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The tyranny of consistency

Consistency is helpful as a tool for designing user-friendly experiences. Until it isn't.



Robert Stribley · Follow

Published in UX Collective

6 min read · Oct 26

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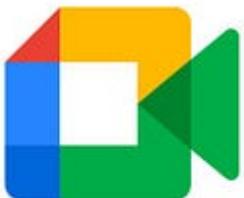


MidJourney output for the prompt: "the tyranny of consistency." No idea what's going on, but it does look pretty tyrannical. — Robert Stribley

In a [recent post on LinkedIn](#), design system consultant Brad Frost referenced [Google's notoriously baffling 2020 changes](#) to the icons for its popular apps, simply noting, "All

this time later. I still consider this decision to be a big mistake.” Erica Hall, co-founder of Mule Design

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In 2020, Google changed the icons for their most popular apps from the ones in the top row to the ones in the bottom. Some confusion ensued.

I agree. The problem is Google’s updated icons are more consistent to a fault: You can no longer distinguish between them quickly at a scan.

I often refer to “the tyranny of consistency” (with tongue somewhat in cheek) in my UX classes. My takeaway there is this:

Consistency is an important but sometimes over-rated tool. It’s key in maintaining a coherent experience. But develop an eye to know when to break from it.

To be sure then, in principle, consistency does help contribute to maintaining cohesive user experiences, but we also need to recognize that forcing things to fit sometimes actually undermines usability. Spotting those moments and determining how best to articulate why they are a problem is its own skill.

I had been grappling with this dynamic when occasionally encountering situations with clients, where they insisted that something be changed in our designs “to be consistent,” though I knew that “consistent” in these specific situations was not congruent with “usable.” Sometimes, consistency becomes a blunt tool: Like trying to sledgehammer a square peg into a round hole.

“Consistency” is a terrible word, Senior

Content

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I had been joking about this “tyranny of consistency” for several years. I even presented on it within a larger talk entitled “[Everything Is Not Important](#)” at SXSW in 2013. So I was much relieved to eventually discover that voices in design much greater than mine agreed.

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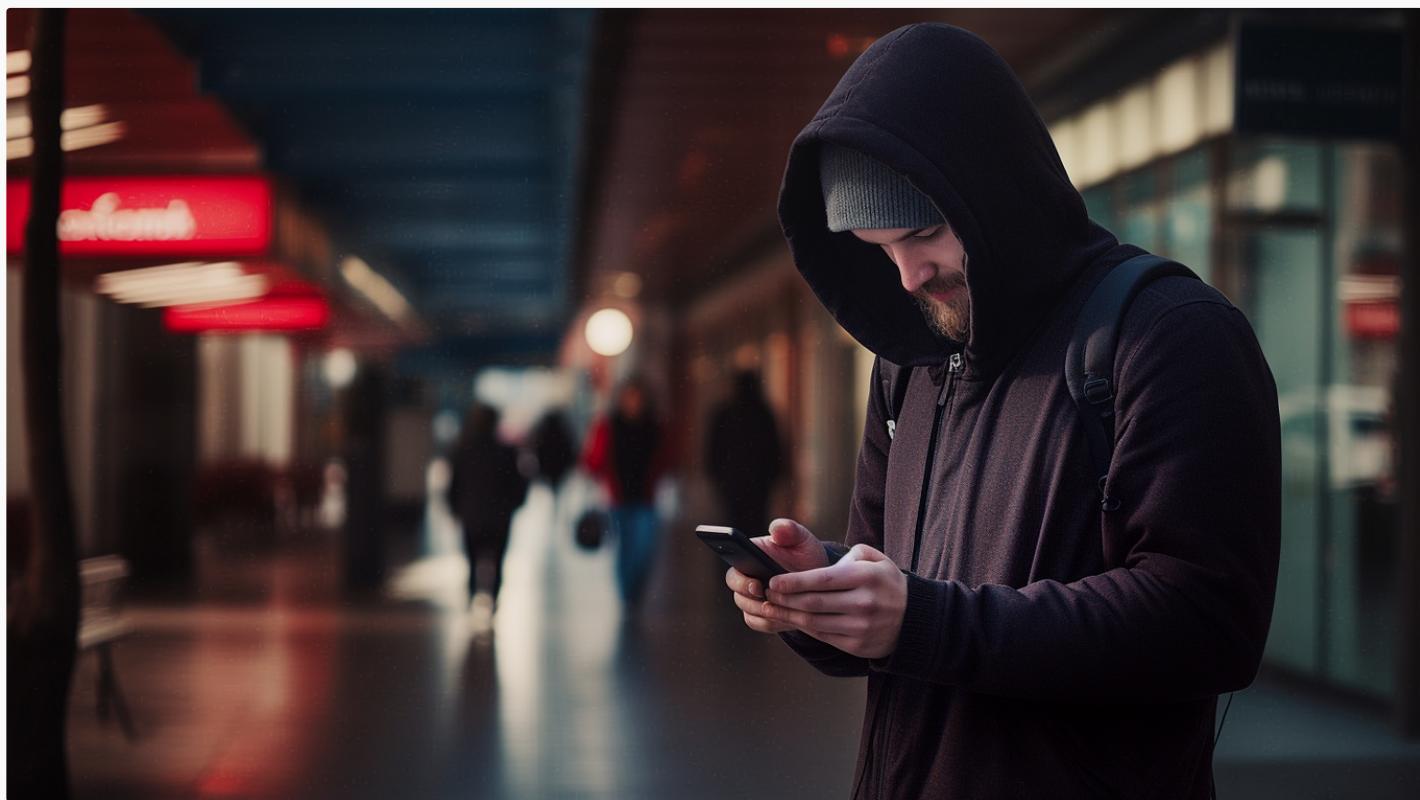
Written by Robert Stribley

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Writer. Photographer. UXer. Creative Director. Interests: immigration, privacy, human rights, design. UX: Publicis Groupe. Teach: SVA. Aussie/American. He/him.

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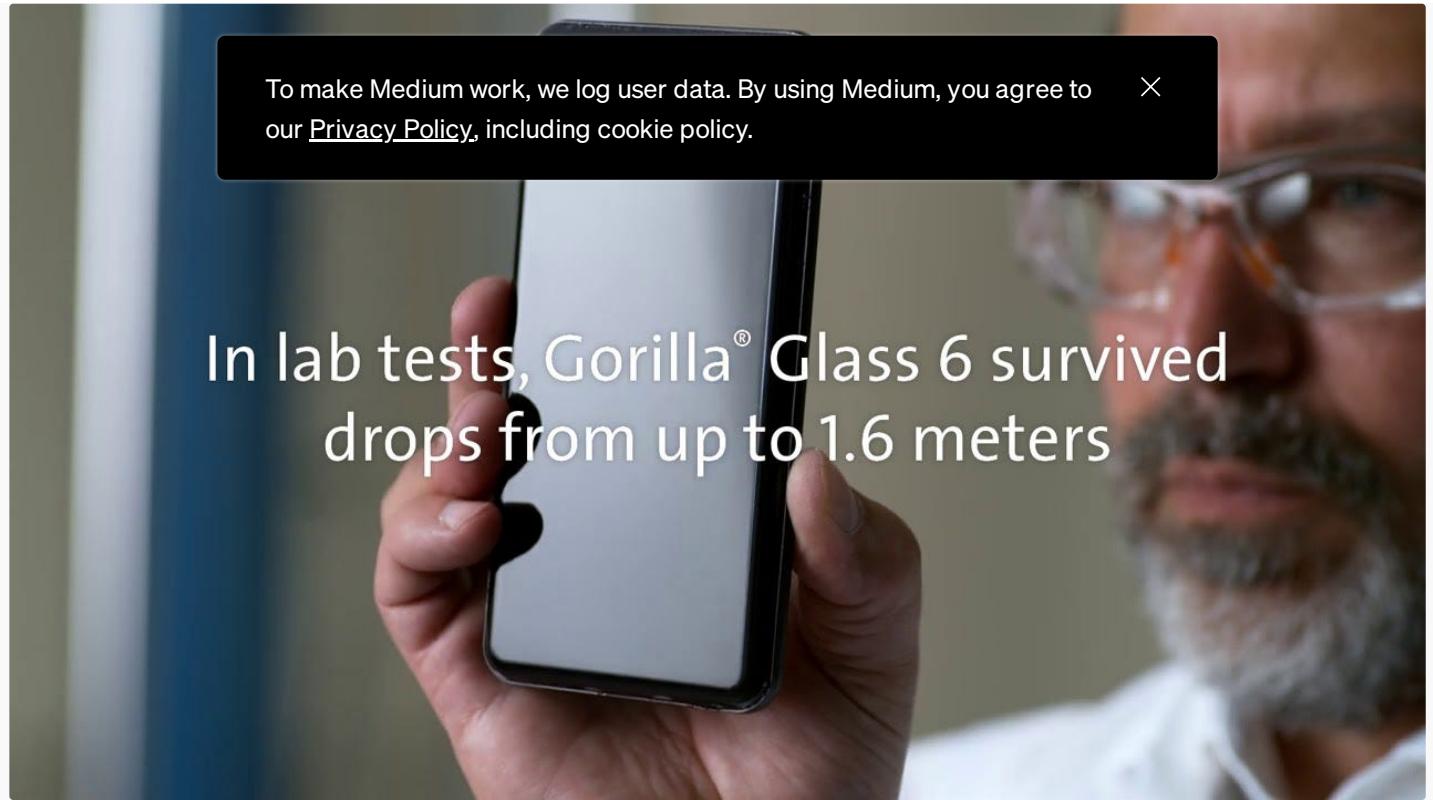
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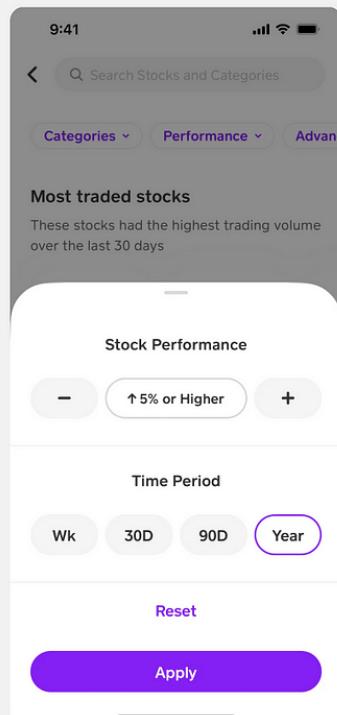


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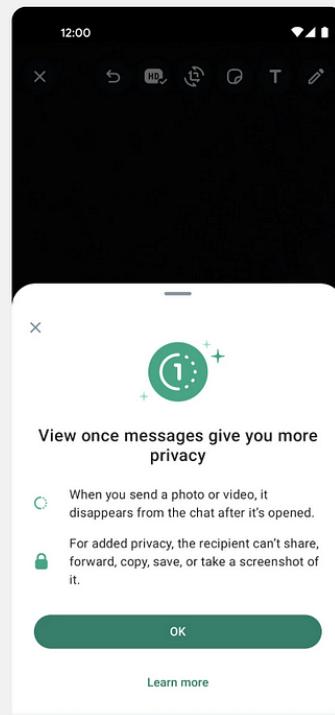
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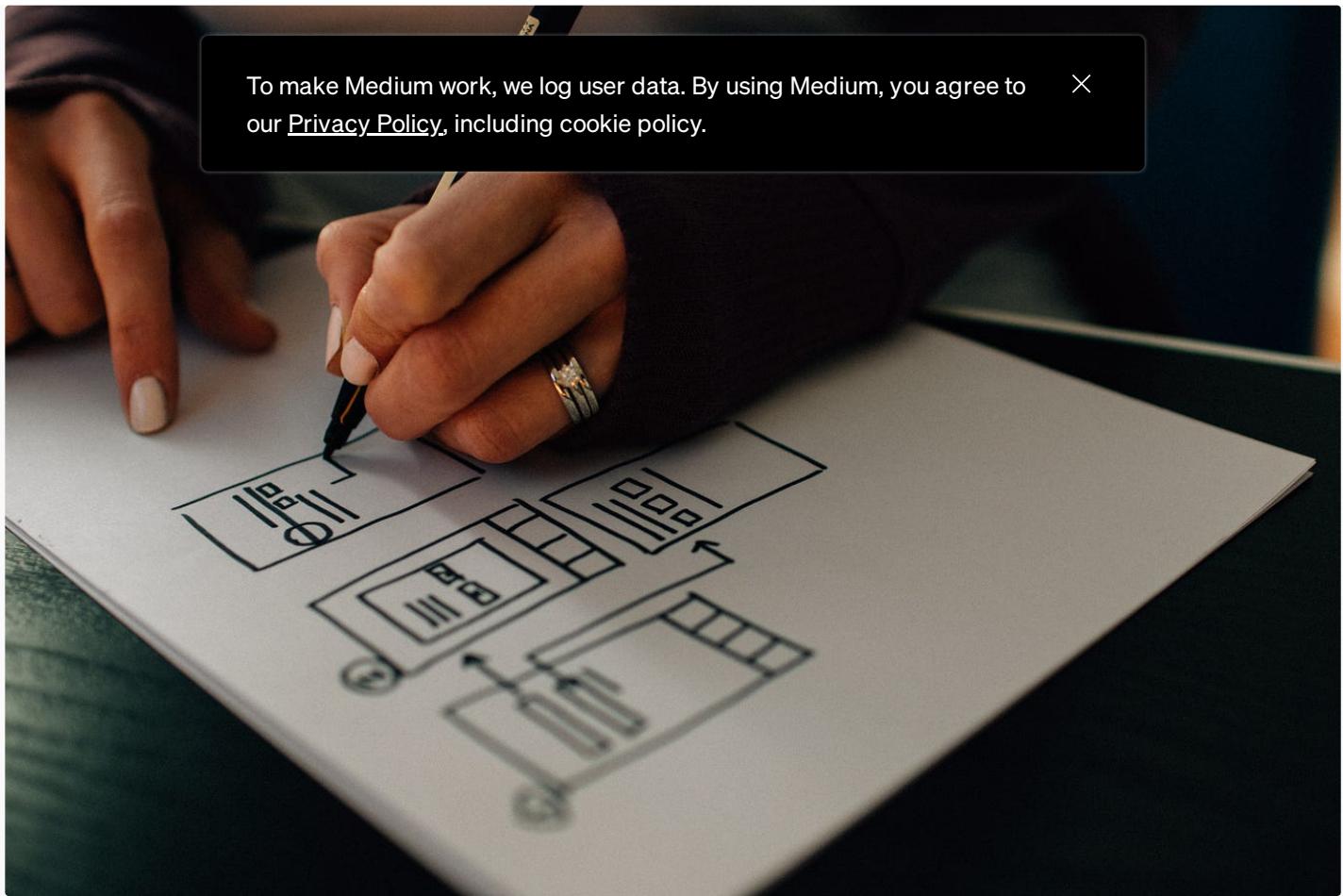
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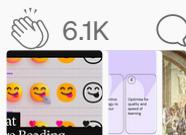


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Vehicle Summary

Make	Ferrari
Model	360
Mileage	24,200
VIN	ZFFYU51A340136383
Title Status	Clean
Engine	3.6L V8
Drivetrain	Rear-wheel drive
Transmission	Manual 6-speed
Body Style	Coupe



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Body Style	Exterior Color
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{  
  "name": "JSON is slow!",  
  "blog": true,  
  "writtenAt": 1695884403,  
  "topics": [ "JSON", "Javascript" ]  
}
```



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