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Introduction

In this research document, I will explore the meanings of the words 'Curiosity', 'Utilitarian', and 'Balance' within the context of graphic design. These words were chosen based on my personal design values and beliefs. I believe Curiosity is a driving factor for good design, and I think it enables me to create my best work. I chose Utilitarian because I believe it is a design aesthetic that will pave the way for graphic design in the future, if done correctly. Finally, I chose balance because I believe that design needs both curiosity and utilitarianism; function and expression to be effective.

Curiosity

Curiosity is the driving factor in many people's lives, including my own, and it is something we are all born with, a natural sensation that drives us to explore the world around us (Boudreau, 2020). Jordan A. Litman defines curiosity as "a desire to know, to see, or to experience that motivates exploratory behaviour directed towards the acquisition of new information" (Litman, 2005). Whilst this may be seen as a positive in some eyes, curiosity can also be seen as dangerous to some, hence the saying "Curiosity killed the cat" (Kidd & Hayden, 2015, p. 449). However, for creative people like graphic designers, curiosity plays positively hand in hand with creativity. Being able to experience curiosity during the creative process can be extremely beneficial by enhancing creative thinking. It can do this by encouraging the person to consider a range of ideas, allowing them to have cognitive flexibility when it comes to idea generation (Ren et al., 2024). For example, this could be beneficial for a graphic designer when creating a wide range of different logos before settling on a final design. There are also many different forms of curiosity. Idea linking is one of these many forms defined as, "using aspects of early ideas as input for subsequent ideas in a sequential manner, such that one idea is a stepping stone to the next" (Hagtvedt et al., 2019). This part of curiosity can benefit in the practice of graphic design when experimenting with ideas; when sketching logos, a designer will use parts from one sketch to form another sketch, creating an entirely new design. A general awareness of one's curiosity could also be beneficial for a graphic designer when meeting and talking to their clients. Being genuinely curious about the client and their needs can benefit the future outcome of the work.

Investigating how curiosity can benefit a person has led me to believe that it should be something every graphic designer should try to initiate when they enter the creative process. I believe they can benefit from increasing their cognitive flexibility, which in turn helps their ability to generate ideas. I also think that a general curiosity for the world around you can be beneficial to discover new ways of working and thinking. But how relevant is the ability to be curious in the real-world of graphic design?

Paula Schaer, one of the most well-known and influential graphic designers in the world, says, "the most important thing is to keep making things and that in the process of doing that you make discoveries", (School of Visual Arts, 2019). Graphic designers need to be curious enough to discover their ability to create things. This shows that even the most important and influential figures in the graphic design industry have a deep sense of curiosity for the world around them and their craft. I believe designers should follow in their footsteps and should also be curious in their day-to-day lives.

I believe a good example of curiosity being used in the real world of graphic design is the series of prints by Marina Willer titled *Overlooked 2.0*. The pieces celebrate the industrial design of the drain covers in London, highlighting the beautiful designs and details. Willer used the 19th-Century technique of taking rubbings to create a detailed negative of the design; these were then screen-printed in different layers to create the pieces seen in (figure 1) (Pentagram, 2025). I believe that without some level of curiosity for the world around you, the opportunity for this kind of project wouldn't have existed. Willer and her team needed to go out and be curious about their surroundings enough to see it as something that could be transformed into something new, creating something that is interesting and unique.

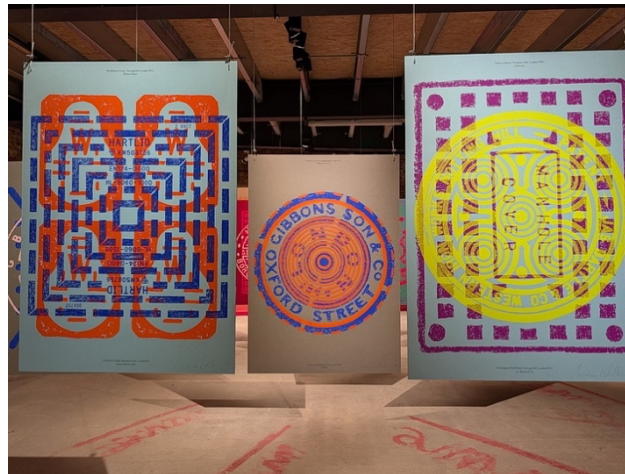


Figure 1: *Overlooked 2.0* by Marina Willer (Willer, 2024, as cited in Urban75, 2024)

After looking into curiosity in the context of graphic design, we can see that curiosity can enhance graphic designers' creative thinking, which can lead to better idea generation. Curiosity is also seen by renowned designers as a tool for design, and this is seen in projects like *Overlooked 2.0*, where curiosity has led to unique and interesting design opportunities.

Utilitarian

Utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill define Utilitarianism as "The greatest amount of good for the greatest number" (Driver, 2009). In graphic design, this philosophy is often associated with minimal and functional design principles, prioritising usefulness and functionality over aesthetics. These principles are often seen in graphic design movements such as Swiss design or Modernism. The book *New Utilitarian* by Victionary talks about the current emergence of 'New Utilitarianism', which is a movement deemed "new Swiss graphic style" and aims to visualise the future of graphic design. (Victionary, 2023).

To me, the new utilitarian style is a way of visualising the future of graphic design. I believe it's the sort of style of graphics you would see in science fiction movies that depict how the world will look in the next thousand years from now. For the most part, I

find this aesthetic to be visually pleasing. However, I believe that utilitarianism has largely shaped the way we see graphics in the digital world. User interfaces are created to be simple to understand by using very few distracting elements; instead, they focus on typography, colour, and the use of white space to make the experience for users as functional as possible (Gumber, 2023). A good example of utilitarianism in action is through responsive design. This refers to when the digital form of media, like a website, can be built to adapt to various screen sizes. The design is made to be functional for the largest possible number of users across many devices; this means the design prioritises usability over ornamentation (Lane et al., 2012). I believe that as a response to utilitarianism taking over the digital world, brands have adopted this style across brand identities as well by making their logos incredibly simple, but is this what consumers truly want from brands?

An example of where utilitarianism weakens a brand's image is Gap's rebrand in 2010, when they presented a new logo to the world. They went from the old logo as seen in (figure 2) to the new logo as seen in (figure 3).



Figure 2: *Gap logo* (Gap Inc., n.d., as cited in Wikipedia, 2024)



Figure 3: *Gap logo redesign* (Gap Inc., 2010, as cited in M Design Baltimore, 2021)

This new logo created so much backlash that customers protested on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, with thousands of people criticising the brand for changing the logo (Halliday, 2010). The disapproval of the logo even led to someone making a

website called 'Make Your Own Gap Logo' where people can make parody versions of the logo. The website still runs today and currently 19,253 versions of the logo have been made (Make Your Own Gap Logo, 2025). However, some people praised parts of the logo. Award-winning logo designer Jon Pink says, "The letter forms in lowercase have an attractive quality to them and the simplicity is refreshing" (Geoghegan, 2010). I think if I were seeing the logo in 2010, I would probably say the same, but looking at it from the year 2025, I must disagree with this statement. I believe Gap's new logo failed to please customers because it lacks the luxury feeling and personality that the old logo had. The elegance of the serif typeface they used in the old logo made customers feel like they were buying a form of luxury. The logo redesign lacked a clear direction and instead looks like it would be more suited for a technology company rather than a fashion retailer.

An example of where utilitarianism really helps a brand stand out and feel fresh is SanDisk's rebrand for 2025. In December of 2024, SanDisk unveiled their fresh brand identity for the year 2025 and they defined it by the statement, "Mindset of Motion". The new look contains philosophies of moving forward into the future (SanDisk, 2024). People have been extremely accepting of the rebrand. Rob Beschizza writes, "The corporate trend of paying an agency \$500,000 to blandly render the name in a characterless Helvetica clone is over" (Beschizza, 2024). They reverted from their old logo as seen in (figure 4), for a more modern and futuristic logo as seen in (figure 5).

The image shows the SanDisk logo in a classic serif typeface. The letters are red and the 'D' is open on the right side.

Figure 4: *SanDisk logo* (SanDisk, 2007, as cited in Wikipedia, 2025)

The image shows the SanDisk logo redesign in a bold, blocky, sans-serif typeface. The letters are red and the 'D' is open on the right side.

Figure 5: *SanDisk logo redesign* (SanDisk, 2024, as cited in Wikipedia, 2025)

This is probably one of my favourite recent rebrands for a company. For me, this new SanDisk fits into the category of 'new utilitarianism'. The rebrand maintains the heritage of the old logo with the open 'D' whilst also taking the brand into a new direction. I believe it's also a perfect example of a rebrand that could shape the future of graphic design; it feels fresh and futuristic, which is exactly what they were aiming for.

After looking at both rebrands, I believe that utilitarianism can work if used correctly. I firmly believe that when it comes to design, functionality shouldn't undermine the personality of a brand. While it is essential for good design, a brand identity and the brand's personal connection to people shouldn't be lost for the sake of simplicity.

Balance

Balance is one of the key principles in graphic design; it can easily make or break a piece of work. Rune Pettersson defines balance in graphic design as "the sum of all the elements, the horizontals and the verticals, the darks and the lights that make up the design" (Pettersson, 2024). Most designers would agree that balance is often discussed in terms of the visual composition of a piece of work; elements like colour, scale, and spacing all coming together to create a visual harmony for the viewer, but I believe balance can also be viewed as a connection between utilitarianism and curiosity; between function and expression. As a designer, I am constantly pulled in two directions, one direction values functionality, and the other values expression. I believe that to create the best outcomes, there needs to be a good balance between both sides.

One example of where I believe there is a good sense of balance between curiosity and utilitarianism is through Dropbox's brand guidelines. At the start of 2025, Dropbox released "a digital home" for their new set of brand guidelines. A website that outlines all of Dropbox's brand identity from their icons, typography, motion graphics, logo, etc. (Rafie-Tari et al., 2025). To most people, looking through brand guidelines doesn't sound very exciting. However, Dropbox managed to make this experience fun and engaging whilst also serving as something functional. Let's look at some of the ways Dropbox achieves this.

One way Dropbox creates a sense of curiosity in their brand guidelines is through the use of motion graphics. Motion graphics are becoming an increasingly popular way for brands to communicate their messages to users, and there are many different benefits of including them in a brand, such as visual storytelling, brand differentiation, and audience engagement (Das, 2024). The part of Dropbox's motion graphics I want to focus on is the audience engagement. As seen in (figures 6a, b, c), Dropbox introduces users to the website by visually expanding the user's view to see all components of the brand guidelines. This sense of motion pulls the viewer in and evokes a sense of curiosity, compelling the user to explore more, creating an immersive experience. Enabling curiosity through the use of motion graphics like this is an effective way to keep users engaged with the work; studies show that brands who use this type of visual engagement have 94% more views than brands who used purely text-based designs. (MDG Advertising, as cited in Das, 2014).

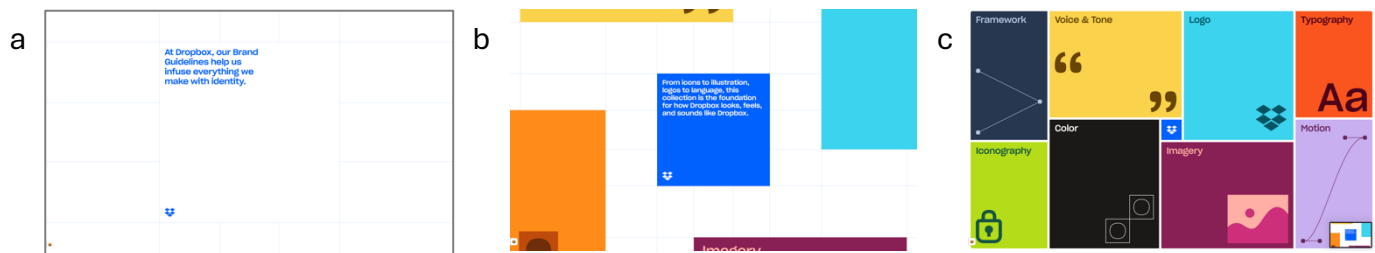


Figure 6: (a) Screenshot of Dropbox Brand Guidelines: Home page animation start (Dropbox, n.d.) (b) Screenshot of Dropbox Brand Guidelines: Home page animation middle (Dropbox, n.d.). (c) Screenshot of Dropbox Brand Guidelines: Home page animation end (Dropbox, n.d.).

Where Utilitarianism and curiosity meet to create a balance in Dropbox's brand guidelines is through the composition. We can see that the design of the website takes ideas of utilitarianism by keeping the site functional through minimal typography and large amounts of white space, allowing the user to easily navigate the pages. However, it also doesn't lack personality. Looking at (figure 7), we can see they use these animated hand-drawn icons to illustrate the meaning of the words that come after. They could have made these icons super minimal; however, they have injected them with personality that feels personal to Dropbox, in turn creating a personal connection with the user.

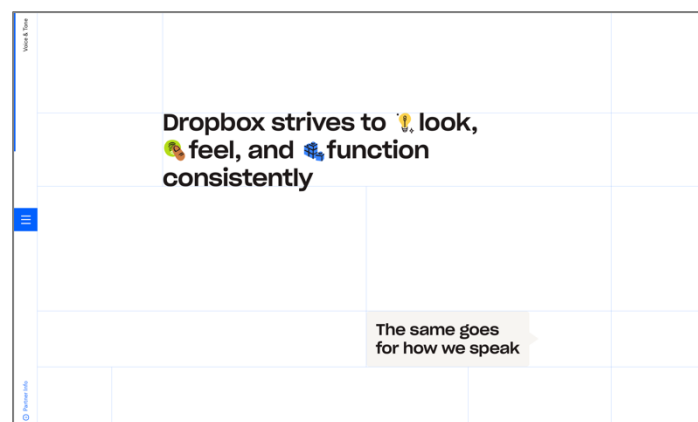


Figure 7: Screenshot of Dropbox Brand Guidelines: Voice & Tone Page (Dropbox, n.d.).

I believe that the executions of these brand guidelines really come down to the perfect balance between function and personality. It is a strong example of how design can be really engaging for the user to the point where they feel as though they can physically interact with the elements on the screen, and combining this with minimal typography and expansive white space, the user has no choice but to want to explore and learn more. I believe this is something a lot of new brand identities that are released into the world are lacking. I firmly believe that a balance between these two areas of graphic design creates good work.

Conclusion

Exploring these three keywords has led to many questions. I have discovered how curiosity can be a great tool for designers to generate ideas and create unique and interesting design outcomes. I have also discovered how a brand's use of utilitarianism can determine its success in pleasing customers, and when used incorrectly can potentially ruin a brand's image. Finally, I have discovered that finding a balance between curiosity and utilitarianism can lead to very successful design outcomes. Contextualising these keywords has led me to the question I propose for my final dissertation, "How can designers reintroduce curiosity into the increasingly utilitarian landscape of modern design?"

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