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## Occupy Wall Street signs: Visual reflections of hidden social issues

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# Occupy Wall Street Signs: Visual Reflections of Hidden Social Issues

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ICA Annual Convention – Phoenix, AZ  
Visual Communication Studies Division

# Social Action Theory

- Individuals capable of conscious thought/ own interpretation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; Schoening & Anderson, 1995)
- Individuals defined by their culture (Holliday, 2010)

# Persuasion & Advertising

- 6 cultural myths (Larson, 2010)
  - Wisdom of rustic
  - Coming of the Messiah
  - Value of challenge
  - Possibility of success
  - Presence of conspiracy
  - Eternal return
- Ads fulfill 8 hidden needs (Packard, 2007/1957)
  - Emotional security
  - Ego-gratification
  - Love objects
  - Sense of roots
  - Reassurance of worth
  - Creative outlets
  - Sense of power
  - Immortality

# Advertising

- Iconography of the present (MacRury, 2009)
- Carrier of cultural values (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Cheong, Kim, & Zheng, 2010; MacRury, 2009)
- Distorted mirror (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990)

# Occupy Wall Street

- Signs reflect current circumstances, give life to problems
- Frustrations processed/filtered through culture

# Research Questions

- How are the OWS protesters communicating their messages through signs?
- What are their issues?
- How do the issues relate to persuasion and advertising models?

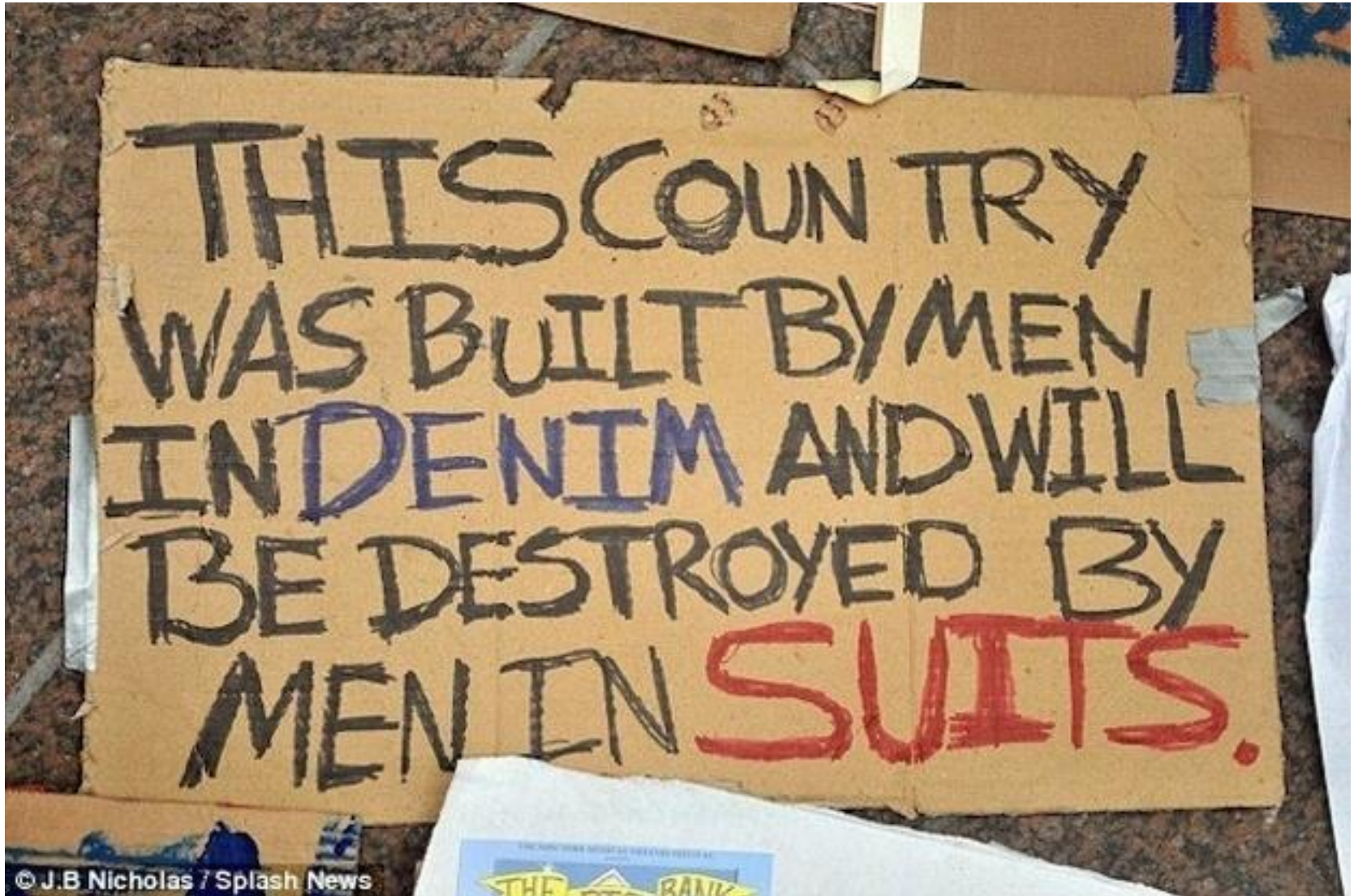
# Content Analysis

- 55 signs from “The 50 Best Signs from #Occupy Wall Street” (Fjelstad, 2011)
- Coding Categories
  - Physical (cardboard, poster board, other)
  - Type style (by hand, typed, printed)
  - Image (yes or no)
  - Overall look (hand-made or professional)
  - Message (speech, worship, want-economic, hunger, educ, class/taxes, fear-war, gov control)
  - Tone (anger, humor/sarcasm, serious)
  - Context (Americana, world, other, none)



# Findings

- Material
  - Cardboard 55%
  - Poster board 40%
  - Other 5%
- Type Style
  - Hand written 96%
  - Typed 4%
- Image
  - No 84%
- Homemade 100%
- Freedom Message
  - from want (class inequalities, hunger, poverty, educ, jobs) 69%
  - from fear (war, peace, broken political/financial systems) 13%
  - of speech 9%
  - of religion/humanity 5%
  - other 4%
- Tone
  - Serious 54%
  - Angry 24%
  - Humor/sarcasm 22%



Freedom from want (class inequalities/warfare), serious, Americana (denim/suits).

Source: BuzzFeed.com; sucka99.tumblr.com



Freedom from want (class inequalities/warfare), humor/sarcasm, Americana.

Source: BuzzFeed.com



Freedom from want (class inequalities/warfare), humor (misquoted line from “Blazing Saddles”), Americana.

Source: BuzzFeed.com; theatlantic.com



Freedom from want (Class inequalities/warfare), humor, Americana (TV program reference).

Source: BuzzFeed.com



Freedom from fear (war), serious, Americana (1960s references).

Source: BuzzFeed.com; facebook.com



Serious, Americana (Bob Dylan, 1960s references).

Source: BuzzFeed.com; cwesphotos.tumblr.com



Freedom of speech, serious, Americana references.

Source: BuzzFeed.com





Freedom from want (class inequalities/warfare), serious, Americana.

Source: BuzzFeed.com; advocate.com

# Discussion

- Signs are like mirrors – reflect/help articulate deep feelings
- Protesters grew up/socialized with myths and promises
- Signs calling into question basic American ideologies
- Issues can no longer be ignored

# Limitations and Future Studies

- Expand sample size
  - More signs from the Internet
  - Snap photos at protests
- Review signs/messages across nations
  - Messages/issues
  - Symbols
- Interview protesters
- Compare news reports with visuals