

Big Tech Greenwashing: Corporate Memphis

Editor's Comment

Social greenwashing can be linked to graphic designers' use of an illustration style which is negatively referred to as Corporate Memphis. The bright and simplified illustration style, typically promoting a big tech company, is used to construct a friendly and appealing brand image. This can cover up a company's unethical business practices, and the negative impacts of their financial growth.

Original photography used, which has been heavily edited.
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/architecture-blue-and-white-building-business-271202/>
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/illustration-6046541409/>



What is Corporate Memphis and Why is it Everywhere?

By Sriya Choppara - T-Artmagazine.com

Characterized by solid coloring, geometric shapes and cartoonish figures with disproportionately lanky limbs, Corporate Memphis has become increasingly ubiquitous since it was first popularized in 2017. While it debuted as a space-filler in social media, websites and SaaS (software as a service) products, the style can now be found as images accompanying website articles and on magazine covers. The style is well received by the majority of consumers and has become the go-to choice of illustration style in marketing and user interfaces. However, its omnipresence has spurred criticism for its apparent shift away from more intricate, detailed illustrations to what critics deem to be generic and uninspired.

The exact origins of Corporate Memphis are unclear. Some credit its creation to Alice Lee, an independent illustrator who partnered with Slack to design 40 illustrations for their website and platform. She has remarked that she was influenced by Mary Blair's Disney concept art in the process of creating these warm and whimsical figures. Others credit BUCK, the design firm that created

the style guide, illustration, and animation system called Alegria for Facebook's ecosystem. Corporate Memphis is also said to be the illustrative analogy to the 80's post-modernist design movement Memphis. Corporate Memphis' geometric forms, along with its highly contrasted and bold color style are similar to that of Memphis furniture designs. Additionally, the way figures are warped in Corporate Memphis is reminiscent of how Memphis designers depict everyday objects in unusual ways.

Considering past trends in graphic design, the art style's current ubiquity was inevitable. Take your phone's interface, for instance. With every update, app icons have taken one step forward to a minimalistic, simplified, and flat look. The days of skeuomorphism are long gone. Big Tech companies have increased their demand for Corporate Memphis illustrations. Additionally, the progression to a minimalistic finish is evident in how several corporations have revamped and decluttered their previous busy and detailed logos.

There are several reasons why there is such mass appeal for simplified design, and why

the Corporate Memphis style has flourished in particular. For one, the illustrations of people are often inclusive to the extent that some resemble anthropomorphic aliens. But no matter their appearance, people can see themselves in illustrated figures with skin as purple as a plum. The cheery color palettes and the characters reminiscent of childhood cartoons only add to their charm. The simple vector art has just the right amount of detail to please the eye while one swiftly skims through social media or lengthy policy updates.

Corporate Memphis is flamboyant. It's spirited. It's joyful. It's most certainly prepossessing to the general public. But it's exactly these elements that warrant greater scrutiny. Illustrations in the style, with its aggressively friendly expressions, portray a world that is uncannily utopian. The deliberate oversimplification in Corporate Memphis can give a false sense of security in situations where the opposite behavior should be observed. While it may not be obvious, the bubbly style can make consumers subconsciously lower their guard and lure them in. For instance, Corporate Memphis is often strategically placed

in predatory subscription terms or privacy agreements. This smart marketing ploy for firms may have negative repercussions for users.

So what is the future of Corporate Memphis? Despite criticism that it is generic, or even lazy, the decision of several companies to invest in and use it in their visual branding is a sign of its appreciation by the majority of its audience. While its appeal may come with questionable implications, it is also hard to argue against its radical inclusivity and how it allows many to easily project onto the cartoon-like figures. It is important to consider it a warning sign when it accompanies consequential texts like terms and conditions, but I appreciate its style and love to see how different artists put their own spin on it. In the light of its pervasiveness, I am keen to believe many are fond of it too. Whether its influence is seen in accompaniments to editorials or fillers to bedeck empty space, Corporate Memphis' sweeping popularity will not disappear anytime soon. ■

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This is a sample copy featuring the first 15 pages of the Graphic Design Magazine issue on greenwashing.