

Readers' impressions of typographic meaning

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Typographic meaning

Existing research shows that the designers' choice of typeface can influence readers' impressions of documents. But typographic presentation involves the manipulation of a far broader range of typographic and spatial attributes than simply choosing a typeface. Variations in typographic attributes such as weight, scale, spacing and layout differentiate particular kinds of information to create meaning and promote ease of use. But how does all this variation influence our assumptions about documents?

This research explores how typographic presentation conveys meaning through three participant studies designed to:

1. Explore the kinds of impressions readers form based on typographic presentation and
2. Identify the combinations of typographic attributes that interact on the page to convey meaning.

Research design

Test materials

Study 1 used a collection of gardening and financial magazines to identify which combinations of typographic attributes seem to influence readers' impressions of the magazines. The results suggest that typographic meaning is signalled by varying patterns of typographic differentiation. Building on these findings, Studies 2 and 3 used purposely-designed test materials that controlled the documents' content and images. This enabled testing of the relationship between three patterns of typographic differentiation and readers' impressions of documents.

Results

Kinds of impressions

Typographic meaning is not simply a question of style and aesthetic taste. The results indicate that readers form a wide range of impressions based on typographic presentation, including:

- Genre and the kind of information presented
- The style or tone of voice in which the information is presented
- The credibility, usefulness, and accessibility of the information
- The intended audience and
- The ways in which readers might engage with or use the information.

Kinds of impressions



Figure 1: Examples with minimal white space, greater compositional complexity (layering and irregularity), angled elements, strong shapes, high differentiation of visual weight and colour, and lots of typographic variation were mostly described as attention-grabbing, striking and sensationalist. These examples were described as the least credible and the most commercial or entertaining.



Figure 2: Highly structured examples with regular use of shape and alignment, bold differentiation but not too much overall variation were seen as informative, credible, and user-friendly. They were described as journalistic, professional and business-like and some of them were considered very academic.



Figure 3: Examples with symmetrical layouts and/or lots of white space, subtle typographic differentiation of display type, restrained colour, and few graphic elements were seen as the most highbrow examples. While some participants described these examples as dull and others described them as elegant, they agreed that these were intended for readers who already had an interest in the subject.

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