggest ethical ways of conducting global design work. These images were selected because they are instances of global design, and therefore share the fact that they target a global audience. This research looks at the target audience, not from a socio-economic perspective, but from a viewpoint of geographical and cultural reach. For example, while the selected image for the United Nations aims to target the world geographically and culturally, the visual chosen for Coca-Cola aims to target the African continent.

2. It was determinant for the choice of visuals to know their context, what Banks terms “external narrative” (2001: 11). The external narrative is the social and cultural context of the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing. This point is shared by Pink (2001), Barthes (1977), and Mitchell (1986). It is important to know both internal (the content of the image) and external narratives when reading and interpreting images. While both narratives are important in the analysis of images, the external narrative is of a greater importance in this research since it is in the qualitative paradigm that the researcher, using a naturalistic approach, seeks to understand phenomena in context, so it is mandatory to know the context. In addition, because the images selected for the analysis were not taken/created by me, I need to know the context since I was not familiar with the cultural settings in which the image was created (Banks, 2001).

Creating a Global Design Taxonomy
After analysing findings gathered from the analysis of seven research images I established three main categories for global design. The three categories emerged in the analysis, following an ethnographic methodology, while observing the images, comparing them with other global images, differentiating them, learning and understanding them. Having analysed seven main graphic images which I take to be reasonably representative of the practice, I will advance different categories of global design by looking at what I found to be their more significant attributes. In doing this, I hope to shed some more light on the concept of global design: to better understand what global design is about and the different ways in which it manifests itself in the design practice, as well as the distinct ethical implications of the different categories of global design.

Three Categories of Global Design
The global design patterns I will advance constitute three categories that reflect and encompass what I understand to be the existing approaches to global design. I have named them (1) standard, (2) multicultural, and (3) localisation categories.
Figure 2. This image is a visual representation of the three categories of global design.

Standard and Multicultural
The standard and multicultural categories of global design use one (the same) design campaign to be presented to all the different audiences. I will call this a ‘same-to-all campaign,’ that is, a single or unified campaign equally presented to the world or global audience. The whole world is addressed by the same campaign (or the same campaigns). Examples of these are the Darlie packaging (See Fig. 1) and the United Nations stamp design, among many others. Using one image to target the world has its advantages:

1. It is a cheap solution for a company or organisation to use the same design to target the world. Localisations are costly and increase the complexity of the design and maintenance processes.
2. It raises brand recognition.
3. It is easy to develop and change a global design as opposed to several localisations.
4. It is an attainable solution for small and medium sized companies that have a global perspective (through online business).

Standard
The standard category is design carried out by a same-to-all campaign (or image). The designer creates a single campaign to target the global audience with whom it seeks to communicate. Further to the fact that it uses a single image, the standard category represents, in marketing language, a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. It is standard in that it uses a standard campaign (same-to-all). But it is also standard in that it conveys a standard (not diversified) message, typically by means of a single or simplified visual symbol. In this it contrasts with the multicultural category, which, although being carried out by a same-to-all campaign, integrates a number of diverse visual elements modelled on the audiences’ diversities. Characteristically (but not necessarily), the standard method tries to make use of ‘problem-free’ visuals that have the potential of being exhibited in any culture across the globe. According to graphic designer Stephen Woowat, the most difficult thing about being a graphic designer is “trying to find design solutions which please everyone” (2006).

Of course – and this is one of the main problems faced by the standard category – the response of those looking from different cultural contexts will not be uniform. An example of the different cultural lens towards an image is the Ikea standard’s design attempt to conciliate in their instructions the uniqueness of the standard category’s message with some culture-specific concerns regarding Muslim countries. To avoid
offending their customers in Muslim countries, Ikea used only pictures of men (in their manual instructions for assembling furniture) in the standard design used for the whole world. However, Norway’s Prime Minister charged Ikea with sexism for not including women in their instructions (The Evening standard, 2005). In fact, this is a good example, not only of the practical difficulty of dealing with cultural diversity by means of a single and uniform design solution, but also of the ethical implications of that venture.

Creating a universal standard without any cultural connotation is a complex task because there are too many differences between cultures. As noted by Per Galle the worldview itself includes inconsistency and “the cure for this inconsistency is explicitly addressing the issue of world views underlying design theory” (2006). This standard category might use different visual approaches. Among several other possibilities, it could be a search for the one thing in common, a sort of lowest common denominator, or it could be done through the use of a rather abstract image (iPod campaign with shadow silhouettes of people of indeterminate race or age). As noted by Lipton with regard to visual solutions that intend to target too many audiences at the same time, there is a danger in that “if you dilute what is ethnic about a design (…) you risk watering it down or losing entirely the intended impact on the audience” (2002: 8).


For a standard category of design to work it needs to have the potential to be reasonably well understood by all the communities it targets. In this sense, for instance, it should be unambiguous. It must be capable of conveying the intended message to all its recipients. I will address this concern, which I will name the communicative requirement of global design, below. This is a relevant requirement, particularly for the standard category, because finding a single solution that is understandable by distinct communities is, in itself, likely to be rather a challenge to the designer. We will also see that the standard category gives rise to particular ethical concerns, being very much the emblematic category of much of the criticisms leveled against global design.

Although avoiding culture specific images is a fairly frequent way of producing standard global design, the standard category can also be achieved by resorting to culture specific messages, symbols or images (in contrast with culture-free images). Conceptually speaking, there is room for the use of culturally-bound elements in a single standard message. There are also actual examples of this. This would occur when the design advertises a typically local product or one with strong culture-
specific connotations. This could be the case of local wine, say Port, which is characteristic of the Douro Region of Northern Portugal, as well as, for example, of Italian food. The standard category can also be culture-specific in the sense seen by many as cultural imperialism, such as the westernisation of values. Here the object of the design work is said to be forcefully bent to match a specific, sometimes dominant, culture or way of seeing, and is then visually ‘imposed’ on everyone. These different sorts of standard design give rise to distinct ethical concerns, such as the levelling down problem (cultural sustainability) and the ‘cultural imperialism’ criticism, which will be discussed below.

**Multicultural**

The multicultural approach is one that globalises by including mixtures of elements from different cultures, such as people, products or symbols in a same-to-all campaign exhibited to its global audience. Examples of this kind are the Multicultural IPA logo (Fig. 6), the Guardian online banner (Fig. 5), the ‘Face the World Foundation’ brand image (Fig. 7), and ‘We are All Africans’ brand image (Fig. 8). Its aim is to be global by being inclusive of different races and culture manifestations. In a way, the multicultural category of global design is a method of getting the possible relevant localisations into a single graphical design work, making it a universal – as opposed to a localisation – type of global design. In this category, as in the localisation category, the culture specificity of the campaign lies in incorporating values borrowed from the different communities of the addressee audience. It does not impose culture specific values or ways of seeing on others, it aims to reflect in the campaign the diversity of those targeted by it. It therefore expresses a concern for the culture specificities of the audience, and not of the product or of the dominant culture.

Multicultural design is necessarily a composite, made up of diverse elements incorporated into a single design work or within the same campaign. This complexity is not only a pictorial or artistic challenge, it is a communicative one. A frequently recurring case is that of multiracial design, as exemplified in Figure 5. Lipton argues that the use of ethnic models is hardly new, nonetheless the “practice of ethnic inclusive casting constitutes a trend” (2002: 179). I believe that more than ethnic casting we are witnessing the growing trend of mixing different cultural elements to represent cultural diversity.

![Figure 5](image-url)

**Figure 5.** Promotional header for the guardian journal captured from the guardian website on October 11, 2006 (guardian.co.uk), 2006.

There are, however, many other possible cases of multicultural design that appeal to local specific values or elements, other than the rather straightforward case of race. Food is a good example of an additional element that designers have recourse to in order to express in their work culture-specific values. In fact, food is widely seen in the popular eye as one of the obvious expressions of a community’s culture and identification.
Figure 6. The image shows the logo for the US Primary Care Medical Group, Multicultural. The brand image was designed by Futuristic Logo (www.futuristiclogo.com), 2006.

Figure 7. Brand image for the Face the World Foundation by Ion Design, which is an organisation that supports children’s charities throughout British Columbia (www.designcares.com), 2006.

Figure 8. The image shows an African hand in which each finger carries a different shade of white. The title of the campaign is ‘We are all Africans’ and it is sponsored by ONE, the campaign to make poverty history (www.one.org), 2006.

Localisation
In the localisation category the designer carries out his work by means of diversified campaigns. Instead of setting a single campaign to his global audience, the global designer develops several campaigns that, having some common or traceable visual elements, are different from each other. He does this by adapting the campaign’s base to the different communities it will address. Instead of incorporating distinct culture-
specific elements in a single campaign (as in the multicultural category), the localisation category develops different (although related) campaigns. This approach localises in two related senses: (i) by proposing different campaigns to different communities, and (ii) by appealing to local or culture-specific values of those communities. It is in the second sense that one might talk of the multicultural category as integrating different localisations. The complete and proper sense of the localisation category, however, is seen when diversified campaigns are carried out in different places to suit the culture-specific demands (values) of those places. Localisation, as proposed in this research, constitutes an autonomous category of global design, and not merely a characteristic (cultural adaptation) shared by some global design works.

Figure 9. Two snapshots of Coca-cola’s front page website for Japan and the United Kingdom (www.cocacola.co.jp) and (www.coca-cola.co.uk), 2006.

Figure 10. The image shows an example of the localisation category of global design: the Euro coin design. The front is common to all European countries, which adopted the Euro, but the back of the coin is localised to each country. In this figure one can see French, Spanish, and Portuguese coins. This duality also occurs in Euro notes (Barreto, 2006).

Jakob Nielsen (1999) said that localisation is the making of an adapted version of one design for a specific locale and that it often involves translation. The localisation category does not necessarily mean a visual solution created from scratch but it is rather an adaptation of some features that could signify a breakdown in communication or even be offensive in neglecting or misunderstanding other communities’ values. The approach of the localisation category has gained popularity as a method of addressing cross-cultural audiences. Unlike the standard global design approach, which in its most typical cases tries to erase cultural traces, the localisation category makes these cultural differences its focus. The localisation category works by writing towards a specific discourse community, where the specificities of a certain
culture are used instead of a global standard.

Some examples of global design-localisations are: FedEx with 117 design localisations, Coca-cola’s website image with 85 localisations, and McDonald’s. The use of localisations involves more logistics, tends to be a costly solution and is most often seen in large multinationals like the above-mentioned brands.

The Localisation category has the following advantages:
1. Because it is a localised message it should engage its local consumers more and avoid breakdowns in communication.
2. It allows the brand to adjust to its context. For example, while in Europe IKEA furniture is a cheap design solution in other places like Macau and China it is state of the art European design (as noted by Olins [2003], “not everybody everywhere has the same reaction to the brand”).
3. Localisations are easier to blend with local organisations, like charities and Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives that will improve brand equity and will help local causes.
4. It is an attainable solution for giant multinational companies that have several branches across the world, like the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Corporation (HSBC), which can afford to cater for small niche markets (cf. the New York campaign).

There are several ways of conducting design localisations, there is no unique formula. As Brennan (A. Brennan, personal communication, October 20, 2006) stated in her interview “two major localisation assignments that I was involved with was the localisation of Hilton Hotels and Opodo[4]—each of them was carried out in a different way.” Every company finds specific modes of localisation and the balance of local content is resolved case by case and susceptible to evolution. Because what are valued ideals in one cultural system may be conditions to be avoided in another, localisation is a great communication challenge. Nancy Hoft (1996) notes a potential danger when localisation is not performed in a skilled and proficient manner, as “we find a strong trend toward generalisation.” Excessive generalisation can lead to myth and stereotyping, among other extremes (Ibid). The danger of stereotyping in global design localisations might occur in different circumstances but a common instance is one where global companies do not use local knowledge to help them localise their image. Generalisations in graphic design can be avoided by means of a good knowledge and research on the audience/culture to target.

Communicative Challenges faced by the Global Design Taxonomy

The specific communicative and ethical challenges faced by the three categories of global design lie primarily in being called to address several cultures, expressing different, sometimes contrasting, and at times antagonistic and incompatible values. This is – among other reasons of a practical and economic nature – what makes global design idiosyncratic, and therefore what gives these two elements the distinctive shape they have when read as constituents of global design. One can refer to the former type of challenge that designers and companies are likely to face in the design process as the communicative element of global design. It can be seen as an epistemological problem since, in the words of Steup, “understood more broadly, epistemology is about issues having to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry” (Steup, 2006). In fact, one of the specific challenges of global design concerns precisely the creation and dissemination of knowledge in a diversified cultural context.
One of the fundamental maladies faced by global design consists of breakdowns in communication caused by cultural blindness. I believe this is firstly a matter of inefficiency: a campaign that did not succeed, that failed in its communicative and persuasive purposes. Yet, communication failures might also give rise to ethical problems. This is for instance the case of offensiveness, where (by ignorance or professional negligence) a successful image in one country causes offense in another, as well as many forms that show disrespect to the audience's cultural integrity. In many other cases, as noted above when discussing the iceberg of culture, breakdowns in communication give rise to delayed or abandoned projects, loss of business and reputation, failure to persuade the audience to a social cause or concern, etc., but no evident wrongdoing is involved. Rather, these are cases where the efficiency of the design work as a communicative device failed, falling short of transmitting/communicating its message and achieving its communicative aims. Even though, as mentioned above, communicative fiascos are also very likely to constitute ethical failures, it was worthwhile looking at each of the two elements as separate yet related dimensions of global design. Let us now look at the communicative challenges typically faced by each category of global design.

The communicative challenge of the standard and multicultural categories of global design consists of succeeding in reaching its aim by means of a single and unitary graphic device. The standard category does this by using a common or one-size-fits-all element, while the multicultural tries to take on board the diversity it will have to contend with, by incorporating elements harvested from the different cultures or communities it sets out to address. The standard category is likely to face a more demanding challenge regarding the substance or content of the visual message, since it is tackling broad cultural diversity with a single or simplified solution. That is not so much the case of the multicultural category, where building the substance of the message is facilitated by bringing into the campaign a diversity of weaponry modelled on the very cultural diversity it is meant to deal with. Yet, the multicultural category might have to face more rigorously the challenge of accommodating them graphically, of reuniting successfully in a single design work a diversity of meanings, symbols, images or colours.

The localisation category of global design is made up of a group of local images which together constitute the global campaign. The challenge faced by the localisation category will in great part lie in achieving preservation of brand unity or the internal harmony of the various campaigns by using a common string of identifiable visual or verbal elements. The unity or harmony of the global campaign is made problematic by the use of a plurality of graphic devices composed of different and culturally-specific elements. This can turn out to be a dual, although intimately related, challenge. It might come in the form of struggling to preserve an identifiable graphic harmony between the different visual elements used in the localisation campaigns. Alternatively, the challenge might reside in succeeding in passing with a significant level of consistency the global campaign's common message which is presented throughout the world in different shapes by the localisation campaigns (having reference to distinct elements, colours or symbols that are likely to express dissimilar meanings). In the case of localisation within a mini-global design scenario some of these problems might manifest themselves in a more intense fashion, since the different campaigns are all presented in the same location, and are open to scrutiny by all the diverse communities targeted by each of the localised campaigns.

**Ethical Implications of the Global Design Taxonomy**

The ethical implications and challenges of global design are intrinsically related to the
method of addressing a diversified audience characterised by cultural diversity, which might express not only distinct, but also contrasting and antagonistic values. I will advance two possible fundamental ethical implications of global design:

- causing offense (by neglecting or misjudging culture-specificities)
- leveling down cultures (which is the cultural sustainability concern).

As we will see, these two ethical implications very often go hand in hand, as design leveling down cultures conveys disrespect for the audience's cultural integrity by being both disrespectful and offensive. In this paper I will look into the ethical implications of global design works as global design works. Needless to say, there are other ethical concerns the global designer needs to consider, such as how to strike a good balance between his general duties towards the audience (or society as whole) and his specific duties towards his client, ethical commitment to the truthfulness of the message, etc. However, these are general concerns of the design field, not distinct concerns of global design practice. Together with understanding the global design practice, the specific ethical challenges posed by global design constitute a main object of interest and the driving force of this pilot study. The question to be answered is, 'What are the specific ethical issues designers and companies should be concerned with when carrying out global design campaigns?' I am suggesting that for global design to be successful it must achieve in communicating (if possible, in an appealing fashion) to the global audience the message the designer intended (communicative requirement), in a manner not distasteful or offensive for locally-bound reasons and without leveling down cultural specificities as required by cultural sustainability.

I will start by spelling out the danger of causing offense through the use of global design works. I am assuming that there are both justified and unjustified offenses. That is, that there are offensive advertisements (or other actions) that use offense as a justified method of conveying a message or making a point. A case of justified offense is Benetton’s death penalty campaign (Fig. 131). It is justified not so much because one believes that it rightly exposed a wrong-headed policy, but because it was reasonable defense of a reasonable point. This is a consequence of the ideal of tolerance according to which one should accept much of which one dislikes or believes to be bad, wrong or objectionable. Offensive criticisms are part of our society and should be tolerated (within certain limits, discussion of such criticisms lie beyond the scope of this paper). Contrary to these sorts of offensive advertisements, global campaigns that are offensive due to the specific nature of global design are not put forward to make a sensible or reasonable point, nor are they offensive in their intention.

Successful examples of global design must meet the standards set by both the communicative and the ethical or unobjectionable requirements as described above. In fact the latter is in great part a reflex or consequence of the first. If someone unintentionally causes offense in the above-mentioned sense it is because she failed to pass on the message in the manner intended because there was a fundamental failure at the communicative level: the designer did not take into account the cultural specificities and the diversity that the design work would have to encounter and address, and the result might become catastrophic as a design work. Instead of appealing and engaging people, it offends and repels them. This element tends, in its typical form, to be a particular expression of the communicative element: if a global graphic work offends because it has neglected culture-specific values, it is primarily because it failed to communicate the intended message; it was a communication failure with significant ethical implications.

The specificities that mark global design call for ethical guidance to designers by
inculcating awareness of the cultural specificities of their audiences and the particular implications of their global work. Neglecting cultural specificities is a potential source of unjustified disrespect for other people's values. Therefore, the inoffensive requirement of global design – in the specific shape traced above – is a result caused by a breakdown in communication. These are cases where, due to cultural blindness, either by ignoring or misjudging cultural specificities, the design work has offended instead of persuaded, has mistreated instead of praised an audience chosen for the product or social cause in question.

Another likely ethical consequence of global design is the leveling-down danger. By approaching a culturally diverse audience through a global campaign there is the risk of cultural annihilation or of reducing culture-specific diversities to a common or dominant view. This is where the concern about cultural sustainability lies. Approaching cultural diversity with a single view tends to bend some of the audience's opinions to a single, dominant view. For this reason, some critics refer to this practice as cultural imperialism. The Westernisation or Americanisation of values often produces this result. Examples of anti-American and Western values are seen in Fig. 12. However, the culturally dominant view might arise from the opposite side of the equation. The Ikea example could exemplify just that; the company tried to match the cultural concerns of Muslim Countries by not featuring women in their instructions manual, yet ended up sacrificing a value of gender equality fundamental to Western culture and triggering an institutional reaction in Norway’s courts, where a legal case was brought against Ikea.

![Figure 12](image12.jpg)

*Figure 12.* These four images show a satirical criticism of the 'cultural imperialism' of the west, especially of the United States of America ([www.Adbusters.org](http://www.Adbusters.org)), 2006.

It is of course possible that leveling down the culture specificities of the audience is in itself a cause of offense. It might express the sort of disrespect and diminishing conduct that one tends to observe in offensive actions. Hence, the same action might be unethical for both these reasons.

Global design also incurs the danger of stereotyping cultures. Stereotypes of race and culture have been long seen in the design practice. This is particularly relevant to global design practice as it is a deliberate cross-culture design. Stereotypes can be seen as a consequence of a leveling down approach and of lack of sensitivity to cultural sustainability concerns. These maladies can go as far as to imply more deeply-rooted ethical problems such as that of racism, which is a wrong in itself, independently of the context in which it is seen, a more extensive problem than that which cultural sustainability concerns seem to encompass.

Not causing offense or leveling down different cultures by neglecting, misjudging or disrespecting the cultural specificities encountered is a general requirement of any successful instance of global design, calling for an attitude of interest and respect, and demanding professional research of relevant cultural traits of the targeted audiences.

Nevertheless, it is worth underlining that – although respect for the cultural specificities
of the global audience constitutes the ethical requirement of global design—ethical concerns might themselves be justifiably presented as the reason for causing offense and levelling down cultural-specific traits.

Conclusions
Is this new practice possible? The question is not an ontological or existential one, since the practice is out there for all to see. The question is whether it is feasible or achievable. Can one successfully design for the world? Bogaert D., personal communication, October 30, 2003).

Glaser (1994), Sless (2003), among many others, are rather skeptical. Other authors and practitioners tend to dismiss it as an unproblematic practice. I suggest that none of these positions is precisely right. Beginning with the latter, I believe that global design is a problematic practice that faces difficult challenges (on communicative and ethical levels) which ask for a change in the culture and in education of the design profession. These challenges and difficulties are, in part, a reflection of the challenges and difficulties faced by any sort of cross-cultural communication and, in part, specific challenges faced because global design is visual communication. On a different note, I believe that it is not even strategically wise to defend the unproblematic nature of a problematic practice. Facing a problem has always been the first step towards defeating or overcoming it. Exposing the possible merits and demerits of the practice is in great part what this research is about.

To those who disbelieve the possibility of a successful global design practice, I would respond that global design is becoming a rather sophisticated and diverse practice. Much of the criticism levelled against global design are in truth merely addressed to those design works to which I referred under the category of standard (global) design. The multicultural and localisation categories allow the designer to overcome many of the difficulties presented. On the other hand, the go abstract solution is a way of avoiding cultural clashes, even within the standard design context. If there are situations where global design can simply not work, that does not mean that we are facing a doomed or hopeless practice. The iPod example, among others, demonstrates that there is room for a successful global design practice. If people, companies, institutions, products, and social causes have become global so will graphic design. The choice is not between doing it or not, but between doing it in a professionally and socially responsibly manner or not.

I believe that the best way for designers to deal with global design in an ethical manner is to acknowledge its existence and learn its contours. As argued by designer Simon Esterson “a prerequisite to ethical awareness is an acknowledgement of the complexity of the issues involved” (cited in Roberts, 2006: 152). This will endow designers with their own theory and methods when dealing with global design, instead of following other disciplines’ methods or, as is more common, the clients’ method. This client-oriented design culture was found, from literature and interviews, to be a problem in the design profession. As pointed out by Frascara, “if designers want to become active in the definition of their roles, instead of allowing them to be always defined from outside, then they have to become involved in the identification of problems” (1997: 23). The designer’s role has to change from being merely a problem-solver to a problem-identifier. This pilot study is an attempt to contribute towards filling this gap: to be a problem identifier for global design, and, it is hoped, a problem solver too.

References


Notes
1. According to Thomas Oosthuizen "many brands equate the term globalisation with creating images that appeal to the lowest common denominator" (2005: 62).
2. I do not mean to say that this requirement is exclusive of global design, and not applicable to non-global or ordinary instances of design work. Quite the contrary. However, it gives autonomous attention to what is particularly at stake when applicable to global design (even more regarding the standard category of global design).
3. I do not mean to say that this requirement is exclusive of global design, and not applicable to non-global or ordinary instances of design work. Quite the contrary. However, it gives autonomous attention to what is particularly at stake when applicable to global design (even more regarding the standard category of global design).
4. Opodo is a Pan-European travel agency based in England owned by nine of Europe’s airlines.