

# Art as a Business: The Intention of Andy Warhol's Brand Images

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the business and artistic values of Andy Warhol's three artworks, Green Coca-Cola Bottles, Campbell's Soup Cans, and Brillo Box. The three art pieces could be considered typical examples of the cohabitation of art and business, the two seemingly conflicting concepts. The business value of his works lies in the similarity between the pattern in his paintings and the mass production of the consumerist society, the association between the brands and their products, and his underlying intention in rebuilding the brands' brand image. The artistic values of Warhol's art could be detected in the composition and the technique used to produce the paintings. Warhol's works also successfully blur the boundary between art and reality, echoing the spirit of rebellion in the postmodern era. Fredric Jameson's theory of consumerist society is also utilized in the analysis.

**Keywords:** *Andy Warhol, brand images, postmodernism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Born in 1928, Andy Warhol was a representative of the post-modern Pop Art movement in the 20th century. The impact of Warhol's paintings is profound, which could be supported by the praise of Warhol from the "New York magazine", as the embodiment of the US during the 1960s [1]. Warhol's artworks could be divided into several branches, including portraits of "celebrity", "money", "time", "death", and "identity" [2]. Warhol is renowned for his series featuring products from various brands, and this series is often associated with the concept of "brand images" during the mid to late 20th century. According to scholar Schroeder, Warhol's depiction of these commodities alters the image of the products in the people's minds and endows these brands' new meanings [3].

Before his career as a painter, Warhol took the occupation of a "commercial illustrator", which probably lay the foundation for his later frequent engagement of commercial products in his works [1]. When Warhol graduated from college with a degree in "pictorial design", he started his career as an illustrator, whose renowned story illustration could be found in "Glamour Magazine" issue published in 1949. This

success gained him reputable customers such as "Tiffany & Co" and "Vogue" [4], forging Warhol's first bond with the commercial world.

The most typical idiosyncrasy of Warhol's artwork is "repetition" and nuance "variation" of the subject [1]. The technique Warhol used, "silkscreen", which creates the possibility for duplicating the same object multiple times, was most commonly used for marketing purposes at that time [1]. Using this technique, Warhol created numerous paintings featuring a single subject, but the same imagery is repeated multiple times. Such pattern could be easily detected in one of his most prominent artwork Campbell's Soup Cans [5], where the image of soup cans was repeated 32 times with alterations in the labels. Another work of Warhol's, Double Elvis [6], also adopts a similar pattern.

Warhol's preference for duplicating subjects might originate from the brand "crisis" during the 1950s and 1960s. Warhol, who has been engaged in the field of media marketing, was aware of the issue national brands were facing during the 1950s: the competition between national brands and private ones is only becoming tougher [7]. The emergence of private brands compromises the significance people put into "national

brands". According to Forbes Council member Timothy [8], brand image is a combination of all the things that are somehow connected with the brand. Therefore, the representations of the distinctive products, such as the soup cans in Campbell's Soup Cans [5], serve as part of the brand image, as suggested by Timothy [8].

In the middle of the rat race of American brand competition in the 1960s, Andy Warhol's brand images strike the eyes of consumers and art critics at the same time. Brands are inherently visual, designed to attract attention and stimulate the senses. Images, then, provide a critical marker of economic value [9]. Warhol's brand images win both commercial success and critics' reviews, inside of which copies of logos were made in forms of repetition. His choice of subjects, which are mass-produced products, revealed his marketing techniques aimed at consumerism, at a "postindustrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society" [10]. Not only did his work win a commercial success, but Andy Warhol also embodied a new aesthetic trend to an industrial society and brought Pop art into the realm of brand culture. Among his designs, the and Green Coca-Cola (Fig.1), BottlesCampbell's Soup (Fig.2), and even Brillo Box (Fig.3) were deemed, representative. These works were easily recognizable and reproducible with a certain mechanicalness and repeatability. Unlike modernist arts, these brand images and commodities are results of "styling changes derive from artistic experiment" [10]. To help us learn Andy Warhol's aesthetic design and historical background, Frederic Jameson's theory of the aesthetic of consumer society is applied to this paper.

In Frederic Jameson's book *The cultural turn: Selected writings on the postmodern 1983-1998*, he raises the theory of "The Aesthetic of Consumer Society" about the relationship between cultural production and social life [10]. He states that postmodernist art is commercially successful. There are two reasons why Jameson's theory can be used to explain Andy Warhol's brand image very appropriately. First of all, Andy Warhol is a typical postmodernist artist, in line with the main object of Jameson's discussion. Secondly, Andy Warhol's brand image is an art form based on commercial purpose. The 1960s is the prosperous age of consumer society, consistent with the artistic feature and social background of postmodernism that Jameson points out.

To be specific, with the help of Frederic Jameson's theory, the secret of how Andy Warhol's brand images can balance the seemingly contradictory sides of art and business could be worked out. In Jameson's opinion, commodity production is now closely linked to the stylistic changes in artistic experiments. Then these art forms are considered a classic by the art circle. Back to Andy Warhol's series of brand images, such as Green

Coca Cola Bottles, they are original as a kind of advertisement strategy to help national companies win in "the battle of the brands" with private brands [11]. After constantly practicing these images for commercial purposes and bringing them into the gallery by means of artistic operation, Andy Warhol has established his mature style and won a great reputation. Eventually, Andy Warhol enjoyed both commercial and artistic success.

## 2. GREEN COCA-COLA BOTTLES

In Andy Warhol's brand image, Green Coca-Cola Bottles (Fig. 1), business is compatible with art fairly perfectly. Firstly, regarding the composition, dozens of coca-cola bottles filled the whole picture. This repeated way closely binds the brand of Coca-Cola with the image of a glass bottle so that when people see the bottle, in reality, they will associate it with Coca-Cola. Once this brand symbol has left a deep impression in people's minds, consumers will also prioritize Coca-Cola Brand when they buy cola. Thus, the most basic business purpose of Andy Warhol's brand image has been achieved. However, this work is not only for commercial purposes. In our daily life, advertisements are often full of vitality, focusing on the use of goods. By contrast, Andy Warhol adopts a static way of presentation, just copied and pasted commodities as images and arranged them neatly. A wide range of commodity images in Andy Warhol's ingenious arrangement has become a creative art form.

In addition, from the perspective of color, Andy Warhol skillfully applied the principle of contrast color. The arrangement of cups in the main body of the picture follows the original green of green glass bottles in the 1960s, but there is a bright red Coca-Cola logo under the large fluorescent green. The simple color contrast between the two groups emphasizes the vigorous sales of Coca Cola industry and highlights the symbolism of Coca Cola brand. This kind of alternative creation has a strong visual impact, enabling the ordinary commodity image to also have artistic appeal.

What is more, from the pioneering silkscreen technique Andy Warhol used, we can also see the interesting combination of art and business. On the one hand, this skill enabled him to create his own works of art through a mechanical process consistent with the theme of the consumer culture he borrowed. Frederic Jameson believes that the formal features of postmodernist art express the deeper logic of this social system. And "copy" is indeed an obvious feature of postmodern society: the copying of images, the dissemination of media, the production and circulation of commodities, etc., are full of repetition. These duplicate images of coca-cola bottles and standardized formats remind the mechanical reproduction of goods, a kind of artistic creation based on contemporary life

experience that has the neat beauty of modern industrial society.

On the other hand, the artist's presence is the key to his unique distinction between artworks and mechanical reproductions. Although this is a creative printing method, Andy Warhol still needs to make an original bottom plate of Coca Cola bottle and then use screen-printing technology to copy and arrange the bottom plate one by one on the screen. Andy Warhol's artistic creativity is reflected in the creation of the prototype. So, we can pay attention to the shape of one cup first. He used printmaking, an art form between machinery and handwork, and summarized the Coca-Cola bottle into a carved image with strong lines and concise images. Also, as evidenced by the signs of "mistakes" deliberately revealed in Andy Warhol's works, the black outline on the screen is probably due to the hand printing from a carved wood block to a green grid pattern. Each bottle is different in color uniformity and outline clarity. The bottle is often a little crooked, not a regular set of printing, making them appear simultaneously handmade and individualized. This is also the secret to the establishment and impressiveness of the special style of Andy Warhol's works.



**Figure 1.** Andy Warhol, Green Coca Cola Bottles, 1962.

### 3. CAMPBELL'S SOUP CANS

The painting Campbell's Soup Cans [5] is probably Warhol's most renowned artwork. This painting features 32 panels, and on each panel is one of the canned soups from the company Campbell [12]. There is one soup can on each panel, and these cans look quite similar to each other at first sight, though each can has a unique label indicating the content inside [5]. As Jameson suggests, the rising of a "new society" provides possibilities for a new pattern of lifestyle, featuring mass "consumption", ubiquitous "advertisements", and a more convenient traffic system. Jameson later attributes these phenomena as a result of consumerism and "capitalism" [10]. With the competition between national and private brands escalating during the 1950s and 1960s [7], Warhol's

artworks featuring commodities could be interpreted as an attempt to rebuild the brand images of the products portrayed in his work.

The business value of Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans [5] lies in the way it is composed. We could see the can in the painting are almost identical, and one might assume that the image was produced by reprinting the same image multiple times. This is Warhol's attempt to reflect the consumer society in his artwork. As Jameson [10] argues, the rise of consumer society is closely associated with "capitalism". On the other hand, consumer society is often linked to mass production, which features duplicating the same product multiple times to magnify the available margin. Campbell's Soup Cans [5] adopts a similar construction method. Warhol duplicates the same image multiple times to achieve the effect of "infinite convergence", that the products look almost identical to each other. Yet, there are still nuances in the label.

In addition, the arrangement of the cans in Campbell's Soup Cans [5] adheres to the requirements of advertisements in consumer society. Warhol intentionally narrows the space between different panels to fit as many cans onto the canvas as possible [5]. Through this kind of visual impact, the audience might be shocked at first sight: having so many cans all in one place can be overwhelming, and certainly, they do not see this scene very often. For most Campbell's customers, their impression of these soup cans might be the ones being served on dinner tables, except for in the supermarket. Therefore, Warhol's [5] specific way of displaying these cans could be interpreted as a way of mimicking how the audience will see them in the supermarket. More importantly, Warhol realistically displays these cans, which further strengthens people's impression of these cans. Combined with the overwhelming number of cans in the painting, Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans [5] successfully links Campbell with other similar products. Consequently, every time people see canned soup, they will think about the brand Campbell. Every time consumers hear the word "Campbell", they will probably think about the Campbell's soup cans, with the signature red and white color combination, as portrayed in Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans [5].

Scholar Grudin mentions in his book one interview from the New York Times written by Bart that the wives of middle and working classes perceive different brands of soup from different points of view. Bart claims that the women of the middle class do not feel differently towards soup from national brands, but the women from the working class attach feelings such as pride and "confidence" [13]. This also potentially explains why Warhol chooses the soup cans as the subject of his artwork in Campbell's Soup Cans [5]. By increasing the frequency people engage with

Campbell's soup cans as well as creating the profound and even shocking impression with countable cans being present all at once, he tries to rebuild the brand image of national brands like Campbell's, attempting to gain the customers back and help "defeat" the private brands that are the counterparts in this competition.

However, Warhol is still an artist, not entirely a businessman. From Campbell's Soup Cans [5], we can see that even though these cans are realistic, the uneven edges show that they are handmade. The reason behind their extreme similarity is "silkscreen prints", which makes duplicating countable images possible, and was most often seen in the field of commercials at that time [1]. In addition, we can also observe that these cans are neatly lined up in an almost artificial way [5]. This is where the artistic value of Campbell's Soup Cans [5] lies. Though the extremely realistic portrayal of these [5] cans is Warhol's way to avoid inserting his personal interpretation of them and getting himself involved in the context, Warhol still hides his personal interpretation in the arrangement of these cans. These traits are subtle, yet it almost becomes Warhol's most idiosyncratic style. Such neat organization of the cans represents a sense of restraint, which is in drastic contradiction with the social environment during the mid 20th century, where brand competitions are only growing tougher [7]. However, these are all intentional. Warhol is building the brand image of Campbell's using a unique strategy, which involves the concept of rebellion against traditions. Warhol is undoubtedly an artist, but the subjects of his artworks are everyday commodities; we can see these things everywhere, in supermarkets, for example. In a traditional sense, art is only the business of the upper class; the working class does not often get involved in this "noble" business". However, Warhol challenges this idea. His artworks reclaim the social status of daily commodities and thus blur the boundary between art and reality. Indeed, artistic creations should take inspiration from reality, and his choosing commonly seen products as subjects only make it easier for the audience to comprehend his artwork. The ideology behind the creation of Campbell's Soup Cans [5] also conforms to the post-modern era, during which the rigorousness of the modernist era is overthrown and replaced with more liberating and flexible styles.

Other characteristics of industrialization could be traced in Campbell's Soup Cans [5] as well: The multiple duplications of the same can, created with silkscreening, echos the universalization of mass production, yet Warhol still manages to insert a "primate" method of painting by hand drawing the cans [5]. Therefore, Warhol combines both art and business into creating Campbell's Soup Cans [5]: silkscreening, the technique commonly used for marketing purposes at that time [1], is now used to duplicate the hand-drawn cans.



**Figure 2.** Andy Warhol, Campbell's Soup Cans, 1962.

#### **4. BRILLO BOX**

In 1964, Andy Warhol showed his series of Brillo Box on a solo exhibition. He plagiarized from the original white-red-blue soapbox packing and remade such images into blocks to be stacked together or displaying separately. The random displays of the identical boxes are Warhol's provocative claim against the line, which distinct art from banality. By preempting the normal commodities into the realm of art, Warhol probed into questions of how art is being viewed and valued. Not only did he called for broadening the conception, subject, context, meaning, and function of art, Warhol also contributed his aesthetic ideas to brand culture.

The brand culture perspective reveals how branding has opened up to include cultural, sociological, and theoretical inquiry that both complements and complicates the economic and managerial analysis of branding [9]. As the Brillo Box series was first known to the public in 1964, American society underwent drastic cultural changes: industrial setbacks and political movements, together they formed the shape of American twentieth-century cultural features. The duplication and mechanicalness in Warhol's design was a demeaning sensation that postindustrial brought upon people. Also, its repetition can be deemed as equality since consumerism is requiring consumers, regardless of their social status, to pay for their product equally. The relationship between social life and cultural production is always tight. In the triple-colored Brillo Box case, the middle-class public took a sharp turn in their taste for art and thus changed the features of cultural products. These new features of postmodernism, as Jameson noted, "is an offense to common sense and good taste" [10].

With the Brillo Box series, Warhol did two things: copying and displaying. Copying is what Jameson named "transformation of reality into images, " which might match his description of "fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents". The process was almost indifferent, as if the artist made no endeavor but simply moved what we saw on a supermarket shelf into an art gallery. Comparing to how modernist or previous

art tried to function as “critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like”[10], the exhibit of Brillo Box can only be described as bored, with a random, careless combination of repetitive products. Warhol’s design, however, was more than their appearance.

Warhol challenges the commonsense of art: that only elegance or astonishment founded in exclusive places can be called art. To define this, he isolated and reified the banal and commonplace objects of consumption and forced the public to view them again on fine art exhibitions. He dragged the artistic threshold down to the level that the mass public might appreciate and understand. Regardless of his or her social status, whoever walks in the gallery will instantly recognize the soapboxes they saw in shops or in advertisements. These everyday boxes reminded the audience of the exquisite taste of the value of banality and opened a window for art criticism. As for the mass crowd, Warhol’s boxes generously brought them into his narratives, reminded them that even people who sacredly know about art are still parts of the world. Such skills, as using common objects in artworks to awaken the sense of identity, can be found in the previous genre, most to attract a certain acknowledgment of upper class, but never had they become so radical as the contemporary artist made them in the middle twentieth century. “Secondary or minor features...we have something new when they become the central features of cultural productions” [10]. Indeed, the soapboxes, which are widely connected with cleaning chores and housewives, chores that never before considered artistic, and people who once were excluded from the realm of art, stated Warhol’s firm declaration to meet with the cultural and economic tide. With industrialization affecting the lives of all classes, the time for mass communication and media has come. As artists and advertisers eager to take money out of consumers’ pockets, everyone was lifted to the position of art critic, and the threshold for art is deliberately wiped.



**Figure 3.** Andy Warhol, Brillo Box.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Warhol’s brand image wins him both high regards from art critics as a postmodernist and commercial

success during one of the most competitive eras in a consumerist society. Art and commercial representation of elitism and mediocrity, which were considered to be contrary, achieve harmony in his work. To realize the mechanism behind Warhol’s aesthetic practice, Jameson Fredric’s theory, in which he acknowledges the theory of “The Aesthetic of Consumer Society” about the relationship between cultural production and social life, was brought in for further interpretation. Warhol’s design both meet the consumerism demand, in which a larger market is required for more consumers regardless of their social class and his unique aesthetic style, as repetitive objects revealed a postindustrial background and a postmodernism artistic feature. By duplicating commodities, Warhol strength these images in consumers’ eyes and raise people’s social consciousness. As consumers gradually recognized his brand images, Warhol sold his artistic design with several famous brands. In Campbell’s Soup Cans, Green Coca-Cola Bottles, and Brillo Box, as their abstraction gradually decreased and objects became visually realistic, such features and techniques can be found.

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