

10 simple things about
The Simple
Visual Analysis and Projections



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1 The Simple Is a List of Ten Ingredients

The backstory of The Simple trend is fairly simple. The downturn has caused people to re-evaluate their lives, their expectations of what a successful life consists of. People are looking to an idea and image of The Simple. But the story of The Simple is a little more complicated. The Simple isn't simply back to basics; there is no turning back the clock on iPods, LCD TVs or broadband internet connections. As director Martin Scorsese said about film directing: "There's no such thing as simple. Simple is hard." And though The Simple is not as simple as it may look at first sight, this report will enable you to lock on to the major visual trend of the moment. As simple as 1, 2, 3.



88057876, Mike Harrington, Digital Vision

2 The Simple Is a Value

"Millions of people, everyone out for themselves, can this really be the only way?" says the voiceover on the ad for Chivas Regal, as one man turns around and walks against the flow of commuters on their way to work. What makes the idea of The Simple so emotionally and psychologically powerful for consumers is that it can be communicated and grasped so simply, as in this Chivas Regal spot – the Simple act of one man going against the crowd. This spot ticks off many key features of The Simple. The voiceover



Chivas Regal

continues as a list: “No! Here’s to doing the right thing, to giving a damn. Here’s to the straight talkers who give their word and keep it, to knowing the true meaning of wealth. Here’s to a code of behaviour that sets certain men apart from all others.”

The Simple isn’t just a look, a design style or even a lifestyle. It’s a value, demonstrated in the Chivas spot by images showing a football player picking an opponent off the

ground; a barefooted guy giving a piggyback to his girl; guys helping a driver push a stalled car; a group of fireman, spiritually satisfied, having done their job. The story of the Chivas spot is constructed as a list, and as a way of conveying The Simple through structure, the list is a guide. The Simple appeals because for consumers who are either anxious or looking for direction as the values of the economic bubble collapse, the list offers the gift of simple clarity.

3 The Simple Is Messy
We’ve been tracking the ebbs and flows of The Simple trend in tearsheets and in images sold on our website since our *One Life* report in 2005. Back then the most striking ads were “Dirt is Good” for Persil laundry detergent, which counter intuitively celebrated dirt with images of people enjoying themselves covered in mud, and the “My Life, My Card” campaign for American Express, with actors like Kate Winslet and Tina Fey responding to such life questions as “Childhood Ambition?”

The image style for the campaign was documentary portraiture, the celebrity shot in an environment that was a little messy and occasionally chaotic. Which is another way The Simple is visually coded. Again it might seem counterintuitive; one might think The Simple can only be represented through an image of minimalism, but The Simple as messy, disordered, pictures someone who has their values in order. They know what’s truly important isn’t the state of their home; it’s the state of their kids, their friends and their family. It’s about psychological improvement rather than home improvement. And since the downturn, we have seen a surge of interest in images anchored in the ideas, aesthetics and values of The Simple. To sum up the contradictory nature of The Simple in one sentence: Expect to see more images with high-production values that look clean and simple (see point 8) and images with low-production values that look cluttered and full of life.

My Life, My Card American Express, Global





Inside every story, there is a beautiful journey. Early evening, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Sofia Coppola, Francis Ford Coppola and Louis Vuitton are proud to support The Climate Pledge.

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4 The Simple Is Tradition

The idea of The Simple is deeply rooted in our culture, in all the world's great philosophies and religions, which is why it has such purchase when it emerges as a trend. Aristotle developed the idea of the good life as the practice of balance in living, while Epicurus developed a philosophy of

simple pleasures: One should avoid excessive pleasures, as these inevitably lead to dissatisfaction, never being able to have enough. These are recognisable values that bubble up in the culture from time to time, but are currently resonating strongly with consumers reacting to the transience and excess of "bling" culture, exactly because The Simple is a value rooted in time.

The Simple is also illustrated in Annie Leibovitz's pastoral image of Francis Ford Coppola and Sofia Coppola for Louis Vuitton's "Core Values" campaign. It's about wisdom, tradition and knowledge passed on from generation to generation, like the recent Coke ad where a 102-year-old man travels to see the newest arrival to his family, the 19-hours-old Aitana. Expect to see a lot more intergenerational imagery picturing The Simple wisdom that comes with time. It's played out as part of the trad fad. Likewise, the trend towards comfort food, whether homemade or in a restaurant, is about The Simple experienced as tradition, as the food your grandmother cooked for you, your mother cooked for you as a treat or when you were ill. As Forrest Gump might have said (and Forrest is a prophet of The Simple), "Life is like a bowl of soup."

It's why we are seeing a wave of interest in images related to childhood nostalgia, to favourite foods, places to visit and activities that smack of something older. And most of all, images of kids, not just because kids are a symbol of hope in difficult times, but because of the innocence kids represent. These images of kids picture adults as we currently might like to imagine ourselves, not influenced by aspiration or wealth, engaged in simple pleasures, climbing trees, scraping knees and jumping in puddles.



6228-000781, Steven Puetzer/Photonica



Make Magazine, USA

5 The Simple Is Craft
One of the most important features of The Simple is that it is not only a value, and a look, it is a certain kind of knowledge. The idea of The Simple, as we have seen, has a long tradition, and because of that it's associated with the idea of tradition and craft and crafted objects. There has been a marked increase in interest in activities such as baking, crafting, growing your own food, making your own clothes, knitting, an increase that is reflected in our keyword searches. You can even see this in advertising with the amount of consumer-generated content around brands.

Craft, and doing it your self, is touchy-feely, hands-on – it connects with the past. The fact that doing it yourself is cheaper isn't the driver of Craft; it's the benefits to your emotional well-being. In the US, etsy.com, the online site for craft goods, and the magazine and webzine *Make*, a digital craft magazine, have both opened up avenues for consumers to explore Craft in a contemporary way. Craft is the new rock 'n' roll, and advertisers who want to tap into the most contemporary form of The Simple need to explore the imagery around Craft. From knitting to mending and fixing, Craft captures the feeling of time well spent.



82474988, Marc Debram/Stone

6 The Simple Is Nature
When, at the beginning of this year, *Elle* magazine in France gave actress Marion Cotillard the chance to edit the magazine, she devoted 60 pages to how we might change our habits and treat ourselves and the planet better. The idea of The Simple connects two other image trends, Goodness (both health and ethics) and Sustainability/Nature. Cotillard delivers a manifesto in pictures, double-page spreads of her on a farm thinking aloud. Cotillard marching purposefully across a field, the copy reads, "the citizens

84587197, Life Boat/Taxi



of the world truly want to change things," her animal spirit pictured as a duck, which shadows her stride on the other half of the picture. Another spread shows her sitting in an undecorated rustic kitchen, a loaf of farmhouse bread cut on a breadboard as she meditates on her own green activism. Her absorbed, thoughtful, contemplative look is *the* expression of The Simple. It's the pause, the time-out from the life that has been overcomplicated by too much of everything.

Nature imagery has always been a visual sign of The Simple, the idea of nature as a refuge from the stress of everyday life, emphasizing the oneness and harmony of humanity and the natural world. One of the biggest sellers on the Getty Images website is an image of a dandelion seed blowing in the wind. The dandelion seed is nature's own thought bubble, a dream of the future, of purity, used in ads for anything picturing serenity, from Carefree Body Shape Liners to the Co-Operative bank, which uses the image of the seeds floating in the wind as an image of connectedness.

Elle, France



"Il y a un désir des citoyens de ce monde pour que les choses changent vraiment."

Westin Hotel Group, US



7 The Simple Is Sensuous

It would be easy to confuse the idea of The Simple with austerity, the sober and the ascetic. But The Simple is about pleasure, all the trends point to us being more in touch with our senses, whether it's cooking, or interior design that's more textured, or even the smell of washing and laundry. It's no longer that they simply smell or feel nice, it's that these smells and touch signal being in touch, being in the moment.

Westin Hotels have been representing themselves to customers not with widescreen TVs in their bedrooms or luxurious interiors but with a close-up of leaves wet with drops of rain, rich with green tones, and the tagline: "White tea. The calming new scent of Westin." Advertisers who want to plug into this need to look for imagery that shows people or objects in the raw, lots of textures and tones, evoking feel.

Muji Packaging



8 The Simple Is Black and White

The conventional visual language in magazines and advertising layouts is white space. Designers talk about giving the image or copy room to breathe. Historically, the use of space in branding has belonged to high-end products but sometimes it has been successfully adopted by the mainstream, as in the case of a brand like Muji has built its brand, design and packaging around The Simple. For Muji, simple packaging implies thoughtfulfulness. Over the last few years, as people have spent more and more time online, the visual language of offline design has been influenced by the busy aesthetic of websites and blogs. Expect to see more design and images that strip back background and allow people to focus. The Simple is the gift of focus for consumers who want to cut out lifestyle noise.

9 The Simple Is Iconic

Because the word “icon” is so overused, we have lost the sense of what the truly iconic brings to an image. Whether it’s a truly iconic celebrity, monument or landscape, or simply an iconic object, the Icon has an iconic image because it embodies clear values. It’s Jennifer Aniston as the girl next door, or it’s an image of apple pie, or it’s The Simple image of a skateboard. All these images embody values, and in the current climate what’s deeply important (going back to the original religious meaning of “iconic”) is that they imply a certain faith, that despite rapid economic changes, consumers can have faith in recognisable values. Expect to see more simple, Iconic imagery.

82474966, Marc Deham/Stone



88573876, John Howard/Riser



10 The Simple Is Bold

John Maeda from MIT, who wrote the widely acclaimed book *The Laws of Simplicity*, listed ten laws, the first nine of which are intended to be encapsulated by the tenth: “Simplicity is about subtracting the obvious, and adding the meaningful.” There is room for bold imagery that means something and captures the imagination. The obvious is about being held back by fear, picturing what consumers already know. The Simple is about being bold.

81987952, Peter Beavis/Stone



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Put The Simple in your next project

Here are some highlights from our interpretation of The Simple. This project brought in thousands of images, so if you're interested in seeing more, let us know and we'll put together a great big light box for you.

[View Simple imagery](#)

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