

# Abstract

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## **Emotional impact of typefaces**

A Study on the atmosphere-qualities of ten different typefaces in human perception

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### **I. The Background**

Typographers usually agree on atmosphere-qualities of typefaces. But if the question is asked how to find the *appropriate* typeface the answer often will be like this: «... it is the right amount of the right thing in the right place».

What has media-psychological research to set against this statement? Until 1920 there have been more than 21 studies on the general theme «atmosphere value of typefaces». But most of the results were disappointing and barely to use for experts like Illustrators or Art-Directors.

Since Desktop-Publishing has appeared to become a tool for nearly everybody to create whatever he wants, the type-scene has changed radically. Today every typeface is available for anybody. There are no longer well educated experts who do the typesetting. The horizon of this process of democracy is that everybody has become his own typesetter or graphic designer. So one theme has become more important than ever: the emotional impact of type(faces).

This study claims to work out a kind of basic orientation on the question «what typeface is the *appropriate* one?» The essential aim of this study is the question on the consciousness of type in any context. Based on the data obtained, the different emotional ways of typeface-impact in human perception should be analyzed. A wide range of character-features shall enable whom to determine the impact of about 100 very frequent used typefaces.

### **II. Hypothesis**

In short terms the main hypotheses of the study are:

- 1) Which differences in valuation / perception of typefaces are there between experts (typographers) and layman? Do typefaces have an unique impact or is it under variation, depending on the people who percept the typeface?
- 2) What atmosphere-qualities or connotations are combined with which typeface? Is it possible to recover these qualities on definabel character features?
- 3) What kind of interaction exists between a text and its typeface? What impact has the text on the typeface (or the typeface on the text) while reading? Otherwise: Which typefaces evoke an intuitive feeling of appropriateness for a text or a message and which do not?

### **III. Research-Design, Methods**

A cross-modal-design was decided to be the best, because of the very complex processes of typeface-perception and its consequences.

- 1) *Semantic Differential* (bipolar attribute-scale from Wendt, 1968). This reliable and valid instrument was especially constructed to measure emotional connotations of typefaces in a semantic space. The tested persons had to adjoin attributes to typefaces set as a meaningless text.
- 2) *Assignment-procedure* (qualitative ranking): The tested persons had to make an intuitive choice for the appropriate (inappropriate) typeface for any of six very emotionalizing texts. Any text was set in ten different typefaces. Experts selected the texts (short stories).
- 3) *Questionnaire*: Measures different aspects of type-consciousness like reading-behavior, perception of type and charts; knowlegde on type etc. In a special part, the persons had to do free specifications for which purpose they would place each of the tested types.

*Testing-material:* 10 different typefaces (6 with serifs, 4 sans serif); selection based on characteristic typeface-features; the very first selection was based on the specimen-book «Übersicht» (1991), in which typefaces with visual similarities are grouped.

*Random-sample:* The population (130 persons) was split into two groups: one with (typo)graphical education or experience and the other with layman; well known international typographers formed a special expert-group.

#### IV. Results and Discussion

- 1) Typefaces «have», through their unique aesthetic style, emotional connotations. The strength of the emotional impact can be recovered to typical character features. The impact can also be generalized on typefaces with similar features.
- 2) An (most of all) unconscious interaction between typeface and text was found. Some typefaces were perceived significant *appropriate* or *inappropriate* for a text.
- 3) A large number of significant differences between experts and layman could be found on the semantic differential but there was no significant difference at all when typefaces had to be attached to texts. This indicates that the reader (consciously or not) «feels» if a typeface is appropriate for a text, a message etc. or if there is a perceptible discrepancy between style of type and content.
- 4) A significant influence of the PC-usage on the perception of type could not be proved. But there is a strong tendency: the use of PC's changes the perception of type with people who usually have paid more attention to the perception of type. People who did not care about the use of type until now, keep their strategy of perception anyway they use a computer as a desktop-publishing instrument.

In spite of all clear results there has to be pointed out that the choice of the *appropriate* typeface is still a subjective and intuitive decision. But there are two points that should be mentioned by creative designers as well as by layman: firstly, the results of the present study are a unique scientific basis to answer the question if one's own perception (evaluation) of a typeface agrees with a larger population who possibly will read the message. Secondly, this work should be an impulse for a stronger courage to lay these typefaces who support the message.

#### Basic Literature

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