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Standards, Beauty, and Perception.

This essay will explore three chosen keywords – Standards, Beauty, and Perception while developing an understanding of each key word and how they are portrayed through graphic design. Through various sources this essay will attempt to link each word back to a graphic design frame of reference and conclude with a rhetorical question for an independent research project. In this essay, we will explore each of these concepts individually, and then examine how they intersect in the context of graphic design. This essay will follow campaigns such as ‘Dove Real Beauty’, touch upon ambigram designs and explore the concept of standards within the graphic design world. Each topic will aim to develop an understanding of each key work

chosen with relations to graphic design, designers and artist relating back to key references and design perspectives.

Beauty

The Dove "Real Beauty" campaign and its short film "Evolution" expose the manufactured ideals of women in the media while using graphic design as a potent tool to challenge and undermine conventional concepts of beauty. In the short film "Evolution" (Dove, 2006), a woman undergoes a change through significant computer retouching, professional cosmetics, and lighting, culminating in a billboard picture that barely resembles her actual appearance. This contrast illustrates how prevailing notions of beauty are created rather than innate.

“From real to retouched in 60 seconds – this video illustrates how lighting, make-up, and digital manipulation distort our perceptions of beauty. You’ll never look at a beauty ad in the same way again!” (Dove UK, n.d.).

The goal of this campaign was to expose the reality behind the "ideal image". In addition to its product line, Unilever's personal care brand "Dove" has made a name for itself in the worldwide market by working to redefine the stigma associated with beauty standards. With the mission to "further the global understanding of women, beauty, and well-being", "Dove" is regarded as "one of Unilever's largest beauty brands" (Scott-Strategyone and D'agostino-Strategyone, 2004). With the "Real Beauty" campaign "in production since 2004", Dove has created multiple "body confident campaigns" (Unilever, 2024).

The 'Real Beauty' campaign began in 2004 with 'Dove's' aim to 'challenge societal expectations of a woman's appearance' (Jones, 2024). The idea for this project stemmed from a global report, 'which uncovered that sadly only 2% of women considered themselves to be beautiful' (City Girl Network, n.d.). This shocking discovery allowed 'Dove' to use their brand and platform for good. 'The campaign began with billboard advertisements featuring images of real women, varying in size, shape, and appearance. Dove then continued to promote the message through short films, television adverts, and magazine features' (Jones, 2024).



Figure 1 (www.dandad.org, n.d.)

Figure one features one of the many 'Dove' advertisements created for the 'Real Beauty' campaign. The figure showcases a billboard advertisement of women 'aged 96 (actually, 96 and a half)' ([Carbonmade.com](https://www.carbonmade.com), 2019) photographed with 'no editing or retouches' ([Carbonmade.com](https://www.carbonmade.com), 2019). The aim behind this was to enable the image to be as true to real life as possible, showing all society's set 'imperfections'

as they would be resized to fit a New York 'Times Square (Carbonmade.com, 2019) billboard.

This example of advertisement, shown in Figure One creates a visual of the use of graphic design within this campaign. Executive creative director of this project 'Debra Fried' created this graphical message to be interactive via mobile phones becoming 'one of the first advertisements to be used for real-time voting on a billboard' (Carbonmade.com, 2019). Throughout this visual communication Key elements of graphic design, such as visual storytelling, typographic emphasis, and advanced digital editing, are employed to guide viewers through this transformation and evoke an emotional response. With the design being responsive to the audience, allowing them to interact with the design allows the design to become more emotive and relatable as 'Dove' as a brand aims to 'reach over 60 million women' (Dove, n.d.) and 'build body confidence and self-esteem' (Dove, n.d.).

This is one example of how graphic communication was able to allow a meaningful campaign to evolve and interact with an audience differently. The typography within each design in this campaign can engage with the audience, using simple typographic choices, colours, and design aspects to stand out while complimenting the imagery well. This is a good example of how graphic design is a powerful tool used to portray a message in a clear direct way, allowing the campaign to come together and create the response intended. Fried (2012) further argues that design can function as a tool for social change, particularly when it promotes inclusive and

authentic representation. Fred (2012) states that design can be used as a tool for social change, with the campaign exemplifying design-driven activism.

The result of 'Real Beauty' created by 'Dove' reached over '60 million young people (Dove, n.d.) helping young girls and women all across the world feel more empowered in their bodies. In 2006 'Dove' went on to develop a 60-second video, 'Evolution' that 'illustrated how lighting, makeup and digital manipulation distorts our perception of beauty' (Dove UK, n.d.). The short clip had a powerful message, with the 'Real Beauty' campaign allowing graphic communications and photography to emotive the audience in a static visual, and 'Evolve' allowed a digital video to capture an audience further. Each graphic element throughout this campaign expressed how graphic communications are used to impact visual communication using static and motion graphic opportunities. It is able for this campaign to have the outcome it has resulted in can be said to be from its strong graphical communication, allowing each visual to express a deeper message than meets the surface.

Perception

Perception plays a critical role in graphic design, as it determines how visual information is interpreted, emotionally received, and cognitively processed by an audience. The graphic design relies on visual cues—such as colour, shape, typography, and spatial organization—to guide viewers' attention and convey messages effectively. 'Graphic design is an act of communication' (Díaz, 2022), it can be perceived in many ways. Each piece of graphic design is 'required to be

received as a message' (Díaz, 2022). Designers are often required to 'shape the sender's perception' (Díaz, 2022), this can be through graphic posters, logos, and graphic communications.



Figure 2 (Davies, 2023) 'Save me'

Figure two represents how graphic design affects how an audience perceives a message. This design is an ambigram, meaning the design is based around a word, art form, or symbol that is designed to reflect the same – or form another word, when viewed from a direction or perspective. For example, Figure two shows a word being reflected in a mirror to reveal a new word. Each viewer can perceive this design differently depending on their perspective of the artwork. Figure 2 shows an ambigram of the phrase 'I'm Good' is reflected in 'Save me, this message can be perceived in any way the viewer chooses showing how the graphic design has influenced the viewer's perception through designs such as ambigrams.

“At first glance, the reader sees a positive phrase. But when inverted, the copy reveals a sentiment quite the opposite.”

(Zhang, n.d.)

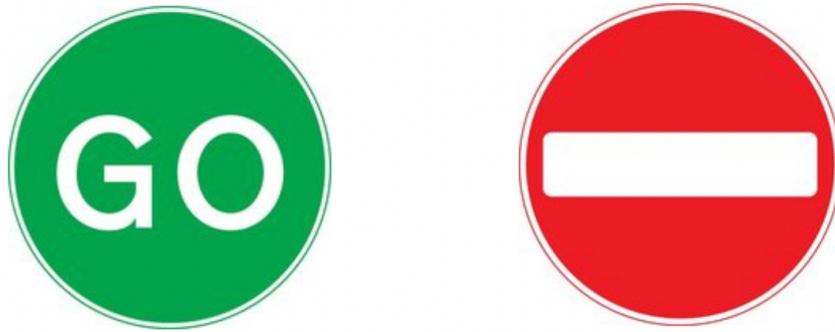


Figure 3 (THE HIGHWAY CODE, n.d.)

Figure three is an example of how semiotics can affect the public's perception of everyday visuals such as highway road signs. Semiotics – the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation, shows a clear example of how our perception of highway road signs (as seen in figure three), embed meaning into colour, shape and design.

For example, a "No Entry" sign uses the colour red, universally associated with danger, alertness, and prohibition, to immediately signal a command to stop or refrain from entry (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010). Its bold circular shape, combined with a stark horizontal white line, visually reinforces the concept of a barrier, heightening its intuitive clarity. A "Go" or green traffic light is associated with nature, safety, and permission, encouraging forward movement and positive action (Ou et al., 2004). Design aspects like simplicity, high contrast, and minimal text allow drivers to respond quickly when passing infographics at moderate speed. Therefore, semiotics ensures that road signs transcend language barriers, relying instead on

culturally ingrained colour meanings and instinctive visual forms to influence behavior instantly and uniformly across different populations. Semiotics is a prime example of how public viewers are affected by graphic design, through the choice of colour, shape, and design within an everyday visual. The public's collective perception of a road sign such as 'Go' and 'No Entry' are subconsciously universal, due to the design aspect proving that graphic design has an impact on the way we perceive everyday items and understanding of a united perspective.

“Design is a powerful tool that can change the way we perceive the world around us” (admin, 2023).

From shape, colour, and design structure, each element of a design can affect our perception - Impacting emotional responses and attitudes (admin, 2023). It is crucial to consider the viewer's perception of each design element to promote a responsive design. Designers have the power to create a message through design, this may be through a united perspective or an inoperative perception. Designers hold a great responsibility of interpretation when creating graphic visuals, choosing the wrong colour, typeface or layout may have a dramatic impact on how the design is portrayed.

Standards

“a level of quality” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).

Standards are set in society as a spectrum of quality with high or low morals.

Standards are all around us and are defined by judgment.

Standards in graphic design serve as fundamental frameworks that ensure communication is not only visually appealing but also effective across different contexts and cultures. Standards within graphic design include contrast, alignment, proportion, and typographic hierarchy, each contributing to the way a viewer processes and interprets information (Landa, 2018). In digital environments, compliance with accessibility standards, like WCAG guidelines, shows the responsibility designers have to create inclusive experiences (Lupton, 2010). Without such established norms, design risks becoming chaotic, inaccessible, or misleading, weakening its communicative power. Therefore, graphic design standards act as both a creative foundation and a professional obligation, balancing artistic expression with functional necessity.



Figure 4 (Creative Energy, 2024)



Figure 5 (Creative Energy, 2024)

Figure four and five show examples of good and bad graphic design. Figure four is an example of dated graphic design techniques with figure five featuring a rebranded version. Figure four features a 'generic logo' (Creative Energy, 2024), with combined detail and complexity. This is an example of how the standard of graphics is perceived by the viewer. The typeface can be said to be unclear when placed on top of such a complex design. Although, as a designer, this may be obvious to see do people outside of the graphic design world see the flaws?

“After working in the industry for over six years, I’ve learned time and time again that the fundamentals of good design matter so much, and not just to the people who put them into practice, but to everyone.”

(EMBRAY, 2024)

Both Figures four and five are designed for the same concept however, each is set to a different standard. Figure five is simplified and neat which, from a designer's point of view is better. It's clear to visualize and easy to read, holding a strong typeface, colour combination, and simplistic design. Figure 5 can be said to be 'brand focused' (EMBRAY, 2024) and set to a more professional standard. Statistics show that '87.5% of non-designers picked the right design' (EMBRAY, 2024) when asked. This is proof that standards within graphic design have benefits to non-designer clients as the standards are visible to both creatives and non-creatives. Within the graphic design industry it is clear to see a high level of standards within each designers work, fitting into trends, new techniques and modern day technology. The evolution of design has heightened the bar within graphic design standards resulting in designs becoming more simplified, sleek and neat to the viewers eye.

Modern day minimalism has become a trend within the design society as technology has progressed. Each colour selection, typeface and designers choice behind a design is set to a high standard that not only designers see, but non-creatives too setting the standards higher than ever.

In conclusion, the exploration of Beauty, Perception, and Standards reveals the profound ways in which graphic design shapes, challenges, and enhances communication in society. Beauty, as demonstrated through Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, illustrates how graphic design can dismantle traditional ideals and foster more inclusive representations, proving that visual communication has the power to evoke emotion and inspire social change (Dove, 2006; Fried, 2012). Similarly, the concept of perception shows that graphic design does not merely present information—it actively shapes how audiences interpret, feel, and respond to messages, whether through an ambigram, semiotic visualisation or more. Research shows that graphic design has many impacts in society and can be seen in each of the three key words. Design helps evoke emotion, communication and can be a tool seen to set standards. Each keyword highlights a different dimension of graphic design's responsibility: the ability to question norms, influence understanding, and maintain quality and accessibility. Together, they underline the critical role of thoughtful design in shaping society's visuals and collective experiences. Ultimately, this essay shows that graphic design is not only a tool for communication but a powerful medium that influences societal values, challenges perceptions, and upholds a measurable standard of excellence. This leads to a vital question for further research:

How can graphic designers continue to evolve beauty standards, audience perceptions, and professional norms to foster even greater social impact in the future?

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Figure List

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