
Fascinating fonts; Is the power of typography a marketing myth?

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This article examines the literature about typography and the connotative power of fonts, concluding that the existing scholarly research is so brief and sketchy as to provide little support for many of the popular myths and widespread arguments about the importance of font to corporate branding. There are passionate proponents of font branding, and there are even legal arguments in support of font connotation. Yet, while many if not most of these arguments may ultimately prove supportable, this article concludes that to date, the empirical research is scant. Much more investigation is needed to ensure that organisations investing in typography are doing so for valid reasons.

Introduction

In some marketing texts, font is an overlooked or briefly mentioned element of branding design. In others, such as *Branding With Type* by Rogener, Pool, and Packhauser (1995), a fervent argument is made for unique but consistent typefaces as a crucial element of corporate branding. Rogener et al. describe the fonts used by IBM, Mercedes, Nivea, and Marlboro as instantly recognisable internationally, and imply that the significant investment by such companies in design and copyright of trademarked fonts is worthwhile. For example, Rogener et al. discuss the Nivea Bold typeface developed in 1992 by Gunther Heinrich at advertising agency TBWA in Hamburg, Germany, for skincare brand Nivea, and claim that the Nivea Bold typeface has effectively embodied the Nivea brand's 'pure and simple' product philosophy. They link the font directly to profitability and Nivea's worldwide product category market share of 35% (Rogener, Pool & Packhauser, 1995, p. 91).

Other companies have also seen investment in font design as worthwhile. For example, design and marketing ezine *Inc.com* reports that American shoe company White Mountain Footwear paid BrandEquity International almost \$100,000 to re-design its 21-year-old typeface, with a resultant 20% increase in sales in the first and second years following the redesign. BrandEquity designer David Froment was quoted as saying the redesign's impact was "nothing short of miraculous" (Raz, 2002). Froment's fervour is typical of the passion that Philip Meggs, co-editor of *Texts on Type: Critical Writings on Typography* (Heller & Meggs, 2001) identifies when he writes that "the wellspring for typography's enduring vitality is human passion. A passion exists for letter forms, dynamic arrangements, history, and technique" (p. 1).

The widespread perception of the connotative power of fonts has also been sufficient to establish a legal argument. In January, 2003, the European Court of Justice granted brands the power to invoke 'unfair advantage' and 'detriment' against other brands using similar fonts and typefaces in similar product categories. The ruling occurred when luxury goods brand Davidoff sued the Hong Kong-based company Gofkid, whose brand Durffee used typeface identical to Davidoff's distinctive cursive-based logo ("Stronger Protection", 2003). The case against the Durffee logo succeeded on the grounds it used the letters 'D' and 'ff' in exactly the same font and positioning as Davidoff, thereby taking advantage of the high prestige appeal associated with the Davidoff brand (Angelini, 2003). The ruling gave typography in brand logos a concrete, tangible value, defensible at law, and thereby implied that typography is a vital and quantifiable component of a brand's equity.

But is there scholarly research to justify the enthusiasm in marketing publications,

particularly by designers with a vested interest, about the thousands of dollars paid by companies such as Nivea or Davidoff to develop and defend exclusive corporate typefaces? Literature searching conducted for this article suggests that academic research in the area is scarce, and that much more careful and thorough research is needed to establish validity for the depth and breadth of some claims about typeface influence.

What is typography?

Broadly, typography is “the art or skill of designing communication by means of the printed word” (Childers & Jass, 2002). Solomon defines it as “the art of mechanically producing letters, numbers, symbols, and shapes through an understanding of the basic elements, principles, and attributes of design” (1986), and Lupton describes it as “the design of letterforms [fonts] and their organization in space” (1996).

The premise of typography is that different typefaces or fonts carry different connotations and can have differing influences on the readability, assimilation, interpretation, and impact of the words and concepts they represent. Speikermann and Ginger (2003) argue that “the choice of a typeface can manipulate the meaning of that word” (p. 103).

The “basic element of typography” (Dair, 1967, p.15) is the individual letter or character, but this in turn has several components. The baseline is the foundation of a letter and the primary point of reference between different letters. The vertical space occupied by all lowercase letters is referred to as the x-height (so called because all four ends of the letter X touch a point of measurement). An ascender is that portion of a lowercase letter that protrudes above the x-height, while a descender is that portion of a lowercase letter that protrudes below the baseline (Solomon, 1986, p. 89). The enclosed spaces such as those found in the letters e, a, g, and p, are referred to as counters. Finally, the main body of a character is referred to as its stem (Shriver, 1997, p. 252).

Typefaces themselves have four major qualities, commonly referred to as the ‘elements’ of type. These are line, weight,

orientation and size. As its name suggests, line is the basic element of type that gives each character its form and style. The weight of a typeface refers to its thickness in relation to the volume of white area its letters displace with ink. Typefaces can vary from light, to medium, to bold. Orientation refers to the vertical position of the typeface which, for example, can be either upwards or slanting. The final element of type is style, which is influenced by a character’s x-height, ascenders, and descenders. Childers and Jass (2002) argue that every typeface in existence today is created through the use of a distinctive mix of these four elements.

Two final properties having an important effect on typography are leading (rhymes with wedding) and line length. Leading refers to the amount of vertical space between lines of type. It is the principle on which the concepts of single and double spacing are based. Excessively tight leading makes text appear unduly dense and hampers effective reading. Line length on the other hand, refers to the distance between the right and left margins in the text. Line length is usually measured in column width (Shriver, 1997, p.260).

There are thousands of typefaces in existence today. Solomon listed 270 common fonts in his ‘Directory of Typefaces’ in 1986 (p.181), and many more have been developed since.

There are some broad categories into which most typefaces are classified. Solomon classifies according to categories of Roman (e.g. Garamond, Baskerville, Times New Roman), Script (e.g. Mistral, Brush, Corsiva), Gothic (e.g. Gothic, Franklin), Ornamental (scripts designed for decoration rather than readability such as Jokerman), and Period (e.g. Bauhaus, Broadway) (Solomon, 1986). Morrison classifies using Old Style (e.g. Garamond, Times New Roman, Perpetua), Transitionals (Fournier, Bulmer, Baskerville, etc.), Moderns (Bodoni, Caledonia, Cooper, etc.), Square-Serifs (Bookman, Memphis, Rockwell, etc.), Sans-Serifs (Gill Sans, Futura, Helvetica, etc.), and Shaded Sans-Serifs (Optima, Ad Lib, Brittanica, etc.) (Morrison, 1986). The most basic form of typeface classification is however, simply into serifs and sans-serifs. A serif font is one in

which lines or curves adorn the ends of each letter, such as Garamond. A sans-serif font, however, as the name suggests, is one which is sans such adornment at the end of each letter, e.g. Arial.

The power of font

It has become commonplace in the design and communication industries to suggest that different arrangements of these elements of type, and therefore different categories of type, have different connotations. For example, design texts and popular websites make such claims as “Old style fonts have a traditional, warm friendly feel to them ... Modern fonts have a very business-like and professional appearance” (Tariq, 2004, n.p.). Boser (2003) argues that a fraction of a millimetre can be the difference between an aesthetically appealing and unappealing letter. It has even been suggested that typefaces may have a gender connotation. Davies (2002) argues that traditionally square bold typefaces are masculine, while rounded and curlier typefaces are feminine.

Gender issues in typography are not a new development. As early as the late 19th century, American academics such as Theodore Low De Vinnie campaigned for the restoration of “vigor and virility” to text that had become “feminized by fussy, pale, modern typefaces” (Davies, 2002 pp.23–24). Typographer Rian Hughes argues that some fonts have distinct gender orientations and gives, as an overtly masculine example, Judgment, the font he designed for the popular (and ultra-violent) comic strip Judge Dredd (Davies, 2002).

Marshall McLuhan’s celebrated argument that “the medium is the message” (cited in Belch & Belch, 2004, p.188), implied that the medium through which a message is communicated carries a message independent from the content it conveys. In his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan applied this insight directly to font design, arguing that “(t)ypography is not only a technology but is in itself a natural resource or staple, like cotton or timber or radio; and, like any staple, it shapes not only private sense ratios but also patterns of communal interdependence” (McLuhan, 1962,

p. 166). This viewpoint is picked up in arguments about typography by writers such as Spiekermann and Ginger, who assert that “the choice of a typeface can manipulate the meaning of that word” (2003, p. 103).

While this seems to make perceptual sense (and the comparative font graphics that Spiekermann and Ginger provide on pages 101-103 lend intuitive ‘support’ to their argument), little actual research has been conducted to test or quantify the connotations or effects of typography. This article briefly overviews existing research, before suggesting ways in which future research might isolate and test the power of typography by examining its elements in isolation.

Evidence for typographical impact

Sir Cyril Burt was one of the first typographers to explore typography’s effects on reading speed and comprehension. Hartley and Rooum (1983) report that, in 1911, the education section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) chose Burt to head a sub-committee probing different fonts’ effects in children’s school books. Burt found that line spacing had “little or no influence” on readability in all but the “youngest and poorest readers” but that serif fonts were “more legible than unserifed” (cited in Hartley & Rooum, 1983, p. 204).

According to Hartley and Rooum (1983), Burt’s findings have subsequently been challenged and are now considered questionable, due to the absence of verifiable research procedure records and the effects of Burt’s personal biases and opinions on the research findings.

Other key names in the history of typography are Frederic W. Goudy and Carl Dair. Goudy, in his book *Typologia* (1940), praised typography’s capacity to impart “personality, power and direction” to messages (cited in Gottschall, 1989, p.78), but his assertions were also not based in repeatable scientific method. Dair was a Canadian typographer who, in 1957, was chosen to develop the first ‘truly Canadian’ font, CG Cartier. Between 1964 and 1968, he published a series of pamphlets for West

Virginia Pulp & Paper entitled 'A Typographic Quest', in which he first outlined '7 Principles of Contrast'; size, weight, form, structure, texture, colour, and direction (Dair, 1967).

Finally, no review of typography would be complete without mention of the 'Elder Statesman' of type design, Matthew Carter. Carter, widely regarded as one of the foremost typographical designers of the 20th century, created several common typefaces, including those used by *Sports Illustrated*, *Business Week*, *The New York Times* and United States-based commercial telephone directory publisher Verizon for its directories. Carter argues that the best typography is inconspicuous, a concept originally proposed by Beatrice Warde, who likened good typography to fine crystal, stating that "everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than to hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain" (cited in Gutjahr & Benton, 2001, p. 109; c.f. Warde, 1955). Likewise Carter argued that good typography should "provide a seamless passage of the author's thoughts into the readers' minds with as much sympathy, style, and congeniality as possible" (cited in Boser, 2003).

Some research has been conducted regarding legibility in typography. Some of the more important studies in the field include those by Poulton in 1955 (the importance of the x height of a typeface to its legibility), Foster and Bruce in 1982 (italics reduce reading speed), Breland and Breland in 1944 (text in all capital letters reduces reading speed by up to 20%), Smith and McCombs in 1971 (blank space around paragraphs helps increase legibility), and Strong in 1926 (blank space in text attracts and holds readers' attention longer than text without such space). While this is not an exhaustive list of all research done in the field, Schriver suggested in 1997 that it presented a fair overview of some of the more important studies to that date.

Some subsequent research has focused on issues such as typeface legibility for readers with disabilities such as dyslexia. In such cases, minute details such as the flicks or swashes at the end of serif fonts may play a large role in hampering reading comprehension. Keeping this in mind, specific fonts have been developed especially for persons with reading disabilities,

effectively demonstrating type's role in textual comprehension. One such font is Read Regular, developed by Natscha Frensch, which is a sans-serif type designed to be "uncomplicated, deliberately dressed down, taking away all the unnecessary details" (Manuelli, 2003, p.17).

Gutjahr and Benton (2001) researched typography's role in literary texts. Citing a range of texts from *The King James Bible* and the works of Edgar Allen Poe to *Spiderman* comics, they argued that:

Type and typography are an intrinsic part of the text that a reader encounters when he or she reads a book.... Literary texts are no less 'marked' by their typography than more commercial or functional texts. Once given visual form, any text is implicitly coded by that form in ways that signal, however subtly, its nature and purpose and how its creators wish it to be approached and valued (pp. 3 & 6).

Several studies have explored links between typography, brand perceptions, and consumer memory. Studies by Bartram (1982), Rowe (1982), and Tantillo (1995) revealed that consumers possessed only a limited number of semantic associations with regard to typefaces, such as elegance, potency, and novelty. Further research by Walker, Smith and Livingstone (1986) revealed that typefaces possessed specific semantic qualities and that a particular typeface would be effective if it shared similar features to the product being advertised. For example a sturdy or heavy type such as Impact would be appropriate for advertising heavy machinery.

A more recent study of consumer effects by Childers and Jass (2002) had three primary aims; firstly, to examine the semantic nature of typography; secondly, to test the extent to which typography in advertisements influenced consumer perceptions of brands; and finally, to understand the effect of typography on consumer beliefs of advertised brand claims. The study found that typography did influence consumer perceptions and consumer memory regarding brands, and that semantic associations

were formed in three key ways; consistent use of a specific font in a particular situation, direct relations with the perceptual qualities of the type, and abstract connotations. The authors illustrated this with reference to the Johnson & Johnson brand logo which they argued may convey several layers of meaning through the three paths. Due to its consistent use on products such as baby oil and baby shampoo, it may convey 'gentleness'; due to the delicate style of typeface (curved lines and light weighting), it may convey 'delicacy' or 'thinness'. Again, due to the distinctive elaborate typeface in which the logo appears, it may connote an abstract association with 'elegance'. Childers and Jass concluded that typography was a potent force on consumer brand perception.

Despite the paucity of empirical research further exploring or substantiating these links, other publications have likewise argued for such connections. For example, Unnava, Burnkrant, and Erevelles (1994) argue that the 'old style' typeface used in the brand logo of American fast food chain, Wendy's, leads consumers to assume that Wendy's burgers are 'old fashioned' and therefore more wholesome. Rogener, et al. argue in *Branding With Type* that Augustea Nova was an appropriate font choice for a De Beers diamond advertisement because "its serifs, apostrophes and i dots have sharp, brilliant contours; every letter polished like a real diamond" (1995, p. 96).

Rogener et al. (1995) are particularly fervent on the topic of similar typography used for brand logos and advertising by different brands in the same product category, for example; generic brands mimicking fonts identified with category leaders. They argue that Apple Computer was the first computer brand to use the ITC Garamond typeface, but that more than 50 other technology brands such as Intel, Compaq, Panasonic, and NEC now use the same, or related, fonts. Rogener et al. argue that the imitators are inadvertently strengthening Apple's brand image through the use of identical type, and recommend a highly differentiated typeface that is used consistently over a long period (usually several years) for creating strong visual brand identity. They do

not provide experimental evidence to back this claim, however.

Conclusion

Although there have been some studies, at its most basic level typography appears to remain something of an enigma, surrounded by passionate proponents and convincing mythologies that seem to make intuitive 'sense', but lacking substantial scientific assessment. German designer Kurt Weidemann, creator of the Trilogie Corporate typeface for Mercedes Benz, argues that typography cannot be quantified. His is perhaps typical of designers' viewpoints when he describes typography as an undefinable artform "like cooking or lovemaking" (cited in Rogener et al. 1995, p.20). Organisations investing hundreds of thousands of dollars, however, may wish for more substantial evidence than the creative instinct of a graphic artist as to what may or may not work in the marketplace.

Future research is therefore recommended that takes the independent elements of type design (for example Dair's seven principles of contrast could be combined with characteristics described by other cataloguers of type) and, using computer manipulation, varies each element separately while testing responses using a range of data collection methods including surveys, experiments, and focus groups. The results of such research, by either confirming or disproving some of the mythology surrounding fonts, could enable typography to take a further step from the hit and miss realm of art to the more dependable realm of science. It is certainly clear that fonts are an under-theorised aspect of communication, and much more research in this area is recommended.

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