

Design Research Seminar

METHODOLOGY OF SELECTING FONTS

A basic study on *'How Designers select fonts'*

Project Guide

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Abstract

After spoken language, writing has been the most ancient and yet popular form of communication. With ever evolving social and cultural practices, writing or 'Typography' as we call it today, has become an important and mandatory element of communication.

Every communication involves the complexities of the purpose of communication, the content, the medium of communication and the audience addressed and these complexities are in-turn translated to the typeface. The effectiveness of the content in any communication is influenced by the choice of typeface.

"Typography exists to honor content"

- Robert Bringhurst, "The Elements of Typographic Style"

Introduction

Over the last decade, significance and awareness for typeface and typography has evolved as an expertise and has become a part of the mainstream culture. But why have Designers started caring so much about typography and fonts? Communication Design, especially Visual Communication has been an integral part of human race since the age of primitive man. Today it has become an inseparable part in our social and individual lives. Design gives us the visual instantiation to the communication. For any communication to stand out, it needs to own a unique personality that would identify with its purpose, its content, its medium and its audience. Hence Designers give equal importance to typography like the use of color, images or abstract graphics.

This study aims to observe the various methods that Designers adopt while selecting a font. Under the guidance of Dr. G. V. Sreekumar, this study is drawn by addressing the following questions:

Q) What is the importance of Typography in Communication Design?

Q) What are the key aspects that a Designer studies while selecting the fonts?

Q) How do Designers map the several fonts in their mental imagery?

Q) Do Designers categorize fonts? If yes, what aspects do they consider?

Q) What challenges do Designers face while selecting regional language fonts?

Q) What is the significance of font size and font color in Communication Design?

Methodology

To draw a thorough study on the methodology of selecting fonts, few renowned Designers with different approach on the subject were interviewed. To begin the research, a basic understanding on typography was collated from the following books as recommended by Dr. Sreekumar:

While You're Reading - Gerard Unger

[ISBN-13: 978-0976224518]

[ISBN-10: 0976224518]

Stop Stealing the Sheep - Erik Spikerman

[ISBN-10: 0201703394]

[ISBN-13: 978-0201703399]

With this and more research material from the Internet, a questionnaire (mentioned earlier) was designed for the interview.

Participants

Dr. G. V. Sreekumar

Dr. Sreekumar is an inter-disciplinary faculty of Design at the Industrial Design Centre (IDC), IIT Bombay. He teaches subjects in the area of Typography, Visual Design, Publication Design, Magazine Design, and Information Graphics. He is also the guide on this project.

Dr. Girish Dalvi, Phd

Girish Dalvi is an inter-disciplinary faculty of Design at the Industrial Design Centre (IDC), IIT Bombay. He teaches subjects in the area of Visual Design, Interaction Design and Design research.

Prof. Anirudha Joshi

Anirudha Joshi is a teacher of Interaction Design at the Industrial Design Centre (IDC), IIT Bombay.

Mr. Arko Provo Mukherjee

Arko Mukherjee is the Co-Founder and CCO at RedMelon Design, founded in 2008 in Mumbai. Mr. Shyam Krishnan is the Founder and Design Director at Backwater Design pvt. Ltd., founded in 2005 in Mumbai.

Others Several formal and informal conversations with design experts, friends and acquaintances.

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Q) What is the importance of Typography in Communication Design?

Dr. Girish Dalvi takes a neutral stand when he confirms that Typography is both important and sometimes not very important in Communication Design. He says, typography, and several other media like photography, graphic design, etc. are all vehicles that carry the message to the audience. One school of thought says that if the message is strong enough, then as a Designer you can override the vehicle that carries it. While another school of thought gives the vehicle an equal weightage along with the message.

He explains; “the reason why the vehicle becomes important is because human language and communication is fairly complex in itself. Communicating complex things becomes important and possible only when the vehicle bears the burden of the message and makes it simple for the varied audience to perceive. In other words, it becomes importance to give importance to the vehicle by which the message is communicated.”

Prof. Dalvi further adds; “The act of communication, the dimension of the message, the thoughts or the configuration of the sender or the transmission of the medium, and the variety of the audience, all of these add to the complexity of the communication, therefore the vehicle of communication becomes important.

The vehicle can be anything like a signage or an icon or even text, which is one of the most popular means of communication, which becomes more intricate and as complex as the message and communication itself, if not any less.”

On the contrary, Prof. Anirudha Joshi simplifies the objective of Communication Design and states that primary function of Typography is to bring clarity to the communication. He sums up the importance of typography by adding, “whatever the content be, typography aids in communication. It must look clean and must be clearly understood by its audience.”

Arko Mukherjee adds a very interesting dimension to Communication Design when he says; “Selecting a font and Typography are two very different things for me. The Visuals and Typography must go hand in hand in a communication and once these are finalized, I begin to think which font would I would like to use.” He gives an example of a signage at the airport that reads ‘washroom to the right’. He says that the basic message is very clear so the visual design becomes the first step.” He gives another example of signage designs that direct people to IDC. He says, “If I am designing a signage that reads, ‘For IDC, take left’, it cannot look like a print ad or anything else, you will have to give attention to matters like the font type width, etc. The purpose of the signage is to get me to IDC from main gate and it must do that without any hassle. It cannot expect people to drive well while reading the multiple signages, and while focusing on the traffic and the students crossing the roads. With a calligraphic font, it will take forever to read F and I and L alphabets in the signage. Ideally it must take the minimum time to read the signage in a clear and crisp way so one can navigate smartly. Picking the right visual, the right font, its typography play a very important role in Design communication and designing a signage like that comes with experience.”

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Q) What are the key aspects that a Designer studies while selecting the fonts?

Throwing light on Communication Design and within that, the selection of font process, Mr. Arko Mukherjee takes us through many insights and many examples, citing personal experiences, choices and anecdotes from the Design marketplace today. He starts by saying that there are no written rules while selecting a font, but having said that, every Designer has a unique method while selecting the fonts.

He personally likes to begin at a very nascent stage and usually has an idea if he would like to use 'serif font' or cursive font, also if it will be 'fixed width type' or 'slab serif' or any 'round' font. He adds, "When you say that you are thinking in the back of your head about what font you will be using, you will have definitely categorized the fonts. There will be some fonts, which you will definitely use, some of which are your all time favorite fonts. Yet for me, selecting a font is a very difficult process, since it involves you to communicate the right message, which is more important in the Design.

If I like font 'Universal' or 'Helvetica', I will not force them in every project. The character of the font I select will be governed by the message I want to convey and next follows the typographic design." "Consider a company called 'Ramharesh Ball Bearings'; the banner outside his shop will create enough impact to attract customers to his shop but using type, 'Arial', 'Universe' or 'Helvetica' won't make a difference.

The first process here will be to understand the business of Ramharesh and then the content on the shop banner. For the name of the shop, I would use a

clean 'san serif' font in all caps so that the message is clean and can be read from the distance. If there is an address to be noted, that can go in lower case. Then I will look into the background color and the font color to make the banner impactful. This is how I generally select my font."

Mr. Mukherjee adds interesting insights to the challenges in the Design world, he says, "There are only 1% of formally educated Designers in India. So they begin to look at the Design process differently than a person who has no formal education but has learnt on the job. Ultimately it is experience and good design that matters. Secondly, most of the fonts are chargeable and not every one is willing to spend money on Designs. So the purpose of having a huge bouquet of fonts is defeated and not cared for much.

Lastly, when a Designer is designing something, he adds his personal touch to it. Its like, I will wear what I will like to my marriage and I will convince everyone that my choice is the best. Similarly when I use a particular font in a Design, the one that I like, I will make sure I convince my client that it is the best font ever for the Design."

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Following these inputs, the next question I posed was **“How do different mediums affect the selection and use of fonts and what are the challenges that a Designer faces here?”**

Mr. Mukherjee explained with an example, “Take a look at the Indian Railway display boards. The screen size is fixed, but the text is always different at every moment and at every station. We know that the text is not heavy so I would select ‘sans serif’ font since it has a good amount of character spacing and fixed width characters that make the lettering easily visible from large distance. The lettering could also be condensed as it gives slightly ‘boxy edges’ to the characters, which work well with the supporting railway announcement.

These days, digital media and fonts are so optimized that they render the fonts on the go. Today, the rendering machines on your phones are far more advanced than what they were on your computer displays 5 years ago. But the challenge here is that most of the existing display screens at the railway stations still have the old technology and have not adopted the new-age LCD / LED screens.

So the new learnings on font and character cannot cater to the old technology, and hence there is a compromise in design and its media.” “But today, the scenario in India has changed a lot. With the advent of digital interactive media, the use of fonts and typography in Communication Design has increased many folds. The ‘GOOGLE’ fonts are also now very well designed, always innovative, adding a new experience every time to the user” says Mr. Mukherjee.

He explains how knowing more number of

fonts and learning more about the characteristics of each font makes the whole selection process a difficult task at hand. “If I know 5 fonts then I will select from only those 5, but when I know 500 fonts and their characteristics, I will have a huge library to choose from and most of the time it is a very difficult task to creatively satisfy the selection.

While considering a font family, one must look at the following characters: ‘H-h’, ‘O-o’, ‘N-n’ and ‘G-g’. If you want to design a ‘Ganapati’; and you want to play with the alphabet ‘G’, ‘Universe’ is a good font but ‘Bodoni’ is more like Ganapati. In the end, I believe, the best font is the one that conveys my contents of the Design clearly.”

On a similar note, extending from Mr. Mukherjee’s conclusion, Prof. Anirudha Joshi comments that fonts are not very important in Design Communication, as they must be clean and legible. Yet he brings forth a very interesting analogy on the process of selecting fonts, “It is like selecting the clothes that you wear. The processes cannot be easily defined, yet you have a sensibility towards your selection. Its like, why are you wearing this particular shirt today? Yet, it is your choice for the day and for the occasion. It is more about how you feel rather than the process of making that particular choice. So I would say, clothes and typefaces are same thing.”

In a different light, Mr. Shyam Krishnan adds, “There is no written rule for selecting a font, we Designers follow our sensibilities and instincts which we learn from either years of experience or by working with good professors and bosses. While selecting a font my instincts come first, I then throw light on the rules of Design and Typography, and work backwards.” He

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narrates a beautiful example in Design Communication, citing, “You may like many Design gurus who will ask you to limit your use to a maximum of 4-5 fonts in a Design. At the same time, you will work on brochures or assignments, in which you will use close to 12 fonts. Take the example of the Jack Daniels label, it uses more than 7-8 fonts in a mix-match style and you don’t even feel it is odd. You’ll learn that there are no rules in Design.”

“We are very much interested in letterpress, but in India it is mostly client driven so we stick to what the client wants from his Design. In fact in USA, ‘Letter Print’ is coming back as a trend into the market. It is the feeling of the font and the Design that makes the difference and letter-print gives a hand made feel compared to the digital fonts. In Baroda College, we had letter-press, but we didn’t use it much because it was a dying style” he adds.

When questioned how different was the font selection technique in older days, Mr. Krishnan says, “There were no 800 fonts back then, there were only 10 to 50 fonts like some 10 odd families, ‘Garamond’, ‘Goudy old school’, ‘Italics’, etc. Selection was limited and easier. You and your client were more in agreement on the Design.”

Deviating from here, he adds, “When you follow the brand story and the purpose of the Design, you can find the font easily. You will actually need only one or two different fonts to communicate the Design. But back then, the clients would sometimes complain and say, ‘they all look the same, do something different’, and hence we started changing a few characters in the these fonts and today we have a pool of more than 500 fonts to select from.”

Giving a new dimension to the process of

Design and selecting fonts, Dr. Girish Dalvi, shares his inputs of several years of Industry and teaching experience, and puts ‘the method of selecting the fonts’ into two broad situations; one when the Designer has a lot of time to play with, and the other when he/she has no time at hand. For the later, he cites an example, “If today morning, you are given to design a poster which has to be submitted by the evening, you fall back on things which you already know are there, or are aware of. Typefaces that you keep on hand and use frequently for a variety of design jobs are called as ‘Workhorse Typefaces’.

The famous Italian designer Massimo Vignelli, in his book, ‘The Vignelli Canon’, says that you do not need so many typefaces.” Dr. Dalvi cites examples of typefaces ‘Myriad’ and ‘Frutiger’; which are visually very similar and it is almost impossible for a layman to distinguish between them. He adds that only a seasoned designer will be able to tell the difference from one another. Further on, he validates, “

The reason why we have so many similar looking yet different typefaces are because of copyright issues faced by designers. Vignelli says that in the new computer age, the proliferation of typefaces is causing a certain visual pollution and one must stick to a few basic typefaces like Garamond, Bodoni, Century Expanded, Futura, Times New Roman and Helvetica.”

Summing up the above situation, Dr. Dalvi says, “You must fall back to your basics when you are short of time. You must select and use fonts, which you are very comfortable with and which you really like, and you know they will fit well in your grid system in the Design; and this comes with practice.”

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Illustrating the second situation of selecting a font, i.e. when the Designer has more than required time to explore, Dr. Dalvi says, "You must study the purpose of the communication and the feel to the message. You must try and look at the aesthetics of the message and compare and match that up to the aesthetics of the font. You can also explore functions such as the color and the size of the font and the medium of the Design.

With all these facets to explore, Type becomes an important medium of expression. With lot of time at hand, a Designer will want to explore and try out varied fonts and typographic styles to the given content to find the right-connect before he completes the Design."

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Q) Do Designers categorize fonts? If yes, what aspects do they consider?

“I do not categorize fonts. Usually my projects are not about fonts and lettering, or not mainly about typography. However, It is important to focus on it. For example I am typing a proposal and if there are some typographical errors in the content, then I cannot think straight. If the things are not aligned correctly, or the spacing is not right, or there are any other typographical errors, then I will not be able to focus on the content and the proposal since everything will be very distracting. So I am not very concerned about categorizing or selecting any fonts. We must note that font should be reasonably readable, but for me, typography is beyond typefaces. What matters to me is what you do with the typeface...” concludes Prof. Anirudha Joshi.

On the contrary, Mr. Shyam Krishnan throws light on an interesting experience from past, explaining how categorizing fonts and selecting and using them is an important aspect of Communication Design. “Designers use similar fonts to create a theme and tell a story. If it clicks, great; if not, they chuck it and they use a different style, different set of fonts and families in their Design.

It’s the synergy of a few fonts clubbed together that brings out the feel to the whole Design. This is largely driven by the brand-story, because every brand has a story to tell. Take example of one of our clients, a NGO in Gujarat that works selflessly for the local people. They have spent close to 8 Crores of Rupees towards development, without any external donation; it is their family tradition to do so. Immediately we learn the kind of look and feel on Design we would want for

them.

Of course the fonts that will come to play. For a year maybe we use ‘Universe’ and the next year ‘Garamond’, but still we have maintained that look and feel. The clients might not get it, but they can tell that something is off and they say things like ‘its too flashy’. Then it is up to us to make the changes in the font families and maintain the essence of the Design. This year, we tried presenting some ‘Goth’ font, but they didn’t like the look and feel and wanted ‘Serif’. So the brand-story governs the Design and the family of fonts we use.”

Q) What challenges do Designers face while selecting regional language fonts?

“This is the best question of the lot,” says Mr. Arko Mukherjee. “Regional language is something that

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is looked down upon, in India. If you go and speak to someone in Marathi, or present a Design in any regional language, you will be looked at someone as who doesn't know English. But still a good amount of work has been done in this space today.

Dr. Mahendra Patel from NID and Mr. Nirmal Biswas from IDC have done an extensive exercise on Typography in their respective mother tongues." He adds, "I see the 'Vodafone' in Hindi language font. It looks like 'Proxima Condensed'. I see the Hindi script 'Va', 'Da', 'Fa', and 'Na'. In totality these fonts are being designed with different purpose but it draws a similarity from its English font." He explains that working and designing regional fonts is a difficult process for him because in regional language there is a lot of tendency to write in the cursive form. "When you write 'Ravi Rao' in Hindi script, every alphabet will be connected with each other, all the alphabets will join into a word. It is a very sensitive thing when in 'Ravi' the 'ee' is a 'bade ee ki matra' or a 'chote ee ki matra', which makes a lot of difference to the font designing and is hence difficult."

"Opposite IITB main gate, there is a steel shop where its name is written in Hindi script and below, the same name is written in English script in smaller size. You realize, most of these Hindi, Gujarati or regional language boards, even today, are hand drawn and painted.

What the painter tries to do is create the board in his own way; he must not have followed any catalogue or rulebook while designing. So the beauty of the font is not the process that the designer follows, character, font family or line width, but it lies in the unique typography and the design that he creates with his hand painting."

"Being a Bengali, I know that very little work has been done in Bengali fonts, mostly only in traditional art. Bengali or Hindi are very specific languages with 'matras' that play a major role, but with languages like Malyalam, I will have to write so many characters, that makes the whole Design experience challenging," narrates Mr. Mukherjee.

Contradicting this approach, Dr. Girish Dalvi has an interesting outlook towards regional fonts. He says, "I do not believe that regional languages have limited options. Yes, we do not have as many fonts as compared to Latin. So the part of the problem with regional typefaces is the lack of usable typefaces according to the technology that we have. If I want to use 'Devnagri' and I have 3-4 major vendors, like Modular fonts, Akruti, Sumit Infotech, etc. who have hundreds of typefaces, together there will not be scarcity in the number of the regional fonts but there will be a visual scarcity, i.e. most of the fonts will look very very similar and there will be a lack of visual exploration or diversity in regional typefaces."

Adding to the above note, Dr. Dalvi shared his experience and challenges that he faced when he had to Indianize a Latin font. He says,

"The only assignment in this space is when I had worked on the logo of the popularTV channel 'Life OK'. We were given the reference of the Latin typeface called 'Sain Ryde' and we had to write 'Life OK' in similar font in Devnagari script. It is very hard because regional languages have a very different orthography than Latin typeface. Even in terms of visual orthography, our Indian scripts have far more visual features. So in order to derive from Latin, we had to

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interpret a lot of things like the knot in the character 'D' in Devnagari; which does not exist in any Latin alphabet. For times, like the shape of Devnagari 'k' looks like Latin 'a', we could also interpolate the character 'Tha'. Sometimes we had some visual cues to work from, but for some letterforms there were no reference and it needed a complete arbitrary interpretation." Summing up his challenges on real life assignments on Indianized and Latinized fonts, Dr. Dalvi concludes, "For the font 'Mukta', we designed the Devnagari script first and then the Latin." Mr. Shyam Krishnan cites an example of his recent assignment with one of his clients, he says, "We just did a wedding invite for a Marwari family. It was as rural as it could get, as the wedding was in a village in Rajasthan. We were very very limited in our recourses and creativity. So we ended up using a very calligraphic font. But if there ever were an English counterpart, we would have never used calligraphy font." He adds an analogy from his experience in using regional fonts, "If we need to use Devnagari script for a signage, we try to remake 'Universe' font, as for signages there are a lot of resources. But for wedding card it is hard to find a variety of fonts. There will be close to 200 fonts only in Hindi script, but all of them seem the same."

Mr. Krishnan adds, "On certain assignments, when we are designing something in English script, we have to keep in mind if the design in regional script will look equally good or not. In this case we go for a very simple approach. Like in ads for brand 'Kingfisher' in regional language, we use the font that will look close in almost any language, like 'serif'. Also sometimes we need to modify fonts but we do not get much out of it because it is more like cleaning up. The resources available are very limited."

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Q) What is the significance of font size and font color in Communication Design?

While Prof. Anirudha Joshi says that font size and color are not very important aspects as compared to the other parameters in Communication Design, Mr. Shyam Krishnan says that though they feature later in Design stages, they hold a lot of importance.

Prof. Joshi says, “I have grown up in this era where I don’t have a control over my typeface. Even if I’m composing a simple email, it is most likely to be reformatted on another computer. If today I am typing on a Unix machine and someone is going to read it on a Mac or Windows, phone or tablet, I will have more control on alignment, composition, etc. while drafting the email. Hence, at base level, it becomes an important aspect but not at an advanced level like whether I should use ‘Garamound’ or ‘Myriad’. For me, it does not make that much of a difference honestly. It should be well hinted and easy to read. It should look clean, should not have too many grey pixels, and should be decently sized for the eye. If I can take care of these things then communication design is complete for me.”

Mr. Krishnan says, “Type is not driven by color, it is the other way around. After the font is decided, we run a color testing on the font. Certain brands have certain color families they must strictly follow. Hence, when the color testing fails, or it may not be clear, which is rare, we change the font.”

Dr. Dalvi adds, “Color is a very visual choice. Mostly governed by the brands, if not, it depends on the Designer’s experience. The regular color palate doesn’t influence my choice of font color at all. I look at

something called the typographic color, which denotes what is the grey value of the color, how dark or light does it look and what kind of a visual texture do I want for it.”

“Whenever I design any artwork which involves type, I do it in color but I convert it into gray scale to cross check the design, because in Mac, the color red looks more red than it is. The moment I work on another monitor, the red does not remain so red. When I have a red background with yellow text, or very nearing color values, then I convert them to gray scale to find the difference.

Today the tools and painting technology that improves opacity plays a very important role in Graphic Design”, says Mr. Arko Mukherjee. He comments on how the advanced technology in Finland and North Europe has given the Designers the creative platform to come up with some amazing graphic work. He says, according to him fonts and colors go hand in hand, so does the typography and the letter spacing and size. All of this goes well with technology and they are all important elements of design.

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