

Aesthetics and Functionality of Graphic Design in Instagram Feed: Global Challenges and Opportunities

Wahyu Kurniawan^{1✉} and Della Naradika²

¹Departement of Desain Grafis, Universitas Sains Indonesia

²Department of MA Art Education, Culture, and Practice, University College London

✉Jl. Akses Tol No. 50, Gandasari, Kec. Cibitung, Kab. Bekasi, Jawa Barat 11650, Indonesia

✉wahyu.kurniawan@lecturer.sains.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the relationship and balance between aesthetic values and functional aspects in the context of graphic design on the Instagram platform, especially in the arrangement of user feeds. Through a qualitative approach by applying Miles and Huberman's analysis model, this study investigates how graphic designers integrate aesthetically appealing visual elements while maintaining functionality that optimises user experience and communication effectiveness. The data collection process was carried out through in-depth observation of Instagram feeds from various professional designers, accompanied by analysis of related documents and literature. The research findings show significant developments in the approach to Instagram feed design, where there is a dynamic balance between global trends and local adaptations. This study identifies innovative strategies used by designers to overcome the technical limitations of the Instagram platform, as well as optimise the visual potential to increase user engagement. The main contribution of this study lies in the development of a strategic framework for graphic design practitioners in maximising the aesthetic value and functionality in Instagram feeds. By understanding the dynamics of the interaction between these two aspects, designers can create visual content that is not only visually appealing but also effective in achieving communication goals in this competitive digital era.

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INTRODUCTION

Instagram has evolved into a platform that not only functions as an expressive medium for individuals but also as a strategic communication and marketing channel for brands and organisations. With over 1.4 billion active users worldwide, Instagram has become a competitive arena where graphic design plays a crucial role in building visual identity and facilitating effective communication (Rachmawaty, 2021). As a platform that focuses on visual content, Instagram offers an ideal space for graphic designers to express their creativity while facing the challenge of meeting the functional needs of the content they produce. Graphic design in the context of Instagram is no longer just about creating visually appealing images, but has transformed into a critical element in a broader visual communication strategy (Pradipta, 2021). Every design element, from colour selection to typography to composition, plays an important role in conveying messages, strengthening brand identity, and creating emotional connections with audiences (Creativani, 2023).

Graphic design has become a critical element in visual communication strategies in the digital era. As a discipline that combines art and technology, graphic design plays a role in creating and organising visual elements to communicate ideas, messages, and information effectively (Pan et al., 2024). In the context of Instagram, graphic design is not only concerned with the individual aesthetics of each upload, but also concerns the overall visual coherence of the feed that reflects the identity, values, and communication goals of its users (Sy & Sinaga, 2023). The application of design

principles such as balance, contrast, harmony, proportion, and rhythm is a fundamental aspect in creating an engaging and meaningful visual experience for digital audiences. The Instagram feed has evolved into a representative digital portfolio for graphic designers around the world (Kumar & Naaz, 2023). The 3x3 grid display that characterises this platform demands special attention to how each visual element interacts, not only as an individual entity but also as part of a larger whole (Sari et al., 2023). This phenomenon has given rise to new specialisations within the graphic design industry, with the emergence of professions such as “Instagram grid specialist” or “feed designer” who focus on creating a cohesive and engaging visual experience through the application of structured design strategies. The Instagram feed is no longer just a collection of images, but a digital canvas that allows designers to demonstrate their skills, creativity, and understanding of contemporary design principles.

The interaction between aesthetics and functionality in Instagram feed design represents a complex dynamic in the creation of digital visual content. Aesthetics, which focuses on beauty and visual appeal, must go hand in hand with functionality that emphasises ease of use, accessibility, and communication effectiveness (Mercius & Utami, 2023). A holistic approach to Instagram feed design requires a deep understanding of how these two aspects complement and reinforce each other (Elhersh et al., 2024). In practice, attractive aesthetics can increase visibility and initial appeal, while good functionality ensures that the user experience remains positive and the message conveyed can be clearly received. The balance between these two elements is key to creating an Instagram feed that is not only beautiful to look at but also effective in achieving communication goals. According to Yulianti, Sucipta, & Kristanto (2024), they argue that social interactions in it have great potential to be carried out, both between individuals and groups, groups and groups, and individuals and groups. According to Yulianti and Yuda (2024), the behaviour, manners, and outlook on life inherited from a particular culture will also influence the effectiveness of the communication process. The development of graphic design in the digital era has undergone a significant transformation influenced by technological advances and changes in media consumption behaviour (Aripradono, 2020). Instagram, as one of the platforms that emphasises visual aspects, has become an important catalyst in the evolution of contemporary graphic design practices.

Mobile technology and changes in the way audiences consume visual content have given birth to a new paradigm that prioritises responsiveness, interactivity, and personalisation in design (Ikasari & Christiani, 2021). This requires modern graphic designers to not only master the principles of visual aesthetics but also understand the various technical aspects that are part of the digital ecosystem, such as platform algorithms, optimisation formats, and user device preferences. The ability to integrate these elements allows designers to create works that are not only visually appealing but also effective in achieving communication goals in the fast-paced and competitive digital era. Visual aesthetics in the context of social media have unique characteristics that distinguish them from traditional media. Instagram, with its main focus on visual content, has formed its own aesthetic landscape influenced by global trends, image processing technology, and the preferences of its user community (Iksandy, 2022). This phenomenon has given birth to various distinctive "Instagram aesthetics", such as flat lay, minimalist, pastel, vintage filters, or composites that have become visual identities for various communities on this platform. Individuals learn not only to receive information passively but also to process it into something meaningful (Kurniawan, 2025)

Understanding how visual aesthetics evolve in the Instagram ecosystem is fundamental for graphic designers to be able to create content that is relevant, contemporary, and resonant with the target audience (Yang et al., 2021). The functionality of design on microblogging platforms such as Instagram is a crucial aspect that often determines the success of visual communication (Aripradono, 2020). Unlike traditional design media that tend to be static and focus on conveying visual messages directly, Instagram presents a more dynamic challenge by demanding interactivity, navigability, and an integrated information hierarchy. In this context, functionality is not only limited to the ease of users in accessing and understanding content, but also includes how the design is able to optimise the use of various platform-specific features, such as tags, hashtags, stories, highlights, and e-commerce features. The success of visual communication on Instagram depends not only on the aesthetic appeal of the design but also on the design's ability to facilitate a user experience that is intuitive, efficient, and relevant to the audience's needs (Cuevas-Molano et al., 2021). According to Reza and Kristanto (2024), more effective digital promotion requires synergy between visual identity, communication messages, and the selection of appropriate digital platforms to reach the right audience. Effective design not only aims to get content viewed but also encourages audience engagement through the available interactive features.

This requires graphic designers to create creative solutions that are able to align aesthetic integrity with the functional potential of the platform (Ramadhan et al., 2024). They must consider various elements, from the arrangement of attractive visual compositions to the insertion of navigation elements that support further exploration. With a holistic approach, designers can create visual experiences that are not only aesthetically appealing but also function strategically to support communication and business goals in the digital era.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach with the Miles and Huberman analysis model as the main methodological framework (Wikansari & Setyanto, 2023). The choice of this approach is based on the consideration that the graphic design phenomenon on Instagram is a complex reality and requires in-depth exploration to understand its nuances and context. The Miles and Huberman analysis model offers a systematic framework that allows researchers to process qualitative data through three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions/verification (Sumiran et al., 2022). This approach was chosen because of its ability to accommodate the complexity of the visual and social phenomena that are the focus of the study.

Data collection was conducted through a combination of a comprehensive literature study and systematic observation of Instagram content. The literature study included an analysis of scientific publications related to graphic design, social media, visual communication, and digital aesthetics. Literature sources included academic journals, textbooks, conference proceedings, and creative industry publications (Jaramillo-Dent, 2021). Meanwhile, content observation was conducted on the Instagram feeds of professional graphic designer accounts, with systematic recording of visual elements, composition patterns, content organisation strategies, and identified design trends. The combination of these two methods allows for data triangulation that strengthens the validity of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of dominant visual composition patterns reveals a significant preference for a structured grid approach, with the majority of designers tending to apply grid systems consistently. Balanced symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions are the primary choice in visual arrangements, while radial and spiral compositions are used by only a small number of accounts.

This preference for grid systems underscores their effectiveness in ensuring alignment, balance, and clarity. Grids simplify the process of organising content and maintaining visual consistency, which is especially critical in digital design, where responsive layouts require adaptability across various screen sizes. The structured nature of grids also enhances usability by guiding viewers' eyes naturally through the composition, enabling them to digest information efficiently.

Design Aesthetic Analysis

The aesthetic aspect in Instagram feed design is a fundamental dimension that shapes the visual identity and attractiveness of the content. Through an in-depth analysis of the research sample, several key aesthetic elements were identified that were consistently manipulated by graphic designers to achieve the desired visual effects (Prasetyo et al., 2022). Specific techniques include the strategic use of harmonious colour palettes and engaging fonts to ensure the feed functions as a modern showcase that captures the audience's attention and encourages them to read the shared information ([Lachance & Przygoda, 2022, p. 561](#)). According to Reza and Kristanto (2024), human creativity often involves elements of spontaneity, emotion, and intuition, which are difficult to measure or program into algorithms. Aesthetics in this context is not only related to "beauty" in the conventional sense, but also to how visual elements are organised to create a coherent and meaningful sensory experience for the audience.

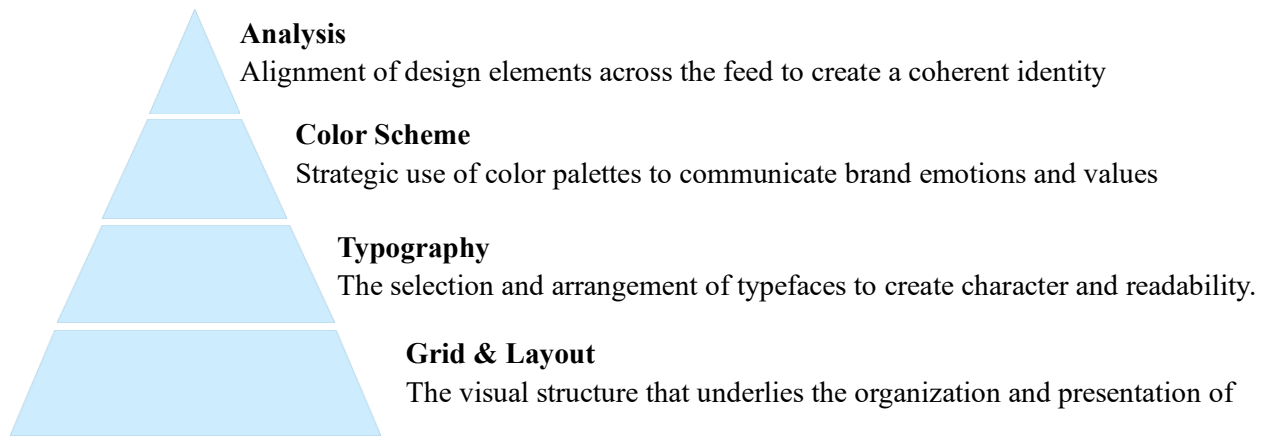


Chart 1: Pyramid of Design Aesthetics

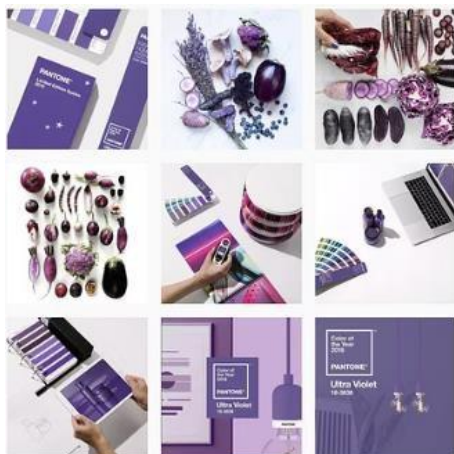
Grids and layouts are the dominant visual frameworks that shape the aesthetics of Instagram feeds (Mercius & Utami, 2023). The study identified three main approaches to implementing grid systems: structured grids that provide consistency and predictability, fluid grids that offer flexibility in accommodating different types of content, and broken grids that, although less commonly used, show an innovative trend among designers looking to create visual differentiation. Structured grids are the most common choice, while fluid grids are used quite often to create variation, and broken grids are used by a small number of designers looking for an experimental approach.



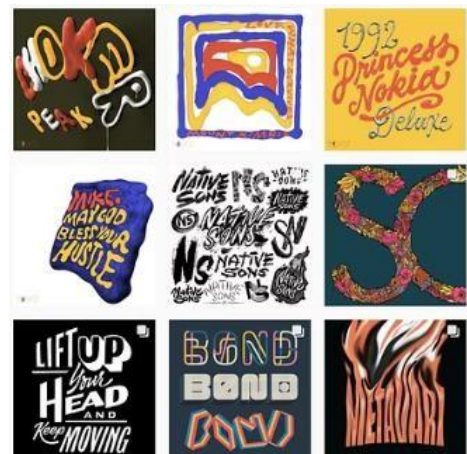
Picture 1: Instagram Feed Grid Checker Board
<https://www.freepik.com/free-vector/instagram-puzzle-feed-template> [source]



Picture 2: Instagram Feed Grid Consistent
<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/visual-hierarchy> [source]



Picture 3: Instagram Feed Colour Scheme
<https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2015/02/visual-hierarchy-principles> [source]



Picture 4: Instagram Feed Typography
<https://www.canva.com/learn/layout-design> [source]

A modular approach in the context of layouts that allow for variation in visual unity is becoming a dominant choice, with many designers relying on consistent yet flexible template systems. In addition, research notes a strong tendency towards the use of white space or negative space as an active design element (Hartono & Ramadhan, 2022). The use of white space not only provides a clean and modern aesthetic but also improves readability and helps the audience focus attention on the most important visual elements. Colour schemes play a crucial role in shaping the visual identity of an Instagram account (Hidayat & Alifah, 2022). According to Kristanto & Maulidini (2024), the use of bright colours, strong contrasts, and striking graphic displays can attract the interest of the younger generation who want to be different and stand out. In the context of branding, both personal and corporate, colour consistency is an important factor in supporting audience recognition and memorability (Purnomo et al., 2024). Accounts that maintain a clear colour identity generally show higher engagement rates compared to accounts that adopt an inconsistent colour approach.

Typography as an element of expression and identity also receives significant attention in Instagram feed design (Yu et al., 2024). The study identified that most designers prefer a minimalist typography approach, limiting the number of font families used in their feeds. Sans-serif fonts are the dominant choice, followed by serif, and a combination of the two is only used by a small number of designers. The trend of using custom typography as an element of differentiation is also increasing, with many designers developing or modifying typefaces to create a unique visual identity (Mahardikayana et al., 2023). In addition, a clear typographic hierarchy is often implemented through the consistent use of weight, size, and spacing between letters to differentiate levels of information. The study identified three levels of consistency implemented by designers, namely macro consistency covering the entire feed, micro consistency focusing on thematic content series, and element consistency involving the repeated use of certain visual components. Most designers demonstrated a high level of macro consistency, creating a cohesive visual experience when the feed is viewed as a whole.

Design Functionality Analysis

Ease of navigation and user experience are very important functional aspects in Instagram feed design (Sartika et al., 2021). Research shows that most professional designers carefully consider how users will interact with their content, not only in terms of aesthetics but also in terms of functionality. Feeds that are designed with users' natural scrolling behaviour in mind tend to generate higher engagement, with longer visit durations than feeds that focus only on aesthetics.

The hierarchy of information in the Instagram feed is an important element that determines the effectiveness of visual communication in the Instagram feed (Yanti & Triadi, 2020). Readability and legibility in Instagram design are two fundamental aspects in ensuring the functionality of visual content on Instagram. Although often considered similar, readability refers to the ease of understanding the text as a whole, while legibility focuses more on recognising individual characters. To improve legibility, the contrast between text and background becomes an important element, often reinforced with techniques such as the use of semi-transparent overlays, text shadows, or placing text in border elements to maintain readability without sacrificing visual aesthetics (Hidayah, 2023). Adaptability of design across devices is a major challenge in ensuring that content can be accessed and enjoyed optimally on various types of devices (Isma et al., 2023). Most designers actively consider the appearance of their content across different screen sizes and resolutions. Recent design trends show an increasing adoption of a “mobile-first design” approach, where content is designed with the mobile user experience in mind. This approach reflects the predominance of Instagram users accessing the platform via the mobile app rather than the desktop version.

Global Challenges in Feed Design

Differences in visual preferences across cultures present significant challenges in designing Instagram feeds targeted at a global audience. Research has identified substantial variation in the reception of visual aesthetics across geographic regions and cultural contexts. In East Asia, for example, information-dense designs tend to be more appreciated than the minimalist approaches that are prevalent in Scandinavian and North American markets (Banindro, 2021). Colour preferences also show significant cultural variation: saturated and high-contrast colours are more preferred in Latin

America and Southeast Asia, while desaturated and muted colour palettes tend to be more popular in Northern Europe (Rousi, 2023). In the context of typography, research has found that audiences in markets with strong calligraphic traditions (such as East Asia and the Middle East) show a higher appreciation for typographic experimentation than markets with Latin typographic traditions.

The technical limitations of the Instagram platform create a series of obstacles that graphic designers must navigate in implementing their creative visions. The platform's automatically applied image compression can reduce visual quality and alter colour tones, forcing designers to develop pre-upload optimisation strategies. Limited aspect ratios limit compositional flexibility, while inconsistencies in colour rendering across devices create challenges in ensuring a consistent visual experience. The platform's characteristic 3x3 grid, while offering a clear visual structure, limits the possibility of visualising large content that requires more than one post (Pradipta, 2021).

The competition for attention in the digital economy represents a fundamental challenge for Instagram feed designers. In an increasingly crowded social media landscape, with the average user spending less than 8 seconds evaluating content before continuing to scroll, designers are faced with the urgency of creating visuals that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also able to capture attention quickly (Garnita & Irawati, 2021). Research identifies a trend of "scroll-stopping design" that implements high-impact visual elements such as strong colour contrasts, large-scale typography, or unconventional compositions to break up the rhythm of scrolling. Research also reveals that Instagram's algorithm, which prioritises content based on engagement metrics, tends to drive design preferences toward the more "clickable" rather than the sophisticated, creating additional pressure for designers to balance aesthetic integrity with the need for algorithmic visibility. Consumers not only see aesthetics as a visual aspect, but also as a reflection of brand values (Kurniawan, 2025).

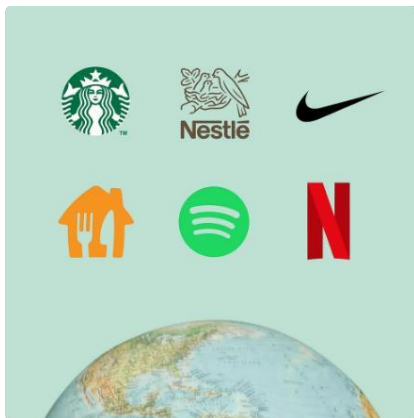
The need to maintain consistency while encouraging innovation creates creative challenges that Instagram feed designers must overcome (Sartika et al., 2021). Visual consistency is an important aspect in building strong brand recognition and identity, while social media demands constant updates to maintain audience engagement and avoid visual fatigue. To manage this dynamic, most designers adopt an approach that focuses on incremental change, known as "evolution, not revolution." This approach allows designers to maintain core elements of a visual identity while inserting innovation into secondary elements. A widely used approach is "visual framework, variable execution," where designers create a flexible design system to allow for variation within predetermined parameters. Additionally, seasonal refreshes are often used as strategic moments to introduce larger aesthetic changes. These changes are usually made in conjunction with natural events such as the changing of the seasons or important brand milestones, allowing the visual appearance to be significantly updated without creating an unfamiliar impression or reducing the sense of familiarity for the audience.

Design Development Opportunities

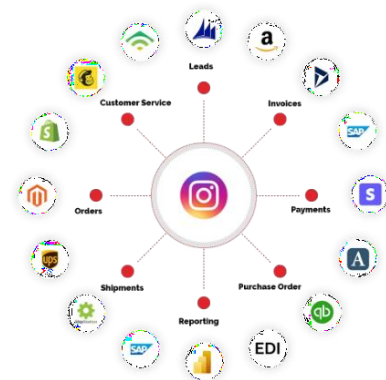
Localisation of design in a global context represents a significant opportunity for the development of more inclusive and culturally relevant visual strategies. Research identifies an emerging trend in "glocal design" approaches that blend global aesthetic elements with local visual sensibilities (Rachman & Andi, 2022). This strategy involves adapting design components such as colour, typography, and iconography to respond to specific cultural preferences while maintaining the coherence of the overall visual identity. Successful implementations of localisation have been identified across multiple dimensions: the use of colour palettes tailored to local cultural associations, the adaptation of typography for different writing systems while maintaining consistent visual characteristics, and the modification of compositions to accommodate differences in visual scanning patterns (such as right-to-left vs. left-to-right).

Multimedia integration in static feeds opens up a new dimension in Instagram visual design. Although Instagram started as an image-based platform, the evolution of technology has created opportunities to enrich the visual experience through the integration of various media formats (Arumsari & Utama, 2018). A significant trend identified is the use of "cinemagraphs" of static images with limited motion elements that create arresting visuals without the complexity of full video. The implementation of seamless transitions between static and dynamic content in the same feed is becoming an increasingly popular strategy, leveraging contrast to create a dynamic visual rhythm. The study also noted the

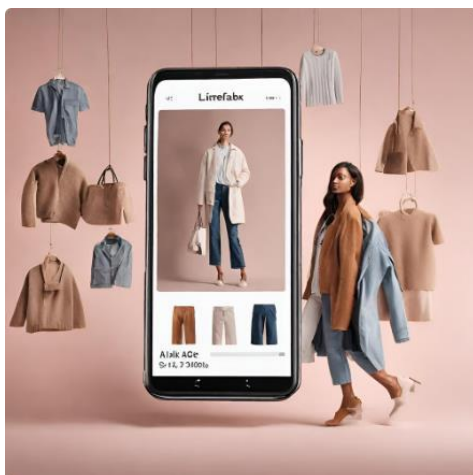
untapped potential in the integration of AR (Augmented Reality) technology into feed design, where visual elements can be extended to an interactive dimension through features such as Instagram Effects. The key to successful multimedia integration lies in a purposeful approach that uses various media formats to strengthen the visual narrative, rather than simply variations for the sake of variations.



Picture 5: Famous Brand Development Design
<https://www.toptal.com/designers/ui/visual-hierarchy> [source]



Picture 6: Social Media Map
<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/instagram-ecosystem-marketing-diagram> [source]



Picture 7: Visual Branding Personalisation
<https://www.pinterest.com/search/pins/?q=instagram%20feed%20grid%20design> [source]

Personalisation of visual experiences is an emerging frontier in Instagram feed design, driven by advances in data technology and contemporary user expectations (Kozharinova & Манович, 2024). Research identifies a trend towards “adaptive design systems” that can tailor visual displays based on the characteristics and preferences of specific audiences. A simple implementation of this approach is seen in “content segmentation” strategies, where designers create visual variations for different audience segments, using targeting features in Instagram Ads or scheduled posting strategies to serve relevant content to specific groups. At a more sophisticated level, personalisation can involve creating different content paths based on previous interactions, allowing for increasingly personalised and relevant experiences for each user. Research also identifies potential in the development of “visual UX personas” that serve as the basis for designs optimised for the aesthetic preferences and content consumption behaviours of different audience segments. A key challenge in implementing personalisation is balancing the need for variation with consistency of the overall visual identity, ensuring that adaptation does not compromise brand recognizability.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex dynamics between aesthetics and functionality in Instagram feed graphic design, identifying patterns, trends, challenges, and opportunities in a global context. A synthesis of key findings reveals that effective Instagram feed design cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of “beautiful” versus “useful,” but rather emerges from the strategic orchestration of visual elements that simultaneously fulfil aesthetic and pragmatic functions. The implementation of design principles such as consistency, hierarchy, and proportion remains fundamental, but is reinterpreted and adapted to meet the specific needs of the Instagram digital ecosystem with its unique characteristics such as scrollability, 3x3 grid, and engagement-driven algorithm.

Future research directions include several promising areas for deeper exploration. First, a longitudinal investigation of how Instagram feed aesthetics evolve could provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between continuity and change in digital design. Second, comparative research that analyses how design principles are applied across social media platforms could reveal insights into how platform-specific characteristics shape design practices. Third, a deeper exploration of the intersections between visual aesthetics, algorithms, and user behaviour could expand our understanding of how design decisions interact with and are influenced by these external factors. Finally, research into the ethical implications of visual aesthetics in a global context could articulate a framework for design practice that is not only effective but also culturally and socially responsive. Collectively, these research directions have the potential to expand our understanding of the role of graphic design in shaping and responding to the evolving digital communications landscape.

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