The rise of brutalism and antidesign

And their implications on web design history
This exam work has been carried out at the School of Engineering in Jönköping in the subject area Web design. The work is a part of the three-year Bachelor of Science in Engineering programme. The authors take full responsibility for opinions, conclusions and findings presented.

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Abstract

The following bachelor thesis is written by a student at New Media Design within Informatics at the School of Engineering, Jönköping University.

The background of this study is based on the emergence of web design trends brutalism and antidesign, which have been argued to originate from styles used during early periods of the web’s history. Furthermore, a lack of cultural analysis within web design has been identified. The visual evolution of the world wide web is not sorted into distinct and widely acknowledged periods or categories such as is the case with most other cultural areas like music and art. The emergence and popularity of brutalism and antidesign were identified as potential cases of visual styles returning from the past. They were therefore considered opportunities to examine visual periods in web design and predict where the field is heading in the future.

The study was conducted using the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. The empirical data was analysed using a thematic analysis and was later compared with theories derived from literature studies.

The study found three reasons behind the rise of brutalism and antidesign in web design; the world wide web’s coming of age, reactions towards the mainstream web and the interest in retro trends. The study also aimed to find the possible implications of their emergence on the aesthetic evolution of web design. It was found that brutalism and antidesign are part of a large number of experimental and retro trends that will continue to emerge. Though they are unlikely to directly affect mainstream web design in its current state, they may be seen as design movements. This may be viewed as a step in the direction of visual categories within web design.
Summary

The study aims to examine design styles and periods of the web and find the reason for the emergence of the web design trends brutalism and antidesign, which have been described as derived from the early days of the web. The study provides insight into the visual evolution of web design, and how it may proceed in the future. To be able to answer this purpose, two questions were formulated.

[1] What is the reason behind the recent rise of Brutalism and Antidesign in web design?

[2] What implications can the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design?

To aid in answering these questions, a qualitative method in the form of semi-structured interviews has been used. These were conducted with experts within the field of web design. The method was chosen to ensure a qualitative set of data which would provide an understanding into the field of web design, its history and its trends. A thematic analysis was performed on the empirical data which was then compared to existing relevant theory.

The results show that brutalism and antidesign can be considered retro trends. The reason behind the recent rise of brutalism and antidesign in web design is a combination of the following:

1. The world wide web’s coming of age

The empirical data states that the web either is mature or has begun to mature. It also indicates that the return of visual design languages has not been commonly seen before, which is because it has been too young until now. The web has recently reached an age where it is relevant to start borrowing from the past.

2. Reaction towards the mainstream web

Brutalism and antidesign are reactions towards two different, yet related, perceived qualities of the mainstream web; visual uniformity and commercialism.

3. The interest in retro trends

There is currently a large interest in retro trends in pop culture, especially from the 1990s, where brutalism and antidesign are derived from.

The implications that the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design are as part of a larger number of experimental trends and retro trends that will arise. Brutalism and antidesign are unlikely to directly affect mainstream web design. They may, however, be seen as design movements, which is a potential step in the direction of acknowledged categories within visual web design.

Keywords

Brutalism, antidesign, web design trends, retro trends, visual web design, web design evolution, web design history.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Web design is a young sub-field to the field of design. It is also evolving rapidly along with the world wide web. According to Internet World Stats, it has grown in number of users from 0.4% of the world's population in 1995, to 55.1% in June 2018. During the 28 years of evolution of the world wide web, 330 billion websites have been noted in the digital library of The Internet Archive. Doosti, Crandall and Su (2017) argue that the world wide web — “perhaps the most important and best reflection of today’s new media” — has had little examination through the lens of cultural analytics. Furthermore, Doosti, Crandall and Su note that studies into the evolution of web design are few, despite the web arguably being the most encountered interaction design today. Widely acknowledged categories or periods, as within the closely related field of graphic design, are absent in web design.

An art or design movement is described as “a style or prevailing inclination in art or design that upholds a specific philosophy or ideal and is followed and promoted by a group of artists for a defined period of time” (Encyclopedia Britannica). As argued by Chen, Crandall and Su (2017), time periods are powerful means to compare cultural artefacts that share aesthetics or philosophies. When periods, styles, tools and vocabulary can be identified by critics, they become portable concepts that can be adapted, built upon and rejected; a style or time period may be a reaction to another. Chen, Crandall and Su (2017) argue that art is not created in isolation but is a result of all the people cooperating in an art world’s conventions. This, they explain, means an artist must work within a social context, conventions and histories of critics, galleries, the public and others in the art community, so that their work may be regarded as art. Petrovic (2013) argues that art and design have an undeniably close relationship and these rules apply to fields in design as well. Even in human-computer interaction (HCI), Gaver and Bowers (2012) have argued for designers to be aware of design artefacts surrounding them. Domingo (2019) describes labels and categories as “time-saving building blocks” which help people understand the world and communicate with each other. Labels, she argues, provide a “readily accessible image of what designs truly are and where they belong in relation to other categories of designs”. Domingo (2019) argues that design movements can be used by user experience designers to explain decisions and provide inspiration. Therefore, mapping periods and styles of a field not only leads to knowledge and understanding of its history, it also gives designers a set of references which may be used for work within the field. Doosti, Crandall and Su (2017) argue that there is a lack of cultural analysis of the web, but that there is a growing recognition that such new media should be preserved.

In recent years, two design styles based on past web eras started gaining popularity and interest. They have been labelled brutalism and antidesign in their modern adaptation. Moran (2017) states that these two trends are derived from the early days of the internet. She describes how brutalism references the early days of the web by aiming to look unadorned and haphazard, utilizing few design features other than the default appearance of websites. Antidesign aims to mimic what Moran (2017) calls “bad 1990s’ design on steroids”. It lacks visual hierarchy and utilizes strong colours and patterns and distracting, often animated, features. Brutalism and antidesign may be seen as instances of historical web design eras returning. Furthermore, the trends have been named and have distinct design principles which can be recognized. These traits bring brutalism and antidesign close to the definition of a design movement according to Encyclopedia Britannica. While these two design styles are different in both philosophy and visual appearance, they are often bundled together and confused for each other as described by Scacca (2018). The return of these visual styles, as trends, may be viewed...
as steps in the direction of acknowledged categories and periods. Therefore, the cause and implications of the emergence of brutalism and antidesign is deemed relevant to the aesthetic evolution of the web. A study on the subject is believed to provide further insight into web design eras and where the field of web design is heading in the future.

1.2 Problem description

Web designs have evolved for 28 years, from simple, static pages of black text on white or grey backgrounds, to visually rich, interactive and responsive designs. Styles have gone in and out of popularity. According to Chen, Crandall and Su (2017) we still lack theories to describe or explain its changes, which are driven not only by changes in aesthetic style, but also (perhaps even more) by evolution in technology. Chen, Crandall and Su (2017) advocate a need to understand patterns of change in web design, explain why certain designs stay while others fade, and give insight into past, present and future design practices. They argue that being able to compare web design periods could be valuable to website designers, marketers and even beyond HCI.

According to Doosti, Crandall and Su (2017) the web differs from more traditional cultural artefacts in that it is essentially boundless. The describe how this provides more material to find statistically-significant general patterns, but also makes study and organization of web design impractical. Another obstructing factor is that because the web is a relatively young field, much of the aesthetic evolution is directly related to its technical evolution. As a result, telling visual trend from technical advancement is at times difficult. It should be noted, though, that this is the case in the beginning of the rise of any cultural artefact. The advancement of tools used and visual preferences evolve parallel to each other, often blending together. Examples of this can be found throughout the history of product design. According to Milton and Rodgers (2011) its timeline begins with the Industrial Revolution which shifted the main production method of goods from craft production to mass-production. Milton and Rodgers (2011) describe how the industrialization affected not only production methods but the products themselves, resulting in a great deal of new designs. Eventually reactional movements such as Arts and Crafts followed which advocated a renewal of artistic handwork.

Doosti, Crandall and Su (2017) see a need of automated techniques that can be used to characterize, compare and contrast web design styles in a meaningful way, as exists within for example art and music. Doosti, Crandall and Su (2017) view the world wide web as a significant cultural artefact. Defining and understanding its visual design styles as with other cultural artefacts is part in recognizing it as such. Graphic design is a field, related to web design, that often requires its practitioners to have a fundamental knowledge of its history, periods and styles. Bradley (2014) argues that knowing design history adds context that helps understanding design, allows observation of change over longer periods of time, and reveals patterns that are beyond a human lifespan. He believes it is an opportunity to learn from the best practitioners of the past, develop an understanding of trends and evolve personal taste. Bradley (2014) also argues that learning from history helps in creating designs that stand the test of time. While one could argue that the web is too young to have distinct periods in the same way as graphic design, the pace of evolvement and number of easily accessed examples in web design provides diverse material in an amount that would be enough to enable definition of styles and categories. The benefits of learning about history, including its past trends, can be applied to web design just as any other design field. Hence, studies on web design trends and history are deemed valuable for the advancement of the field.
1.3 Purpose and research questions

The problem description argues that there is a lack of studies that define, categorize and analyse web design styles, and that there is a need to do this. This entails knowing and understanding the history of the web and its visual design styles. A potential categorization in web design has been suggested by Chen, Crandall and Su (2017). No studies have been found specifically on brutalism and antidesign. They are found to be examples of visual web design languages that have returned from the past and received labels and recognition, something that is typical of design movements. Therefore, they are viewed as opportunities to find indications of where web design is heading. Whether brutalism and antidesign can be considered legitimate web design movements can contribute to the purpose of categorizing visual web design.

The study has an exploratory purpose, which according to Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) entails exploring a subject or dimension of a subject that has previously not been studied to any great degree. Brutalism and antidesign are viewed as dimensions of the subjects of web design history and visual categories within web design. The study aims to examine design styles and periods of the web and find the reason for the return of past visual styles, in its modern adaptation labelled as brutalism and antidesign. The study will provide valuable insight into the visual evolution of web design, and how it may proceed in the future.

To be able to answer this purpose, two questions have been formulated. The web has seen a return of past visual design styles in form of the trends called brutalism and antidesign, but no explanation has been found to why they return, or why they do so at this moment in time. Because of this, the first question reads:

[1] What is the reason behind the recent rise of brutalism and antidesign in web design?

Furthermore, since the two visual styles in question are derived from specific periods in time, there is reason to look at the meaning and the implications that their return could have on the field of web design. Hence, the second question reads:

[2] What implications can the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design?

1.4 Delimitations

The study focuses on the visual design of websites, as viewed by users. This includes aesthetic elements such as colours, images and typography, and information architecture elements such as layout and navigation. Functionality of websites has not been studied in depth.

Web design evolution is not only driven by the advancement and changes in visual expression, but also, perhaps even more, by technological advancement. While the research questions of the study are based on visual styles, much of the theory and reasoning used to answer them bring up technological factors. This is something that has been carefully considered and followed up upon throughout the study. However, the focus has been kept to what the technical advancement contributes to the evolution of visual styles.

The literature study involves the history of web design and product design. In the case of product design, relevant parts of its history have been studied for the purposes of
comparison, and to provide understanding for web design history. It is a vast field and the focus has been kept to cases from where comparisons may be drawn. This means that product design history will not be studied in great depth.

When talking about a retro trend in web design, it refers to a trend that came into existence specifically on the world wide web. The expression does not include adaptations of offline retro styles derived from other environments such as print media.

Most websites come in variations depending on factors such as viewing device, screen width, browser and content updates. Websites shown as examples during the semi-structured interviews have been viewed through the same device to eliminate some of these variations. The variations that may still remain have been overlooked, since they are deemed insignificant when studying general visual expressions.

1.5 Outline

This report has been clearly structured with headings and subheadings to reflect the content of the following body text.

The next chapter is called Method and implementation and describes the choice of method and process. There is also a discussion on the reliability of the report.

The Theoretical background describes the theories that have been applied to this study.

The empirical chapter is an objective description of the empirical data that has been collected.

Findings and analysis summarizes the findings from the empirical data and compares it with findings from existing theory.

The Discussion and Conclusions chapter contains a discussion of method and findings and states the conclusions and implications of the study. Further related work is also suggested.

Next is References, followed by Search terms.

The Appendices contain screenshots of example websites shown during the semi-structured interviews and the interview outline.
2 Method and implementation

2.1 Connection between research questions and method

The following chapter describes the methods used to gather and analyse the data that have been used to answer the questions posed by the study.

The two research questions are closely related, with the second being a follow-up question to the first. Furthermore, they are of the same nature, both being related to history and trends in web design. As a result, the same method has been used to answer both the first and second question: by conducting five semi-structured interviews with experts within the field of web design.

2.2 Research design

According to Blomkvist and Hallin (2015), using interviews as a research method helps in discovering new dimensions and developing a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. One of the most common methods used in qualitative social science research is to gather empirics via qualitative interviews. Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) describe how this method makes it possible to learn more about how individuals reason in different research questions. Interviews of an open nature allows for unexpected discoveries. The study aims to find the reason behind the rise of two web design trends and their implications on web design history. Conducting interviews with practitioners who have worked in the field since the early days of the web will provide valuable insights that have been gained first-hand. The second research question “What implications can the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design?” has an element of prediction and is believed to be best answered by the long-time experience of web design practitioners, who have seen and partaken in the evolution of web design and its visual trends. Qualitative interviews will allow these experts to elaborate on their experiences, views and predictions.

Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) describe how a qualitative interview can be unstructured or semi-structured. In the unstructured interview there is only an overarching topic, and what is supposed to be found out is undecided in the beginning. Semi-structured interviews are organized around several themes or question areas that are determined in advance. They still allow for flexibility and many of the questions are decided upon or even created during the course of the interview. Since the research questions are formulated and a number of topics are already found as being of interest to the study, but there are yet dimensions to be explored, semi-structured interviews is deemed the most suitable choice of method.

2.3 Approach

The study has been carried out using an inductive approach. According to Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) this means conducting an empirical study based on an identified problem and using theory to develop a better understanding of the findings. With an inductive approach, the empirical material determines which theory is of interest and hence, it is possible that the empirical findings lead to a different theoretical framework.

Nunnally and Farkas (2016) state that quantitative research produces consistent and generally agreed upon results. They describe that while it is very informative, it does not reveal why things happen, nor share information that isn’t specifically requested.
Nunnally and Farkas (2016) also describe qualitative research and state that it is used for studying something that is subjective and difficult to measure in precise units. The study focuses on trends, something that is to a great extent subjective and difficult to measure. It also aims to predict shifts in web design, something that is best supported by the experience and opinions of experts. Nunnally and Farkas (2016) describe how qualitative research is suitable for finding the “why” behind a phenomenon. This research method best matches the purpose of the study, which is to find the reason behind the emergence of two trends and their potential implications. Because of this, the inductive approach has been combined with a qualitative method.

To be able to formulate relevant interview questions, literature studies were initiated first. Existing theories on the subject, together with an understanding of web design history, provided a basis from which more in-depth questions could be asked. Furthermore, as the interviews were to be of a semi-structured nature, and thereby allow for some further elaboration and discussion, a certain level of insight beforehand was deemed beneficial. While examining existing literature, questions relevant for the interviews arose. Because of this, interview questions were formulated parallel to conducting the literature study and were refined as it progressed. From the empirical data some new themes and theories surfaced that were deemed relevant to the study. In accordance with the inductive approach, the theoretical framework has been expanded after conducting the semi-structured interviews to provide a deeper understanding into the relevant themes. This is the case with several of the topics, such as that of 1990s trends and nostalgia, which was mentioned by respondents. The same is true for mentions of reactions towards commercialism, and early social media profile customisation, which were made by respondents.

2.4 Data collection

The data in this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews. These provided empirical data that has been compared to the theories derived from the literature studies, and, in turn affected further studies.

2.4.1 Interview design

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews is to provide insight into how web design professionals view and reason around the subjects of the study. These subjects are “Trends in web design”, “brutalism and antidesign” and “Web design history” and are based on the research questions. The interview questions have been designed to generate data which will aid in answering the research questions of the study.

The first subject is “Trends in web design”. Studying the factors that contribute to the emergence, use and popularity of web design trends in general will provide insight into the specific trends brutalism and antidesign. This includes what drives trends and which ones tend to last. The questions within this subject cover the following topics:

- How to view and work with web design trends
- What drives web design trends forward
- What makes a trend last

The second subject is “brutalism and antidesign”. The respondents’ assessment of the origins of the trends and the reason for their emergence can potentially aid directly in answering research question “[1] What is the reason behind the recent rise of brutalism and antidesign in web design?”. Finding out how the respondents view the trends, how they have emerged and whether they would implement them will provide insight into
the impact and life-length that the trends may have. The questions within this subject cover the topics:

- The respondents’ level of familiarity with the specific trends
- Where they are derived from
- The reason for their popularity
- What the specific trends may be utilized for
- If the trends will have an impact on the field of web design

The third subject is “Web design history”. Brutalism and antidesign are derived from earlier periods of the web’s history. Studying it will provide insight into the circumstances around the origins of the trends. Since a lack of visual web design eras and categories has been argued, questions have also been formulated to find whether the respondents believe there are any, or if they could possibly exist, and what they could be based on. Furthermore, insight into the phase of web design history we are currently in will aid in finding the context in which brutalism and antidesign find themselves at the moment. Finally, the respondents’ predictions on what is next to come will aid in determining the life-length and long-term impact of the trends. The questions within this subject cover the topics:

- View on web design history
- View on acknowledged eras and categories
- View on the current phase in web design history
- Predictions of coming shifts and trends

The interview questions have been divided into these three categories. Some of the questions sometimes overlap and relate to other categories depending on what angle each respondent has answered from. The interview outline can be found as an appendix to the study. Since the interviews were semi-structured, questions have varied; some were excluded and some were added along its course. The presented outline has been translated to English, since the interviews were conducted in the Swedish language.

All respondents were shown the same example websites of brutalism and antidesign; three of each, six in total. These were shown to ensure that the styles discussed were perceived as the same by interviewer and respondent. This reduced any potential misunderstandings over the topic. The websites were chosen based on findings from the literature study, some as direct examples and some based on description of the design principles. Screenshots of the websites that were shown can be found as appendices.

2.4.2 Selection of respondents

The selection of interview subjects was based on profession, experience and areas of personal interest. Specifically, professionals who work with, or closely related to, web design. Other requirements specified were

- A couple of years of work experience
- A knowledge of and interest in web design trends

These qualities are considered valuable since the study relates to the coming and passing of trends, which is knowledge that comes with working experience. Web design history is short enough that many currently active practitioners have experienced its very beginning and its development ever since, and this is experience that is deemed
valuable to the study. Potential interview subjects were found by word-of-mouth information and consulting the faculty of Jönköping University. These sources provided the names of a number of design agencies, and in some cases specific contact persons, which in turn pointed to professionals that met the requirements. These were contacted via e-mail, briefly describing the subjects around which the interview would revolve. All interviews were carried out in similar environments and were recorded as audio files which were transcribed shortly after.

Five interview subjects were selected. Out of these, four are located in Jönköping and one in Gothenburg, meaning all are in proximity to Jönköping University. This was a decision made in regard to time and cost constraints.

2.5 Data analysis

Analysing the empirical data has been done in close relation to gathering it. The empirical method consists solely of semi-structured interviews, which produced qualitative data in the form of answers. These were recorded as audio files which have been carefully transcribed.

A thematic analysis has been performed on the data. Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) describe that this is done by drawing up categories into which the empirical material is sorted. The categories may be based on for example words and terms used by participants, or themes that emerge when examining the empirical material or existing theory. Based on these categories the questions of the study are answered, according to Blomkvist and Hallin (2015).

The first categories which were used in the sorting are equal to the three main subjects that were formulated to categorize the interview questions; “Trends in web design”, “brutalism and antidesign” and “Web design history”. Firstly, the answers were summarized and compiled under each respective heading and each respondent was given a colour code. Secondly, sub-categories were added to each main category. This was done by examining patterns and themes that were found in the respondents’ answers. These sub-categories are:

- **Trends in web design**
  - Trend-driving factors
  - Trend usage
  - Trend life-spans

- **Brutalism and antidesign**
  - Origins
  - Style
  - Reasons for emergence and popularity
  - Application
  - Life-span
  - Significance to the field of web design

- **Web design history**
  - View on history
  - Web design eras
  - Trend cycles
  - Current state
  - Predictions
The colour-coded data was then applied to each of the sub-categories. This created an overview which allowed for comparison between answers. In the last step, answers under each sub-category which were in agreement or otherwise similar were grouped together. This also made for a clear overview of conflicting or otherwise divergent answers. Theory that supports or contradicts the empirical data has been included and referenced in the analysis.

2.6 Reliability

Several factors may affect the reliability of a study. Some of the choices made in the process of this study are accounted for in this chapter, since they are believed to be influencing factors.

Web design trends and predictions are important research areas for the literature study. As are trends in general. These topics are seldom covered by academic papers and books, but to great extent by essays and magazine articles, which are influenced by opinions and personal beliefs. Documents of this nature have been studied in cases where academic papers and referenced literature have not been sufficient. The inclusion of such sources has been necessary to get a proper overview of attitudes and opinions regarding the studied subjects. The potential risk to the study’s reliability has been taken into consideration. The material has been treated for what it is, which in many cases is qualified opinions, assessments and predictions, written by practitioners or critics. To ensure reliability, the articles have been carefully examined and where statements are based on opinions and personal beliefs, it has been made clear through the text. Alternative views and attitudes are accounted for when necessary.

The language in which the semi-structured interviews have been conducted is Swedish. This is due to the interviewees’ nationality, and native language, being Swedish. Conducting the interviews in English was perceived as a potential barrier to the respondents expressing themselves fully as intended, which would have had a deeper impact on reliability than a translation from Swedish to English. Therefore, the decision was made to translate the interviews for the summary presented in the Empirics chapter. The translations were done with a great level of care to ensure that no information was wrongfully interpreted.

In accordance with the nature of semi-structured interviews, respondents have sometimes elaborated upon their answers in ways that could not have been predicted. This is data that is deemed valuable to the study. It does, however, make comparison between answers less generalizable. The qualitative empirical data has been analysed with care to ensure a reliable assessment.

According to Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) everything that the interviewer does and says has an impact on how the interview evolves. To reduce possible disturbances, all interviews have been held in secluded and silent rooms and the interviewer remained as neutral as possible to avoid introducing bias.

In the case where answers have been too vague to make an objective assessment of them, they have been left out, to avoid affecting the reliability of the study. To avoid produced answers, the interview outline was not sent in advance to the participants. Instead, only a description that was enough for potential participants to decide whether to partake or not, was provided beforehand. This way it was ensured that answers were based on experience and opinions rather than research.
The example websites shown during the interviews were chosen with care to ensure they were representative for each of the styles. According to Scacca (2018) antidesign websites are often confused as brutalist websites by several widespread online articles. To avoid any misunderstandings by the interviewer of the styles in practice, these websites were chosen based on findings in theory. The principles described by Moran (2017) and the examples that she presents have been used as a basis for the selection.
3 Theoretical background

3.1 Connection between research questions and theory

Because of the second question being a follow-up question to the first, it should be noted that all the theories covered by this chapter together form the basis for both questions.

To provide a theoretical basis for the first question “What is the reason behind the recent rise of brutalism and antidesign in web design?”, the following subjects are covered.

“Brutalism and antidesign” is covered in 3.2.

“Design trends” is covered in 3.6 and in part examines theory on returning trends, also called retro trends. The web evolves parallel to and mingles with other pop culture environments, and the behaviour of trends within other fields is believed to contribute to an understanding of web design trends. According to Moran (2017) brutalism and antidesign are derived from earlier days of the web. Sasso (2011) argues that the use of retro-style design has increased dramatically, despite an ongoing technological revolution. Studying the interest in retro trends is believed to provide insight into why brutalism and antidesign, being trends from past decades, have gained popularity. Examining the rate at which the trends of past decades return is believed to aid in determining the life-span and future of brutalism and antidesign.

To provide a theoretical basis for the second question “What implications can the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design?” the following subjects are covered.

To find the context from where brutalism and antidesign emerged, web design history has been studied. It has to great extent been driven by technical advancement, which is why “Technical Advancement in Web Design” is covered in 3.3. Several visual styles and eras have been identified while studying web design history and conducting empirical studies. These are listed in “Visual Evolution in Web Design”, 3.4.

According to Milton and Rodgers (2011) product design is generally recognized as a discipline that was born out of a massive technological change in society; the Industrial Revolution of the mid-eighteenth century. The birth of the world wide web bears similarities, also being the starter of a big societal change. A comparison is deemed valuable for the sake of potential predictions in web design history. Therefore, “Product Design History” is covered in 3.5.

3.2 Brutalism and antidesign

Moran (2017) describes how brutalism and antidesign are reactions against a perceived uniformity of web design and have been gaining popularity over the past few years. She states that they were, at first, mostly seen in cultural contexts such as designer portfolios and art museum sites, but some designers have also advocated including brutalist and antidesign principles in products. Moran (2017) makes a clear distinction between brutalism and antidesign.
3.2.1 Brutalism

3.2.1.1 Origins

Moran (2017) states that brutalism in web design draws inspiration from brutalist architecture, which became popular in the 1950s. These buildings, according to Moran (2017), are described as having a heavy and ruthless appearance. Hopkins (2014) describes brutalism as a branch of Modernist architecture which originally centers around the work of architects Alison and Peter Smithson. Hopkins (2014) describes how the duo took inspiration from the post-war work of Le Corbusier — buildings with exposed, rough concrete, famously known as béton brut. The buildings they constructed from this inspiration deliberately exposed the structure and raw materials in a “crude, unfinished state”.

3.2.1.2 Philosophy

In his book Towards a New Architecture, first published in 1931, Corbusier (2013) explains mass-production as a spirit that must be created. Mass-produced houses are described as healthy, morally correct and beautiful. According to Corbusier, the new tools created by the industrial society were capable of adding to the welfare of people by providing their most basic need: shelter. He argues that the old architectural codes should no longer be of concern, and that there has been a revolution in the conception of architecture. Furthermore, he states that “the house is a machine for living in”. According to Day (2006) brutalism is more than an aesthetic style — it is equally much about a socio-political attitude. He describes how brutalist architects rose from the new-left Britain in the late 1950s and saw it as their social responsibility to design rough, grey buildings, without decoration and displaying their true function. Day (2006) describes how cables and ducts were intentionally exposed and where paint was used, it was in colours like pure blue, red and yellow.

3.2.1.3 In web design

According to Moran (2017) brutality used in digital design aims to look raw, haphazard or unadorned, mimicking the visual appearance of early 1990s’ websites. This includes leaving elements “bare-boned”, with a default appearance. Moran (2017) claims that advocates for brutalist web design are looking to break away from the dominating style on the web today, which is perceived as stale, premade templates. Scacca (2018) describes how many brutalist websites carry a black and white colour scheme. She states that some designers may use grey, staying close in appearance to the concrete of brutalist architecture, and that many brutalist designs utilize monospace typefaces because of their raw, unadorned quality.

3.2.1.4 Popularity reasons

Moran (2017) states that brutalism is considered a way to make the web “true to itself” and honest. Brutalist web design, according to her, serves as a valid reminder that there are more possibilities in how to design for the web than with simple, conventional interfaces and stock photos. According to Wilshere (2017), another important aspect is that in today’s political climate, there is a widespread suspicion of corporate interests — in particular, the data about users that is being collected by big tech and social media companies. The brutalist web design trend he believes may express a desire for increased online transparency, reflected in the baring of the underlying structure. Wilshere (2017) argues that this is yet a reminder of brutalist architecture, which not only exposed its raw materials but also its social vision.
Theoretical background

3.2.1.5 Usage

Scacca (2018) believes brutalism can be used for some contexts. She sums up the good and bad qualities of brutalism as follows.

Brutalist web design may be good for “

- Brand new designers trying to get the hang of HTML.
- Anyone who wants to shock their audience or make a statement.
- Websites suffering from slow page speeds or overly complex conversion funnels that want to experiment with a total redesign.
- Text-heavy websites that want more focus on the reading experience and less on distractions.
- Small e-commerce sites that want more focus on inventory and less on flashy promotional bars and overweight designs.
- Websites that have an audience that this type of nostalgia might appeal to (e.g. other web designers, developers, gamers, etc).”

Brutalist web design is not good for “

- Corporations and other entities that want to appear professional and modern.
- Anyone that wants to make their website a warm and welcoming environment.
- Websites that are complex in nature and require conversion features like mega menus, pop-ups and live chat to support their goals.
- Anyone nervous that anything but a modern design would confuse their audience and prevent them from converting in the end.”

Scacca (2018) believes that in many cases, the safer choice is to incorporate brutalist elements with an otherwise modern website.

Moran (2017) argues that a brutalist style works for some websites. She recommends limiting the brutalist style to the visual design and avoiding breaking visual hierarchy, navigation or interaction design.

3.2.2 Antidesign

3.2.2.1 Origins

According to Milton and Rodgers (2011) antidesign as a movement came into being during the 1960s in Italy, where designers formed a reaction against established design norms and obsession with consumption.

3.2.2.2 Philosophy

Woodham (2016) describes how the antidesign that was formed during the 1960s “sought to harness the social and cultural potential of design rather than embrace style as a means of increasing sales”. Antidesign is attributed as a reaction to “the impoverished language of Modernism”, which was considered good form by leading manufacturers and influential designers at the time. Woodham (2016) emphasizes how the differences between the movements are reflected in their respective design language. Modernist objects generally utilize a muted colour palette, often blacks, whites and greys, while antidesign embraces all colours. An antidesign value is to embrace the temporary nature of Pop, consumerism and mass media language. This means including decorative elements, kitsch, irony and distortion in scale. Woodham
Theoretical background

(2016) states that these characteristics would also, later on, become important to Postmodernism and Memphis design.

Greenhalgh (1993) quotes Ettore Sottsass, key advocate of the antidesign way: “The only design that does not endure is the one that in such a society looks for metaphysics, looks for the absolute, for eternity. And then I don’t understand why enduring design is better than disappearing design.”.

3.2.2.3 In web design

According to Moran (2017) some designers use the term brutalism when they are actually utilizing the principles of antidesign. She describes how instead of stripping down an interface and keep the styling at a minimum, which is key to a brutalist design, they intentionally create unattractive, disorienting or complex interfaces. These sites, according to Moran (2017), often lack visual hierarchy, use harsh colours, disorienting patterns and distracting features such as animations and customized cursors. The overall effect she describes as “bad 1990s’ designs on steroids”. This does not fit the original sense of brutalism, and hence, Moran (2017) calls it antidesign instead. According to her, these designs are often created as an inside joke for designers, who perceive them as ironic. Antidesign, she states, has met some resistance in the UX community since the design principles contradict those of UX design.

3.2.2.4 Popularity reasons

According to Moran (2017), some designers are becoming bored with simple and polished designs, and antidesign brings them some “freshness”. Some advocates have even argued that users need to be challenged, and complex experiences would be more memorable and enjoyable, something that Moran (2017) rejects, unless for specific contexts. She argues that users are not looking to solve a challenge when they use a product, and web designers should not make things harder for them just for the reason to stand out or keep their interest. The main reasons designers use antidesign are, according to her, for humour and to get attention for being edgy and provocative.

3.2.2.5 Usage

Antidesign, according to Scacca (2018), should be completely avoided since “the only statement it’s making is that you want to anger everyone and adhere to no smart design principles”.

The only contexts where Moran (2017) advocates the use of antidesign, are:

- if the audience is designers, illustrators or artists. They are generally skilled at using digital products, which is why they can manage it. They also have the potential to understand the intended joke.
- if the product is meant for entertainment, which means interaction doesn’t have to be smooth and the user doesn’t have to perform a task.

3.3 Technical advancement in web design

3.3.1 Browsers

Robbins (2006) describes 1991–1993 as the birth of the World Wide Web. During this period, all pages were displayed as black text on a grey background. In 1993 the Mosaic Browser was created. According to Robbins (2006), though this browser was not the first to allow graphics on pages, it was available cross-platform and thus became the most popular. It also supported sound, video, bookmarks and forms. Allowing images in documents she describes as a key to the Web’s fast rise in popularity.

In 1994, the Netscape 0.9 browser was released. According to Robbins (2006), the early browsers were sold and aimed to offer a better experience than free browsers such as Mosaic. She describes how Netscape had its own HTML tags, for example for background colour and table text formatting, disregarding the traditional standards.

1996–1999 Robbins (2006) labels “The Browser Wars” years. Netscape and Microsoft both aimed to dominate the market with their respective web browsers, Communicator and Explorer. She explains how this led to a rapid advancement of browsers, including the creation of JavaScript, CSS and dynamic HTML.

In 2000 Internet Explorer 5 was released for the Mac, something that Robbins (2006) appoints as a significant change in browser history. This browser fully supported the HTML4.01 and CSS1 Recommendations, which she describes as a high standard at the time. Moreover, it supported the PNG image format with transparency.

Robbins (2006) states that Netscape suffered what was regarded as its official loss in the Browser Wars when being sold to AOL (America Online).

In 2005, Mozilla Firefox 1.0 was released. Robbins (2006) explains how it had a strong support of web standards, and its security was higher than Explorer’s. Firefox, she states, was the first browser to take a significant share of the browser market from Microsoft.

3.3.2 Web design tools

Hong (2018) describes how in the early days of the web, there were no ways to properly structure web layouts into columns and rows. Instead, designers did this using the table markup, which allowed for a separation of content, however in an unintended and cumbersome way. Hong (2018) describes how designers used spacer GIFs: small, transparent GIF images placed in between content, to create white space. Graphic elements such as visit counters and animated GIF images were used experimentally.

Hong (2018) describes that with the introduction of Adobe Flash, previously Macromedia Flash, in 1996, the field of web design saw great changes. Flash became the primary tool for creating interactive and graphics websites, allowing animation, custom fonts and shapes, 3D effects and splash pages. The whole site was compiled into one file to be read by the user’s browser, making it heavy and unoptimized for search engines. Hong (2018) states that in 2010 Apple stopped supporting Flash in their iOS software, which was one of the reasons for a decline in usage.

During the 2000s, CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) was increasingly supported in web browsers and gained popularity, according to Hong (2018). Since CSS defines how the HTML is displayed, it allows designers to keep content and design separate. Websites became easier to maintain, quicker to load and more search engine-friendly when the use of CSS increased. Another change during the early 2000s that Hong (2018) emphasizes is the rise of JavaScript, which enabled designs with interaction, complex navigation and multimedia applications.
Theoretical background

The early web was mainly centred around aesthetics according to Hong (2018). As the web matured, the focus shifted towards usability for the end user. Hong (2018) describes how designers became more aware of colour distribution, placements, typography and the usage of icons. Eventually, SEO (Search Engine Optimization) gained awareness as well, and the web industry started putting more effort into it. Sites and applications that could be interacted with started appearing. This shift in the history of the web is labelled Web 2.0.

According to Marcotte (2015), the first iPhone was launched in 2007. This led to a rapid increase in mobile browsing according to Hong (2018), something that was unforeseen by the web industry — browsing a website on such a small screen was not perceived as user-friendly. Designing for smaller screens was a new challenge. Hong (2018) describes how in the beginning, web designers tackled it by creating two versions of the same website, which meant more, and more complicated, maintenance work. The increased usage of smartphones, and thereby mobile browsers, brought along a need for a more efficient way of designing for the web. According to Hong (2018), Ethan Marcotte suggested a new method for web design in 2011 that meant using the same content and changing the layout for smaller screens — responsive web design. Media queries were introduced for CSS3, making responsive design easier to achieve. Hong (2018) states that in 2016 mobile and tablet internet usage surpassed desktop usage for the first time.

3.4 Visual evolution in web design


3.4.1 The first web designs

Hong (2018) describes how the first ever website was created by Sir Tim Berners-Lee in 1990 and simply existed to tell visitors what the world wide web was. A copy of the original page from 1992 is still online (figure 1), and it consists of black text and embedded, blue links on a white background. Most of the websites at the time looked similar, according to Hong (2018): entirely text-based and with a simple HTML structure.
Siegel (1996) describes first-generation sites as “designed to look good on ASCII (text-only) terminals, black-and-white monitors and low-resolution colour displays”. These sites, he writes, are linear and typically adapted to slow modems. Text and images are top-to-bottom, left-to-right and with separators such as bullets and horizontal rules. Siegel (1996) describes how some had banners and were organized, while most had edge-to-edge text that ran on for pages; “at best, they looked like slide presentations shown on a cement wall”.

### 3.4.2 Second-generation sites

In 1995, Netscape released extensions to HTML which initiated what Siegel (1996) calls second-generation sites. These, he writes, were similar to first-generation sites but with graphic changes such as icons replacing words, tiled images, image borders and an increase in banners. They followed the “home page model”, something that according to Siegel (1996) means that the landing page was decorated with icons, 3D buttons, windows and pictures. Sometimes sound files were loaded into these as well.

### 3.4.3 Table-based designs

Along with an HTML version supporting tables, new possibilities were introduced. Because of the lack of tools to create structure on web pages, Hong (2018) describes how designers turned to the table element during the early days of the web. To create white space, designers used spacer GIFs: small, transparent GIF images placed in between content. Graphic elements such as visit counters and animated GIF images were used frequently and experimentally, according to Hong (2018). An example of a table-based design can be seen in figure 2.

In his book, Siegel (1996) describes his model of building websites, calling it third-generation site architecture. He advocates and teaches the method of building page layouts with the table element, and the use of spacer GIFs.
3.4.4 The Flash era

Early HTML sites were very limited when it came to design options, and Craig (2009) explains how the intricate table structures and spacer GIFs needed for complex designs made Flash a welcome alternative. He states that it was introduced to the scene of web design in the late 90s, early 2000s.
Theoretical background

Flash became the primary tool for creating interactive and graphics websites according to Hong (2018), allowing animation, custom fonts and shapes, 3D effects and splash pages. A splash page serves as an introduction to the website. According to Craig (2014), it is often aiming to make a “strong first impression” by displaying a “cacophony of visual excess” in the form of sliding photography, videos and status bars. An example can be seen in figure 3.

3.4.5 Mid-2000s personal profile designs

Safir (2012) states that for a long time, and with its prime during the mid-2000s, MySpace was widely regarded as the best online platform for social networking. It started as a social website where mostly young people connected, but soon started to attract many types of professionals looking to network and promote themselves. Safir (2012) describes how before MySpace, creating an individual website was a demanding and difficult process for those not educated in programming. He states that the platform opened the opportunity for everyone to have a “page” of their own, which led to massive popularity. According to Craig (2014), users with an average level of skill tended to over-design when personalizing their MySpace profiles. Figure 4 shows an example. Some designers, he states, also picked up on the trend and adapted it for websites.


3.4.6 Web 2.0

Craig (2014) argues that along with Web 2.0 came an excessive use of rounded corners, reflections, drop shadows and gradients. He views the style as typical for designs from 2005. An example can be seen in figure 5, which is a design that Craig (2009) created in a tutorial on how to design for Web 2.0.
3.4.7 Skeuomorphism

Banga and Weinhold (2014) argue that creating a sense of familiarity is important when designing for the web, since most users tend to prefer things that they are accustomed to. Skeuomorphism is, according to Schwartz (2017), a purely visual style of design that is used to preserve the meaning and experience of earlier, real world objects. Hong (2018) describes how this is done by using gradients, drop shadows, textures and other elements that create a real and three-dimensional impression.
Skeuomorphism advocates argue that it makes interfaces easier to understand and more intuitive for users. In the case of some products, when moving from analog to digital, it allows for a faster and more efficient transition because interface elements are more recognizable, according to Schwartz (2017). He states that in other cases, designers use skeuomorphism to enhance enjoyment, often aiming for a “retro” look. Shotts (2014) states that while transitioning to visually flat platforms, many interfaces were described as overly skeuomorphic — Apple being a big promoter of the design approach. An example of Apple’s skeuomorphic designs is seen in figure 6. While most modern platforms have abandoned what Shotts (2014) describes as the exaggerated textures of skeuomorphism, other of its features are still an integral part of many interfaces. Knobs, switches and buttons tell users how to interact with interfaces, and many app designs — such as calendars and calculators — still feature skeuomorphs, according to Shotts (2014).

3.4.8 Flat design

The increase of smartphone usage, and thereby responsive design, is the main reason for the rise of flat design according to Hong (2018). He describes how skeuomorphic designs became challenging for designers to implement when screen sizes and browser constraints became increasingly varied. Simplified designs solved many of the problems with tedious design processes and slow loading websites. What further popularized this trend Hong (2018) attributes to the launch of Microsoft Metro and Apple’s iOS 7, which soon made rich design (skeuomorphism) seem outdated. This caused many to suddenly see a need to redesign their website or app.

Hong (2018) argues that Flat design also borrows influences from Swiss Style (also known as International Typographic Style), which was dominant in the 1940s and 50s. Swiss style is characterized by asymmetric layouts, strong grid systems, sans-serif typefaces and a clear hierarchy of content. Figure 7 displays a Flat design example.
3.4.9 What comes next?

Hong (2018) emphasizes the fact that web design trends do not spring from one source, be it person or company, but is a mix of visual design (which takes influence from print design) and web technology. Designs are becoming more complex than the original flat design, and thanks to new technology there is more flexibility. Hong does not predict the evolution of web design trends, but states that it moves very fast.

3.4.10 Suggested web design periods

A study performed by Chen, Crandall and Su (2017) resulted in a suggestion of four rough web design categories using names suggested by experts. These are:

- **Rudimentary, Simplicity or Informational period.**

  Experts described web designs of the late 1990s and early 2000s using words like “naive”. Pages are deemed to be functional, informational and lacking a balanced design. One expert describes 1990s websites as similar to the front of a newspaper.

- **Chaos, Gradient or Rise of the Image period.**

  Many of the experts in the study described websites from 2000 to 2005 as “terrible” and with “overused, garish, colorful backgrounds”. The amount of content increased, making some websites look crowded. Images were styled with shadows to give a 3D look.

- **Formative or Cinematic period.**

  Beginning around 2007, this period saw large visual changes in web design according to several of the experts. Web 2.0 became popular and basic, well-organized layouts for different genres of websites were established. The term “cinematic” comes from the popularization of the website banner.

- **Condensation, Sci-Fi or Flat period.**

  Around 2011 flat designs became popular and websites were refined and responsive with clear information architecture models. Websites utilize many various media types.

Chen, Crandall and Su (2017) view their study as a first step towards understanding how and why web designs have changed over time.

3.5 Product design history

3.5.1 1750s-1850s

According to Milton and Rodgers (2011), product design is generally considered to have emerged as a discipline during the Industrial Revolution which occurred around the 1750s to 1850s. What we today describe as craft production was before this the only means of producing objects. Milton and Rodgers (2011) describe how with the Industrial Revolution, goods could suddenly be produced in large numbers, by workers with lower skill and to lower costs. The profession “product designer” emerged and entailed giving the mass-produced items form.

3.5.2 1850s-1914

The 1850s to 1914 are called “The Great Reform movements” by Milton and Rodgers (2011). Workers’ unions and parties were formed as reactions to awful working conditions in factories. Inventions listed by Milton and Rodgers (2011) that came into being during this time include the first electric streetcar, the incandescent light bulb, the microphone, the household sewing machine and the telephone. They state that
Towards the end of the 1800s, Europe saw a second wave of industrialization which resulted in new methods of production and equipment.

Between 1854 and 1914, the Arts and Crafts movement was active. Milton and Rodgers (2011) describe it as a reaction to industrial and city development and the growing mass production, and that it advocated a return to nature and handcraft.

Art Nouveau was another response to mass-produced wares during this time, according to Milton and Rodgers (2011), which developed into a big international movement that lasted between 1880 and 1910. They describe it as a strive “for a comprehensive artistic reformation of all areas of life” and that practitioners were expected to design not just art but also products such as jewellery and furniture.

3.5.3 1900s-1945

The 1900s to 1945 Milton and Rodgers (2011) call “Modernism to pre-war luxury and power”. During the first half of the 1900s Europe and China alike were ravaged by political and economic turmoil.

Between 1907 and 1935, the Deutscher Werkbund were active in Germany, according to Milton and Rodgers (2011). They describe the goal of the founders as to prove that applied arts and industry could cooperate to develop a national style fit for the modern age. The Werkbund were against revivalism, believing that architecture should represent the age when it was created.

Modernism, or The International Style, Milton and Rodgers (2011) appoint as the dominant design style between 1914 and 1939, and state that it differed greatly from design movements in the past. It emphasized experimentation, formalism and objectivism. Products, according to Modernism, were supposed to express the spirit of a new age and surpass what can be seen in earlier work.

Art Deco lasted between 1920 and 1939 and is described by Milton and Rodgers (2011) as an eclectic, decorative arts style that reached a wide range of fields and materials.

3.5.4 1945-1970

1945 to the 1970s is called “The post-war period” by Milton and Rodgers (2011). They explain that while European countries and Japan were recovering from the war, the United States could quickly establish itself as a leader in economy and design. American culture spread into Europe and its products became symbols of a new, international lifestyle. The early 1950s saw a wave of consumption and advertising increased.

The “Good Form” principle lasted between the mid-1950s to 1968 and was characterized by functionality, durability, clarity, suitable materials and environmental responsibility, according to Milton and Rodgers (2011). They state that in the late 1960s, a counterculture to mass consumption was formed by consumer taste and the ideologies of designers. Antidesign arose as a protest against established design norms.

3.5.5 1970s-Now

The 1970s to present day are labelled “Post-modernism” by Milton and Rodgers (2011). They describe how the rebellious decade of the 1960s gave birth to radical design
movements that produced objects which made ironic comments on modern designs, such as applying heavy decorations that referenced historical styles.

The Memphis Style, which aimed for liberation from the “soulless, good taste” had its time between 1976 and 1988 according to Milton and Rodgers (2011). They describe how it became a catalyst for many designers to join a range of anti-functionalist movements all under the umbrella term “New Design”. These, according to Milton and Rodgers (2011), are often influenced by subcultures and anti-authoritarianism. New Design movements focus on experimental works, use their own production and distribution networks, mix styles and utilize irony and provocations.

3.6 Design trends

Schwartz (2017) describes how design trends come in waves and sweep the market of a field, dominate it during a time period, fade out in favour of new trends and later on return as retro fashion. At this last point, he states, the trend joins “the spectrum of general design patterns and vocabulary available to designers”.

3.6.1 When to follow a trend

According to Sherwin (2018), there are 3 Bs to keep in mind to know when to follow a web design trend or not. These are

- **Budget**
  If the team does not have the budget to redesign in the following few years, Sherwin advises caution around utilizing trends since they may go out of style.

- **Brand**
  Sherwin describes how some brands benefit from keeping up with trends since it displays a level of awareness. There are also brands that do not benefit from using trends, such as banking or security brands which users may expect to convey reliability and stability.

- **Behaviour**
  A trend can be adopted if it supports human behaviour. Sherwin gives the example of larger buttons as a potential trend that actually supports usability and therefore would be safe to adopt. Trends that make it more difficult for users will lower user satisfaction, according to Sherwin.

3.6.2 The interest in retro trends

Reilly (2014) attributes the reason for why fashion history returns in part to the nostalgic factor — objects from the past may recall happy memories of people’s adolescence or give a romanticized image of an era that fascinates them, but they are too young to remember. Another reason, according to Reilly (2014), is that there is a limited number of ways to make or style a garment and returning to the past is a way to make something appear new, especially if the customer is unfamiliar with the era.

Reynolds (2011) argues that there is an obsession with retro styles in pop culture. He states that pop’s metabolism used to have its own dynamic energy through periods like the psychedelic sixties, the post-punk seventies, the hip-hop eighties and the rave nineties. The 2000s, he argues, is different — the pulse of “now” feeling weaker because it is crowded out by the past. Reynolds (2011) states that the 2000s “has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel”. Further, he notes that earlier eras have had their own admiration for antiquity, but never has there been a society in history so obsessed with
Theoretical background

cultural artefacts of its own immediate past — the difference being that retro, as opposed to antiquarianism, means a fascination for a time that occurred within living memory.

According to Sasso (2011), the attraction to retro styles — bringing back outdated trends, fashion, products and culture — has always been strong. Though, in 2011, he notes that in the past few years the use of retro-style design has increased dramatically, despite the ongoing technological revolution.

3.6.3 Trend cycles

Gopnik (2012) argues that American pop culture nostalgia tends to focus on the decade between forty and fifty years back in history. To him, the popular tv series Mad Men, set in the early sixties, is a sign of this. Gopnik also mentions epicycles within what he calls “the Golden Forty-Year Rule”; a twenty-year cycle, a smaller wave of nostalgia where people in their forties recall their youth.

Staskiewicz (2012) instead sees a twelve-to-fifteen years nostalgia life cycle — a time frame that is enough for teenagers to grow into their thirties. This, to him, explains the popularity of boy bands such as One Direction and prequels and sequels to movies such as Star Wars. These, according to Staskiewicz, are signs of late -90s nostalgia, noted in 2012 when this article was written.

Wickman (2012) criticizes the cases that Gopnik and Staskiewicz make. He acknowledges that waves of nostalgia do occur but argues that there is no fixed rule to when and why. Some cultural phenomena, he means, cannot be explained in such a generalizing way.

Henderson argues in an article by Rizza (2018) that nostalgia comes in twenty-year cycles, but that the internet could be causing that time frame to shrink or even vanish. Social media allows younger generation to easily post throwbacks. Henderson poses the question if material that is recorded digitally, and hence, never fully goes away, will still have a strong resonance when it makes a comeback.

According to Kim, Fiore and Kim, all products have a finite life cycle; new styles are introduced, last for a certain period of time, decline and disappear. In relation to describing the life cycle of clothing fashion, they note that rate and duration vary, but the diffusion of a specific fashion usually follows a predictable cycle. These fashion cycles help retailers to predict the market, and have four distinct stages:

• **Introduction**
  The new style enters the market, in a limited supply (sometimes by only a few high-price brands) and starts gaining acceptance.

• **Growth**
  The style gains popularity and is exposed to a wider mass of consumers. Competition increases and the original style is modified to suit mass fashion and be produced at a lower cost. Mid- and high-priced stores increasingly sell the style.

• **Maturity**
  This is usually the longest period in the cycle. Competition becomes more intense, leading to further modification and a drop in prices.

• **Decline**
  The styles lose their popularity and start going out of fashion, making sales decrease rapidly. Retailers that have remaining items of the style put them on sale.
3.6.4 The return of 1990s’ trends

According to Fury (2016), a rediscovered taste for the 90s is reflected in music, colours, TV shows and fashion. He believes that the aesthetics of any time are “a response to a complex series of economic realities, social norms, the moral dilemmas of the day and various technological and cultural occurrences”. Fury (2016) argues that the idea of authenticity might be the most important message of 90s fashion, something that is shown in purposefully creased and shredded synthetic fabrics with little embellishment.

Ewart (2016), attempting to find the answer to a return of 90s influences and TV shows, claims that “Hollywood has made 2016 the year of the TV nostalgia”. According to Reid, who is referred to by Ewart (2016), people are more likely to experience nostalgia when they feel loneliness and other negative emotions and that it helps them to overcome them. Further, Reid explains that millennials are now in the middle of a transition where they are starting their careers and living independently. Holding on to a simpler time with less responsibilities calls for nostalgia: “a bittersweet longing for an individual’s valued past, i.e. our obligation-free childhoods, filled with all the TV shows that are now getting reboots or revivals”. Reid believes that the stress of these transition periods brings about nostalgia as a method to cope and adjust. According to Dr. Batcho who is referred to by Ewart (2016), the nostalgia peak usually happens between ages 18 and 34. Batcho adds that nostalgia is not a want to be a child again but is a way for people to be grounded in who they are and supports them while securing stable work, financial and relationship situations. Ewart (2016) argues that while reboots of classic 90s TV shows draw in large numbers of viewers, there could be a potential overload.

Dewey (2015) argues that with the emergence of other 90s’ trends, it was unavoidable that internet trends from the same era would follow. Web 1.0, she writes, was “niche and intimate, the domain of certain tech-savvy nerds”, while Web 2.0 is “a massive capitalist endeavour with no less an ambition than to monetize every last person on Earth”. Dewey (2015) argues that because of a widespread disappointment in the development of the world wide web, people look back at the early web with a sense of longing. Digital historian Michael Stevenson has noted an increase in early web nostalgia. He is cited by Dewey (2015): “Today’s nostalgics are motivated by a range of things, from hipster irony to sentimental attachment to motives slightly more political”.

4 Empirics

The chapter provides a summary of the empirical data which the study is based on. All interviews were conducted in the Swedish language and the answers have been translated for this summary.

Respondent A works as digital strategist and business developer at an agency specialized in strategy, user experience, technology and coding. The respondent has worked with the web since the end of the 1990s and started coding for the web approximately 1995.

Respondent B works as a consultant manager at a communication and technology agency. The respondent has designed for and in other ways worked with the web for approximately twenty years.

Respondent C works as a digital art director at a brand experience agency. The respondent has worked with the web for approximately seven years and also has a background in graphic design.

Respondent D works as digital creator at a brand agency. The respondent has worked with the web for approximately twenty years and also has a background in graphic design for print.

Respondent E works as a UX designer at an advertising agency. The respondent has worked with the web for almost twenty years.

4.1 Trends in web design

4.1.1 Trend-driving factors

Respondent A believes that trends have changed a lot over the years — both in the definition of what a trend is, and what drives trends forward. One big change, he says, is that fifteen or twenty years ago, the [visual] design aspect may have been the main driving force. Today, factors such as the user aspect and new frameworks for the web have become more important. Moreover, big actors like Facebook establish guidelines which become best practice and users recognize them, according to the respondent. These are often preferred [by designers] over what is considered attractive or trendy. The iPhone is mentioned as a trend setter when it comes to interface design; from icon design to how the user moves in web applications. Respondent A mentions the flat design approach of Android and Google as a technical solution that led to a visual design language, and that this is often the case.

According to respondent B, technological development drives a lot of the visual evolution in web design. The introduction of touch screens and responsive designs are mentioned as examples of inventions that put high demands on web design. Another factor that respondent B believes influences the visual evolution in web design is accessibility; colours, typography and readability all affect this. The respondent believes that there is a big need for creativity among designers. Web designers need to be allowed to put their own personal touch in their work, even if they are creating an interface with high accessibility demands, the respondent argues.

Respondent C states that the web as a medium is changing constantly, making visual trends a result of the technology available and the needs of its users. The visual evolution of web design is driven by user needs and technical development parallel, she
explains; when the use of a technical solution increases, those users develop certain needs. She believes that trends tend to come as reactions against each other.

**Respondent D** believes that web design clearly has its trends, which were more distinct in the past but have now “matured a bit”. He sees technological limitations as a big factor; websites are always designed within the existing boundaries. When a limitation disappears due to technological advancement, a trend may appear. The respondent brings up the example of rounded corners on objects in web design. When CSS started allowing for this, he saw that many started using it and it became a trend. Now, according to the respondent, many limitations have disappeared, and he believes that this will lead to new types of trends. Predicting trends due to technological advancement may have been easier than predicting what will come next now, he argues.

**Respondent E** argues that the visual evolution in web design is in part driven by trends from the outside world, such as fashion, but probably more by functionality [from a user perspective]. A trend such as Flat or Material design he sees as trends that come from a functionality perspective; a way to effectively convey a message.

### 4.1.2 Trend usage

When it comes to new trends, **respondent A** believes that they should be tested to find out if they work; both for the designer personally and for their clients and clients’ users. At the respondent’s workplace, he believes that trends are followed not consciously, but subconsciously. They do not aim to design in a certain way because others are doing so and it is popular at the moment, but more so for the reason that it might be best practice or create recognition. Trends that are brand new and unestablished they avoid, because of the risk that their services would become hard for users to comprehend. Furthermore, the focus of the respondent’s agency is to generate business for their clients. This, he says, means that they do not put too much time or effort into making updates on their products to follow visual trends.

**Respondent B** states that to him, web design is about usability, accessibility and simplicity. Trends, according to him, should be utilized if there are practical reasons to do so in a specific case. The way that the respondent works, the client often already has a graphic manual that the project needs to relate to. He brings up the example of the parallax effect, a visual effect used in web design that became popular around 2017. “This was a design trend where I had a hard time seeing that many user cases where it was done for a practical reason. Somebody had seen it and thought it looked fun or cool. And that’s what I’m against in a way. There is no reason, it is not helpful.” The respondent adds that the visual impact of such an effect is difficult to translate to a visitor who is blind, for example.

**Respondent C** states that it is important to assess the life length of a trend before utilizing it. Using trends, she says, means that you will need to update your designs in the near future. Certain websites, according to her, keep up with trends to show modernity and trend awareness, and they will inevitably need to update themselves soon again. Another aspect is whether the client that they are working with is ready to adopt the trend, she explains; some clients do not have the experience or budget to be at the forefront of trends. A better option for those clients might be to make design that lasts. The respondent adds that there are clients who have great courage when it comes to standing out. In one of these cases, she analysed the market in which the client works and decided to utilize a trend to help him stand out in the crowd. Often, she says, clients would rather see that someone else has done something before they can take the
step of doing it themselves. And we don’t want their customers to feel uncomfortable, she explains.

Following trends or not is not always an easy choice, according to respondent D; following them shows a level of awareness, but as a designer you still want to have your own unique expression. The respondent’s agency doesn’t use trends consciously. A website is only a part of the big picture which is the client’s brand, he explains, and often there is already a visual identity that needs to be taken into consideration.

Utilizing a new trend or not is always something to determine for each case, according to respondent E; he would not use a feature for the sake of it being a trend. In many cases trends become a standard, he adds, which leads to users actually expecting to see them. In those cases, it can be advantageous to use that trend, since users will already be familiar with and not have to learn a feature. The trend needs to fill a function for the users, according to the respondent. Trends are utilized quite frequently at the respondent’s agency, but not in a literal way, rather as an inspiration from which they can build upon.

4.1.3 Trend life-spans

Respondent A believes it is difficult or even impossible to judge if a web design trend will last for a long time. This, he says, depends on how the trend is received, how it works in reality and what group of people or companies it reaches, which affects how widely it is spread. A timeless design is something that the respondent does not believe is possible to achieve; looking at 2, 3 or 5-year-old websites or applications, they may already look dated. Something that may last is rather conventions, such as where the page menu is located.

The life length of a web design trend often depends on where it comes from, according to respondent B, and brings up the potential scenario that Google would release Material design 2, which he believes is a trend that would last for a long time. Generally, he believes that trends that last are those that can prove that they actually improved something. It is just like everything else in a commercial society, he argues. Something that works and becomes appreciated will sell, and so it stays. According to the respondent, design trends for the sake of artistic expression always fade.

A trend that lasts is often one that has a function when it comes to user experience, according to respondent C. Colours, typography and other graphic details change with trends and they don’t really affect the user experience to great extent, she says. Technical solutions that make the user experience better, she views as more long-lasting.

To the question if it is possible to see if a trend is going to last for a long time, respondent D is hesitant. He believes that when a trend arises due to a technical limitation or opportunity, it is more likely to pass [be outdated] when it is not necessary anymore. He brings up the example of WebGL, which is a tool for working with graphic effects and 3D; many experiment with this at the moment, some to show off what they can do and show what is possible. But, he predicts, when this tool has matured and it becomes mainstream, it will lose some of its popularity since it does not really add any value. Some elements might be kept around in a subtler way. Otherwise, he says, judging whether a trend will last or not is more of a gut feeling.

Determining how long a trend is going to last is difficult, according to respondent E. This is partly because it is simply a difficult thing to measure, he argues; if a trend is
still on the web because many websites that used it have not gotten a redesign in several years, does that mean that the trend is still active? He believes it also depends on the trend, but that in general he would not be able to predict how long trends will live.

4.2 Brutalism and antidesign

4.2.1 Origins

Respondent C believes both brutalism and antidesign are derived from the end of the 1990s, beginning of the 2000s, “when we were using complicated modems”. The web designs from that time, when there were limitations in colour choices for example, have come back, according to her.

4.2.1.1 Brutalism

Regarding an example where an Explorer file system interface has been utilized (appendix 3), respondent A says: “This I have seen a lot before. It is an old [early] 2000s' gimmick. I have not seen it used lately, except sometimes by mistake”.

Respondent E relates brutalism to the time of the birth of the internet, when interfaces were difficult to build, and websites were mostly made by “technical people who wanted to display information”. Brutalist web design is a way to replicate a style that was not designed at the time, but looked like that because those were the tools that were available then, according to the respondent.

4.2.1.2 Antidesign

Respondent A comments the antidesign example websites: “To me this is how it looked when we built sites in -97. It wasn’t irony then, it was testing the limits by using tables, buttons, gif animations… that was what you could do and it was state of the art.” The respondent perceives antidesign as being derived from a time earlier than brutalism.

Respondent B states that “this feels like a group of people born in the 90s happened across an example of what the web looked like in -97, thought it was fun and chose to work with it”. The respondent believes this is art, and it is fun to him because he was around and working with the web at the time when websites looked like these examples. It brings to mind his youth, MySpace and Lunarstorm, an early Swedish social media which has been described by Crampton (2005). These were environments where everyone was allowed to do whatever they wanted, he explains, and non-designers' creativity came out on the web in the form of some blinking background and dancing figures.

Respondent C mentions Lunarstorm, an early social platform that allowed for profile customisation.

Respondent D says “I have also seen something like in the 90s, when MySpace was popular and everyone had their own page where you could edit the CSS, [...] with lots of animated GIFs, starry skies in the background and such things” before the trend is mentioned by the interviewer. When antidesign is mentioned and shown as examples, he recognizes the style as what he had talked about earlier. He describes MySpace as having been a way for anyone to create an account and have their own page which
could be styled relatively simple. Many did a lot of it [styling], and it gave common people [non-designers] a way to express themselves creatively, he says.

Having been showed three examples of antidesign websites, respondent E states that he has seen the style before and that it feels like a retro trend. He believes that the origins of antidesign came shortly after the origins of brutalism, “when they started building interfaces but perhaps weren’t very user focused”.

4.2.2 Style

These two [antidesign and brutalism] are totally different, according to respondent E; one is nothing at all and one is over the top, and today’s [mainstream] designs might be somewhere in the middle.

4.2.2.1 Brutalism

Respondent B calls brutalist web design minimalistic, but yet another step; whereas in minimalism you pay attention to some elements, brutalism is about removing it all. Brutalism, according to the respondent, might not work for users since it could fail at making them feel secure and comfortable. He states that it “peels away what is unnecessary, but also what is actually necessary”. The respondent argues that all the branding and marketing has been removed with this visual language.

Respondent C believes that the brutalist trend ties into fashion and how there is a 90s trend right now. She says that it is a type of minimalism and also seems like a way to display yourself [an organisation or company] as part of a certain type of genre.

Respondent D relates brutalist web design to the Bauhaus school of design and Swiss design, in that it looks strict and minimalistic. He says that it is a bit of an antidesign, but it is still designed.

Respondent E comments that brutalist web design looks like a lack of interface and design and “the user is left to add their own layer in a way”.

4.2.2.2 Antidesign

Respondent A sees an aware irony in antidesign web design, where it is “so ugly that it looks good”.

Respondent B describes the antidesign examples as “MySpace after an explosion”.

Respondent C states that the style of antidesign can be seen on YouTube as well; the thumbnails that creators use to market their videos “look like some kind of scrapbooking, with some cat with big eyes and an airplane flying in...”.

4.2.3 Reasons for emergence and popularity

The reason for these visual expressions to return, respondent A believes lies in timing; music, fashion and movies right now does the same thing. “Stranger Things is the same, only it’s in movies. They’ve taken the ugliest parts of the 80s, and it is super cool and looks great. But had you asked someone in 1997 if it looked good, they would have said it looked awful.”
**Respondent B** believes these trends may have gained popularity because they “go against a lot”, which is fun to creatives and artistic people, according to the respondent. Later, he says, something else will come along. As to why antidesign and brutalism are popular right now, the respondent likens it to how generations tend to look at the first names of their grandparents to find names for their children. He believes it has to do with generations; when a new generation grows up they look at old trends and re-use them, since they were not alive at the time when those trends first came. Another factor is anti-commercialism, according to the respondent; these trends are replies to another trend, which is what the big companies are doing. A lot of the public web, he argues, looks the same, and more so every year. “Designers are creatives and they want to try around and experiment. And this is the way that they are doing it right now.”

**Respondent C** believes that when a field comes far enough that the tools can be used to create almost anything, then an antidesign movement will rise. The internet is young, she says, and now we can for the first time start borrowing design styles from past trends and periods. But since web history is short, there is not that much to go back to yet, which is why designers go back to the source; the beginning of the web. This, according to the respondent, is something that we will see more of in the future.

**Respondent D** believes that because of web design limitations disappearing, a lot of experimental styles and subcultures appear on the web.

**Respondent E** believes that brutalism and antidesign have gained popularity because they stand out, “as all trends of this kind”. But it is more of a phenomenon than something that anyone would use, it raises attention, he adds. He believes it might be a counter-reaction towards Flat design and a perception that everything [on the web] looks similar.

### 4.2.3.1 Brutalism

**Respondent C** explains how brutalist web design is a way to show that “we have come so far that we can now go back” — being up to date enough to be able to design with irony.

**Respondent D** views brutalist web design as a subculture that some people, though a lot of people, work with. This, he believes is an example of the trends that can emerge when technical limitations in web design disappear; designers start going to extreme measures.

### 4.2.3.2 Antidesign

**Respondent A** views antidesign web design as closely connected to clothing fashion; that right now, there is a strong trend of 90s’ fashion going on and this [antidesign] is the same type of expression. He believes that there is a common perception of people that leads to it becoming a trend. There is, he states, also an aspect of nostalgia.

**Respondent C** says “When things look too good, we [people] have to destroy them. We must find ways to get away from it [what looks good], because it becomes nothing, it becomes boring routine where nothing makes you look twice. And that’s where you need to find a way to do the exact opposite. There is a sense of punk in that.”. She adds that even in punk, there is some order, and in this case the order is the fact that the creator and target user have a sense of shared belonging. Antidesign, she believes, is used to raise attention. She references Lunarstorm. She says “You could throw in something really tacky, like a shark on your profile, just because it was possible. [...]"
Now that we look at it, it’s embarrassing. But as long as you could change the background colour, you were satisfied. And now that we can do almost anything, that’s when we go back to how it was when we could do almost nothing; but with a gleam in our eyes."

**Respondent D** says “The thing is, in many areas today you need to stand out, and those who were first [with antidesign websites] do stand out. But if many do this, it won’t be as fun anymore”.

### 4.2.4 Application

#### 4.2.4.1 Brutalism

**Respondent A** mentions architect, art and designer contexts as to where he has encountered brutalist web design. “It is close at hand for them. I believe it is quite hard for a company to get away with this. It’s possible, of course, but it takes a lot of courage”. To build a company or e-commerce site with these principles the respondent thinks would be “super cool in a way”, but that it would never work businesswise, because it is not what the user expects.

**Respondent B** believes that brutalist web design will be used for portfolios and possibly organisations with less focus on profit. Brutalism, according to the respondent, might not work for users since it could fail at making them feel secure and comfortable.

**Respondent C** says that she has seen brutalist web design on artist and architect webpages. She could not see a big grocery store chain utilizing brutalism, but perhaps a certain type of fashion store; “fashion and web design go hand in hand”. She believes that using all of it [a completely brutalist website] at once would not work for a big corporate website, where the focus is on user experience.

**Respondent E** believes there needs to be a very specific purpose for brutalist web design to be applied, but what that purpose would be, he is unsure of.

#### 4.2.4.2 Antidesign

**Respondent B** has come across antidesign a few times, but no client has ever asked for it and he has a hard time seeing how a case could be built around the design style.

**Respondent C** has encountered antidesign in “joke websites”. She emphasizes the fact that standing out on the web is important — perhaps not in the extreme ways as shown in the examples, though.

**Respondent D** views antidesign as nostalgia and fun, and while it is hard to build a “serious site” with it, it might be possible to do something “fun with advertising”.

**Respondent E** believes that antidesign could be a fun style to utilize for a campaign site or something else that is temporary, but that the customers of his agency would likely not ask for it.

### 4.2.5 Life-span

**Respondent A** believes that antidesign may return and disappear with short intervals, while brutalism may live for periods that are a lot longer. This because
brutalism is a “more aware method of non-design, more thought through”, while antidesign is more “in search of an effect”; the effect being either nostalgia, irony or a celebration of something.

**Respondent B** explains: “There are trends that are expressions of the design industry’s longing to renew itself all the time. [They are] made by creative people. But often, since we are controlled by the need to work and get paid by someone, these trends have a hard time surviving. As a designer, this trend might be fun for six months, then they will try out a new trend.” For a trend to be deemed useful, it often takes a couple of years where an organisation has kept that trend in their design and been able to measure how well it worked, he adds.

### 4.2.5.1 Brutalism

**Respondent B** believes that brutalism will eventually fade because no company will want to implement it.

**Respondent C** believes that the big masses might follow this type of trend five years after early adopters. She thinks that the style could mature and be adapted in a subtle way.

### 4.2.5.2 Antidesign

Antidesign is, according to **respondent A**, a clear trend that comes and goes in waves, being derived from “how it really looked on the internet” around 1996-1997 and having returned consistently as a trend ever since.

**Respondent B** predicts that if there is no practical reason for antidesign to survive, it won’t.

**Respondent D** believes that the type of trend that antidesign is, is unlikely to get established and those who design in this way will re-design in a couple of years.

### 4.2.6 Significance to the field of web design

**Respondent B** believes that trends such as brutalist web design are only outliers that don’t make a big impact on the big trends.

**Respondent D** believes that because of web design limitations disappearing, many small trends will arise. Five years later, he says, some will have died while some will have worked and actually stayed. He believes that this is an exciting time because there is a lot of freedom on the web.

**Respondent E** believes that trends like these might affect the field of web design in that they could inspire and give rise to thoughts around what we are doing.

### 4.3 Web design history

#### 4.3.1 View on history

**Respondent A** believes that there is a rather clear line from 1994 and forward, with landmarks where web design has changed.
**Respondent E** views the development of web design as an evolution, where it has been moving in one direction step by step and there has never been a real revolution on that path. Twenty years ago, he says, websites were often used as display windows by companies, but today the aim might be more of a conversation where users can participate.

### 4.3.2 Web design eras

Answering whether there are any distinct categories in web design as there is in other cultural environments, **respondent A** is unsure, but mentions that perhaps they could be based on pixel versus SVG graphics.

To the question if there are any distinct categories to be seen in web design, **respondent B** mentions public web versus functional web. Public web, he argues, is very similar and even boring. He adds that there probably are categories, but they are quite subtle and many outside web design would not understand the differences. And what differs the web from other cultural environments such as music, is the level to which technical development affects it. The respondent believes that “we can want to design all we like and claim that we are artists, but people don’t go to websites to see how pretty they look”. Since users turn to the web to solve their problems, the respondent believes we should make it as easy as possible for them to do so.

To the question if there are any distinct categories in web design, **respondent C** says that the web is very young and we might be able to see categories when looking back, in the future. She believes that the examples of antidesign and brutalism are signs that we could possibly see web design categories in the future. A possibility, she says, is that we will instead name categories from the devices which we were using during a period in time; such as a mobile or VR era.

As to if there are distinct categories or periods in web design, **respondent D** names skeuomorphism as a clear era, and flat design which followed as a counter-reaction. And then there is a clear era which is when everyone was building websites with Flash, and before that we had this MySpace era, he says.

There are no real categories in web design as there are in fields such as art, according to **respondent E**. He believes that the web is different from other cultural environments; the web is not art in itself.

### 4.3.3 Trend cycles

A reason for taking back old trends, **respondent A** believes is the need for comfort and security, which is “what nostalgia is”. And this might move faster on the web, he says. To the question if the respondent has seen visual web design trends return before, he states that it is hard to say. One small trend, he says, might be how the old iPhone icons used to be very realistic, only to become flat and one-dimensional, and now we might be returning to more realistic designs again.

Some web design trends do return, according to **respondent B**, but he cannot think of any big visual design languages. He describes how trends tend to move similar to a swinging pendulum, with the example of how gradients were popularized at the time when Windows XP came, only to swing over to Flat design and then back to Material design which introduced more depth. Another instance of a returning trend is the top menu, which for a long time was situated at the left on the page to give more space on a wide site, only to return to the top again with the emergence of responsive web pages.
When it comes to these more extreme trends [antidesign and brutalism], the respondent believes that the pendulum swings even faster since there is no practical reason for them to stay, making that type of trend “a trend for those who like design”. The respondent believes that it takes around twenty years, “one generation”, for a trend to come back.

When asked about why people bring back trends, respondent C says that nostalgia is a big factor, but also the fact that we copy; creating something entirely new without influences is difficult. She also mentions irony as a cause of bringing something back. The respondent lists animations as a design feature that is making a comeback. She describes how everything used to be animated, which created a reaction against, and websites became static. This time, movements are subtler. Another example is how gradients and shadows used to be very popular, only to swing over to totally flat design. Right now, she sees a change from where designs have been flat for a long time and shadows and depth have started to come back.

Respondent D states that brutalism and antidesign are the first instances he has seen of old visual languages returning, which he believes is due to the web being as young as it is. Everything goes in trends, according to respondent D, and he believes that nostalgia is a factor. Twenty years, he estimates, might pass and then people may look at something and remember something from back then. If more people feel the same it might appear as a trend, he says. Even outside of web design, people borrow from other trends and mix two together, he argues, and besides, it is not possible to style things in infinite ways; eventually old expressions come back. Trends must go in cycles. One trend that has clearly shifted, he says, is how many interfaces at the beginning of smartphone use utilized a skeuomorphic design language. Flat design was a reaction against that, he says. Then he adds that shadows have started to come back in a subtle way, which he believes makes for a better balance.

Returning web design trends is something that respondent E has not seen much until now. The field might be too young, he believes; “perhaps it [web design] is not old enough to iterate around itself in the way that the fashion industry and art are doing”. As to why there is an interest in old trends, the respondent believes that nostalgia is a factor. Antidesign and brutalism are not examples of designing for practical function, but for transporting someone to another point in time. That might be a reason why they appear like this but aren’t really received in the mainstream design community, he argues.

4.3.4 Current state

As a platform, respondent A believes the world wide web is mature. People know how to use the web and the boundaries [between offline and online] are fading. To new generations, saying that “I talked to a friend” means that they probably wrote a text or wrote them on Snapchat, while in the past it meant that they met in person or talked on the phone.

Respondent B believes that everything was changed with the arrival of touchscreens and smartphones, and that now, ten, fifteen years later, the rules and trends that came with it have begun to “settle in”. For the current level of technology, the web is quite mature, according to the respondent. We are, he argues, in a phase of resting stability. Public websites, he says, are mostly stable, functional and and boring.

Right now, respondent D believes we are in a phase where technology is not limiting us as designers anymore. Web technology is mature and everything is possible, and he
is interested to see what will happen due to this freedom. He sees a change in how websites are designed; they used to be quite uniform, but today there is a lot of variation and plenty of sub-trends. Still, he adds, there is a mainstream way of designing which is very put together, with a lot of whitespace, few separating lines and well-thought-out typography.

For a while now, we have had a period where we’ve been moving more and more towards a user focus, according to respondent E. And if this is to be viewed as a trend, it’s a trend that won’t disappear, he says, it will rather be a necessity. It could even be viewed as strange that we have not been thinking like this before, since the user is the one actually using the web, he says. As to how mature the web is, the respondent believes that it has “begun to settle in” but that there’s still some way to go.

4.3.5 Predictions

Respondent A believes that we might be at a breaking point where we are moving from still images to video, which will shift the way that people consume and create media. AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality) exist, but the respondent does not believe that they are ready to break through because of high thresholds in hardware, software and knowledge. The coming years, the respondent believes that big companies will become even more influential on the web and its frameworks, communication methods and messages.

As for what is coming next, respondent B believes that designs will be increasingly flexible and personalization will become bigger; a website will look different depending on who is visiting it. He mentions that something like AR or VR could potentially change the game again [as with the arrival of touch screens].

Respondent C believes that the web is unprepared for what will happen next. She notes that there is talk about a merging of websites and social channels, which could cause the website to lose its function. She believes that it is uncertain whether the website will look the same in the future; perhaps it won’t even survive. Next up, she believes that pusher tools will be increasingly used; the website getting updated while the user is surfing, perhaps with messages directed to them. She also mentions personalization in the form of websites changing depending on the user. Lastly, she predicts an increased awareness of storytelling on websites.

Respondent D mentions personalization as something that will increase on the web; adapting websites to the user who is visiting them. AR is something that he thinks will become big; being able to view physical objects through your phone by placing them in a room, for example. He states that this doesn’t directly touch on design, but it will be interesting to see how we will design for that type of technology.

Next, respondent E believes that websites might start looking more and more like applications, where the experience is seamless between pages and functions. Animations and motion design he believes will gain more attention and be more integrated into sites.

4.3.5.1 Retro trends

Respondent A believes that there will be more retro trends emerging; “They come back all the time and get more refined, better and more niched. It happens all the time and I think it is cool. [...] But that is how it is with nostalgia, it has a familiar ring to it and makes you feel secure, that is what it’s all about.”
Respondent B believes retro trends are guaranteed to emerge again; “Wait five years and Flash might come around again. A new generation graduates and something old comes back. Non-stop, all the time”. And, he adds, perhaps in twenty years brutalism comes back for another round.

Respondent C says she believes more retro trends will emerge, “even more now that I have seen these trends [brutalism and antidesign] and we have talked about it”. She believes the first users will be early adopters within fashion and design, because that’s where it always begins; “There is a reason to stand out and be an early adopter for them. In art and fashion you don’t want to be the same as everybody else, you need to find your own expression. Looking back at history, that’s where it always begins”.

Retro trends is something that we will see more of, according to respondent D, since everything moves in cycles.

Respondent E is convinced that more retro trends will appear, but that they won’t make it into the big markets. “It’s fun to see them”, he says, “but I don’t really see any other application for them”.

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5.1  Trends in web design

5.1.1. Trend-driving factors

Respondents A, B, C and D explicitly mention technological advancement as an important driving factor. Respondent A views the Flat design approach as a result of technical advancement, something that is supported by Hong (2018) who connects the design approach to an increased smartphone usage and thereby responsive design. Respondent B views the introduction of touch screens as a big reason for visual evolution. The challenges in designing that were brought along by this shift are also described by Hong (2018). Respondent D describes how a certain feature got popularized once CSS started supporting it, as an example of how disappearing technical limitations can directly influence web design trends.

Respondents A, B, C and E also bring up a user perspective. Respondent A explains how guidelines from big and popular websites can turn into best practice, which users recognize, and therefore designers may take influence from them. Respondent E similarly describes how some trends turn into standards that users expect to see.

Respondent C describes that user needs and technology advance parallel to and affect each other.

Respondent A believes that the visual design aspect used to be the main driving force, but that this has shifted to include a user aspect. Hong (2018) confirms an early focus on aesthetics, and states that the shift to a more user-centred web started around the emergence of Web 2.0. Respondent B believes that designers have a need to experiment with aesthetics and put a personal touch to their designs.

5.1.2 Trend usage

All respondents describe some level of cautiousness when it comes to utilizing trends.

Sherwin (2018) advocates a 3 Bs test to determine whether to follow a trend or not, which includes considering budget, brand and behaviour.

Respondent A believes that a trend should be tested to see if it works. He avoids trends that are very new, due to the risk that users would not understand their product or service. Respondents B and E similarly believe that a trend that fills a function can be utilized. This is supported by Sherwin (2018), which under the headline Behaviour advocates using trends if they support usability. Respondent B is critical of trends that are used only for visual impact.

Respondents B and D point out how the existing visual identity of the company must be taken into consideration which limits the freedom in choosing to use trends. Respondent C believes that the estimated life length of a trend plays a role in deciding whether to use it or not. She also states that it is important to assess whether the client is ready and has the budget to be at the forefront of trends, something that requires more frequent updates of the design. Sherwin (2018) supports these views in listing brand and budget as factors to keep in mind when deciding to follow a trend.
5.1.3 Trend life-spans

Both respondent A and E think it is difficult or even impossible to predict how long a trend will last. Respondent E also believes that it is a difficult thing to measure since a trend may remain on the web long after being used in a design.

Respondent A believes that the life-length of a trend depends on how it is received, how it works in reality and who or which companies it reaches. Respondent B believes that a trend’s life-length depends on where it comes from.

Respondents B and C believe trends that improve functionality are more likely to stay longer than those that are purely visual.

Respondent D believes that trends that appear because of technological limitations pass when those limitations disappear. Likewise, trends that arise because of new technical tools lose their popularity when those tools mature and become mainstream. Similarities to the life cycle described by respondent D can be found in the fashion cycles described by Kim, Fiore and Kim (2011). According to them, fashion styles enter the market in a limited supply and sometimes only with a few high-price brands, which may be seen as an exclusive early adopter group. During the growth and maturity phase of the fashion cycle, the style is modified, gets exposed to a wider mass of consumers and prices are gradually lowered. During the decline phase, the styles lose their popularity and are put on sale. According to respondent D, the interest in a web design trend also declines after it has gotten a wider use; becomes mainstream.

5.2 Brutalism and antidesign

5.2.1 Origins

Respondents A, B, C and D agree that the trends have their origins in the 1990s and early 2000s. Regarding exact years or periods and as to which of the two styles came first, there are variations in their answers.

Respondent A believes antidesign comes from a time earlier than brutalism. Respondent E believes that the origins of antidesign came shortly after the origins of brutalism.

5.2.1.1 Brutalism

Respondent A states that one of the examples shown is an early 2000s’ gimmick.

Respondent E relates brutalist web design to the earliest days of the web, when websites were not designed and made only to display information. Moran (2017) supports this by stating that brutalism aims to mimic the visual appearance of early 1990s’ websites. Moran (2017) describes how brutalist websites are left with a default appearance, and Scacca (2018) state that they often utilize a black, white and grey colour scheme. These design features are in line with how websites looked between 1990 and 1993 according to Robbins (2006) and Hong (2018). Respondent E also points out how the brutalist style is derived from a time when websites were not designed, but their visual appearance was due to limitations.
5.2.1.2 Antidesign


Respondents B, C and D mention early social media that allowed for profile customization (MySpace and Lunarstorm) which led to non-designers creatively expressing themselves on the web. Safir (2012) describes MySpace as a massively popular social platform during the mid-2000s and that it gave anyone the opportunity to have their own page.

5.2.2 Style

Respondent E believes that brutalism and antidesign are totally different in style; brutalism being “nothing at all” and antidesign “over the top”. Moran (2017) agrees by making a clear distinction between the two styles.

5.2.2.1 Brutalism

Respondents B, C and D describe brutalist web design as minimalist. Moran (2017) supports this in stating that brutalism keeps the styling at a minimum. Respondent D mentions the Bauhaus school of design and Swiss design as having similarities with brutalist web design. Moran (2017) describes that brutalism and Flat design share some of their goals in that they strive for web design to be true to itself. Moran (2015) states that Flat design is considered an offshoot of minimalist web design by many designers. Hong (2018) sees a strong link between Swiss design and Flat design.

Respondents B and E think that the style lacks a design layer that they believe is necessary.

5.2.2.2 Antidesign

Respondent A describes antidesign as ironic; “so ugly that it looks good”. This is supported by Moran (2017) who describes antidesign websites as intentionally unattractive and disorienting. Moran also states that antidesign often is utilized ironically as an inside joke.

Respondents B, C and D relate antidesign to early social media profile customization. Respondents B and D mention MySpace and respondents B and C mention Lunarstorm. Craig (2014) describes how users with an average level of skill used to over-design their MySpace profiles and that some designers picked up and utilized the same visual language for websites.

Respondent C has seen a similar design approach on YouTube recently.

5.2.3 Reasons for emergence and popularity

Respondent A believes the visual expressions of brutalism and antidesign return because there is currently a great interest in retro trends. Reynolds (2011) and Sasso (2011) believe that the 2000s has seen an unusually large interest in retro styles. Respondent A mentions the Netflix show Stranger Things as an expression similar to retro trends in web design. McCormack (2016) calls Stranger Things desperately
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nostalgic and predicts that nostalgia in the form of TV shows will be seen even more. McCormack relates the popularity of nostalgia in TV shows to the reality in its present being “singularly unappealing”.

Respondent B thinks the popularity of the trends has to do with generations. He states that generations tend to bring back trends from a time when they were not around. Reilly (2014) supports this in describing how people may feel nostalgia by romanticizing an era which they are too young to remember.

Respondents B, C and E agree that brutalism and antidesign are in part counter-reactions to something else. Respondent B and E believe both styles are reactions towards the perception that everything on the web looks similar. Moran (2017) supports this in describing brutalism and antidesign as reactions against the perceived uniformity of web design.

Respondent B mentions anti-commercialism in that the trends are different from the way big companies are designing for the web. Similarly, Wilshere (2017) mentions a suspicion of corporate interests as a possible reason for the popularity of brutalist web design. Dewey (2015) even argues that there is a widespread disappointment with how the web has developed, from “niche and intimate” to a “massive capitalist endeavour”. The idea of a reaction towards consumerism can be found in the original antidesign movement during the 1960s as described by Woodham (2016). The original architectural brutalism as described by Corbusier (2013) celebrates mass-production, while in its web design adaptation, Moran (2017) states that it is used to “break away from the stale, cookie-cutter, premade-template sites that dominate the web today”.

5.2.3.1 Brutalism

Respondent C believes that brutalist websites are a way for a person or organization to show that they have come far enough to look back. She also sees an element of irony in the style.

Respondent D believes brutalism is an example of the extreme type of trends that can and will arise because technical limitations are disappearing.

5.2.3.2 Antidesign

Respondent A sees a connection between antidesign on the web and current trends in clothing fashion, which are influenced by the 1990s. Ewart (2016) and Fury (2016) support the idea that the 90s are currently influencing pop culture. Respondent A relates this to nostalgia, which he explains as a need for security and comfort. McCormack (2016) touches on this by stating how people turn to nostalgia when the present seems unappealing. Reid, referred to by Ewart (2016) describes how people are likely to turn to nostalgia to help them overcome loneliness and other negative emotions.

Respondent C believes antidesign is a reaction against web design “looking too good” and becoming “boring routine”. This is in agreement with comments that respondent B and E made for both antidesign and brutalism and the description that Moran (2017) makes. Moran describes how some designers use antidesign because they have become bored with simple, polished designs: “For them, antidesign brings complexity and novelty that they feel their products have been lacking”.

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Respondent A mentions a “common perception of people” which leads to something becoming a trend. Respondent C also believes that there is a sense of belonging to the same group between the creator and the target user of antidesign. This is supported by Moran (2017) as she describes how antidesign sites are often created as inside jokes for designers. An inside joke, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “a joke that is understood only by people with special knowledge about something”.

Respondent C also describes how web design has come far enough that it is now possible to look back and design in the same way as in the past, but now with irony. This relates to the comments from respondent D that technical advancement leads to the appearance of extreme trends. The irony which is a key component to antidesign according to Moran (2017) can be related to the New Design movement during the 1980s in which irony, provocations and manipulated borders between art and design were used, according to Milton and Rodgers (2011).

Respondents C, D and E believe antidesign is a way to stand out and gain attention on the web. According to Moran (2017), gaining attention for being edgy and provocative is one of the main reasons that designers use antidesign. She believes that even those who greatly disapprove of antidesign websites will visit and share them with their peers.

5.2.4 Application

5.2.4.1 Brutalism

Respondent A and C have encountered brutalist web design in architect, design and art contexts. Moran (2017) confirms that brutalism started to appear in “cutting-edge design spaces” such as portfolios, digital agency sites and art museum sites first. Moran believes that most design trends start out on these types of websites. Respondent C also stated that early adopters for web design trends often are fashion and design companies, since there are reasons for them to stand out and have their own expression.

Respondent A, B, C and E agree that a completely brutalist web design would not work for a big company that focuses on profit. Scacca (2018) supports this opinion by dissuading from using brutalism for corporations that need to appear professional and modern and convert users.

Respondent B predicts that brutalism will be used for portfolios and perhaps organizations with less focus on profit. Respondent C believes it could be used for a certain type of fashion store, since she views fashion as closely connected to web design.

Respondent E does not see what purpose brutalist web design could be utilized for.

5.2.4.2 Antidesign

Respondent C has encountered antidesign in joke websites. Moran (2017) describes humour as one of the main reasons for using antidesign.

Respondents D and E believe that antidesign is fun and could be utilized for a temporary campaign website, but they cannot see how the style would be otherwise applicable. An example of antidesign being utilized for a campaign site is the website
for the movie Captain Marvel which is set in the 90s, according to Scarano (2019). Respondents B and C agree that antidesign is a difficult style to sell to a client.

5.2.5 Life-span

Respondent B believes both brutalism and antidesign have a hard time surviving since they do not work in commercial contexts. He believes designers will use them for fun for about six months and then they will be replaced by new trends.

5.2.5.1 Brutalism

Respondent A believes brutalism can last for longer periods than antidesign. This is in line with how Moran (2017) believes the brutalist style can be used while antidesign should be avoided, for business contexts.

Respondent B believes brutalism will fade because no companies will want to implement the style. Scacca (2018) is also critical of utilizing brutalism for professional websites.

Respondent C believes that brutalism could mature and certain elements of it could be used for a wider audience. Scacca (2018) supports this in suggesting merging brutalist elements with an otherwise modernly designed website.

5.2.5.2 Antidesign

Respondent A has seen antidesign come and go several times and believes that it will continue to do so with short intervals.

Respondent B believes that unless there is a practical reason for antidesign to survive, it won’t. Respondent D believes it is unlikely for antidesign to get established. Moran (2017) and Scacca (2018) both dissuade from using antidesign for professional websites.

5.2.6 Significance to the field of web design

Respondent B believes that trends like brutalist web design don’t make a big impact on the big, mainstream trends. Antidesign has met some resistance in the UX community according to Moran (2017), which is a potential reason that it will not become mainstream.

Respondent D thinks that this is an exciting time for the field of web design since there is a lot of freedom on the web. He believes many small trends will arise and some of them will die while others will get established.

Respondent E believes small trends like brutalism and antidesign can affect the field of web design by inspiring and giving rise to thoughts. Moran (2017) describes the idea behind brutalism as a longing for honest and not contrived web design. Wilshere (2017) believes that web brutalism is a reminder that there are still alternative possibilities in how to design for the web and brings up a widespread criticism against commercial sites. This indicates similarities with the start of the New Design movement of the 1980s as described by Milton and Rodgers (2011).
5.3 Web design history

5.3.1 View on history

Respondent A sees a clear line from 1994 and forward, with landmarks where web design has changed.

Respondent E views its development as a one-directional evolution without any real disruptions. He sees a shift in how websites are used, from display windows by companies to environments for conversation where users can participate.

5.3.2 Web design eras

Doosti, Crandall and Su (2017) see a lack of cultural analysis of the world wide web. Chen, Crandall and Su (2017) argue that time periods are useful in comparing cultural artifacts — periods, styles, tools and vocabulary that are identified by critics become portable concepts that can be adapted, built upon and rejected. They view the possibility to compare web design periods as valuable both within and outside the field of web design. Chen, Crandall and Su suggest four web design categories which are based on time periods.

Respondents B and E believe that the web is different from other cultural environments, which to them is a reason that it doesn’t use categories or eras in the same way. In this, they both emphasize the user perspective and that people use websites to solve their problems. Respondent B says that the level of influence that technical advancement has on web design makes it different from other cultural expressions. Respondent E believes that what makes the web different is that it is not art in itself.

Respondent B thinks that there probably are categories, but that they are subtle and more difficult for people outside web design to tell apart.

Respondent C states that the web is very young and perhaps we will see web design categories in the future, when we are looking back. Brutalism and antidesign she sees as signs that it is possible to see web design categories. She says that a possibility is that we will name categories from the devices which were used to access the web during a specific period in time.

Respondent D believes that eras may be recognized in a couple of periods on the web; how people designed for MySpace, websites that were built with Flash, the Skeuomorphic era and the Flat design era that followed as a counter-reaction.

5.3.3 Trend cycles

Respondents A, C, D and E believe that people bring back trends because of nostalgia. Dewey (2015) argues that people look to the early web with a sense of longing because of a disappointment in how the web has developed. Digital historian Michael Stevenson, referred to by Dewey (2015) describes an increase in early web nostalgia and believes that the motivations are different, mentioning “hipster irony”, sentimental attachment and political motives. Respondent C and D believe that designers borrow and copy from the past because it is difficult to create something completely new. Similarly, Reilly (2014) states that a reason why old fashion is brought back is that there is a limited number of ways to make or style a garment.
Respondents B, D and E states that they cannot think of any instances of big visual design languages returning on the web. Respondents D and E believe that they have not seen old trends return because the field of web design is too young. Respondent C states that web history is short and there is not “much to go back to yet”, which is why designers now borrow from the beginning of the web.

Respondents A, B, C and D mention how interface design went from detailed with gradients and shadows to completely flat. Now they are seeing detail and depth being reintroduced in interfaces. Respondents B and C mention other instances of small visual trends returning.

Respondent A believes the return of old trends might move faster on the web. Respondents B and D estimates that it takes around twenty years for a trend to be brought back. Henderson cited by Rizza (2018) and Gopnik (2012) also argue that trends come in twenty-year cycles. This is criticized by Wickman (2012) who believes that waves of nostalgia occur but cannot be generalized.

5.3.4 Current state

Respondents A and D believe that the web is mature. Respondent B believes that the web is in a resting phase and is mature for the current level of technology. Respondent E believes that the web has begun to mature, but still has some way to go.

Visually, respondent B believes that the current way of designing for public web is functional and boring. Respondent E sees that the web has become increasingly user focused and believes that it will continue. This change is also described by Hong (2018). Respondent D sees a lot of variation in how websites are designed and that there are many sub-trends, but there is still a mainstream way of designing which is very put together. Similarities to the current state of the web can be found in the Modernism at the first half of the 1900s which sparked a counter-reaction that opposed consumerism, according to Milton and Rodgers (2011).

5.3.5 Predictions

Respondent A believes there will be a shift from still images to video which will change the way that people consume and create media. He also predicts that big companies will gain more influence over the web and its frameworks, communication methods and messages.

Respondent A does not believe that AR and VR are ready to break through yet. Respondent B believes that if AR and VR emerge they will greatly change how we design for the web. Respondent D believes that AR will emerge soon and is interested in seeing how we design for that technology.

Respondents B, C and D believe that websites will be increasingly personalized to the user that is visiting them.

5.3.5.1 Retro trends

All respondents agree that retro trends are sure to emerge again.

Respondent C believes that retro trends will first appear on websites within fashion and design. She says that this is where it always begins and that there is a reason; within those fields it is important to find a unique expression. Moran (2017) describes how the
trend of brutalism started in design-oriented spaces such as designer portfolios and art museum sites. She also mentions that antidesign has been utilized as an inside joke for designers.

Respondents A and C emphasize that everything moves in cycles.

Respondent E believes that even though retro trends will appear, they won’t make it into the big markets.
6 Discussion and conclusions

The chapter provides a discussion of method and findings, and a presentation of results. Following are the implications of the study, conclusions and recommendations and lastly, suggestions for further research.

6.1 Discussion of method

The empirical data that has been acquired through this study is deemed valuable and helpful in answering its research questions. As discovered during the interviews, trends and shifts in web design history is something that web design practitioners view differently. The supposition that respondents with experience from the early days of the web would provide valuable information is supported by the findings. The possibility for respondents to elaborate, describe and predict generated new and relevant insights, which was made possible due to the choice of performing a qualitative study.

6.1.1 Sampling

According to Wysocki (2008) a representative sample of the population must be studied to be able to generalize the findings. Since generalizability is foremost a goal of quantitative research, it has not been taken into great consideration for this study which is qualitative. The sampling of this study was most similar to a convenience sampling as described by Wysocki (2008), in that it is based on subjects who were available. The selection of respondents was based on their level of work experience and an interest or knowledge in web design trends. No requirements were listed regarding gender, age or specific professional title. This resulted in four out of five respondents being male, and four out of five having a minimum of twenty years of experience in working with the web. Though long-time experience is considered a valuable trait for the interview respondents, it is also possible that it introduced a type of bias to the trends. Several of the respondents who had twenty or more years of experience mentioned that they have seen the origins of brutalism and antidesign used “unironically”, when the web was different from what it is now. They used subjective terms to describe them. For instance, several respondents stated that they thought antidesign was fun because they were around at the time when those designs were first in use. The nostalgic factor may have affected their assessment of brutalist and antidesign web designs. However, the respondent with seven years of experience also related the trends to the early days of the web and had memories related to the style of antidesign.

The respondents all work in Jönköping or Gothenburg in Sweden. All respondents have different titles. Two out of five explicitly mentioned having a background in traditional or print graphic design. Web design practitioners may enter the profession coming from a design background or a technical background. Past working experiences may affect a respondent’s priorities and attitudes around visual web design trends, which is what the study focuses on. The differences in past experiences among the respondents was considered valuable since it likely has provided different views on the topics. With a greater sample of interview respondents, more diversity may have been found in background, location, experience, age and gender, and the sample could have been made more representative.
6.1.2 Interview form

Blomkvist and Hallin (2015) describe how unstructured interviews are carried out without deciding in advance what is to be found. This interview form would have produced empirical data that had likely not been comparable enough, since it means there is only an overarching topic and questions are undecided in the beginning. The analysis on the empirical data of the study was made through seeking comparability, and this would not have been possible if the questions and answers had been highly diverse. From the experience of conducting the interviews, the conclusion is drawn that all respondents have different attitudes and ways of working, and they tend to emphasize different aspects of web design. The interview outline that was drawn up, in accordance with the semi-structured interview form, helped in steering the interview in the desired direction. This ensured empirical data that is focused around the purpose.

Quantitative, or structured, interviews aim to create empirical data in the form of measurable quantities according to Blomkvist and Hallin (2015). This interview form would not have allowed for the deep elaboration which was deemed crucial to be able to answer the research questions of the study. Several times it was discovered that subjects brought up by the respondents led to findings which were crucial to the study. An example of this can be found in how the mentioning of retro or returning trends was treated during the interviews. The outline was drawn up with great care to not introduce any bias around this topic. Prior to conducting the interviews, studied theory had described brutalism and antidesign as being derived from early web designs. One purpose of the interviews was to find out where the trends are derived from, which meant that an openness to new theories was necessary. Therefore, it was important that the interviewer would not introduce the idea of the retro trends as a preconception. No questions were asked around retro or returning trends until the respondents themselves had brought it up. As the empirical data shows, all respondents did mention retro, returning or “old” trends. This in turn allowed for questions outside the interview outline, which concerned such trends, to be asked. The conclusion is that the semi-structured interview form was well suited for the purpose and provided empirical data with balance between comparability and unexpected elaboration.

6.2 Discussion of findings

6.2.1 What is the reason behind the recent rise of Brutalism and Antidesign in web design?

Brutalism and antidesign in web design are described by the empirical data as derived from the 1990s and early 2000s. As this is also supported by theory, the study indicates that brutalism and antidesign are instances of retro trends. Theory and empirical data alike indicate that retro trends are currently strong in pop culture which can be seen in fashion and streamed media for instance. Nostalgia, which is a source of security and comfort for many, is a commonly mentioned reason for this phenomenon. Retro trends, according to both studied theory and empirical data, move in cycles. Regarding how long it takes for a past decade of trends to return there are conflicting views, but twenty years is the most commonly mentioned span. This is explained as being the amount of time that it takes for a generation to grow into adulthood and hence, look to their childhood to get a sensation of nostalgia.

One respondent describes brutalism and antidesign as an expression of web design having come far enough that it is now possible to look back. She believes that since the history of the web is short, trends are now borrowed from the time of its birth. The web, according to theory, has evolved for 28 years. Antidesign is identified as derived
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from the 1990s, with particular references to 1997, which is twenty years before Moran (2017) notes the popularity in using brutalism and antidesign on the web. In the case of antidesign, there are indications that the twenty-year cycle is at work. Brutalism is perceived as having earlier origins, as theory and empirical data relates it to the undesigned interfaces from the time of the birth of the web, 26-28 years ago.

Brutalism in web design, with its link to the architectural style with the same name, is more than an aesthetic style, according to Day (2006). Visually, the original brutalist approach means focusing on and intentionally highlighting the function of a designed object. It is based on the idea of mass-production for the good of the many, as described by Corbusier (2013). In web design, this is done by keeping the default appearance of websites, which preserves the original philosophy but translates it to the web.

The original design principles of antidesign are derived from the movement that began in the 1960s, embraces trends and goes against what is considered good form, according to Woodham (2016). These principles can be seen in the web design adaptation. The original design language that embraced decoration, kitsch and distortions has been translated into the digital version of the movement. Designing with irony is another key component of antidesign according to Moran (2017), which is in line with the idea to go against what is perceived as the norm. The inside joke of utilizing antidesign ironically on the web can create a sense of shared belonging between creator and target audience, something that is mentioned both in theory and the empirical data. As it appears, both the underlying attitudes and the design principles of antidesign have been preserved in its web design adaptation.

Not only is antidesign unaligned with the values and principles of brutalism, it could even be described as the opposite of it. The antidesign movement started as a reaction against modernism. According to Hopkins (2014) brutalism in architecture is a branch of modernism. Even though antidesign first appeared within product design while brutalism is mainly an architectural style, this emphasizes the contrast between the two styles. Whereas the brutalist philosophy focuses on content and function, antidesign, in many cases, aims to distract from them. The original brutalism, as described by Corbusier (2013), celebrates mass-production for the good of society, while the original antidesign, as described by Woodham (2016), was born as a reaction against mass-consumption. Brutalist buildings display their function openly and avoid decoration, according to Day (2006). Antidesign in product design, according to Woodham (2016), emphasizes decoration and rejects the idea of “form follows function”. Despite the clear contradictions that can be found in their origins and principles, the two trends, in their web adaptation, are often mistaken for each other and hybrids are created. In a widely spread article, Awwwards (2017) presents an array of what they call brutalist websites, along with an explanation of the design style. This is an example of the common misconception, as described by Scacca (2018), that brutalist web design utilizes design principles that are actually those of antidesign.

The empirical data indicates that the web is young, which is perceived as a reason why returning design trends have not been seen before. Despite stating that it is young, the empirical data also indicates that the web is mature. Some respondents describe current web design as boring, something that is related to the matter of trends returning as reactions towards a uniform web. Both the empirical data and theory show that one of the reasons for the popularity of brutalism and antidesign in web design, is as reactions towards what is perceived as mainstream. Both visual uniformity and commercialism are mentioned in relation to this perception.
Reacting towards what is considered mainstream is nothing new when it comes to design movements — rather, many are born as reactions to another movement or philosophy. Examples of styles that have risen in this way are Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau as reactions to mass-production, as described by Milton and Rodgers (2011). Advocates for Arts and Crafts, according to Milton and Rodgers, also campaigned for a better life for people in the industrialized society. Studied theory shows that trends emerging as revolts against mainstream design have the possibility to become legitimate design movements in their own right, as the New Design movement, described by Milton and Rodgers (2011), demonstrated during the 1980s. It should be noted that this example is within the field of product design and occurred circa 200 years after the birth of the field. Similarities are, however, found between attitudes leading up to movements such as Arts and Crafts and New Design, and those described in relation to brutalism and antidesign on the web.

6.2.2 What implications can the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design?

The world wide web is moving more towards a user perspective and designs focused on user experience is considered best practice. The study indicates that technological advancement and user needs are the main driving factors in web design trends. It also indicates that web design trends should be utilized only if they fill a function and are suitable for the client’s existing brand and budget. Trends, according to the study, are likely to survive longer if they improve functionality for the end user. Trends such as brutalism and antidesign are considered too extreme to be utilized in business contexts since they would not help in converting users and generating profit. Antidesign has been argued to do the very opposite of helping users, both by theory and empirical data. However, the campaign site for the major film Captain Marvel has been mentioned both in theory and the empirical data as an example of antidesign utilized in commercial contexts.

One respondent describes brutalism and antidesign as “trends for those who like design”. This relates to how another respondent describes that unique trends first appear in designer and fashion contexts, something that is also supported by theory. The study shows that neither brutalism or antidesign would work in business contexts or generally in mainstream web design, but that there are other, more niche, applications for them. It is also mentioned in both theory and the empirical data that visual elements of brutalism may be integrated into an otherwise modern web design.

One respondent differs from the others in that he emphasizes that experimental trends, including brutalism and antidesign, arise and will do so even more frequently due to there being few or no technical limitations left in web design. He does, however, acknowledge that there is also a mainstream way of designing for the web which is very put together.

Over the topic of visual web design categories or eras, there are clear conflicts in the empirical data. Some respondents state that the web is different from other cultural areas. This is explained by web design being a young field, that websites are used as products for users to perform tasks and by the level of influence that technological advancement has on the field. These are perceived as reasons why web design does not have acknowledged categories or eras. One respondent explicitly states that brutalism and antidesign could be indications of future visual design categories on the web. Another respondent lists a couple of eras that may be recognized, which are eras that the study has also found in theory describing web design periods.
6.3 Conclusions

Through the empirical data and theory that have been studied, answers to the research questions are believed to have been found.

6.3.1 What is the reason behind the recent rise of brutalism and antidesign in web design?

The recent emergence and popularity of the web design trends brutalism and antidesign are believed to be caused by a combination of three main reasons.

6.3.1.1 The world wide web’s coming of age

The empirical data states that the web either is mature or has begun to mature. It also indicates that the return of visual design languages has not been commonly seen before. The most common explanation found for this is that the field of web design has been too young until now.

The web has gone through visual periods which can be identified by web design practitioners, as demonstrated by the empirical studies. Brutalism and antidesign are instances of retro trends within web design. It is concluded that brutalism and antidesign have returned and gained popularity because the web has recently reached an age where it is relevant to start borrowing from the past.

6.3.1.2 Reaction towards the mainstream web

Brutalism started out as an architectural movement and is often described as an expression of socialist ideals. Brutalist buildings aim to expose their true function on the outside and do not use decoration without purpose. Likewise, brutalist web design aims to look unadorned and raw and preserves much of the web’s default appearance.

The original antidesign movement arose during the 1960s, a time when the world wide web did not yet exist, but similarities are found between the adaptations both in design language and philosophy. An element of irony is emphasized, something that the study has found to be a clear feature of antidesign websites. The original antidesign movement came as a reaction to consumerism and designs that were at the time considered good form. A similar attitude has been found in the empirical data, in that the modern web is considered uniform and commercial which sparks anti-movements.

The rise of brutalism and antidesign are seen as reactions towards two different, yet related, perceptions of the mainstream web:

- **Visual uniformity**
  The study shows that there is a widespread perception among web designers that the mainstream web is visually uniform. Styles such as brutalism and antidesign are seen as counter-reactions to a visual uniformity of mainstream websites — a way to go against the norm. This is a way that many visual styles have formed and gained popularity throughout history.

- **Commercialism**
  The study has found indications of suspicion and criticism towards corporate interests on the web. The empirical data indicates that big companies are gaining and practising an increasing amount of influence over the web. Antidesign and brutalist web design is seen as a way to question and revolt against the values and doings of these companies, including their visual languages. This bears
similarities to the New Design movement during the 1980s which was influenced by sub-cultures and anti-authoritarianism.

6.3.1.3 The interest in retro trends

The study shows that there is currently a large interest in retro trends in pop culture and that it has been noted more frequently during the 2000s than in earlier decades. The study indicates that influences from the 1990s in particular have made a comeback in pop culture recently and has had an influence on web design as well as fashion and film.

The interest in retro trends is in part due to nostalgia. Trends move in time cycles and one cycle that has been noted frequently is that of twenty years. The rise of brutalism and antidesign were noted by Moran in 2017, twenty years after 1997, a year that was specifically mentioned by interview respondents when describing antidesign.

Bringing back trends from past decades is also done for the sake of humour and irony. Antidesign in particular is used as an inside joke among designers. This is possible because of a common perception and sense of belonging to the same group.

6.3.2 What implications can the emergence of these trends have on the aesthetic evolution of web design?

The study indicates that brutalism and antidesign as web design visual languages are unlikely to make an impact on how mainstream web design looks. They are considered small, experimental visual trends which are mostly contained in specific, limited environments. Brutalism and antidesign will likely inspire subcultures within the field of web design. The study indicates that more experimental and retro trends will emerge and that they will first be seen within art, designer, architecture and fashion contexts. Revolts against commercialism have been mentioned both by theory and empirical data. However, a significant revolt of this kind is unlikely to be brought along with the trends. This is because of the indication that user needs and corporate interests will continue to increasingly dominate the web.

The web is, according to the empirical data, often perceived as different from other cultural expressions such as art and music. Visual web design categories or periods are not agreed upon. Brutalism and antidesign have been mentioned as indicators that web design categories based on time periods could exist in the future.

6.4 Implications

The results of the study indicate that the world wide web is coming of age. It is possible to identify and draw inspiration from certain web design eras. The study has concluded that brutalism and antidesign are examples of trends that fit into the description of a design movement. This is a valuable finding in the context of visual categorization of the web as described by Chen, Crandall and Su (2017). This study may be viewed as a step in identifying and naming categories within visual web design. Brutalism and antidesign are considered valid and well described web design movements, and with wide acknowledgement from the field they can be treated as such.

A clear line can be drawn between mainstream visual web design and experimental trends such as brutalism and antidesign. The study indicates that more experimental trends and retro trends are likely to emerge. Reasons are mixed and can be purely
Discussion and conclusions

visual or political. Whether the development of web design will bear more likeness to the development of product design, cannot be predicted by this study.

6.5 Further research

The empirical data of this study comes from interviews with professionals who work with web design commercially and are therefore restricted in using visual trends. Interviews with practitioners who utilize and advocate web brutalism and antidesign would provide a different perspective on the reasons behind the popularity of these trends.

Theory and empirical data generally indicate that brutalism and antidesign should not be implemented for professional websites that focus on profits. However, some of the theory and empirical data state that elements of brutalism could be utilized and complement an otherwise modern web design. There is a relevance in performing user tests with websites of the respective styles. Since brutalism and antidesign have not been largely utilized for business contexts, there is currently little data regarding whether users would appreciate the styles. This would also provide a user perspective on experimental, non-mainstream web design.

The political reasons behind reforms and counter-reactions in design were found to be interesting aspects of this study. However, it could not be studied to any greater depth due to delimitations. It is believed that more accurate predictions around the field of web design can be made by studying the history of other design fields in depth.

Further studies aiming to help in categorizing visual web design would be a relevant continuation of this study. A potential case of other trends emerging that are based on earlier web design eras would provide an opportunity to continue these studies.
7 References


References


8 Search terms

90s trends
Antidesign
Antidesign movement
Art and design
Brutalism
Brutalist philosophy
Brutalist web design
MySpace profile design
Nostalgia
Product design
Retro trends in pop culture
Trend cycles
Trend decades
Web design era
Web design evolution
Web design history
Web design trends
9 Appendices

The following screenshots are of the landing pages of the example websites that were shown to the participants during the semi-structured interviews. Note that the antidesign example websites utilize vivid animations as key features. Hence, those websites must be visited to gain the full experience.


cole jorissen
info
fill, push, destroy
nuclear future meets crispr
falafel coin: crypto meets food diplomacy
ideo colab decentralized credit system
proem: a visual cryptocurrency portfolio
instagram brand extension video editor
art & craft


Appendix 7 — Interview outline

• What is your professional title?
• What is your connection to web design?
• How long have you worked within your field?

Trends in web design

• How do you reason around visual trends in web design?
• When a new trend emerges, should it be utilized or avoided?
• To what degree does you or your team consciously use visual trends in web projects?
  o What do you look for as inspiration or guidance if not trends?
• Can you determine if a web design trend will last for a long time?
• What drives the visual development of web design?
  o How important is technical development versus tastes and trends?
• Can you determine whether an expression is because of a trend which will eventually pass, or if it is a sign of web design evolution?
• Have customers ever asked for a website that will last for a long time, visually?
  o Is it possible to achieve it?
• Is it possible to create a timeless web design as of today?

Brutalism and antidesign

• Have you encountered the trend brutalism in web design?
  o In theory (as an article for example) or in practice?
  o In what contexts?
  o Would you use it in a project?
• Have you encountered the trend antidesign in web design?
  o In theory (as an article for example) or in practice?
  o In what contexts?
  o Would you use it in a project?
• What does these trends bring to mind?
• Are they connected to any period in time?
• Why do you think they have gained popularity?

Web design history

• In many cultural areas there exists categories in the form of periods and styles. Can you see any similar categorization within visual web design?
• Is the web any different than other cultural areas?
• Is it important for a web designer to know the history of the web and web design?
• What phase in web design history are we currently in?
• How mature is the web?
• What comes next in web design?