

**Pragmatic and Syntactic trends in Display Typography on the shop signs of Abdul Rehman
Street, Mumbai**

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Abstract

Shop names are the prima facie image of any shop (owner's business identity). What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. (Shakespeare, 1594-96). For instance, a shop name 'Crystal' for a lifestyle product store brings forth the chic and luxury meanings for the products sold in the shop. This paper aims to archive different pragmatic and syntactic trends in the display of shop names in Abdul Rehman Street.

In Display Typography, Colour and Type are the most distinct features. However, in our case, this conventional meaning of display in type takes four more syntactic devices into account: Framing, Textural simulation, Contrast and Harmony. A total of 40 shop names have been analyzed on the basis of following parameters: a. Year of origin, b. Typeface use, c. Colour use, d. Syntactic devices, e. Pragmatic devices and f. Mood of Type

We propose this conceptual framework to explain Display Typography on shop signs of the historically and culturally significant street bazaar of South Mumbai, India. Its a cumulative knowledge bank of trends of Display Type for student designers undertaking display sign design projects in local contexts (street markets in cities specifically).

Keywords: Display Typography, Shop Signs, Semiotic Analysis, Conceptual Framework

Introduction

Display Typography is the visual pulse of information display on outdoor signs. Display type is a visual tool used to entice the readers/viewers, disseminate information and also projects the mood of the composition with typefaces, their placement, effects, colours and material treatments given to the type and background elements supporting the Type's display. It has been widely explored and investigated by designers and design researchers respectively.

Type for display has four major functions: a. Attract attention, b. Create a differentiation, c. Evoke a Mood and d. Build Hierarchy (Halley, 2006). We have explained each function briefly as follows:

- a. *Attract Attention:* Generally, when designers design using display type; it serves as a strict design element. The primary purpose is to 'catch the eye' with the aid of colour use and unique textural effects given to letterforms. When such a display typeface is used for 'Headings' in case of outdoor signs, posters and advertisements; they aid viewer to link to the accompanying text without any distractions.
- b. *Create Distinction:* Display Type has to function effectively. Therefore, the visual attraction has to sustain in the viewer's mind as a memorable and distinct identity. Hence, the role of visual distinction stands at par with eye catching attraction weaved in letterforms. This helps in create powerful brand image and superiority in the competitive market. A good display typeface used in a consistent manner milks sustained attention and easy recall for the reader/viewer/customer.
- c. *Evoke a Mood:* Display typefaces emote, entice and talk to viewers through character styles and individual letterform expressions. For instance, 'Palace Script' sets and elegance and

charming poise with its smooth cursive style. On the other hand, ‘Clarendon’ expresses robustness, structured discipline, solidity and affirmation.

d. Build Hierarchy: In order to highlight recurring points in a complicated content, an order and structure is devised for display type for headings, body text and footnotes. The objective is to create more reader-friendly content. The structure is governed by placement of various chains of text forming headings, text etc. in different places in a print advertisement, poster, billboard or a sign. In addition, colour and size for display type also contributes towards a visual hierarchy. This hierarchy aids the viewer to distinguish primary and secondary information of significance in an otherwise complex content. This helps for easy recall and specific information retrieval for viewers later.

Case Study of Abdul Rehman Street

Today, as in the past, the streets of India are vibrant with shop signs in saturated colours. They celebrate the exuberance of Indian visual culture and unique display typography. Therefore, this study endeavors to analyze the names of shop signs from the bazaar of Abdul Rehman Street, Mumbai. This case study approach of archiving display type features of the signs of Abdul Rehman Street has been deliberately selected for following reasons:

1. Diversity in Visual Culture displayed on signs:

South Mumbai street bazaars have historic landmarks that reflect socio-cultural identities of the place. Abdul Rehman Street is popularly known as a *Wholesalers Mecca*, including astounding variety of products sold in majority as ‘Wholesale’. It is perennially one of the most crowded street bazaars of the area. A definite joy for a street traveler, the shops provide small and large scale products and services like tool repairs, belts, watches, bags, stationery items, small

agencies, banks etc. The various themes drive the attractive diversity of visual display and culture represented on signs (especially, more via the depiction of the main shop identities – the shop names).

2. Significance of selecting a Historically Relevant Street Bazaar

“The look and make of a sign represents ‘what exists’ (reality) and ‘what it represents’ (constructed reality)” (Chandler, 2003). Taking this analogy to understand Abdul Rehman Street, the shop signs here seem to be influenced by various trends. Firstly, the ‘Syntax’ that creates an order for information flow to appear on the signs; and secondly, the ‘Pragmatic’ factors that are tangible material cues to communicate the image and status of the shops. Also, in pragmatics, one also observes inclusion of visual discourses (different languages and scripts to overcome language barriers of respective visitors and customers). Use of specific wording according to changing times also reflects the level of socio-cultural acceptance and adaptability along with other pragmatic objectives.

3. Importance of collecting transitions

Evolution is a step by step transformation of one idea to another, regulated by certain marked characteristics of specific eras / time periods. Similarly, the transitions in display type depict marked syntactic and pragmatic use of visual devices – formulating different trends.

Harmony in Display Type

There’s a relationship between the text type and display type. Important decision is whether display type would be from the same family as the text type, or will it be in contrast to the text

type? For instance, a display name – set in Distro in a larger size than the other text (tagline) in the same font creates *Harmony* between the display type units. (See Fig. 1 for the function of *Harmony* in display type). The choice of Hindi font [in Kruti Dev 020 (Bold)] creates a ‘Futuristic’ visual mood with its character. Same goes for Distro as well (with same futuristic mood). In Fig. 1, we also see another example of Ajani shop using same ‘Cursive’ style of letterforms (though, scripts and the typeface are distinct to each other). Therefore, *Harmony* in display type functions for similar visual styles and moods of the face.

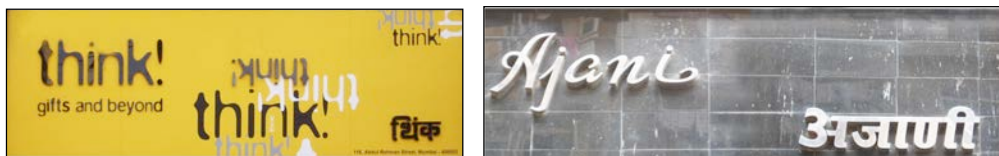


Fig.1. Affinities in the Visual Mood and Visual Style of Display typeface create *Harmony*

Contrast in Display Type

There are many ways in display type to achieve the characteristic of *Contrast*. This characteristic provides novel ways of combining similar and different styles together into innovative combinations. But, sometimes the combinations are not successful in terms of creating a generous degree of visual contrast. For instance, two different typefaces used from the same family might produce a weaker degree of contrast or almost no contrast if they are conjoined together in same sizes or weights. Similarly, two different faces displayed with same cap-height or case (say, uppercase) might blur the required degree of contrast required to distinguish between two chunks of information display.

Decoration in Display Type

The ornate and decorative styles of the character design of a particular display typeface create unique ‘decoration’ or ‘embellishment’ for letterforms. There is an addition of ornate shapes at stroke endings and inside the letter body. Following are a few examples of some decorative display typefaces:

ROSEWOOD STD REGULAR

DAVIDA

STARBURST

HORNS

Expression in Display Type

Expressive Display typefaces have different personas. We can see their use in display designs in 60s and 70s. These typefaces have created a wide range of expressions. For instance, Roman typefaces are more austere, graceful and sophisticated. In contrast, Egyptian slab serifs are more robust, bold and assertive visually. Sans serif typefaces are serious, modern, professionally crisp (‘no nonsense’ appeal) and efficient ones. On the other hand, script typefaces sing the various simulations of the writing hand. The graphic faces are more aggressive, fun-based and spontaneous. They are mostly used for displays pertaining to products for kids / teenagers and youth.

Aim and Objectives

This paper discusses varied roles of Display Type and its features that regulate the syntax. Also, the type's style sometimes matches the pragmatic requirement of its material display. Every period has its distinct characteristics in terms of the use of letterforms, colours, and technology (implied material representations). This paper aims to archive and discuss the following:

1. Major Syntactic trends of display type in shop names
2. Major Pragmatic trends of display type in shop names
3. Period-wise Colour use in shop names
4. Various moods depicted by the display type in shop names
5. Expressive letterform expressions including visual alterations in stroke endings, letter shape, ligature etc.

Methodology

All the 40 shop signs from Abdul Rehman Street belong to the period range from 1930s till 2010. The selected boards also envisage maximum number of attributes. The list includes kinds of shops, shop names, display typefaces/fonts /lettering styles/foundry, visual syntax, material structure and fabrication techniques, colour palate and visual mood. This diverse information was mapped chronologically (according to the year when each signboard was crafted and installed for the respective shops) in an excel sheet. Different headings have been colour coded to relate some causal attributes mentioned above. The final table provides us with following steps of analysis and insights:

1. The analysis includes a manual filtering of maximum to minimum range of syntactic and

pragmatic trends of display type in the shop names.

2. Unique Ligature formations have been archived and discussed qualitatively.
3. Concrete Terms of Framing, Contrast, Harmony, Colour and Textural background simulation are formulated and discussed. Of them - contrast, colour and framing directly connect with the material and fabrication technique applied to visually dress the name display.
4. The most popular syntactic device has been the use of mixed typefaces or styles for a single as well as double-script display of names on these boards. The expression of the letterforms in the big size name identity compliments the materials and techniques used to craft these letterforms.

Observations/ Results

Period-wise record of major Syntactic and Pragmatic Trends:

Periods	Syntactic Trends	Pragmatic Trends	Colours
1930s	Contrast, Harmony (in terms of same typeface and colours), Centrally aligned layout, Letterforms in relief, Borders as frames.	3D letterforms, Standard Channel lettering (plastic body, interior lit), Wooden sign panels, Combined display (display type and images together)	White, Blue, Green
1940s	Harmony, Expressive letterforms, Graphic effects, Ligatures	All kinds of materials used: wood, stone, metal to fabricate + painted letterforms	White, Grey, Green
1950s	Harmony in terms of – uniform letterspaces, cap-height etc. Textural Simulation (uniform horizontal parallel lines)	Backlit Channel Letters ('Halo' backlit). Metal and Stone – major materials	Pale yellow whites
1960s	Contrast (in terms of different typefaces used), Harmony (in terms of colour and material use), Frame within a Frame, Cursive letterform expression	Mixed materials – Sticker letterforms, Plastic letterforms in reverse with outer-glow for illumination. Good wooden boards for sign panels	White, Black and Orange
1970s	Contrast (in terms of different typefaces and colours used to	3D letterforms (Channel letters and Wood-cuts), Sign panel extension (use of two	Pale Whites, White and red, Duotone panel, inclusion of metallic

	distinguish); Emphasis (in terms of white and black outlines for letterforms), Hierarchy (with Type size distinction), Frame within a frame, use of Duotone – two colour background in one sign panel, Harmony (in terms of visual treatments of stroke endings and style of letterforms) – established by more expressive and decorative display type	signboards together), Inclusion of ‘Flex’ and MS boards as panel base), Combined display (display type and images together)	board (in one shop sign only)
1980s	Good Contrast (in terms of use of bright colour combinations and type size for shop names), Harmony (in terms of use of primary colours in names; and the typeface genres used to display names in english and hindi)	Acrylic 3D letterforms with outer glow illumination, mixed materials used like wood, acrylic and enamel paint to make letterforms, Combined display (display type and images together)	Lighter colours and darker backgrounds – like yellow on red, white and yellow on dark blue backgrounds
1990s	Frame within a frame, Textural simulations in backgrounds, Graphic effects (colourful lines in background), Combined display (by using geometric shapes and logos and logotypes), Harmony (in terms of colour, letter spaces, placement of type with respect to sign panel background layout)	Acrylic letterforms and Acrylic boards (with horizontal / vertical divisions to create background Textural Simulations)	White, White and cool colour strips (like green and shades of pink and violet)
2000s	Big Display (in terms of big type size, graphic effects with type (letterform expressions and ligatures), line breaks in case of long shop names, generous length and space given to shop’s name display), Frame within a frame, Textural and colour simulations to create an attractive type display,	Mixed media – 3D Acrylic (interior back-lit illuminated letterforms) along with digital letterforms of surrounding display body text. Panel materials – acrylic, glass, flex, MS board, metallic frame.	Deep Reds, Yellows, Orange, blues, Browns, Multi-colour display for text (one sign example)

Major Patterns observed are as follows:

1. **Harmony** in terms of similar colour use stands apart for the function ‘Type & Colour’

with following attributes in the display type of these shop names:

- Same colours – same type genres (see Fig. 1)



Fig 1. Slab-serif genre of typeface used for both English and Hindi shop names

- Same colours – different type genres and case (see Fig. 2)



Fig 2. Humanist and Sans serif genres of typeface have been used for the words ‘Zenith’ and ‘Iron Works’ respectively. Also, Zenith is written in lowercase while Iron Works is given visual emphasis by using bold letterforms in Uppercase.

- Same colours – different scripts



Fig 3. For Star Stationery, the Latin typeface is ‘Davida’ from Letraset. The Devanagari font used is Kruti Dev 130 (Bold)

- Similar colours along with one kind of 3D crafting of letterforms (see Fig. 4 and 5)



Fig 4. For P Vrajlal & Co., the English and Hindi typeface have same material representation



Fig 5. For Jyoti Plastics, the English and Hindi shop names are crafted in relief in Acrylic 3D letterforms

2. **Contrast** in terms of different colours for same and different scripts is observed.

Contrast is also seen in terms of different type sizes applied to different scripts.

Orientation of the main word (first word) of the full shop name, followed by other upright words in the name establishes strong distinction. This brings a ‘dynamism’ in the name display. (See Fig. 6)



Fig 6. Oriented word display in shop names

3. *Textural simulation backgrounds for the display type*

Seven out of 40 examples show a textural background of the sign panel giving spatial and simulated lift to the display type used in the shop names. They compliment the mood of the typefaces used to represent shop names.

- Multiple Colours (separate bands within text or one colour to each letterform), see

Fig. 7.



Fig 7. Multi-colours used in and with display type on shop signs

- Monochrome effect with word repetition (see Fig. 8)



Fig. 8. Monochrome effects

- Cursive style of the display text (see Fig. 9)



Fig. 9. Cursive unique letterforms – a logotype

4. Graphic Effects:

- *Frame within a Frame*

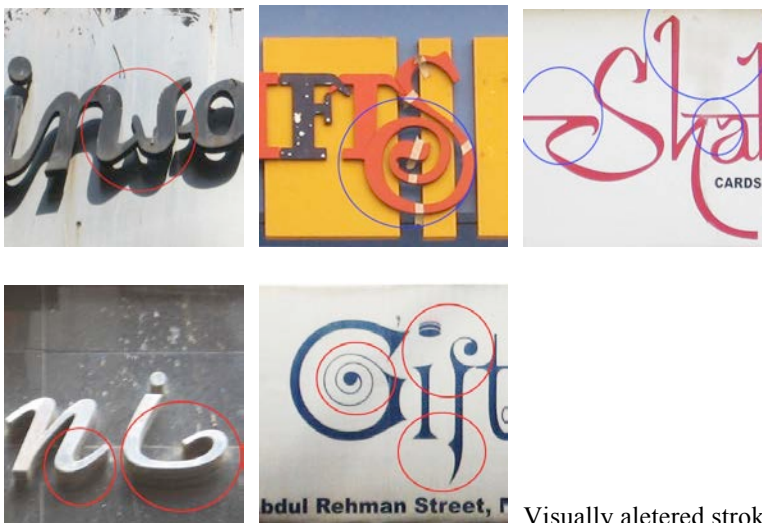
We have devised this term frame within a frame to explain those shop signs, wherein, the shop names are enclosed with an indice or a geometric shape. This whole as a unit display becomes the foreground image of the background sign

panel. Both former and latter images are frames with defined corners. They are enclosed entities – simple borders or ornate enclosures framing a shape.



Fig. 10. Frame within a frame – a new trend of display for emphasizing Type through background shapes

5. *Other Unique Graphic effects and some ligature formations:*



Ligature formations

Visually altered stroke endings



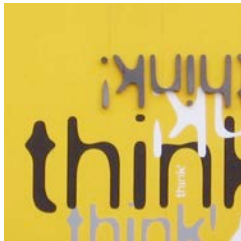
Calligraphic strokes



Combined Display (text and image)



Graphic effects (with punctuation marks) - Flicker



Monochromatic word repetitions (a kind of graphic effect) - Illusion

Results

We have mapped the governing syntactic and pragmatic trends in display of shop names in Abdul Rehman Street with respect to each function of the display type. These four functions are the same as explained by Allan Halley in his study 'Big Choices for Big Fonts' in 2006.



Fig. Conceptual Framework for Display Typography of Shop Signs in Abdul Rehman Street

- a. Big display attracts attention depending on the kind of other display types in surroundings. Display type does not have to be big for catching attention – a well-known thumb rule for using text type as display type (Craig, 2006). This also stands true for shop signs, especially with multilingual name identities. In the case of Abdul Rehman Street, the choice of typefaces, combinations of typefaces, size and colour use on shop signs attract attention.
- b. Decorative typefaces establish either are not readable and are mostly used to depict small text or information at larger sizes. In case of shop signs, the use of Decorative display faces depends on the product or service of the shop; rather than the year of its installation. Hence, there's no connection between the historic origin of the decorative typeface and its use for shop signs (with respective year of origin).
- c. Typeface Genres evoking a certain mood through faces have been used in a random fashion for modern signs of 90s and 2000s. There is a more direct connection between

majority of period and elegant typefaces used for old signs of 30s and 40s. Even for late 80s, in a few examples, popular retro faces have been used like Crille Italic Extra Bold (1980) and STOP typeface (1980 around) for two shop signs. The Moods for Typeface in this study have been based on LETRASET creative opportunities
<<http://www.letraset.com/shopcontent.asp?type=Typeeffective>>

Discussion

Conceptual framework generally alludes to a gamut of concrete terms or concepts. They function as essential dimensions about certain patterns or trends that frame an issue or observations of the data in hand. In the case of Display type and its design, the styles and the technologies, often complex—like typesetting, photolithography and digital displays have now taken a strong position of an omnipresent business equipment.

The above presented conceptual framework is useful for student designers studying the role of display type in following ways:

1. *Visual Syntax and its function for display of type:* The concept of effective display of type should be extended to include a wider range of visual communication nuances that regulate a balanced use of visual relationships in a syntax along with suitable technological logistics of Material representations.
2. *How display elements are used to establish display type functions?*

Halley's four functions are universal requirements for display typography to create an impact with different two and three dimensional design mediums. For instance, in our conceptual model (see Fig.), the element 'Typeface' helps creating two functions of 'attracting attention' and 'evoking mood' on display signs. (See two visual examples in Fig. below to

assert our proposition).



Fig. Pioneer Leathers typeface (Bocklin) attracts attention. Abbas and Co. typeface (Amelia) evokes a mood for this adhesive tapes and Stationery shop

3. *What are the various ways to mix different type styles and scripts to create attractive and distinct display on shop signs?*

Following are some general ways in which contrast in type can be achieved in information display systems:

1. *Selection of Typefaces from different families:*

For instance, a serif along with a sans serif face used for similar and different scripts (see fig)



2. *Single typeface / font used in different weights (same size)*



3. *Single typeface / font used in different sizes (same weight)*



4. *Same material display but different scripts and styles*



Conclusion

Display typography has evolved with the times, and it is an important and interesting probe to study old and new form of display types, their functions, attributes and new trends. By middle twentieth century, the entry of un-Indian, minimalistic expressions, radiant colours influenced the use of the technical ways of crafting and adorning display type on shop signs, posters, print ads and other ephemeral mediums of display. But, at its heart, India has a graphic identity that is distinct, locally popular, and original in innovation and amalgamation – still retaining the essence of Indian concepts and

identities. They serve as a modest appreciation, assimilation and seamless breadth of a culture that has attained a monopoly in terms of local contexts and their display through signs and symbols.

Carrying forward the same tradition, this archive and respective conceptual framework weaving display logic for eras since 1930s till present times is a preliminary designer outlook to understand display type in name identifications. Not only that, the study has helped to develop an exhaustive list of various points of view to dissect, simplify and relate various attributes and functions of display type in the shop names of Abdul Rehman Street.

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