

Fighting Generikee: Resistance Against Native American Marketing Representations, 1930-2015

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The PhD project *Fighting Generikee* uses qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate protests against marketing strategies based on Indigeneity and companies' crisis management strategies to cope with such protests.

Jeep Cherokee, Eskimo Pies, Mohawk Carpet Mills, Land O`Lakes Butter, Red Man Tobacco and Crazy Horse Malt Liquor are just a few examples of the many companies that tout their brands and products with a touch of Indianness. With prototypical characteristics such as strength, pride or (the conquest of) savagery, the generic advertising Indian should evoke associations of American origin, naturalness, exoticism and power in the consumer. Native art and designs have also been highly popular since the settlement of the Americas. Jewelry, souvenirs and other works of art formed a steadily growing, multi-billion-dollar market in the USA and beyond, which became threatened by imitations and cheap imports.

At least since the 1930s, Native Americans have been protesting the unauthorized use of Indigenous designs, symbols and names on a regular basis. Many Native producers and sellers viewed this marketing technique, which oftentimes evoked the impression a product was Indian made, not only as unfair competition that deprived them of their income but also pointed to truth in advertising laws and consumer protection. In light of the civil rights movement's proceedings during the 1960s, activists increasingly raised ethical arguments to question stereotypical representations of Native Americans as "noble savage" or "sexy squaw." As the general awareness of intellectual property and the frustration with the government as a guardian grew, many tribes started legally protecting their tribal names and heritage which resulted in a growing number of lawsuits.

In the U.S., numerous small companies as well as corporations such as Anheuser-Busch, Nestlé, Liz Claiborne, Urban Outfitters, Nike and GAP have become targets of protest. The geographical distribution of protests reveals not only particularly active critics, but also their regionally varying interests, which range from promoting fair representation of Indigenous peoples to protecting privacy and intellectual property to securing income. Occasional protests in Great Britain, France and New Zealand, for example, indicate that, in the course of globalization, ethical advertising guidelines were becoming increasingly relevant for internationally represented companies.

The project also investigates crisis management tactics developed by targeted companies and advertisers. Thereby, the study aims to identify not only effective protest tactics but also successful crisis management strategies to deal with protests. In the case of accusations such as racism or sexism, the marketer's reaction determines if the criticism damages the corporate image or if it even contributes to a positive image building.

In the discussion of the use of Indigenous names, symbols and imagery for the purpose of (self-) marketing and the practice of “Playing (sexy) Indian,” in particular, the relationship between white and Indigenous women receives special attention since protesters increasingly denounced this relationship as hegemonic. In this context, the project discusses to what extent critics regarded advertising as an expression as well as an actor of colonialism, and how they countered colonial marketing practices with strategies of decolonization.