

Less is More or Less is Bored? The Impact of Minimalist Typography on Brand Authenticity

The tools of visual communication are often depicted in standard graphic design education as objectively conveying information. The modular grid is seen as a neutral guide to creating structure, typography is viewed as a study in how to create functionally clear type and the latest versions of modern layout software are shown as empowering, fully-transparent mediums. A look at current visual culture shows us however that all forms of graphics (i.e. the way you present your content) are rarely neutral when it comes to politics or culture. Graphic form mediates how we see brands, perceive consumers, and assign cultural value. For example, over the last ten years there was a significant visual paradigmatic shift in global commercial design towards extreme simplicity. Luxury fashion companies, large conglomerates in technology, and new startups selling directly to consumers have almost uniformly rejected custom-designed logos and fonts based on their history, in favor of simple geometric sans serif font types. This research will begin by investigating this visual movement through a reverse-structure essay format where instead of starting with a formulated hypothesis the researcher will start from the bottom-up with a descriptive analysis of three key terms: Minimalism, Visual Clarity and Brand Authenticity.

Minimalism is defined as an intentional removal of all non-essential visual elements down to a design's fundamental structural components. The roots of minimalism lie within the early twentieth century avant-garde movement; specifically with De Stijl, Russian Constructivism, and Bauhaus. Minimalist graphic design was based on simple geometry, grids that were aligned perfectly, clean (unadorned) typography and large amounts of white or "negative" space. Historically, these concepts have been discussed at length by Philip Meggs and Alston Purvis in their comprehensive history of design. However, as a result of being removed from its historical revolutionary roots and incorporated into modern commercial design practices, minimalist typography can be reduced to simply a visual shorthand—used for projecting a company's operational efficiency and modernity, rather than providing any unique identity.

This stylistic reduction works alongside the pursuit of visual clarity, which operates as a functional design strategy focused on optimizing information hierarchy and minimizing cognitive friction for the audience. In both print and digital environments, clarity relies on legibility, which measures how easily individual letterforms are distinguished, and readability, which dictates how seamlessly blocks of text are processed. Ellen Lupton notes that proponents of visual clarity argue graphic design should act as an invisible medium that facilitates effortless communication. However, within modern digital ecosystems, where consumers process visual information on mobile screens at high speeds, an overemphasis on immediate clarity often results in standardized layout templates and predictable typographic choices that erase visual character and brand distinction.

The tension ultimately converges on what has been termed "brand authenticity," which denotes the social and psychological values that consumers ascribe to a company's perceived honesty, history, and distinctiveness. The concept of brand authenticity was defined by James Gilmore and Joseph Pine. Visual identification of brand authenticity historically took the form of bespoke craft, ornate heraldic imagery, serif typefaces, and physical printed materials (such as embossing or foil stamping) that signified long-standing historical and artisanal qualities. Today, however, the definition of visual authenticity is at issue. Corporate strategists have argued that clean, minimalistic branding communicates modern transparency and dependability. Critics have countered that such extreme simplicity results in an overly uniform aesthetic that removes a brand from its true heritage and cultural identity.

The theoretical foundation of minimalist typography rests firmly upon twentieth-century Modernism. In his seminal 1928 treatise *Die Neue Typographie*, Jan Tschichold rejected decorative, nineteenth-century academic typography in favor of asymmetrical layouts, standardized grid systems, and functional sans-serif letterforms. Tschichold asserted that typography must be stripped of subjective artistic ornament to serve the objective communication needs of an industrialized society.

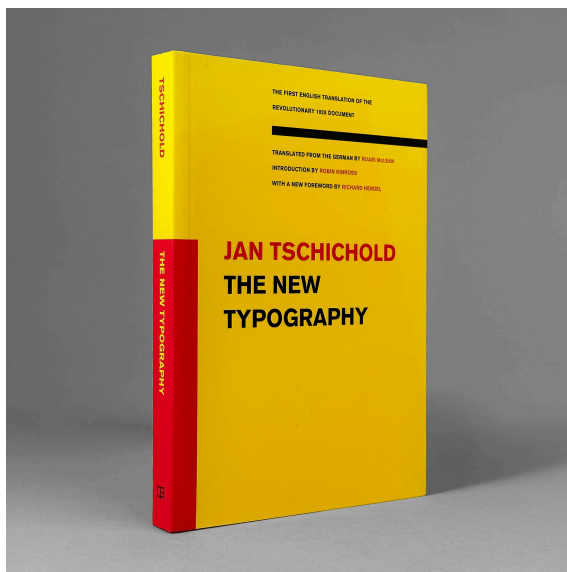


Figure 1: Tschichold, J. (1928) *Die Neue Typographie* [Book cover reprint]. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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As demonstrated by Figure 1; Tschichold's initial works defined the foundational elements of practical print design. The Swiss Style (of the 1950s & 60s) was the ultimate example of these functional ideals being practiced. In this style, a variety of designers including Josef Muller-Brockmann stated that a grid system (modular grid), when used properly would create an objective, universal way for communicating visually, and eliminate any influence of a designer's subjectivity. Thus, within this theoretical paradigm; minimalist typography represents an inherent link with democratic transparency, where clear type represents clarity, honesty and efficiency, while elaborate typographic details were considered deceitful diversions.

The motivation behind Modernist minimalism's social idealism is far removed from today's debates surrounding the use of Minimalist Typography. Design theorists and Cultural Commentators have claimed that Contemporary minimalist typography has become part of the apparatus of Global Capital. As such, the term "Corporate Blandification" (also known as Homogenization) has been coined by design theorist Ruben Pater. In many cases, when Heritage Luxury Houses (i.e., Burberry, Saint Laurent, etc.) choose to replace their historic, developed logos with one another with clean, geometric sans-serif typefaces, the visual identity of the brand is no longer able to communicate the uniqueness of handcrafted goods. According to designer Michael Bierut, this shift represents a practical technological response. Because both Low Resolution Digital Screens and Responsive Mobile App Interfaces are best suited for using simple Vector Shapes, they can be easily scaled up to fit within User Interface Frameworks. This practical technological solution presents an Ideological Dilemma. Because of the need to Optimize Universal Screen Performance at the expense of Visual Distinction, it stands to reason that we will lose the Specific Cultural Authenticity that Defined the Brand in the first place.

The authors of this paper identify two main perspectives to help support a well-structured and valid academic argument; these are two opposing philosophy based on how typography has been defined in modern (and past) times. The first is a Universalist viewpoint held by Modernist theorists and present day UI Designers of Digital Systems, who argue that using a Sans-Serif font style reduces the amount of mental processing required when viewing a screen, which provides better accessibility across devices/platforms and represents professional reliability that will never go out of date. In contrast, Postmodern designers and Critical Theory advocates hold a Humanistic/Expressive viewpoint, stating that simply having legible type does not equal effective communication. Instead, they claim that utilizing typography that includes expressiveness (through varying styles such as Texture and Irregularity), can communicate Emotion, Narrative and Humanity through its use -- characteristics that are missing from Overly Simplified Minimalist Typography.

To understand how these conceptual perspectives have been embodied in actual graphic design practices we need to look at prominent industry designers as well as subcultural voices such as those from the punk/grunge movements. Paula Scher is one of the most recognized names within the area of contemporary typographic design; she exemplifies a method of creating unique personality with the use of simple typographic systems without falling into static corporate uniformity (as seen in Figure 2).

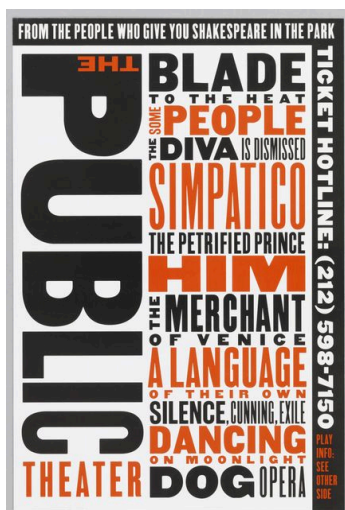


Figure 2: Scher, P. / Pentagram (1994) *The Public Theater Identity System* [Promotional poster]. New York: Pentagram.

Scher's identity system for New York City's Public Theater was made using different weights of strict sans-serif type based upon the historic American wood-type; these types were placed on densely packed, high-energy grids. This demonstrates that the same elements of minimalist typography that are used to create intense cultural energy can still be highly functional for large-scale public awareness campaigns, if manipulated appropriately (scale, proportion, and hierarchy).

On the other side of this spectrum of formalism, the grunge typography movement began in the 1990s under the leadership of David Carson. Carson served as the Art Director for Ray Gun magazine and he did not work with the traditional grid systems. He combined incompatible font styles, overlaid block text, and created an atmosphere of emotion rather than clarity.

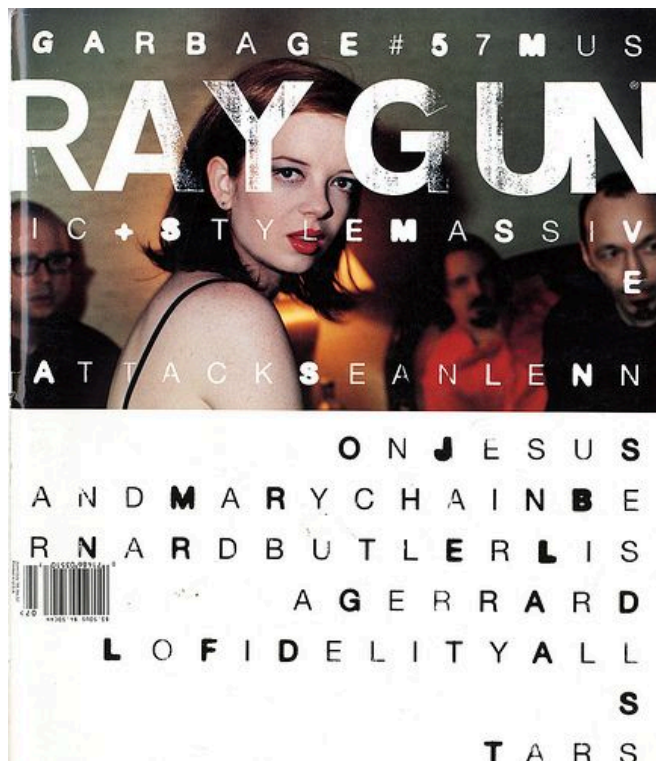


Figure 3: Carson, D. (1998) *Ray Gun Magazine Issue #57* [Magazine cover]. Santa Monica: Ray Gun Publishing.

Carson's use of the visual texture of his writing (as opposed to simply a narrative) is demonstrated in Fig. 3. Carson's controversial use of the "dingbat" font Zapf Dingbats throughout an uninteresting magazine interview was based upon the idea that formal legibility doesn't necessarily result in engaging audiences. As a counterpoint to the growing trend of minimalist commercial design, Carson shows that expressive visual noise may stimulate deep involvement among particular subcultural groups.

The interplay between the above-referenced keywords, literature, and design professionals reveals a central issue. Minimalist typography is efficient when used on digital displays; however, its common use as a standard corporate typeface has resulted in the homogenization of corporations' identities, loss of visual distinction, and diminished perceptions of authentic brands. Reversing this issue through an inverted format of an essay

results in the primary research inquiry for the Level 6 Independent Study: How has the rise in modern minimalist typography affected consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity in digital media? Three secondary inquiries support the primary inquiry. The first inquiry identifies the technical reasons, such as responsive web design and mobile UI rendering, behind the world-wide proliferation of uniform sans-serif logotypes. The second inquiry evaluates the threshold beyond which minimalist design no longer implies modernity but rather conveys a sense of emotional sterility or corporate anonymity. The final inquiry examines how today's identity designers can include tactile print heritage, subtle ornamental design or variable font technology into their designs to create brand personality without jeopardizing screen usability.

To address this research inquiry, the proposed Year 3 studio practice will avoid providing general branding services, and instead employ a comparative studio-based experimental design practice to evaluate the relationship between functional minimalism and the expression of brand personality. The first studio output will be a Three-Tier Identity Systems Matrix. For this project, we will choose a current brand that undertook a drastic rebrand with a focus on minimalism (such as a heritage fashion company or a direct-to-consumer company), and develop a comparative visual matrix to assess three different typographical systems. In Tier One, we will present an ultra-minimalist typographic system, employing a stripped-back geometric sans-serif system to optimize exclusively for mobile interface rendering. Tier Two will represent a modernistic typographic balance, including a refined layout system incorporating customized variable typography, slight grid movement and clear hierarchical functions. In Tier Three, we will develop an expressive humanistic typographic system employing historical serif detail, irregular spacing and printed textures. We will then visually test each tier on identical digital mock-ups and printed materials.

The second studio submission is an A4 bound booklet in printed form called the Tactile vs. Digital Specimen Booklet. It provides comparisons on digital renderings with a focus on the screen's rendering of the minimalistic design element; while in contrast the same design elements are rendered using various tactile print processes. Specialty printing processes will be used (blind embossed, texture paper stock, varnish spots and custom die cuts) for this book to determine if there is value to physically producing the minimalist design forms that creates a perceived authenticity and craftsmanship. In other words the studio submissions are an application of the theory presented in this research project.

While Modernist minimalist design was driven by idealistic social goals for a better world; the use of this same form of design in digital media has become a source of considerable intellectual critique. Many design academics and cultural critics have argued that today's minimalist typographic designs are being co-opted by transnational capitalism. This has led to what is commonly referred to as "corporate blandification" or "homogenization," as described by Ruben Pater. When companies like heritage luxury brands, who were once associated with uniquely crafted, historically developed logos; start using standardized geometric sans-serif fonts for all their branding, they are no longer promoting the craftsmanship that made them so special, but rather creating an unoriginal look consistent across multiple brands.

BURBERRY
London, England

BURBERRY
LONDON ENGLAND

Burberry Logotype Rebrand
Comparison. Source:
www.underconsideration.com

Figure 4: Saville, P. /
Burberry (2018)
*Burberry Brand
Identity Redesign*
[Logotype
comparison].
London: Burberry
Group plc.

Figure 4 illustrates this transition from traditional corporate branding to modern branding for Burberry. The company replaced their long-established Equestrian Crest and classical serif letterform style with a new bold, sans-serif logotype developed by Peter Saville. Michael Bierut has observed that the massive switch to a simpler sans-serif design style across many companies is largely driven by technological limitations; specifically, all images are displayed on digital devices (low resolution) and are viewed through mobile apps which have limited capability to display complex graphics and allow the designer to create easily scalable vector-based graphics using standard user interface design software. However, although creating easy-to-view designs may be ideal for most users' experiences when viewing designs on a variety of screens, it creates an ideologically conflicting issue since if you value consistency over identity then you risk losing your unique heritage that defines your brand.

In order to develop a credible thesis for this research project, this paper will compare/contrast two opposite design philosophies that currently exist within the field of contemporary typography. The first philosophy is the Universalist approach, represented by both Modernist theory and Contemporary Digital User Interface Designers who assert that minimalist sans-serif fonts reduce cognitive overhead, improve cross-platform compatibility and convey timelessness and professionalism. The second philosophy is the Humanistic Expressive Approach, promoted by Post-Modernists and Critical Theorists who assert that legible font does not equal effective communication. These theorists claim that expressive, textured, or irregularly shaped typography communicate emotions, stories and human presence and experience that a technically optimal, overly simplistic typeface cannot provide. Rick Poynor states in his book *No More Rules* that Graphic Design continues to oscillate back-and-forth between periods of Structural Order and periods of Rebellion and therefore the current period of Corporate Minimalism should serve as a benchmark for examining Visual Noise, Tactile Texture and Typographic Personality.

To analyze how these theories play out in real world graphic design we need to look at both mainstream industry leaders as well as alternative/subcultural voices. One of the most influential people in contemporary typographic design is Paula Scher. She provides evidence

of how a minimalist typographic system can produce personality without becoming a static corporation image.

This research builds on the relationship between the theory behind minimalism and the practicality of the Studio as it pushes past questions about if/when minimalism will be functional/boring. It questions the un-critical acceptance of corporate “blanding” through assessing the way typographical elements contribute to consumers' perception of a brand's authenticity in an environment dominated by digital interactions. The research provides evidence for both the legibility and the brand personality (not mutually exclusive) through the comparison of the Three-Tier Identity System Matrix and the physical exploration of the Tactile vs. Digital Specimen Booklet. Ultra-minimalist geometric sans-serif typography successfully reduces cognitive friction and improves cross-platform user interface performance but typically sacrifices emotional connection, storytelling capability and the historical identity that define true Brand Character. Graphic Design has historically vacillated between structure and expression; this research posits that the future of legitimate branding will be found somewhere in between complete Visual Noise and pure Sterility. It requires an intentional hybrid approach from contemporary designers utilizing Variable Font Technology, Subtle Ornamentation Heritage, and Tactile Print Processes to bring Humanity, Distinction, and Cultural Value back to Modern Visual Communication while maintaining digital usability.

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