Investigating the effects of client imagery on the ideation process of graphic design

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Prior work has examined how images supplied by design clients influence the output of graphic design ideation, however, little is known about the effect upon the ideation process itself. This article reports on an empirical study conducted with graphic design students engaged in design ideation. Findings are based on think-aloud protocol data, as well as participants' subjective ratings of their ideation process using factors based on the principle of design flow. Results show some statistically significant effects on the design process of the participants, particularly increases in their reported anxiety and sense of involvement in the task. In addition, some correlations are identified between design output resulting from exposure to client provided images, and the process of designing those outputs.

Graphic design has been defined as a discipline whose aim is to visually communicate on behalf of others—usually between design clients and their targeted audience. Practitioners are encouraged to develop an understanding of parties involved in such communication, including the audience and clients on whose behalf they communicate with that audience. Literature encourages practitioners to develop and maintain awareness of the visual world, and to adopt suitable influences into their work. Previous studies (Laing & Masoodian, 2015; Martin, 2012; Tan & Melles, 2010) have shown professional graphic designers indeed collect a range of visual imagery in their creative practices, including images related to the client and the market relevant to specific design projects.

Despite the documented collection of visual imagery in the graphic design process, little is known of the influence such imagery has on ideation process or outcome of tasks; Laing and Masoodian (2016) provided some evidence of design outputs being affected when designers were exposed to aesthetic of the client and aesthetic of the market images, however, the study did not identify effects upon the process itself.

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We therefore present an empirical study aimed at increasing understanding of the influence of exposure to imagery provided by clients on the ideation process of graphic design.

1 Role of imagery in the design process

Although existing studies have investigated use of images within the design process, these have mainly looked at the role of images in activities leading into the design process (such as problem framing), or concentrated on artefacts resulting from the design process (creative output), without considering the role and influence of images during the process itself—other than studies considering images solely as design examples.

There are many studies from outside graphic design, particularly industrial design and architecture, investigating the role and influence of imagery within the design process. Examples of these include: Cheng, Mugge, and Schoormans (2014) experimented with ways of showing design examples to enhance creativity while diminishing fixation effects; Goldschmidt and Smolkov (2006) considered image influence, finding them to positively influence the creativity of the ideation process; Goldschmidt and Sever (2011) examined text influence on design process; Haug (2015) investigated the potential of design requirement changes over the course of a project, including the potential for stylistic reference through interview studies with senior industrial design students; Makri and Warwick (2010) showed how architectural students seek and use information to inform their design process, including roles in inspiration and problem framing; Chandrasekera, Vo, and D'Souza (2013) have considered subliminal effects of example image exposure on the design outputs of architects; Mougenot, Watanabe, Bouchard, and Aoussat (2009) investigated the influence of magazine images within automotive design; while (Jonson, 2005; Stones & Cassidy, 2007, 2010) examined the influence of other visual artefacts such as sketches on ideation processes.

There are also studies more directly relevant to graphic design; one by Herring, Chang, Krantzler, and Bailey (2009) showed there is a benefit to image exposure during the design process in a range of creative disciplines, including graphic design. However, the results of their study are based on small numbers of semi-structured interviews, providing retrospective accounts of process. Similarly, Beaudoin (2014) identified various image usages occurring in a variety of professions, including artists and architects, though this work has been more toward the need for such information rather than its effects on either the process or creative output. Herring et al. (2009) investigated the use of images as examples, including by graphic design participants, where semi-structured interview methods revealed example use as being beneficial to both preparation and idea-generation. To support usage of examples in design processes, systems such as *Cabinet* have been developed and assessed