Analysis of the Design Discourse Community: Whitney Museum Identity Redesign
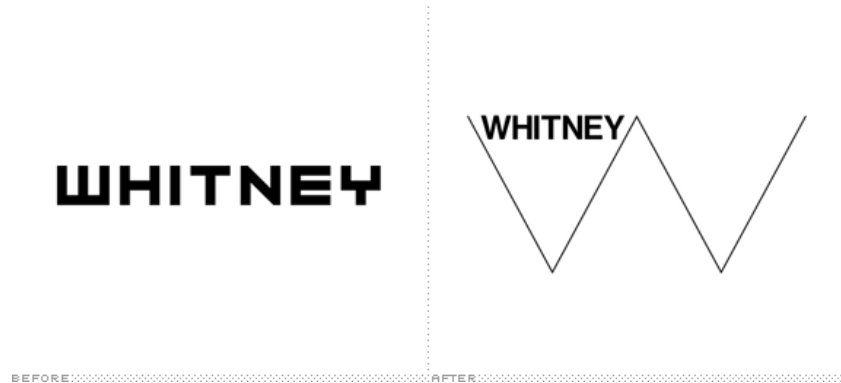
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Introduction

Success is universally one of the most difficult concepts to define. Historically, there have been both quantifiable metrics, like monetary gain, and qualitative measurements, like happiness or social status, that helped shape what success is. These types of evaluation raise the question: do humans desire objective standards to which they can compare themselves and define success? In many industries, like business and science, these metrics exist; however, in certain fields subjective measurements are the norm. For example, it is a challenge to set objective standards in the design world, which centers around perception, psychology and preference. As a result, designers must weigh popular opinion, media attention and professional designers' judgements with personal goals and client constraints to decide whether a project is 'successful' or not.

If these sometimes measurable but often vague outcomes define success, how are they discusses amongst the design community in order to become more tangible? In her article "Discourse Communities and Communities of Practice: Membership, Conflict and Diversity" (1997), Ann Johns discusses the goals of a discourse community saying "...the focus is on texts and language, the genres and lexis that enable members throughout the world to maintain their goals, regulate their membership, and communicate efficiently with one another." The design discourse community centers around critique—critical conversation that analyzes the visual elements, effectiveness and logic of a project. As a result, critiques set the standard for 'good' and 'bad' design, implicitly establish membership within the community and subsequently improve the value of work produced. Through a corporate rebranding case study, this paper analyzes the language and structure of critique in order to better understand the metrics use to define success amongst the design community.

The Whitney Museum's Identity Redesign

In May 2013, the Whitney Museum of American Art announced to the world a graphic identity redesign that would accompany their move to a new building in New York City two years later. The museum staff posted an online notice explaining the reason behind the rebrand: "While the Museum has changed considerably in the thirteen years since it introduced the word mark designed by Abbott Miller of Pentagram, even more extensive institutional changes will come with the move downtown" (A New Graphic Identity). They hired the Dutch design studio Experimental Jet set (EJ) to develop a new logo and complete visual system to reflect these forward-looking changes.

Experimental Jet set Case Study

Whitney logo before and after rebrand (Vit, 2013).

At the same time the museum launched its new brand, Experimental Jetset published a case study about their team's creative process and logic. While Experimental Jetset wrote about all the correct topics—the logo mark, typography, and application of both across media—the post is lengthy, highly conceptual and at times contradictory. It begins with a 15-paragraph explanation of the "responsive 'W'," the zigzag mark EJ designed as the Whitney's new logo. The language they use to describe their thought process is conversational and philosophical, borrowing terms from the high art world and referencing historical movements like Optical, Kinetic and Minimal Art (Experimental Jetset, 2013). Because the design project is for a contemporary art museum, this language choice is justified; however, it used excessively and often distracts the reader from thinking critically about the final product. On the "responsive 'W'," Experimental Jetset writes:

> "But even more than the letter W, we like to think the line could also represent a pulse, a beat – the 'heartbeat of the city', so to speak. It shows the Whitney as an institute that is breathing (in and out), an institute that is open and closed at the same time. An institute that goes back and forth between the past and the future, moving from one opposite to the other (history and present, the 'Old World' and the 'New World', between the industrial and the sublime, etc.), while still moving forward" (Experimental Jetset).

This passage is difficult to interpret. How could a zigzag line possibly represent all of these opposing forces? The implication is that the mark evokes a feeling of forward movement; if this is the case, how does being both open and closed pertain? The metaphor "heartbeat of the city" is about New York City's energy while the comparisons later in the paragraph are about the future. Is this thought cohesive? While creative writing techniques—in this case, repetition—can be successful in establishing rhythm and flow, they don't deliver the concise design explanation the reader craves.

The logic behind the "responsive 'W'" drones on for 1,282 words before the authors' move on to address other visual assets and deliverables. At times their own minds wander, sometimes warranting an explicit refocus—"Anyway, returning to the idea of the 'Responsive W' as a blank canvas…" (Experimental Jetset). Conversational language? Sure. A symptom of a too-long, highly- abstract exploration of a simple line? Perhaps.

Near the end of their case study, Experimental Jetset defends their typographic choice. They write: "The version of Neue Haas Grotesk that we used throughout this proposal is a redrawn version of a Swiss typeface originally designed by Max Miedinger and Eduard Hofmann, between 1957 and 1961" (EJ). Great graphic design relies on a deep understanding of typography—the arrangement of letters, words and sentences on a page—so the subject has become an emotional one in the design discourse community. By including specific dates and names, EJ is paying homage to 'the greats' before them and proving knowledge of the subject.

Response from the Design Community

The case study fueled a lot of debate amongst the design community. Because firms need to win clients in order to stay in business, their case studies become a sales tool and do not provide an impartial review. In the quest to more objectively define success, it is useful to look at critiques from design professionals and the greater design community.

Design Professionals

Michael Bierut is one of the design 'masters,' regarded "one of the most famous graphic designers today" by the American Institute of Graphic Arts. On May 22nd, 2013—one day after the Whitney's brand launch—Bierut tweeted "Great case history by Experimental Jet Set on their new identity for @whitneymuseum. I'm jealous, with good reason" (Bierut, 2013). Though a meaningful shoutout, it doesn't provide much insight into his reasoning. The sentiment does encourage the rest of the design community to believe the project deserves attention.
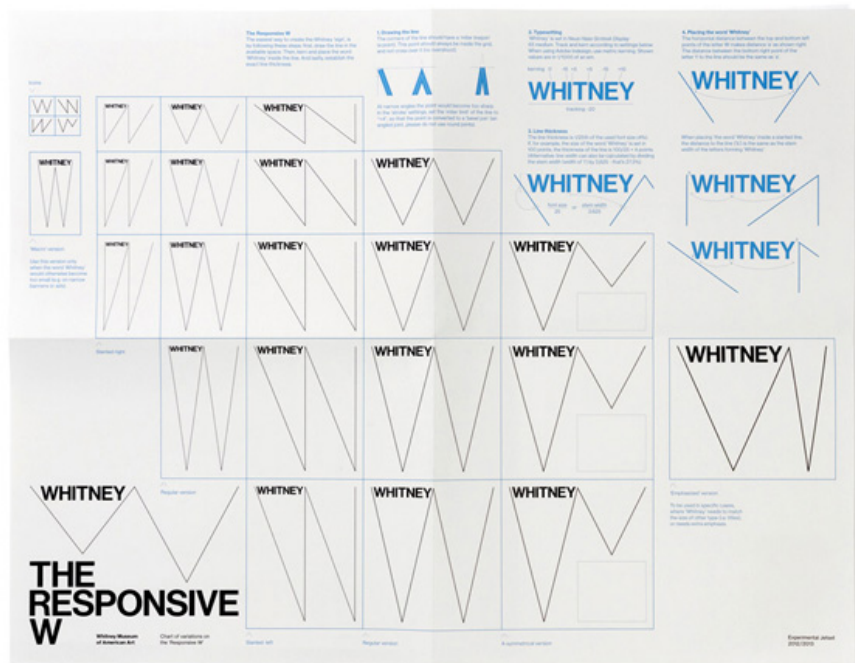

Chart of new Whitney logo templates (Vit, 2013).

Another famous designer, Jessica Walsh of Sagmeister & Walsh, was interviewed later in 2013 by D&AD as part of a design-centric youtube series. The prompt was to discuss what she had

seen that year that made her think 'I wish I'd done that.' Her response was the Whitney branding, explaining "[The branding] I think [Experimental Jetset] can hand off to another design team and it allows for authorship. It's allowing the next team to be as creative as they were" (dandad, 2013). Walsh is responding to the flexibility the "responsive 'W'" provides the Whitney Museum's design staff—the team ultimately responsible for continuing the brand. Known for her experimental design work, Walsh is partial to visual systems that stand out, break the rules and challenge the notion of 'beauty.' Does this subjectivity invalidate an otherwise thoughtful critique?

Greater Design Community

Positive reviews from 'great' designers might be enough for some to consider the rebrand a success. But for others, two individual critiques are not enough. Another facet of the design community active in critiquing projects is comprised of respected design blogs. Brand New is a highly credible and often sourced design forum run by UnderConsideration, a firm that produces client projects and publishes community resources. This particular blog's sole purpose is to archive and critique corporate identity redesigns. Its review of the Whitney identity starts off skeptical but quickly concludes "...this is one of the best logos — even outside of its application — we've seen all year: it goes against conventions, it is perfect for the client and its audience, and it serves as a solid system for the Whitney's design staff to build on their own" (Vit, 2013). Similar to Walsh's praise of the 'W's flexibility, Brand New's review considers the identity successful for its seamless application across various media. It goes on to mention how the "sophisticated, edgy look" of its brand elements stand out against other minimalist black-and-white museum identities. The post establishes a sense of objectivity and validity by discussing both what works—the mark in multiple contexts—and what could be improved—the typography.

At the end of each Brand New post, there is a audience poll to collect feedback on specific design elements of the project. Designers and design-interested folk comprise a majority of Brand New's online audience; although this readership doesn't accurately represent the 'general public,' their votes do provide another lens to assess a project's success. Results from the poll at the end of the Whitney identity review show a majority 'bad' votes for Logo and Typography— 50% and 41%, respectively—and 'great' votes for Application. Based on the overall positive evaluation of the preceding post, these results are surprising. These outcomes are supported by comments from active community members. Shradic Toop, a self-proclaimed artist/designer/filmmaker, commented "...changing the shape of the 'W' (and it is a 'W', no matter what the spiel says) and having a sudden burst of colour in some applications rather than sticking to B&W (they even reverse it and it becomes an 'M' for 'member'), it all just seems watered down, like anything goes, which results in lack of recognition" (Vit, 2013). By referring to elements of the brand that can be seen in the photos in the post, Toop's critique is difficult to dispute. His conclusion that the brand is diluted and unrecognizable due to its formally 'incorrect' aspects presents an interesting metric for judging a design's 'success'— its uniqueness.

In line with the negative response from Brand New's audience, Design Observer—a highly regarded design and culture blog with famous contributors from the field—published an article

that challenges the logic Experimental Jetset used in their case study. London graphic designer Francisco Laranjo makes fun of the firm's "past and future...history and present, 'Old World' and 'New World'..." passage, writing "With this degree of latitude, we might go on to suggest other equally valid (though so far unused) comparisons: Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, up and down, yin and yang, yes and no" (Laranjo, 2013). He continues to argue that initial positive reactions to the brand discount EJ's ambiguous, gratuitous and inconsequential reasoning. The definition of success alluded to in Laranjo's critique relies on sound logic and intentional design decisions.

Response from the "Design Public"

Laranjo's Design Observer article opens by mentioning social media's reaction to the Whitney brand launch—"Great," "bold," "sweet," "I'm really excited," "I'm jealous" or simply "Love it!" were some of the initial glowing endorsements of the work" (Laranjo, 2013). However, according to YCN's interview with Experimental Jetset, these reactions weren't the only ones. EJ shares the feedback the Whitney Museum staff has collected, saying "Hilary Greenbaum, the current Head of the Graphic Design department, described the response as "delightfully polarized", which we agree with" (YCN). Without more context it is difficult to decipher patterns or specific arguments—all that is certain is the existence of both praise and criticism. By happily agreeing with Greenbaums comment, the EJ team suggests their belief in the adage "all press is good press." Perhaps, then, the success of this project hinges on garnering lots of public attention?

These 'delightfully polarized' opinions fueled social media conversation. The keywords "whitney museum identity new" bring up several hundred tweets. Nike product designer Gitamba Saila-Ngita writes "The new Whitney Museum identity is bold. And by bold I mean ugly" (Saila-Ngita, 2013). Another design-oriented professional, Ken Carbone, tweeted "The new @whitneymuseum identity is just wrong. Subpar quality for a great museum. It will be redesigned in a year" (Carbone, 2013). With only 140 characters to make a point, these designers are direct and vehement in sharing their opinions. This calls into question their objectivity—are they reacting based personal design preferences, visual principles or effectiveness in context as other designers have? In contrast, designer Mark Forscher analyzes a specific element of the logo to remain objective, writing "I like aspects of the system but the typeface is a missed opportunity to be bold" (Forscher, 2013). Similar to Brand New's post, Forscher's short analysis mentions both likes and dislikes, aiding in establishing his impartialness and objectivity.

Business Impact and Response from the "General Public"

While it is useful to include social media responses in analyzing a design project it is also important to seek methods of surveying the general public. As was the case in Brand New's voting and commenting section, Twitter results come from a design-oriented audience. To better understand the success or failure of the Whitney redesign, the museum's financial statements can be analyzed.

Figure 1.0: Membership and Admissions Support and Revenue data

	Membership dues	Admission fees
FY 2010	$2,580,000	$2,781,000
FY 2011	$2,627,000	$2,865,000
FY 2012	$2,906,000	$2,116,000
FY 2013	$3,027,000	$2,308,000
FY 2014	$3,270,000	$2,937,000

Whitney Museum of American Art Financial Statements
June 30, 2011 and 2010; June 30, 2013 and 2012; June 30, 2014 and 2013

Figure 1.1: Membership and Admissions Percentage Increase

	Membership dues	Admission fees
2010-2011	1.82%	3.02%
2011-2012	10.62%	-26.14%
2012-2013	4.16%	9.07%
2013-2014	8.03%	27.25%

Data calculated from Figure 1.0

The ultimate goal of many corporate redesigns is increased revenue. According to the tables above, there was a significantly larger percentage revenue increase from admission fees in FY13 than there was a year prior—27.25% vs. 9.07%, respectively. Even before 2012 the museum saw a greater loss of admission fees than gain, making a nearly 30% spike notable. In addition to serving as an analysis of financial growth, the admission fees line-item is evidence of public opinion as well. Whereas membership dues are typically generated by wealthy members of the art community, admission fees represent the general public; according to the Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 'general public' is defined as "ordinary people, especially all the people who are not members of a particular organization or who do not have any special type of knowledge." One could suppose the Whitney's new identity resulted in a 30% revenue spike; if this conjecture is true, such a significant increase would also prove a positive public response. Both business growth, which is a quantitative metric, and popular vote—a qualitative assessment—can be used to define a project's success. In this sense, Experimental Jetset's work can be deemed successful.

Conclusion

In my opinion, the new logo and visual identity for the Whitney Museum is successful. Especially in highly subjective fields, contrarians will always voice their opinions—no matter how unpopular—for a moment in the spotlight. On top of that, the design discourse community loves to argue about semantics and critique work based on personal preferences. Though arguments grounded in visual principles were made to the contrary, it seems as though individual designers with social clout, a decent percentage of the active design community and the museum's business records all point to a successful redesign by Experimental Jetset.

All in all, it is difficult to assess whether a design project is successful. Designers must ask several questions with ill-defined parameters in order to determine the success of their work. Do esteemed design professionals approve? What does the greater design community think? Has the work been well-received by the public? And finally, was there a positive business impact? Because these questions are often difficult to answer, the language and structure of design critique is of utmost importance. Abstract explanations and emotional responses detract from the validity of a critique. The most successful design reviews are direct, grounded in aesthetic principle and don't over-explain or over-sell.

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