

# **Snapshot Aesthetics as a Strategic Resource**

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## **Abstract**

The snapshot, a straightforward, generally unposed photograph of everyday life, has emerged as an important style in contemporary strategic communication. Many recent ads portray models in classic snapshot poses – out of focus, eyes closed, poorly framed – in contrast to more traditional and historical patterns of formal studio shots or highly posed tableaux. Companies such as Volkswagen, IKEA, American Apparel, Ford Motor Company, Apple, and Coca-Cola present snapshot-like images in their print, television and Internet communications. This paper begins a conceptual assessment of snapshot aesthetics as a strategic resource, adopting a genre-based perspective influenced by art historical methods and assumptions.

# Snapshot Aesthetics as a Strategic Resource

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Illustrative example 1: Doc Martin 2008

## Snapshot Aesthetics as a Strategic Resource

In this paper, I discuss the role of snapshot aesthetics in contemporary brand communication and trace a brief visual genealogy of the snapshot, encompassing historical precedents in Dutch genre art, photographic genres such as street photography and reportage, and contemporary uses of the snapshots, such as paparazzi photography and photoblogs. The snapshot aesthetic concept offers researchers a host of questions to pursue. What associations do snapshot aesthetics help consumers build? Many luxury goods draw on snapshot aesthetics, will this erode their brand image? Should companies utilize consumer-generated imagery that draws upon snapshot aesthetics? And will this transform the advertising industry? What are the cultural connections of the snapshot, and how might these work within visual communication? What is the visual genealogy of snapshot aesthetics? Is it a fad that may soon fade away?

The snapshot, a straightforward, generally unposed photograph of everyday life, has emerged as an important style in contemporary strategic communication. Many recent ads portray models in classic snapshot poses—out of focus, eyes closed, poorly framed—in contrast to more traditional and historical patterns of formal studio shots or highly posed tableaux. Companies such as Volkswagen, IKEA, American Apparel, Ford Motor Company, Apple, and Coca-Cola present snapshot-like images in their print, television, and Internet communications. These snapshots often appear less formal, more everyday or “real”—more “authentic” (Nickel 1998). “Intentional” snapshots are often characterized by “disruptions” in formal photographic traditions – off lighting, poor focus, blurred images, awkward poses, harsh shadows, etc.

This paper begins a conceptual assessment of snapshot aesthetics as a strategic resource, adopting a genre-based perspective influenced by art historical methods and assumptions. As part of my broader research project on visual issues, this paper joins efforts in photography theory to systematically explore :

the entire social, spatial, temporal and phenomenological context in which these technological forms are variously viewed and received; the psychic determination by which modes of spectatorial identification and projection are secured; and not least, the industrial (or alternatively, independent artistic) structures that underwrite, shape, manufacture and disseminate them. (Solomon-Godeau, 2007, p. 268-269).

Watch and learn as  
I earn points crazy fast.



Here, I earn big-time points with my PremierPass credit card.



It's the fastest way to earn points—get ThankYou™ Points for the tickets you buy and the miles you fly, on any airline. And that's in addition to the miles you earn in your frequent-flyer program. Solid gold.

“Thank You”  
Rewards Network

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“It's the fastest way to earn points” is in comparison to other air travel programs. Based on CompasMedia data from January through July 2006.  
Card description applies only to Citibank PremierPass Elite Level and does not describe the card annual fee. Citibank PremierPass Elite Level annual and reservation fees are subject to Citibank PremierPass Elite Level and ThankYou Network terms, conditions and limitations. With the Citibank PremierPass Elite Level card, for every one purchase point you earn, one flight point will become available for redemption. Charges for other account-related services apply. Separate enrollment of checking accounts in ThankYou Network required. Enrollment eligibility, qualifying accounts and services, and point accrual and redemption are subject to Terms and Conditions. Citibank PremierPass card is issued by Citibank South Carolina, N.A. Citibank EZ Checking is free of monthly maintenance and per-check fees with a monthly direct deposit. Rewards for checking accounts and rewards for banking are offered through Citibank, N.A. Member FDIC. Citibank, Inc. Citibank, the blue balloon and Citicorp Mortgage logo are registered trademarks of Citibank, Inc. Citibank, Inc. is an equal housing lender. ©2006 Citicorp. Citibank Air Design, Citibank PremierPass and ThankYou Design are registered service marks of Citigroup Inc. ThankYou is a service mark of Citigroup Inc.

Illustrative example 2: Citibank 2006

As internationally celebrated fashion photographer Terry Richardson explains: “Ninety percent of the images I’ve ever taken have been done with a small camera. You don’t have to focus it or do a light reading. You can’t fuck up. And because you don’t have full control over it, they allow for accident. . . . Those cameras aren’t invasive. It’s less formal” (quoted in Braddock 2002, 161). *Vogue* magazine editor Robin Derrick agrees: “Snap cameras, rather than elaborate technical cameras, put the emphasis back on the photographer as auteur, rather than as technician. . . . With point-and-shoot cameras, what

becomes interesting is what you point it at” (quoted in Braddock 2002, 161). The snapshot, along with its close relatives paparazzi photography, reality TV, and photoblogs, offers strategic branding possibilities.

I contend that snapshot aesthetics—an increasingly prominent style of advertising imagery— by accelerating photography’s apparent realism, provides an important strategic resource for corporate communication. In this way, in brand communication that employs snapshots, or images that appear as snapshots, several strategic goals might be met. First, these photographs appear *authentic*, as if they are beyond the artificially constructed world of typical advertising photography. This visual quality can be harnessed to promote brands as authentic, to invoke the “average consumer” as a credible product endorser, and to demonstrate how the brand might fit in with the regular consumer’s lifestyle. Furthermore, authenticity has been argued as a key component of consumer interaction with brands. Thus, an authentic-looking image may support authentic brands, or at least an authentic use of brand values, by appearing honest, sincere, and unstaged.

Second, snapshot aesthetics supports a *casual* image of brands, particularly consumer lifestyle brands. Many brands appeal to less formal consumption—from family dinners to online financial management. Popular fashion brands, in particular, court casual images for their brands and subbrands. Moreover, as the casual clothing market has grown in recent years, fueled by “dress-down Fridays,” expanded demand for men’s clothing in between suits and blue jeans, and haute couture designers’ turn toward basic, everyday clothing in their secondary lines—casual wear such as jeans and T-shirts—the aesthetic regime of the snapshot has developed into a potent marketing tool. Well-known examples include Burberry, Diesel, and Sisley—each deploy snapshot-like photographs in high profile branding campaigns for their everyday clothing lines. Benetton has elevated the snapshot, along with journalistic imagery, to style icon in its long-running, often criticized, and widely imitated United Colors of Benetton campaign (e.g., Borgerson, Magnusson, and Magnusson 2006). Thus, clothing companies offering casual product lines often rely on snapshot-like imagery in the ads, catalogs, and on Web sites, both to show their products intended use and to signal their casual style.

In this way, photographic style helps articulate market segmentation strategy. For example, Italian designer Giorgio Armani’s Collezioni clothing—his most expensive ready-to-wear collection—generally appears in classically composed black-and-white promotional images, whereas the Armani Jeans line—a more recent, entry-level brand—usually features snapshot-like images of sexualized bodies.. Moreover, Burberry’s successful rebranding from

conservative classic to contemporary cool seemed to have benefited greatly from snapshot-like photographs, featuring the likes of supermodels Kate Moss and Stella Tennant (Schroeder 2006). Of course, Burberry's rebranding encompassed many other strategic initiatives, but I contend that for consumers, their iconic early 2000s black-and-white photographic ad campaign remains the most visible and persuasive rhetorical device.

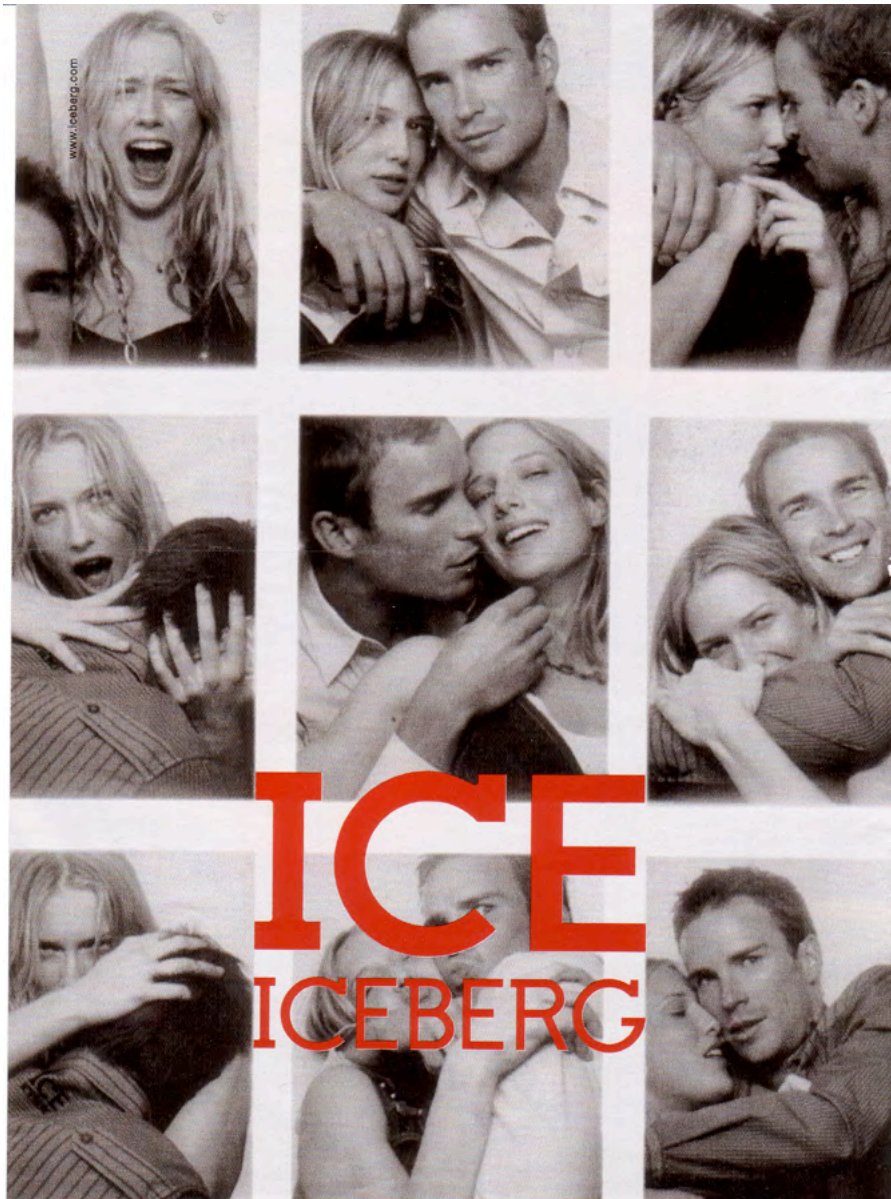
Snapshot aesthetics provide a *visual frame* for marketing images—a “here and now,” contemporary look, by (appearing to) capture a moment, offering a fresh, posed look to the image. Snapshots often appear rushed, carelessly composed, taken almost by chance, thus revealing subjects unposed, “natural” (e.g., Nickel 1998). As advertising photographer John Spinks explains: “The style is basically a recontextualisation of documentary practice. The equipment is rudimentary, but the lie is far more sophisticated, it appears to be *verité* but it's not. It can be set up and contrived and as much of a fantasy as more technical shoots. A lot of the work is in the edit” (quoted in Braddock 2002, 162.) Snapshots within strategic brand communication invoke a *realist* effect that supports a range of brand associations. I argue that this realist aspect of snapshot aesthetics underlines the fashion element of many products—up-to-date, hip, and cool—distinguishing them from classic, boring, or yesterday's goods. In this way, the snapshot look may help to accelerate fashion cycles and trends.

Finally, snapshot aesthetics further blurs the line between strategic marketing communication and popular photography. Advertising excels in appropriating or borrowing cultural codes and styles—snapshot aesthetics draws on the codes and conventions of popular, home photography, but transforms the humble snapshot into a powerful strategic tool. Furthermore, many snapshot ads appear as if produced by average consumers. With the rise of Web sites that allow users to post their own photographs and videos, such as Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, and YouTube, the snapshot enjoys higher circulation than ever (see Cohen 2005; Currie and Long 2006; Smith 2001; Web sites such as Collected Visions, and fotolog.com; as well as Google image and Yahoo! image search engines).

Furthermore, many consumers happily create their own ads, which are often in the snapshot or documentary style. Web sites such as Current TV and YouTube offer consumers a forum to try their hand at brand communication—and occasionally successful specimens are snapped up by brand managers for more conventional broadcast. Other companies sponsor consumer-generated ads, including Converse, MasterCard, and Sony (Petrecca 2006). As Colin Decker, creative director at Current TV, explains, the coveted eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old demographic “does not respond positively to something overly produced



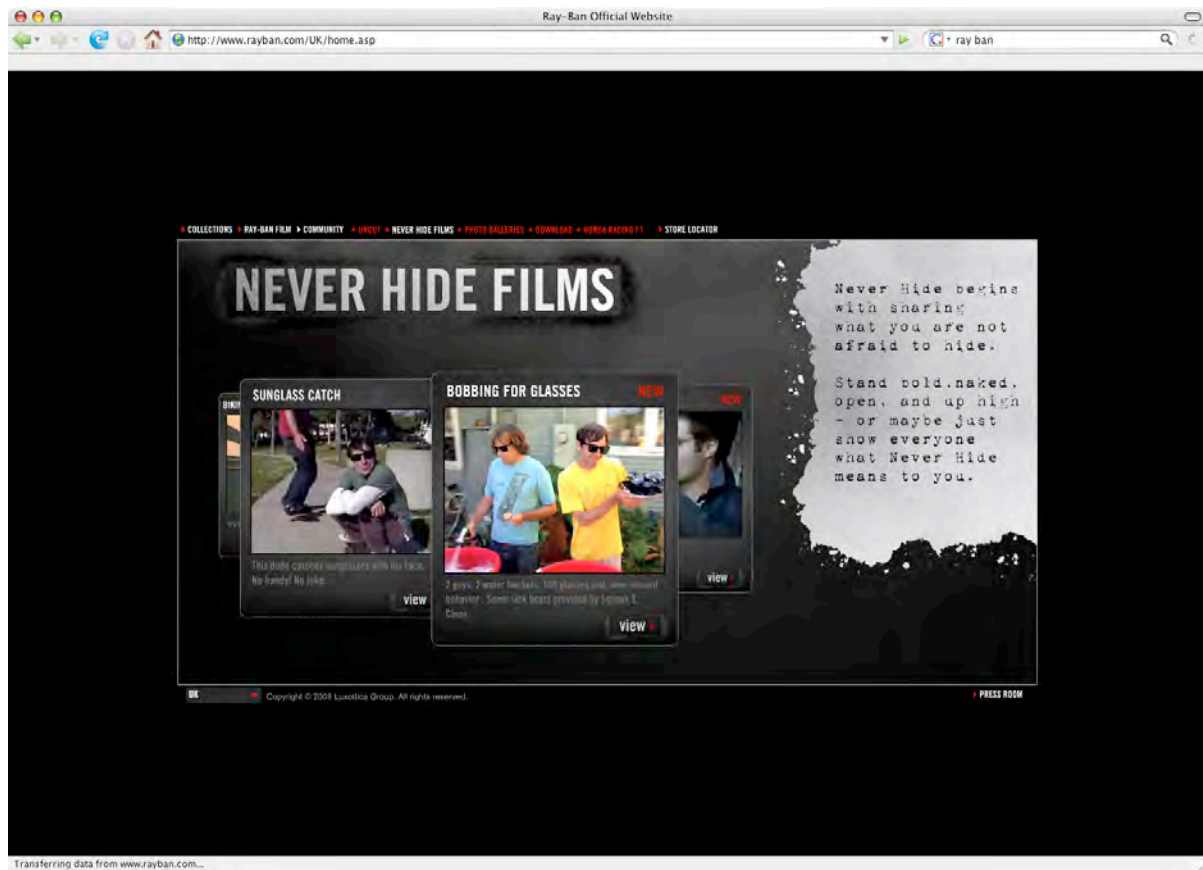
and (that is) a hard sell” (quoted in Mills 2006). Snapshot aesthetics may work against an overly produced, hard sell appearance.



Illustrative example 3: Iceberg 2007

Might we say snapshot aesthetics reveals the power of marketing communication to co-opt and appropriate popular forms, even colonize formerly private, family rituals. Contemporary strategic snapshots embody a doubleness—spontaneous yet composed; authentic yet constructed; realistic yet sophisticated – that refers to the basic problem of photography. As Barthes argues: “The more technology develops the diffusion of information (and most notably of images) the more it provides the means of masking the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given meaning” (Barthes 1977 p. 46). Snapshot

aesthetics offer a useful window into how visual images perform identity work for organizations by capitalizing on historical notions of photography and realism, that is, by invoking the twin conceptions of photography as a record of nature and photography as aesthetic creation.



Illustrative example 4: RayBan website 2008

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