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A Study on the Visual and Verbal Languages of Typography

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A STUDY ON THE VISUAL AND VERBAL LANGUAGES OF TYPOGRAPHY

by

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(Under the Direction of Jason Murdock)

ABSTRACT

It takes a person 0.05 seconds to form a first impression of something new. While first impressions are quick and surface level, they are generally important in the lasting impression developed by the individual. I believe graphic designers have the ability to manipulate the first impression of their work by using the different languages of typography to command the attention of an audience and direct a planned impression. Through the testing and research of this thesis study, I aim to provide examples of how people share common responses and interpretations of visual elements and show that the visual and verbal languages of typography can affect the first impressions of a particular design.

INDEX WORDS: Graphic design, Typography, Visual, Verbal, Communication, Designer

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Typography has multiple functions in visual communication. In the book *Firesigns: A Semiotic Theory for Graphic Design*, author Steven Skaggs (2017) speaks to how typography along with other elements of design are conceptual tools for analyzing works of graphic design. David Lidov (2017) simplifies Skaggs ideas in his review published in *Design Thinking, Design Theory*. (pg. 1-2) Lidov summarizes part one of Skaggs book by determining that there are two key components of semiotics: The "visual entity," which Skaggs coins the "Visent" which is the first visible/visual part of a design and then the "display," which is the second part where a viewer gives more attention and interprets the design. I then moved forward by simplifying this idea of typography itself having two languages, a verbal and a visual. The verbal language of typography is the defining quality of the words themselves. If you see a sign in a store window which reads "SALE," the verbal language is the fact that the word sale itself, being on the sign, means that things are for sale or on sale in that particular store. The definitions of the words themselves or the spoken word become the verbal language of typography. The visual language is the aesthetic qualities and mannerisms of the type face/s, by which the verbal language is presented. Imagine that same sale sign displayed in Arial Rounded Bold. The rounded terminals of that particular font convey a specific feeling and generate a different response than it would if it was displayed in a font with different formal qualities. These languages and how they work together help designers discover ways to successfully communicate desired/intended information.

First impressions are so important in the lasting impact and overall judgment of a person, idea, or design. Graphic designers have to be well-informed and take many factors into consideration when creating something that is visually appealing while also communicating the correct message to the intended audience. What lies at face value and usually attracts the viewers' attention may be a color palette, exciting images or something familiar/recognizable. Take all that away, however, and what is left is usually a body of text with a specific message that is intended to accomplish a goal or get others involved in some way. I am interested in what lies underneath the surface.. This involves stripping back the visual and aesthetic qualities of a design and studying the psychology behind the mannerisms of different fonts/typefaces to see how a design can become more successful by choosing fonts that people associate with different emotions and feelings. This study helps me understand how the less obvious, beginning design decisions can impact viewers. Understanding this impact and being able to design accordingly will create first impressions with longer lasting success in desired communication. My goal with the testing is to determine how users/viewers respond to various typefaces and show how simple decisions made by designers during the design process, can influence the overall first and lasting impression of a communicated message.

Surveying and Data Visualization

While researching and studying typographic forms and their use throughout design work, I discovered how strong the impact of the form truly is. I decided that I wanted to put this concept to the test. I planned four different surveys which were used to collect results on how people interpreted the typographic forms and different languages of typography presented within them. The first round of surveys were paper forms and each of the remaining surveys were distributed digitally and all responses collected were anonymous. With the responses from the surveys I could look at the trends and common conceptions about different fonts and typefaces and compare the public response to that of my learned designer knowledge.

The findings from the surveys are then processed and communicated in a visual way, that is easy to understand and compare the responses. Data visualization is defined as the communication of data in a visual manner. Designers create data visualizations by turning numbers and raw data into forms that can be easily interpreted by viewers. Data visualization is a huge subpart of design and something that I have taken interest in during my work. The data visualizations I am creating help to display the numbers and raw data from my surveys, to communicate that information in a way that is easy to grasp.

Developing and designing the surveys had to be done in a way that would generate meaningful and clear results. Decorative fonts or those with existing associations were avoided

and fonts were chosen from the traditional typographic classifications. Different forms of script, serif, and san serif fonts were chosen for use within each survey.

CHAPTER 2

Survey 1: Basic Human Emotion

The first survey, which I titled "Basic Human Emotion," was given to a total of 56 participants. This was the only survey done by paper forms. All forms were collected and recorded anonymously, and then safely stored. Participants were asked which of the six fonts presented to them best communicated a specific emotional quality. The five emotions given in this survey, are basic human emotions which individuals can relate to. The emotional qualities perceived in each font, play a large role in understanding the first impression and impact on the user. The six different fonts displayed in the survey are all from different typographic classifications. They all have specific qualities about them, without being overly distracting to the viewer. The fonts used were as follows: Acme Regular (San Serif), Alice Regular (Transitional Serif), Headline Text Regular (Blackletter Script), Overpass Regular (Grotesque San Serif), Petit Formal Script Regular (Formal Script), and Geometry Soft Pro Bold N (Geometric San Serif). A mix of the different typefaces were used to create contrast and differentiation within the surveys. Each question was set up so that the participant was given four options and asked to choose which of the choices best communicated a specific emotion. The emotions used were happiness, Anger, Excitement, Satisfaction, and Confusion.

After creating the survey, I then wrote hypothesis statements for what I believed would be the average response from the group taking the survey. After all the responses were collected I

compared them to the original hypothesis statement. My hypotheses served as the designer opinion and the survey results served as the test group. The comparison of the two will help in understanding how the verbal articulation of written language is powerful in contrast to the visual language presented. I continued this process for every survey in this study.

Survey 1 Data Visualization

After collecting the data sets and responses from the participants I had the information necessary to create the first data visualizations. I discovered that presenting this information proved to be challenging because I wanted the focus on the typography but the emphasis kept going primarily to the emotions. While the emotional aspect is important, I wanted the main emphasis on the typography and the qualities which made people assign it that certain emotion. Several different iterations of data visualizations were developed for this first data set. I went through different processes on trying to find a way to present the information without designing something typical or overdone. I started by simply putting the numbers and raw data in a spreadsheet and deciding the best way to display those. I knew that I wanted the emphasis to be on the typography so I ultimately decided to design boards with the name of each font along with its typographic classification, and an example of each letter of the alphabet displayed in that specific type face. This decision put a strong emphasis on the typographic aspects of the surveys

and of my work and this became a decision that I continued to apply while designing the remaining data visualizations for the exhibition.

Early on, I gravitated towards the use of circles instead of more geometric shapes. Circles gave my designs a very organic and smooth feel, and drew the viewers eye back into each piece. There aren't any harsh lines protruding into the line of sight and everything draws back into the center of the circles which is where the information is displayed. The first data visualization I designed consisted of a central circle with the name and classification of each type face used in the survey. Then I placed 6 (number of emotions) rings of 56 (number of participants) circles radiating outwards from the central circle. Each emotion was assigned a color that is commonly associated with it and then the number of participants out of 56, were filled in with that color in those radiating circles. The remaining circles were displayed in gray to show absence. I soon discovered that while these arrangements were pleasing to the eye, they just did not communicate the information in a way that was easy to understand.

Figure 1 Survey 1 Data Visualization

After the first piece, I tried several iterations of more traditional data visualization methods like radial bar charts, circle plots, and several others. I made the decision to display the emotions to one side in a central circle and the fonts to the opposite and then connect them in the middle,

similar to an elementary matching game. The circles containing the emotions were displayed in the assigned color. I did this with several iterations including line variation, emphasis variation on type or emotion, displaying with or without the alphabet, and opacity levels. In the end I felt that I discovered a way to present this data set in the way where the emphasis was more on the typographic elements but the emotions were still prevalent and the overall presentation drew viewers into the design. On a larger scale and on exhibit in the gallery space I believe this to be successful because the design becomes dimensional. It is not a flat, printed image but a designed piece which has many parts and elements to make it more interactive and appealing in the space.

Survey 2: Appropriateness

The second round of surveys, titled "Appropriateness," were given to forty participants and distributed digitally using Google Forms. The remaining surveys were all distributed this way. All forms were collected and recorded anonymously, and then safely stored. Five different words were each displayed in four various typefaces. Each set had a neutral type face (Times New Roman) and then three others which all varied in appearance. The words (Character, Evening, Terrific, Random, Beautiful) were chosen because they don't communicate or symbolize anything too specific or straightforward. Each participant could have a very different idea of what each of these words represent or look like in a visual form. Participants were asked to pick which of the four type faces best communicated the idea of the word itself.

Survey 2 Data Visualization

Figure 2 Survey 2 Data Visualization

For the results in this collected data set, I knew that I wanted to be able to show the interpretation and response to all four fonts in each question, collectively. Doing this would help viewers understand the relationship between the control (Times New Roman) and the other fonts.

I discovered radial column charts and radar charts while researching and used a similar method as inspiration. I combined the function of those charts to match my previous aesthetic from survey one, as well as contain the information needed from survey two. Each word was put in the central circle and the number of participants who chose each font radiated from the center with circles which increased in size in relation to the data. The scale used in the charts increased by increments of five, so that the numbers could be easily calculated but then the total number of people who chose the specific option was displayed in the final circle of the radiating line. This design made it easy to see the difference between the choices at one time.

Survey 3: Communication

Survey three, titled “Communication,” presents participants with the word “Typography” typed in sixteen different fonts. These fonts have been selected from the different typographic classifications so that there is a balanced answer pool. Participants are then given four different emotions or feelings (Amusement, Romance, Fear, Anxiousness) and then they are asked to pick which font BEST communicates that feeling and which LEAST communicates that feeling. They are then asked to explain their answers. This test helps to understand what emotional qualities each type classification is communicating as well as trends among those same classifications.

Survey 3 Data Visualization

I wanted the data visualizations for this data set to be simple since there was a larger number of fonts involved. I didn’t want the viewer to feel overwhelmed with the information and I wanted it to be easy to understand while seeing the differences within each font. I chose to display the typography boards horizontally in a single straight line. I

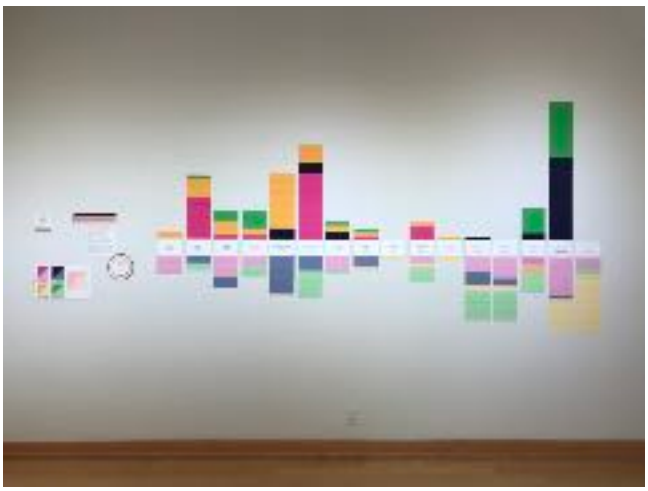

Figure 3 Survey 3 Data Visualization:1

assigned each emotion with a specific color. I chose colors which are generally associated with the corresponding emotion or feeling. Amusement was given a yellow/orange color. Romance was given a pink. Fear was given a deep blue and Anxiousness was given a green/yellow color. Since this survey asks which of the fonts are most and least like the emotions, I wanted to use a vertical scale to show the difference in opinion and results. I designed rectangular bars that went up and down based on the number of people who chose that font for that emotion. The bars above the typography boards represent the responses voting for "most" while the ones below represent the "least." This data visualization is successful because you can easily compare the results and see the data collectively.

Figure 4 Survey 3 Data Visualization: 2

Survey 4: Grandiloquent Words

The fourth survey is titled "Grandiloquent Words." Grandiloquent is defined as pompous or extravagant in language, style, or manner, especially in a way that is intended to impress. Grandiloquent words are large, impressive-looking words that have very simplistic meanings and are often even labeled unnecessary. In the fourth survey, the fonts which had the most votes for

“most or least” of each specific emotion or feeling, go head-to-head in another round of surveying. I created two separate forms that ask the same questions but use the opposing fonts. For example, Form A would use the font voted most fearful while Form B used the font voted least fearful. These two surveys consist of short statements containing the grandiloquent words which may be unfamiliar to participants. The statements are short but still give the word context. The questions in each survey ask participants to decide whether they think the given word/phrase is positive or negative in connotation. They are asked to explain their answers. Participants are asked to consider font style and composition while answering.

Survey 4 Data Visualization

Like survey three, when designing the data visualization for this data set, I did not want the viewer to be overwhelmed with information. I want viewers to easily understand whether the majority of participants in the survey voted the font positive or negative. I designed rectangular boards that had a head-to-head design in the center. It is two silhouette heads facing away from one another with two conversation call-outs, one larger, one smaller. This spawned from the idea of the fonts from the previous survey being tested against one another in a second round of surveying. Each side of the board has one of the two opposing fonts and then the numbers from the data set are displayed within the conversation call-outs. The majority vote is displayed in the larger call-out and the minority in the smaller. I used red and green for this design because of the

association with good and bad. The green indicates the positive while the red indicates the negative.

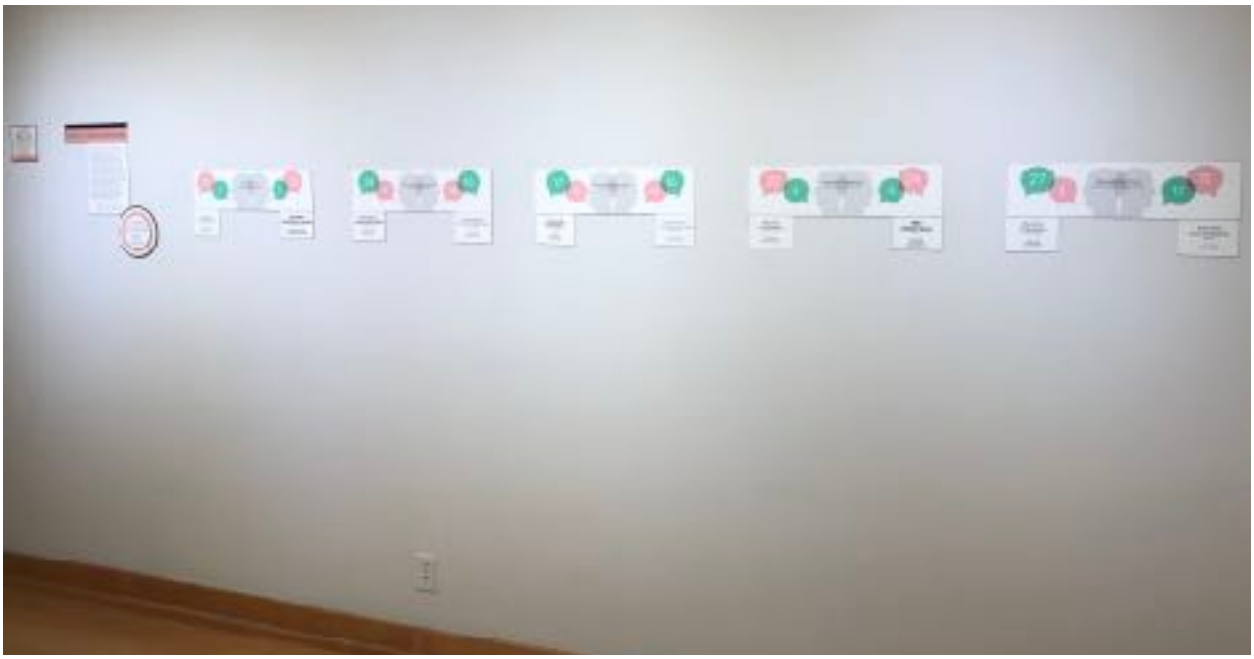

Figure 5 Survey 4 Data Visualization

CHAPTER 3

Survey 5: Interaction

In my exhibition space I developed and designed a fifth interactive survey where I collected data and continued my process. While designing the survey I wanted to narrow my scope and pick a subject that had more context and more predetermined association. The fifth survey is a poster design for a fictional gym or fitness center. Individuals have very preconceived ideas on how gym marketing and advertisements should look. There are many examples of different types of gyms and fitness centers and there are many different target audiences.

My goal with this survey is to create a very general poster but have the headline presented in different fonts. The fonts in the survey are ones which are common within the specific industry as well as others, which are either rarely seen or have a specific niche. After researching different gyms and fitness centers and looking into the typography that is commonly used, I was able to pick a variety of fonts to use for the final survey. In the space, viewers see an oversized poster in front of them. The headline of the poster reads "Keep Your Body Fit & Strong." The headline of the poster is displayed on a monitor where it can

Figure 6 Survey 5

easily change fonts when prompted by each individual. Participants have the ability to generate a randomly selected font from the list I have created. After the headline is displayed they answer a series of questions which pertaining to their preconceived ideas about gym/fitness typographic styles and the ones displayed in the survey. The design of the poster is black and white so that the emphasis lies solely on the typographic forms. Since the poster is oversized, I do not want the participant to be overwhelmed or focus on pieces which are less important and relevant to my study.

The data collected from the fifth survey within the gallery space is more qualitative than quantitative in nature. The questions asked are more personal and more in depth than simply asking the participant to select a single answer from a pool, with no given explanation. Overall 30 participants responded to the survey and all results are anonymous.

CHAPTER 4

Exhibition Space and Design Aesthetic

The overall connecting aesthetic for all of my data visualizations came as I planned for the physical gallery space. The walls of the gallery the work will be presented in are white and the trim of the room is a light tan. In *The Application of Aesthetic Psychology in the Colour Matching of Art Design, author Shenghe Cheng* (2020) states that,

"Colour is a powerful artistic expression tool and one of the important artistic languages for emotional expression"

She speaks on how color matching within a designed space can make people feel comfort and ease them into looking at the presented information, as well as influence their first impressions on a space. (pg. 622–627) This relates to the overall idea of design impacting that first impression and this influenced my choices for the exhibition aesthetic. The colors chosen were picked to compliment the environment of the gallery. When you first enter the gallery space you faced with panels containing the title of the thesis work as well as a quote from the American graphic designer Herb Lubalin. The quote reads, "Let's talk type, Let type talk." The quote embodies my ideas shown throughout the study and speaks on the idea of letting the typographic forms have their own voice. The introduction of the show talks about the psychological elements within my work and research. There is a brain graphic displayed in the entrance to the show,

which explains how information is processed. It touches on three important lobes of the brain and how they process incoming information. This is seen in the very beginning and then as you look through the data visualization pieces, each individual piece is connected back to one of those lobes. The science behind the way the brain works has been important to me throughout the entire process and study so I decided to make that an introduction piece and segway into the actual data visualization pieces. I chose to do a pastel scheme throughout the space which started with the pink colored brain. I contrasted that with stark black letters on the white walls. I decided to keep the color scheme throughout, repeating the pink elements within each data visualization piece. The different surveys are assigned other colors correlating with their emotional aspects but have all been kept in the same tints.

Figure 7 Exhibition Space 1

Figure 8 Exhibition Space 2

Figure 9 Exhibition Space 3

CONCLUSION

The data visualizations I have designed, command the audiences attention while successfully communicating the raw data collected from each of the surveys. The space was designed in a way to be read from start to finish and I feel that the gallery visitors respected that concept and reacted appropriately. The data visualizations do give insight onto how participants of the surveys respond to the different fonts displayed. Through these visuals you can see trends between the different fonts, emotional qualities within each different typographic classification, and even how specific fonts can be interpreted entirely different ways by one person to the next. This study can help designers understand how different typographic elements effect the overall interpretation of a design and how these early decisions and steps taken during the design process can affect the lasting impression of the design.

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