

Investigation of the Visual-Semantic Relations in Typography

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Abstract

The technological advancements initiated with the onset of the Industrial Revolution and persisting rapidly to this day continue to instigate profound transformations in societies, cultures, and even forms of governance, while simultaneously ushering in new perspectives and methodologies in the realms of art and design.

In our age, the concept of language has ceased to be a mere means of communication and has adapted organically to the developing age by assuming certain missions and roles. These roles involve the articulation of narratives and meanings designed to integrate individuals into the existing capitalist system and manage their needs.

This study examines the relationship between typography and language as a design element within the context of semantic arguments. The primary aim here is to analyze the semantic structures of typography as a design element, not only facilitating readability but also visibility, and to dissect them from a semantic standpoint, from parts to the whole. In doing so, it aims to uncover the effectiveness of typography as a tool for perception management. The presented data is anticipated to provide designers, particularly, with methods to enhance the use of typography in conveying messages, meanings, and relationships with the reader, thereby increasing efficiency in terms of conveying meaning and offering various approaches to enhance semantic productivity.

The aim of this study is to position the semantic relationships between the meanings of typographic elements used in graphic design products and how viewers visually perceive the typography used. Thus, the exploration aims to discover how visually symbolic meanings created with typography can be utilized as a more effective form of communication.

Keywords: Semantic, Semiotics, Typography, Meaning, Graphic Design.

1. Introduction

Typographic use in designs generally appears as the written, physical representation of verbal communication. This highlights the critical importance of ensuring readability of messages in typography. However, in addition to the message conveyed, the visual presence of typography also plays an important role in creating the conveyed meaning.

Typography plays a fundamental role in the layout of texts and the conveyance of meaning through visual communication. However, it is increasingly acknowledged that typography has the potential to add depth to meaning beyond being merely an aesthetic element. Semantic typography focuses on the ability of typographic elements used in the visual presentation of texts to influence the reader's perception and understanding of the text.

Typography plays an indispensable role in conveying messages in visual communication. Typographic elements such as font selection, text layout, font sizes, and colors are pivotal in shaping the message intended to be communicated to the target audience. Ambrose and Harris (2018) summarized the effects of typography on the audience by stating, “Typography can produce a neutral or invigorating effect; it can symbolize artistic, political or philosophical movements or express the personality of an individual or organization [1]”. In this context, typography can be defined as symbols with semantic properties that help to understand and support the content of design. This design element is used to represent specific meanings and helps to enhance the communicative power of the content. In this way, designers can identify contexts where they can utilize typography to achieve healthy, accurate, and effective communication.

Mixed research methods were employed in this study to understand the scope of typography and its impact on viewers. The evolution of typography from past to present and its effects on graphic design were examined using a relational research model. The information presented in this study was gathered through a literature review, selected based on the objectives and scope of the research.

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2. Semantic Arguments and Typography

Our daily lives are surrounded by images, and people are constantly interacting with these images and senses. This interaction has led to an interest in examining communication models because communication has played a significant role in human existence since its inception. Since language is one of the most powerful tools in communication, linguistics has focused on this area. The primary goal of linguistics is to examine the processes from the origin to the spread and diversification of language. General linguistics focuses on the structural (relationship between signs), semantic (relationship between meaningful signs), and pragmatic (relationship between meaningful signs, users, and their environments) aspects of language [2].

The emergence and development of language systems are integral parts of human evolution and cultural history. This process has arisen from the necessity of humans to express complex thoughts and engage in communication. George Steiner (2020) has defined the concept of language as a force that shapes the perceptual processes of individuals in their environments and in their relationships with each other [3].

Certainly, a tool is undoubtedly necessary for all forms of communication systems. Since the dawn of civilization, language has emerged as one of the most crucial communication tools shaped by people in verbal, written, or visual forms. Kant (2000) noted that humans communicate not only with concepts but also by incorporating emotions [4]. Today, typography has taken its place in designs as a concrete manifestation of language, fulfilling this role through visual symbols as a design element.

The definitions of the concept of typography have continuously evolved from its inception to the present day. At its most basic definition, typography is considered the arrangement of characters and visual layouts designed to represent and present the content of messages [5]. From another perspective, typography is viewed as a visual representation of language, and therefore, it is considered to exist independently of understanding language itself [6].

Typography always emerges as a cultural product reflecting the characteristics of its time, as a design element representing the technological capabilities and social context of the period. Throughout the

historical process from the initial version of the letters used in Gutenberg's printing to the present day, typography has continually undergone change and development. Evolving technology and changing social structures have similarly influenced and transformed typography culture [7].

From the discovery of the Gutenberg printing press until the end of the 19th century, the concept of typography played a significant role in the field of design for information transmission. The rapidly advancing technology paralleled the evolving design understanding, leading to the emergence of new art and design concepts in the early 20th century [8]. This understanding has shown that typography is not only limited to concerns of readability and usability but has also led to the exploration of its semantic potential alongside its physical and formal presence in designs [9]. As a result, typography has evolved from being merely a communication tool to a point where it can contribute to the aesthetic and semantic values of designs.

The classical typography understanding gave way to asymmetrical typographic structures with the emergence of the New Typography movement in the early 20th century [10]. This shift led to the abandonment of rigid rule-based systems in favor of flexibility. Consequently, this radical change in typography allowed for the creation of more dynamic and liberated typographic designs, enabling the communication of different meanings.

Nowadays, with the rapid development of mass media and the advertising industry, typography is now not only regarded as a mere textual tool but also recognized as a design element designed to serve this purpose [8]. With this shift, typography has evolved from being merely a supportive element in designs to becoming a design object in its own right [11]. Consequently, typography is not only capable of conveying the literal message of a text but also able to communicate compelling or motivational messages to the target audience. The visual language emerging from typography design can evoke emotions and even elicit physical reactions. In this context, semantic structure and analysis should be included in this function of typography.

Semantics is a discipline where language is used to convey understandable meanings to others during communication. Semantics examines the meanings of words and also the influence of words within a sentence on formal meaning [12]. Batı (2012) completes the concept of interpretation, which forms the basis of semantics, by defining it as the meaning attributed to the sign by the target audience and explains it using the following statement:

“The word ‘disaster’ used in an advertisement is a signifier. It is certain that the word ‘disaster’ initially signifies something bad, but within this context, many different connotations are possible. The signifier ‘disaster’ can be interpreted in various ways. For example, if you add a picture of a flooded house below the advertisement and designate an insurance company as the advertiser, the reader will immediately make the necessary interpretation. This is the advertisement of an insurance company appearing as a solution to such a significant problem in the face of the reader's disaster [13]”.

In this context, semantic typography emphasizes how the use of typographic elements influences how the reader perceives the text. For example, writing a specific word in a larger and bolder font within a text may indicate that this word is more important than others and aims to attract the reader's attention. Smith (2018), to convey the power of semantic narrative, uses the following statement: “Design is a tool that strengthens or weakens semantic meaning. Colors, shapes, and composition can deepen or obscure the meaning conveyed in communication [14]”. From this approach, it can be concluded that well-designed typography can clearly convey semantic meaning, evoke desired emotions in the user, and influence audience's behavior.

Similarly, changing or modifying the structure of the text can affect the emotional tone or atmosphere of the text. Semantics is a discipline that studies the features of language and the structures of words and sentences at the morphological and syntactic level. This discipline explores various levels to understand how language is organized and how words are put together [15]. Thanks to the set of data obtained, it facilitates meaningful forms of communication and helps convey messages effectively. In this context, semantic information can be said to be one of the methods that allows determining how messages should be organized to ensure that they are understandable and perceivable by recipients.

Semantics can function as a method for both assigning and analyzing meaning with imagery and the potential for imagery in the field of typography. Visual images represent their meanings using different materials and semantic sources, such as design elements, written language, and photography. The typography of written language not only serves as a tool for verbal expression but also functions as a visual element with its own potential for meaning and as a semantic source [16]. In this context, written or spoken texts can also be seen as social entities that reflect the social contexts in which they were produced and the purposes of rhetoric.

Typography elements have begun to be used as a semantic source contributing to the formation of new potential meanings, not only as a tool for verbal expression but also as an integral part of the narrative itself. Linguists have explained the role of language within the framework of semiotics when defining the structure of language and creating meaning. Structural linguistics has approached language as a systematic structure within the 'language-sign-subject' framework [17]. In this context, typography serves not only as a tool for verbal expression but also as a visual element with its own potential for meaning and as a semantic source. Therefore, in designs, the relationship between typographic elements representing sounds and their physical presence is based on semantic scales.

The visual role of typography aims to expand the boundaries of language by freely examining verbal syntax [18]. This goal proves the potential of visual typography to create unlimited expression. In typography, the most important factor in determining meaning is visual perception, and it is known that this perception is systematically processed in the human brain through perceptual processes [19]. Koch (2009) has noted that typography represents a significant visual domain often overlooked in social semiotic theory; however, he argued that typography provides an excellent environment for observing semantic changes [20]. In this context, the ability of typographic signs to represent various objects and evoke emotional qualities in the target audience allows for transitions between different semantic levels. This enables the design to be loaded with versatile and diverse meanings beyond its textual significance.

3. Semantic Analysis in Typography

Considering all this data, typography is seen not only as a linguistic but also as a visually usable design element. This situation indicates that typographic elements in designs can be combined with semantic functions. In other words, typography can be designed as required by the created sound or meaning.

Research has shown that the visual features of typography can have a prior effect on the actual semantic processing of written messages in verbal communication. This suggests that the visual features of typography can activate their own semantic representations.

In today's design understanding, along with visual images such as pictures, photographs, shapes, and drawings, text is also presented with a specific typeface, and it is expected to be harmonious with the overall design. Understanding the significant role of typography as a semantic source is important. Therefore, there are discussions about how a semantic approach to typography affects its potential

meaning. In the following examples of printed graphic design products, attempts have been made to express various layers of semantic meaning through typographic signs used in accordance with semiotic analyses.



Figure 1. Gillette Logo Design [21].

The logo designed by Anspach Grossman Enterprise for the Gillette brand (Figure 1) has undergone several changes over the years but now has a structure that can easily convey the brand name to the target audience. The logo is created with a sans-serif typeface classified as modern. The strokes of the letterforms are more pronounced compared to other typefaces. Additionally, the kerning between the letters is arranged to make them touch each other; this arrangement aims to instill a sense of trust in the brand among the target audience. Upon analyzing the logo, it is noticed that the negative space between the 'G' and 'i' letters forms a blade-like indicator. This blade indicator is used to evoke the concept of 'sharpness' in the minds of the target audience. Furthermore, the use of a typeface with sharp edges and in an italic structure further reinforces the meaning of the blade indicator.

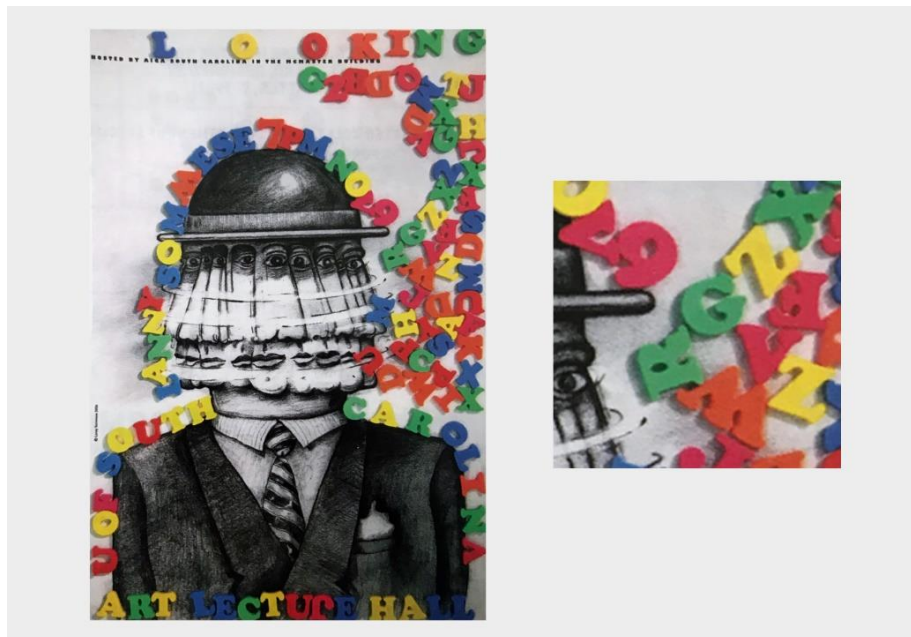


Figure 2. 'Looking' Poster Design [22].

In Figure 2, there is a poster designed by illustrator and designer Lanny Sommese. The poster was prepared for an art event at the University of South Carolina where Sommese was a speaker. The poster is arranged with a black and white illustration of a man nodding from side to side and a dynamic composition made

of colorful plastic letters. Sommese mentioned that the typography used in the poster was designed to promote the event, and the choice of colorful plastic letters was made to make this educational event more enjoyable for students [22].

The plastic-colored letters used in the poster have serif typefaces and are arranged side by side to form text containing information about the event. These colorful plastic letters are used as a signifier that evokes concepts such as ‘childhood’, ‘fun’ and ‘play’ in the minds of the target audience. In many cultures, colored plastic letters are also used to keep notes on the refrigerator at home to remind of an upcoming event. In this context, typography offers the target audience a multi-layered chain of meaning by alluding to the upcoming event.



Figure 3. IKEA Product Advertising Poster Series [23].

IKEA, a furniture company known for its user-friendly and practical furniture products, launched an advertising campaign in 2015 in collaboration with the TBWA advertising agency to highlight its organizing products. This campaign includes a series of advertising visuals (Figure 3) with the slogan ‘tidy up’, featuring drawer organizers, shoe cabinets, and tie hangers. In each visual, symbols such as socks, shoes, and ties are used to refer to the respective organizing product.

The typography in the advertising visuals is arranged in sans-serif letter characters created by combining sock, shoe, and tie symbols. The visuals are designed to emphasize the contrast between order and chaos. The selected symbols are intricately composed to reflect common daily questions such as ‘Where are my socks?’, ‘Where are my fancy shoes?’, ‘Where is my favorite tie?’. The advertising visuals, initially perceived as cluttered, slightly highlight typography.

This poster series aims to provide compelling communication by addressing a common situation encountered in daily life, and it aims to reflect the viewer’s current emotional and mental experience through the visuals and typography symbolizing this situation. Thus, it creates a structure that offers the viewer the opportunity to recognize themselves and establish empathy. Additionally, this poster series is designed around a strategy of providing solutions by presenting the product to the viewer to cope with such situations.

The use of typography in the midst of this chaos, presented in a less prominent manner and requiring the audience to read it in a challenging way, directs the message towards the idea that IKEA's relevant product will alleviate this difficulty. Thus, the typography used adds a new meaning to the visuals and directs the target audience towards the idea of purchasing IKEA products.

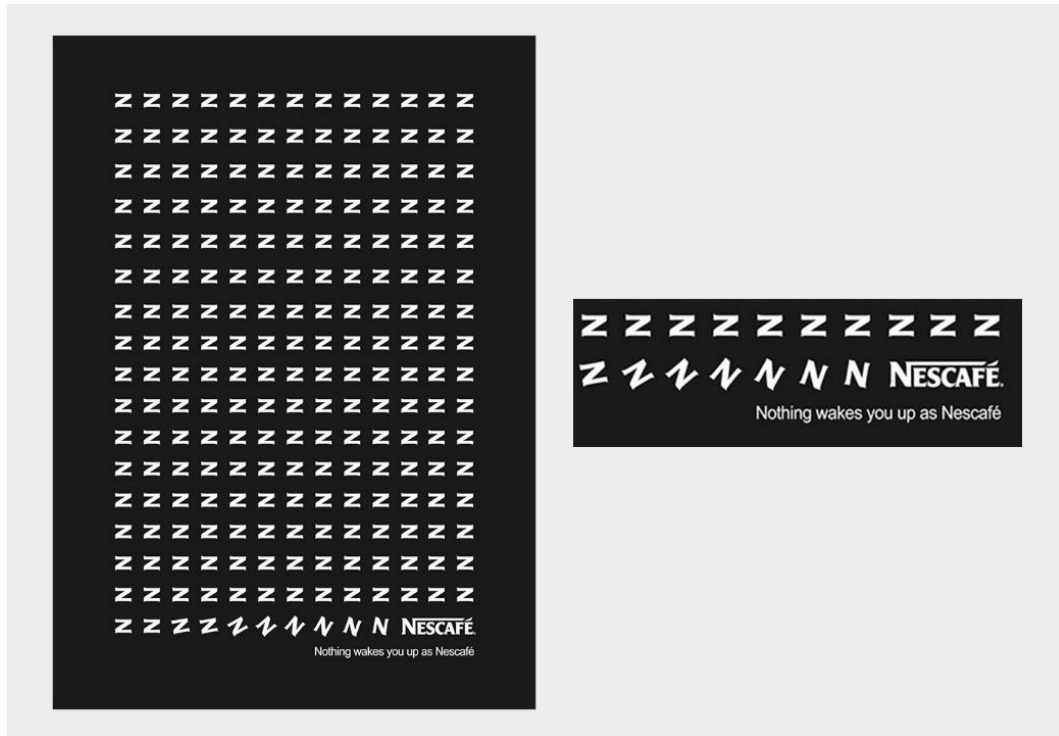


Figure 4. Nescafe Advertising Poster [24].

In Figure 4, the advertising poster created for the Nescafe brand is composed solely of typographic elements. The 'Z' letters placed on a black background immediately catch the eye. However, upon closer examination of the bottom right corner of the poster, it is observed that the structure of the 'Z' letter is distorted to transform into the letter 'N', followed by the logo and slogan. In this context, the typography in the visual serves as a sign designed to reveal the brand logo at the end of consecutive letters.

The black background and the sequence of 'Z' letters in the visual are not coincidental. The black color represents the night, while the arranged 'Z' letters evoke the idea of sleep. When the target audience reaches this layer of meaning, they realize that the arranged letters actually form the tilted version of the initial letter 'N' of the logo. This new sign further supports the concept of awakening.

The slogan 'Nothing wakes you up like Nescafe' is located at the bottom right of the poster. Considering the slogan, the sleeping 'N' letters quickly awaken with Nescafe. In other words, the letters used in the poster are constructed as signs representing the human experience.

The visual also benefits from the principles of Gestalt perception. The principles of continuity, similarity, and proximity applied to typographic elements, combined with the black-and-white figure-ground principle, allow for direct allusions to contrasts such as night-day, sleep-wakefulness, and so forth. When all the signs in the visual are combined, a multi-layered system of meaning is created solely through typographic elements, making the message much more effective and memorable for the target audience.

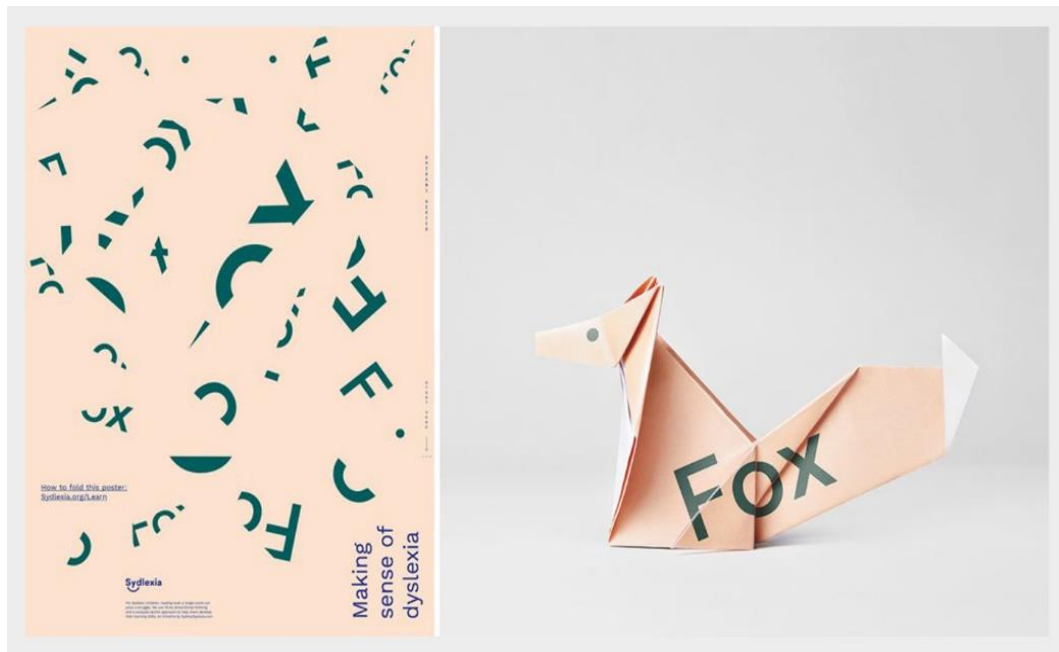


Figure 5. Sydlexia Campaign Advertising Poster [25].

Sydlexia, a dyslexia organization based in Sydney, Australia, with a collaboration with the BBDO advertising agency in Dubai, has organized a series of campaign visuals that combining origami (the art of paper folding) and typography to raise awareness about the learning difficulties of individuals with dyslexia and the confusion surrounding them (Figure 5).

The campaign emphasizes the importance of viewing dyslexia not only as a disorder or defect but also as a new way of learning. The poster series, which focuses on the reading difficulties of individuals with dyslexia, aims to convey the fact that these individuals can perform the reading function like normal individuals if they receive the necessary training, by creating empathy with the difficulties experienced by these individuals.

The simplicity of typography is balanced by the gentle tones of pastel colors, selected to enhance readability while maintaining consistency with main purpose. The design aims for a universal appeal, blending a mature modernist aesthetic with elements that engage a younger audience through interaction. The visuals include words such as ‘fox,’ ‘dog,’ ‘rabbit’ and ‘cat.’ In the visuals, Gestalt principles have been deliberately disregarded, and the letters are arranged in a fragmented and scattered manner. This creates a typographic sign that disrupts visual perception at first glance and obscures the meaning of the campaign design.

The created typographic sign aims to simulate the ‘reading difficulty’ experienced by individuals with dyslexia. However, when the visual is folded using the origami method, the words can be clearly perceived. The meaningfulness of the words after folding is achieved by placing the typography in accordance with the folding method that reflects the meaning of the words existing in the visual. Folding posters become objects that show the true meaning of the typographic words they contain.

Thus, the campaign image, based on tactile and spatial perception, not only allows the target audience to experience the challenges faced by individuals with dyslexia but also conveys the message that these challenges can be overcome with the right methods.

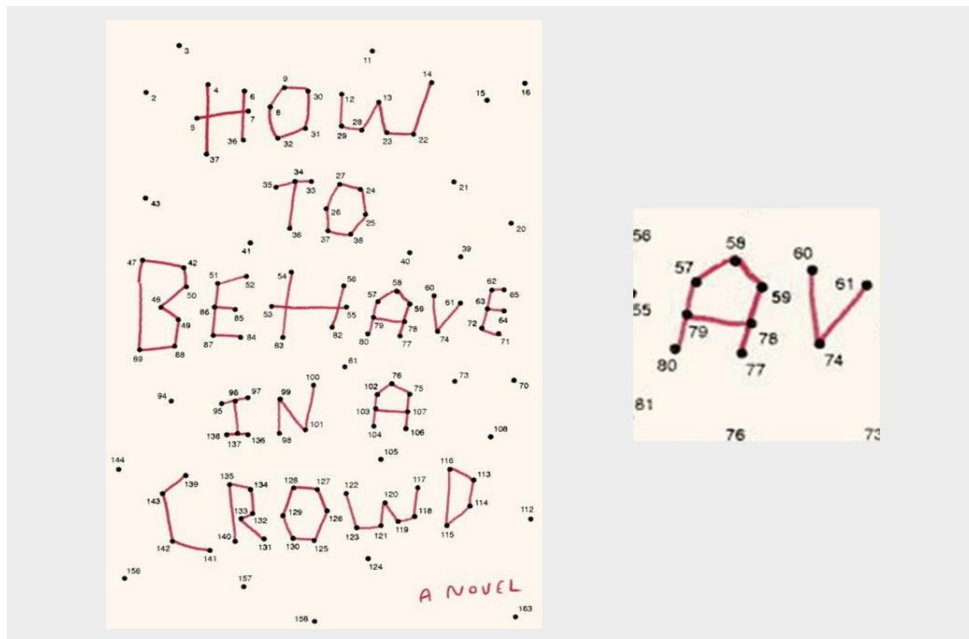


Figure 6. “How to Behave in a Crowd” Book Cover Design [26].

In Figure 6, there is a book cover designed by Christopher Brand and Michelle Jimenez for the novel ‘How to Behave in a Crowd’ The novel is a work where the sad and dark events in the life of an 11-year-old child are narrated with both humorous and profound language.

The cover is designed using only typographic elements, consisting of the title of the novel “How to Behave in a Crowd” followed by a series of numbers. The theme and content of the novel are emphasized through the book title created by the interconnected numbers of characters featured on the cover. The numbers are used as symbols representing people, aiming to visually express the concept of ‘crowd’. The book title, created by connecting the numbers with a red line, reflects the main theme of the novel, which is ‘charting one’s own course’. Typography is utilized not only to convey the book title but also to add further meaning to the cover design.

As seen, even with the use of typography alone, various metaphorical and semantic meanings can be evoked beyond the literal meaning of typography on the audience.



Figure 7. AUDI Curves Campaign Poster Design Series [27].

The innovative headlight system developed by the automobile manufacturer AUDI, aims to help drivers better adapt to bends and minimize risks with a wider field of vision. There is a series of typographic posters designed by typographer Israel Mederios for the promotional campaign of this headlight system. The posters feature the words ‘turn’ and ‘truck’, ‘hill’ and ‘rail’, ‘curve’ and ‘child’, respectively. As can be understood from the words chosen, the posters symbolize potential dangers, particularly encountered in road curves.

The arrangement of the words in the visuals is meticulously designed to serve as signs reflecting the nature of curves. Additionally, both words depict the Gestalt principle of continuity by being connected with slanted links. These slanted links assist the target audience in better understanding the turn of the curve and thus its physical structure. Consequently, a strong connection is established between curves and potential hazards, highlighting the implication that the developed headlight system can effectively mitigate these hazards.

The use of white typography on a black background serves as a signifier emphasizing the concept of ‘illumination’ associated with the headlight system and its provided wide viewing angle. When all these signifiers are combined, a multi-layered typographic expression emerges that effectively presents all the features of the headlight system to the target audience. These exemplary designs demonstrate how typography has evolved beyond merely conveying text to also reinforcing or creating entirely new layers of meaning within the text. This illustrates how the role of typography in communication has become increasingly complex and versatile.

4. Conclusion

Visual communication is increasingly engaging with a more conscious consumer base, necessitating designs that are more attention-grabbing, striking, and clear. At this point, the visual communication platform is continually developing new methods to convey ideas, messages, or phenomena.

On the other hand, the concept of typography is a visual design tool with symbolized messages that have existed since the formation of languages and are encountered in every aspect of culture. Typography is a discipline concerned with the arrangement and use of typefaces, playing a significant role in communication.

Design historian Steven Heller and Gail Anderson (2014) states, “Typography, when considered as a visual communication tool, plays a significant role in the presentation of written or printed messages and largely determines the impact of this message [28]”. From this perspective, typography not only makes a text readable but also serves as a powerful tool to enhance the impact of the message conveyed by the text. This underscores the importance and influence of typography in visual communication.

Typography has evolved and transformed throughout history alongside technological advancements and changes in design principles. Initially used merely as a visual representation of oral communication, typographic elements have now taken on a role where they not only convey textual information but also add deep layers of meaning to design.

In recent years, semiotics research, which has become an integral part of visual communication platforms, has developed structures for examining the production of meaning. Particularly, the analysis of meaning strings conveyed through signs has become an important tool for deciphering relationships between signs. Semiotic and semantic domains within linguistics have been recognized as independent disciplines in visual communication platforms, largely due to advancements in technology.

As Robert Bringhurst states, “Typography must often draw the reader’s attention to the meaning, rather than to the texture, of a passage [29]”. Therefore, typography can be examined from semiotic and semantic perspectives not only due to its close relationship with language but also because of its symbolic and visual function as part of design. Within this framework, the discipline of typography can encompass the power of conveying multi-layered meanings in communication.

This study has focused on examples of designs where typographic elements are used visually, in addition to traditional typographic methods, to facilitate communication. Through the analysis of these examples, it has been observed that typography not only conveys textual information but also plays a role in adding meaning to the overall design visually.

As designers, we play a crucial role in enriching layers of meaning by harnessing the creative potential of typographic usage. This underscores the authority of typography, which holds a strong influence in visual culture. This study contributes actively to the meanings created by linguistic signs, enabling a reevaluation of the relationship between typography and meaning, thus allowing typographic usage to play a more effective role in communication.

Typography should be viewed as a new design tool that enhances the communicative potential of texts, provides an engaging experience, and enables the conveyance of messages in various forms. Designers should continue to explore the perceptual and semantic dimensions of typography to effectively reach and engage their target audience.

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