



Typography and Storytelling

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Type-less: The fluid form of typography in zines & ‘non-books’ serving as an inclusive medium of cultural storytelling

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Abstract:

“Cultural storytelling is a way to share stories of a culture or a group of individual’s values, experiences, ideas and history through arts, literature, music etc”- this restrictive definition refers to cultures as ‘groups of individuals’ and limits cultural storytelling to only include conventional visual forms like folk paintings, pictures, illustration styles, crafts, poems, scripts etc. Before being scripts, or poems, or prose letters are visual forms first. Typography is hence a fluid, inclusive form of visual story-telling which is received, observed, decoded across larger audiences easily. Typographic dialogue not only successfully communicates relatable cultural narratives to audiences, but also enhances the absorption of unfamiliar cultures, as a powerful storytelling medium, with ease. This paper describes how typographic dialogue evokes powerful influence as a storytelling medium and doesn’t restrict the idea of ‘culture’ to include just groups of individuals but also to include mindsets, ideas and opinions in cultural storytelling.

This paper is based on ‘Type-less Zines’- a design research project including research examples and multiple self-explorations and experiments to examine the affordance of typography in physical as well as digital & ‘non-book’ zines; as a cultural story-telling medium to enable ideation, learning and story-telling through typographic dialogue to decode mindsets, opinions, gender expectations and social constructs in culture and understand how typography as a fluid form of story-telling impacts communication and influence in society.

Key words: *Typographic dialogue, Zines, ‘Non-books’, Webcomics, Non-letters, Animation, Non-book Publishing, Cultural storytelling, Intuitive typography, culture, Inclusive storytelling*

1. Introduction

As per the National Geographic Education journal, storytelling is as old as cultural traditions and their function is to entertain as well as educate. Demonstrated in the following pictures are various forms of cultural storytelling across the world which take the form of ritual dances, spoken word chants, songs, holy ritual ceremonies (eg: ‘mantras’ from Indian mythology excerpts recited during wedding ceremonies, or ‘Passover sedars’ in Jewish sit-down meals etc).



Figure.1 (‘Choctaw Ritual Dance’, National Geographic, 13/012025)



Figure.2 (‘Hawaiian Kumu Chants’, National Geographic, 12/012025)



Figure.3 ('Jewish Passover Seder', National Geographic, 12/01/2025)

Hence, we observe that there is a wide range of accepted forms of storytelling in performing arts, spoken literature language etc.

However, when it comes to visual storytelling, especially typography, it is a common first reaction to visualize storybooks and pictures as the primary forms; and to not expand on the scope of story narratives in other forms which are not books or printed pictures. Just like visual forms, letters too are forms first. They have the equal potential to convey stories in a wide range of forms which are not just physical forms of books, scriptures, bound zines and pictures; but also are 'non-book' forms of communication design like virtual platforms, web-zines, online communities, daily objects and other entities which suit the narrative of story ideas. This paper explores the non-restrictive, fluid and inclusive potential of typography in zines and 'non-books' to expand the definition of 'cultural storytelling' from not just groups of individuals, but also to ideas, opinions, mindsets and mentalities.

2. Decoding the story-telling process and affordance of story-telling media for typography

As cultural storytelling through typography has limited forms, it is important to ideate upon more forms of storytelling which can support typographic affordance. In this project the following research & brainstorming experiments were conducted to innovate upon the potential of various storytelling media.

2.1 Understanding 'progressive disclosure' as a design concept

In order to study the scope of zines and non-books as media, it is necessary to understand progressive disclosure followed in them. If all the parts of the story are presented altogether in a chunk, they become hard to absorb; as well as cause loss of focus over important parts of the story. 'Progressive disclosure' in story-telling refers to disclosing information and parts of the story in smaller bits, so that every part of the story gets noticed by the viewer, allowing for scope to highlight important parts of the narrative in story-telling. The following experiment hence acts as a visual comparison of regular typographic story-telling versus typographic story-telling using progressive disclosure in which there is a visual movement rhythm across all the words in the frame for the viewer.



Figure.4 ('Progressive disclosure', Brainstorming experiment by self- example, 22/03/2024)

A series of such experiments with familiar advertisement jingles was conducted to study the advantages of progressive disclosure in story-telling. It also highlights the scope of using 'word pictures' in typographic story-telling as the viewer recalls the tune of the verse better, perceives every word and accounts for better absorption of the lyrics.

2.2 Explorations through 'un-knowing' the affordance of typography in story-telling media

As rightly mentioned in the book 'Ex-formation' by Kenya Hara, a well-known designer, "The explosion of knowledge available to us today can be dangerous for a designer's creativity. What moves people's hearts, in every case, is the unknown. Things that people already know don't excite them" (Kenya Hara, 2015). Inspired by the concept of 'un-knowing' media and daily objects, a brainstorming experiment was conducted to un-know how typography and its tone of voice as seen in regular media of

storytelling. As demonstrated in the following pictures, the experiment was a ‘mismatch’ exercise of storytelling media versus their expected pattern of typographic communication (eg: memes are always a one-liner, webpages always have typography for command buttons, instructions in restrictive layouts etc)



Figure.5 (‘Knowing tone of voice’, Brainstorming experiment by self, 22/03/2024)

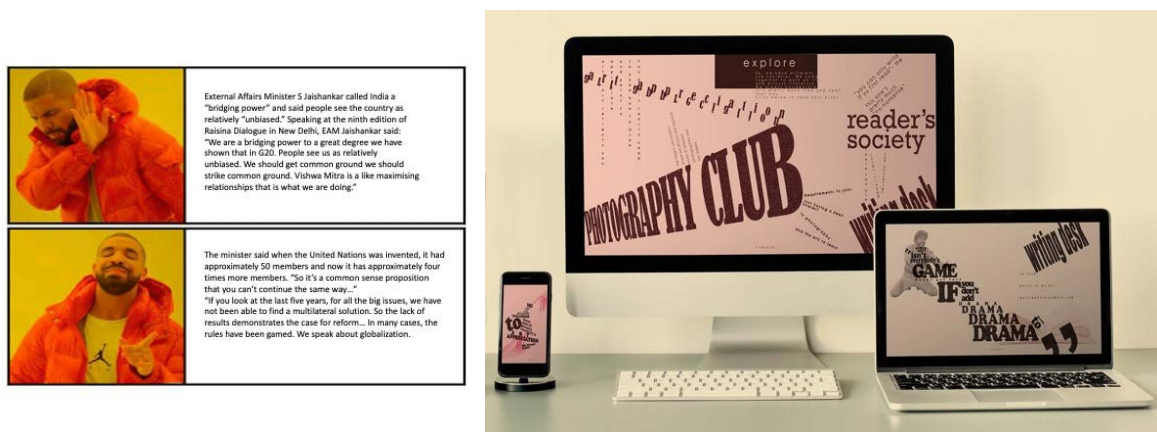


Figure.6 (‘Un-Knowing tone of voice’, Experiment outcome examples, 22/03/2024)

Through the outcomes of this experiment, it is known that un-knowing the medium’s affordance of typography actually expands its scope as a core element rather than a supporting element of the narrative making the overall story-telling process more intriguing for the viewers. Due to the abstract definition of zines to be non-books, each example of the exercise can be perceived as a zine of some form or the other as they contain expression of ideas as well as progressive disclosure which tell a story. A ‘zine’ hence is a fluid storytelling form as it can afford a various range of typographic communication and tones of voice for a wide range of themes from abstract self-

expression to mature themes like mental health, gender inequality, social fabric & inclusivity etc.

3. Research methodology and self-experiments

The research methodology in this project leverages learning from the following unconventional sources and self-experiments ranging from physical, printed zines to ‘non-books’, virtual platforms, webcomics, online communities etc. The core observation of the ‘un-knowing’ process experiments was that due to the ‘surprise element’ of mismatched typographic communication of zines, cultural ideas, mindsets and opinions can be better absorbed and communicated to unfamiliar audiences and evoke powerful social influence through typographic storytelling.

For example, the zine below takes the familiar form of an obituary supplement of the daily newspaper to un-know its original perception and replace it with typographic storytelling of narratives of women facing the aftermath of surviving breast cancer in a society which still emphasizes on beauty standards and appearance; to evoke powerful social impact.




Figure.7 ('Obituary of a Boob', Kadak Collective, 2019)

Similarly, the zine example below takes the form of a monthly newsletter for a niche audience to euphemize harsh narratives of people facing social friction due to stereotypes and perceptions of racism in foreign geographies; to explain 'psychogeography' as a cultural concept. The letterpress treatment used in printing of type also conveys at the

age-old nature of stereotypes and racial discrimination as a cue to set visual context in the story.

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BURN THE BOMB NOT THE NEIGHBOURS



ORANGE REACTION took to the streets in the week running up to July 12th. It's the 'psychogeographic season' when all over Ulster Orange Lodges mount processions to reinforce their psychic dominance of the province. These processions both shore up the fraudulent claims of the 'Loyal Orange Lodges' and terrify all those they exclude. Sir Hugh Amery kept the Portadown Orange Lodge from marching down the Carvaghy road until the Orangemen throughout the province were wound up to fever pitch. Having created the crisis, he then 'collapsed' in face of the very threat he had stoked up.

All places are artificial, they are cultural creations which we inhabit as virtual (socialised beings), they invariably reflect the dominant hierarchies that over lay them in their multiplicity, mediated between such structures rather than between the imagined communities which are mediations of the same hierarchies anyway. The elements that make up the cultural construct called 'place' are of course real in an objective sense, but we are unable to experience them as such, so they have no real existence for us, we experience them as the myth called 'place'. To claim that one such mediated myth is better than another is absurd, to force the point is to stumble, in a stylified way, into the territories given as transcendent by fascism (and we wouldn't want that).

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Since issue 13 we have broken with the Christian Calendar. We are now dating our issues in accordance with the Modern Kemetic Calendar which utilises cycles of 1460 years. The previous cycle (139 — 1599 A.D.) ended with the Hermetic revolt in Calabria, southern Italy.

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SAY YES TO THE MILLENNIUM

THE MOST PRESSING political question of the day is how the proletariat can extract itself from the farrago of mind bending psychological assaults which will be passed off as celebrating the millennium. The function of this great spectacle, which the bourgeoisie has already been preparing for some time, is nothing short of holding their regime in the face of fresh working class onslaughts which will mark the next ten years.

By staging an event which is to be 'enjoyed by all' they hope to restore the bonds which link the wage slaves to the boss, the disenfranchised youth with the history of social workers, cops and teachers who police them; and to reorganise the pseudo-rebels into mainstream culture. However, things were not so easy for the boss class. We will resist. We shall SAY NO TO THE MILLENNIUM.

No Third Reich, No Third Millennium

In the pre-election period, New Labour Minister, Tony Blair, was already planning how to use his accession to power to gain the same sort of self-aggrandisement as achieved by fellow social democrat, late President of France, François Mitterand. Taking a leaf out of Hitler's historical note, Blair spoke of having a thousand days to prepare for the next thousand years. And when there were just a thousand days left, the event did not go smoothly. At Greenwich observatory a ritual which included the ignition of a large number of fireworks took place, and a clock was installed to mark the seconds on ticking away. Regular readers of the newsletter will be familiar with the special place Greenwich holds for the activities of the social evolutionists. The Queen even visited the Queen's House during the eclipse on May 10th 1991 and LPA assistant No. 6, Beltaine 1991.

Even as this is published, the groundwork is going ahead to prepare the millennium in the Greenwich position. Recent studies of the alignment of Canary Wharf have revealed that not only is the building aligned with St Paul's Cathedral and Chicks' Point to the west, but that it also mirrors the top of Greenwich peninsula to the east. We venture the hypothesis that this alignment will be used in whatever architectural commissions are erected to overwhelm the projected hundreds of thousands of visitors which he hope to psychologically possess.

However we are not yet in a position to analyse or harness resistance to this horror show in spatial terms. Our aim here is to challenge the Christian/bourgeois organisation of time by which the fabled notion of the millennium arises in the first place. In fact we are calling on revolutionaries to break with the Gregorian calendar. We have been promoting the Modern Kemetic Calendar which we shall explain in more detail later in this article. However this does not mean that we assume that the world proletariat movement will automatically except it. What we are proposing is that an Anti-Millennium Alliance is formed on revolutionary communist groups can participate in the development of a new calendar acceptable to all, and the fact that our idea seems to be the best, but if another better proposal comes along, we will be happy to follow it.

There will of course be some part-time revolutionaries who will moult and whinge at our suggestion. "Is not important" they whinge, "why make it so?" However such shallow reasoning is easily exposed. Communists are agreed that participation in elections is a way in which the working class is numbered into accepting the charade of parliamentary democracy. But such canals occur only once every five years. However people write the date many times a year. Therefore the potential of organising resistance to the Gregorian calendar is much greater than propaganda against the boss class. We create a rest in the social fabric when we fill in official forms according to our own calendar. It is time for action — and action now.

It is time to break with the Gregorian calendar.

Each day has now been accounted for in the lead up to the millennium, each day has been contained. Each day functions neatly to give way to the next. As our lives get consumed by the drudgery of wage labour, poverty and social decay, all that is held out for us as a party to mark the inauguration of another thousand year Reich. In Zimbabwe, the ruling ZANU party would arrange local party banquets at which the general populace was allowed the privilege of watching the party cadres eat — without themselves being invited to join in. It is exactly the same here, with TV as the media. We are offered the chance to watch the rich and famous laugh and drink and gorge themselves while we look on and are meant to clap. Some have

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Isle of Dogs Reengineered Bombed



"AT FIRST I THOUGHT SOMEONE was kicking the door in. Then the whole building shook. Finally there was a bang and the windows rattled. I knew it was a bomb I rushed outside thinking it had been just outside. I looked up and saw a cloud of smoke rising from just by South Quay." Thus a local resident described their experience of the bomb. It shook the whole Isle of Dogs.

Following the bomb at 7.0 pm on February 9th, the BBC broadcast a newsflash. This announced that a phone call reporting to be from the IRA had said that their cross-fire was over. Even though this came after the explosion, there was no reference to the bomb. It was part of a media programme to massage the collective consciousness. Channel 4 was broadcasting a curious item concerning the Oklahoma bombing in the USA. This item covered Timothy McVeigh's defence which is centred on a plea by German and British neo-nazis. In this confined report it became apparent that this claim also implicated the German and British secret states as well as the US Federal authorities. Interestingly it was following this item that the Isle of Dogs bomb was announced.

We will not go into great detail about matters which have largely covered by the press. Instead we shall seek to point out some issues they have glossed over. The police operation was geared to defusing the interests of business. Our map shows how the Barkstane Council Estate is clearly closer to the explosion than Canary Wharf. Yet it was not until 10.46 that the authorities sent anyone down there to check the devastation.

The local Tenants Association had already started to sort things out. Lantern House had been badly damaged and hundreds of windows had been smashed. The tower block Topmast Point will probably have to be demolished. When council workers (complete with their identification) tried to reach council tenants, they were stopped by the police. Nevertheless, Superintendent Gidner allowed letters and messages of workers in to reach the Tenants Association. Outside commercial interest involved, the police were keen the bourgeois organs of spreading public opinion should be kept going.

The handling of the bomb continued in the whole was the Canary Wharf development.

Aslute readers will note that we have broken with the Christian Calendar by dating this issue Imbolsk 397. This is in accordance with the Modern Kemetic Calendar which utilises cycles of 1460 years. The previous cycle (139 — 1599 A.D.) ended with the Hermetic revolt in Calabria, southern Italy.

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Future trips of the LPA:

Grovely Rights Day

Dawn, Thursday 29th May, 398

Grovely! Grovely! And All Grovely! Unity is Strength

We shall start in Grovely Wood, Great Wishford and then proceed to nearby Salisbury where we shall play the old Lettrist game of "Desperately Seeking Ivich".

312th Anniversary of

The Battle of Sedgemoor

1 pm, Sunday 6th July, 398

BussexFarm, Westonzoyland, Somerset

During the Monmouth rebellion how many of the 3,500 poorly armed rebels had listened to Henry Stubbe rail against the Royal Society as he toured the Somerset Alehouses. Those who weren't killed in battle or executed following their defeat were deported to the West Indies.

Continued from the front

suggested that the occasion be used to inaugurate a truly proletarian party where we simply take back the products of our labour which we have been denied. Our response to that is why wait. It is not better to break with the Gregorian calendar.

The Modern Kemetic Calendar

In the past revolutionaries have inaugurated new dating systems from the point at which the ancient regime collapsed — but this was a feature of the bourgeois revolution. It happened during the French Revolution, and there were even moves in that direction during the Russian Revolution. Our proposal means adopting a calendar which is already nearly four hundred years old. It derives from the ancient Egyptian calendar — Kham being a name for Egypt and from which the word chemistry is derived. Cheikh Asia Diop described the Calendar in his book *Civilization or Barbarism* (1981, English translation 1991, p.279).

The Egyptians invented the 365-day year, breaking it down as follows: twelve months of 30 days, plus five intercalary days, each one corresponding to the birth of one of the following Egyptian gods: Osiris, Isis, Horus, Seth and Nephthys. These are the same gods who will give birth to the human race and inaugurate the cycle of historical times: Adam and Eve are only helical biblical replicas of Osiris and Isis.

This year is divided into three seasons of four months, the months into three weeks of ten days, that do not overlap the months; the day into 24 hours. The Egyptians knew that this calendar year was too short, that it was lacking a quarter of a day in order for

it to correspond to a complete sidereal revolution. Also in 4225 B.C. (the sidereal year) the sun at noon from Memphis, History tells us that such a helical rising took place in A.D. 139, and so it follows that the next cycle commenced in A.D. 1599. This date coincides with the inauguration of the modern era, the advent of science and capitalism. Thus we call our current calendar the Modern Kemetic Calendar (MKC) and we have reached year 398. As yet the finer details of the calendar have yet to be resolved, and we call on all genuine revolutionary communist organisations to involve themselves in the Anti-Millennium Alliance work on these four points.

How can we expect the working class to take us seriously when we still use the superstitious calendar of the Christians imposed by the bosses?

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LPA (ELS)
 Box 15,
 138 Kingsland High Street,
 London E8 2NS

Send more stamps for back issues as available. Institutional, library and supporter subscriptions — £5. (Cheques payable to Unpopular Books).

Figure.8 ('Newsletters', London Psychogeography Association, 2000)

A 'non-book' in this project refers to a storytelling medium which is not exactly a physical book but may carry one or more of the recalls of book-based storytelling (eg: printing,

typography, binding etc) but still tells a story through progressive disclosure and narratives.

For example, the self-experiment below is actually a zine but is has a non-book form as it doesn't contain the pages and legibility of a book; but still communicates the persona of pessimism and self-image issues through delicate glass pages, fonts focusing on negative spaces around letter forms which become confusing to read in the zine's closed state, much like the personality of a pessimist struggling with mental health.

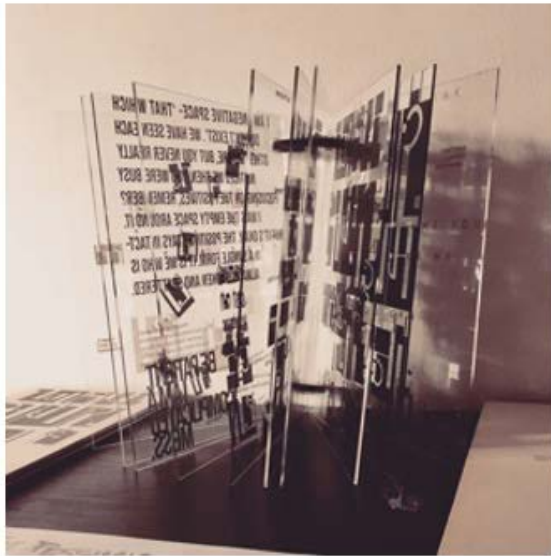


Figure.9 ('Diary of a Pessimist', Sayali Milind Phadke, 2021)

Similarly, the example below is a zine but in the form of a printed 'rolling paper' bunch (wrapping paper for cigarettes) to evoke thoughts on a patriarchal society and its stereotype of type-casting women who smoke to be a 'bad influence' through hand-treated, raw, feminine looking fonts and typographic dialogue.



Figure.10 ('Charaswati- Made In India', Tarini Dixit, 2013)

Thus, we learn that a non-book serves as a great form of inclusive typographic storytelling for topics where physical books and regular media become predictable and for the viewers. However, when typographic non-books are placed in the right spaces, they can afford to make the storytelling process more interactive rather than make them a 'sit back and watch' experience.

For example, the image below is a non-book zine & brand collaboration with Lush Cosmetics. It is called 'The Poetry Pharmacy' which engages customers shopping skincare and body-care products experience mental calm and self-acceptance through 'poetry pills' which are based on themes related to body image, aging, appearance etc; containing short typographic dialogue of poems and healing words



Figure.11 ('Poetry on Prescription', Lush, 2023)

Similarly, in the self-experiment below, showcased at the British Museum, South London for an exhibit themed around 'The Impact of Decolonization'; the state of economic poverty of the colonies after decolonization is conveyed through a fictional currency design which becomes heavier and more hurtful to spend as the denomination grows smaller. The typographic storytelling on this currency design is not restricted to slogans and words, it also uses typographic punctuation marks to convey a state of 'caution' in the emblem design, as well as the symbolic graphic patterns and identity derived with the use of exclamation marks. The progressive disclosure in the storytelling is controlled through a

series of 'leftover currency' in an average household moneybox containing captions of how they became empty over the years, supported with contrasting news audio pieces from the west glorifying decolonization as a humanitarian act. The audio pieces and object-handling experience make enhance the typographic storytelling to feel more inclusive to viewers. The example below is an example of non-book storytelling as it still has elements of printing, and still has progressive disclosure of the story through different slogans & type identity.

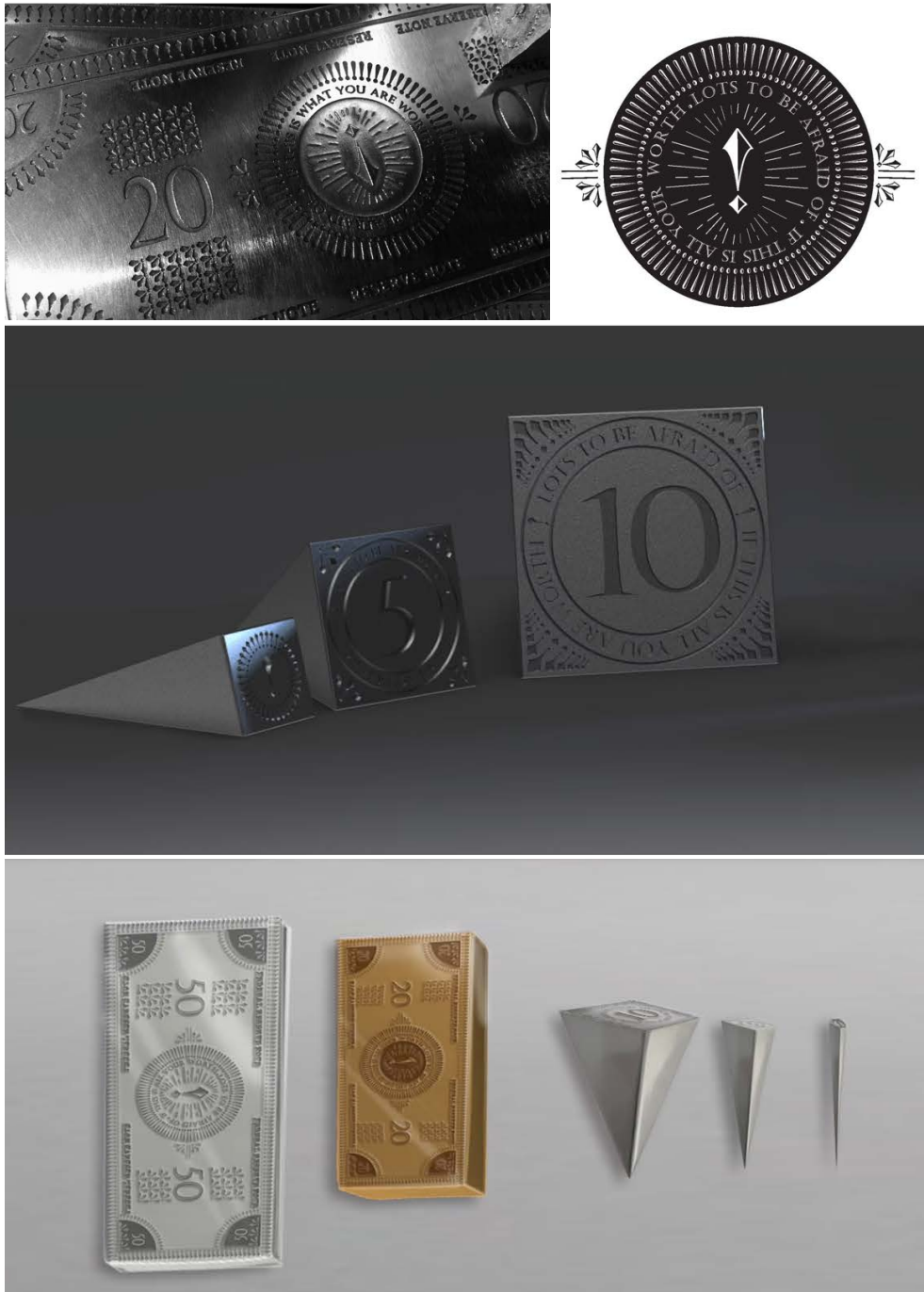


Figure.12 ('Currency of Decolonization', Sayali Phadke, Rohan Sharma, Esmond Sit, 2020)



Figure.13 ('Currency of Decolonization- Narrative', Sayali Phadke, Rohan Sharma, Esmond Sit, 2020)

Thus, we learn that typographic storytelling of incidents which impact culture and mentalities is better absorbed when the viewers are allowed to interact with the non-book media as they experience the narrative more closely. The self-experiment below showcases the plight of homeless immigrants in a foreign land through non-book typographic dialogue printed on a folding carpet occupying the entire floor area upon which viewers can walk, stop and know how homelessness impacts daily lives, making them feel more included in the experience.



Figure.14 ('The Nowhere Zine Carpet Floor Exhibit', Sayali Phadke, 2020)

Similarly, the example below tells the story of the mental shift that comes with moving places, cities etc in a modern society, through a series of typographic ‘visual essays’ in a digital interactive experience, including viewers to reflect on their own experiences of ‘shifting’ as well.

As the daughter of a diplomat,
 I've had to move between countries a
 couple of times. Travel has always been a big
 adventure for me! My parents are unfailingly supportive
 of all the things I like to do.
 So I'm a bit of a nomad and have traveled by myself since I was 17 years old.
 People assumed that I'd probably
 tame down once I got married.
 Marriage however has had no say
 in my solo backpacking
 travels.
 At social gatherings and family occasions
 my husband and I, both shift.
 We quietly take the dressing down and he is
 often further admonished for allowing me to live like a
 wanderer.

Figure.15 (‘Shifting’, Pavithra Dikshit- Kadak Reading Room, 2016)

Studying the affordance of digital platforms as a non-book storytelling medium to include webcomics, webzines, online communities, meme channels etc, it is observed that digital platforms account for personal interaction and full attention of the viewer to create impact. Challenging the role of typography as a supporting element for captions, the following self-experiment is a webcomic which uses storytelling through word pictures as the main focus to narrate the struggles of living with a ‘freckle-face’ and appearance-shaming in an Indian society.



Figure.16 ('Tough Spots', Sayali Milind Phadke, 2020)

Observing the scope of digital platforms in the following examples to engage audience's feedback through likes, shares, comments, 'trolling', tagging, comment wars, it is understood that digital platforms acts as a non-book storytelling medium to impact cultural change.



Figure.17 ('The Royal Existentials', Aarthi Parthasarathy, 2017)



Figure.18 ('Hate comment wars', MapsNMore, 2022)

The following self-experiment hence used typographic storytelling to influence inclusion of viewers and share their personal stories of navigating through social friction caused due to stereotypes and voice notes through an online community web-zine experience where typographic dialogue and animations were created to support the voice note stories in each post.

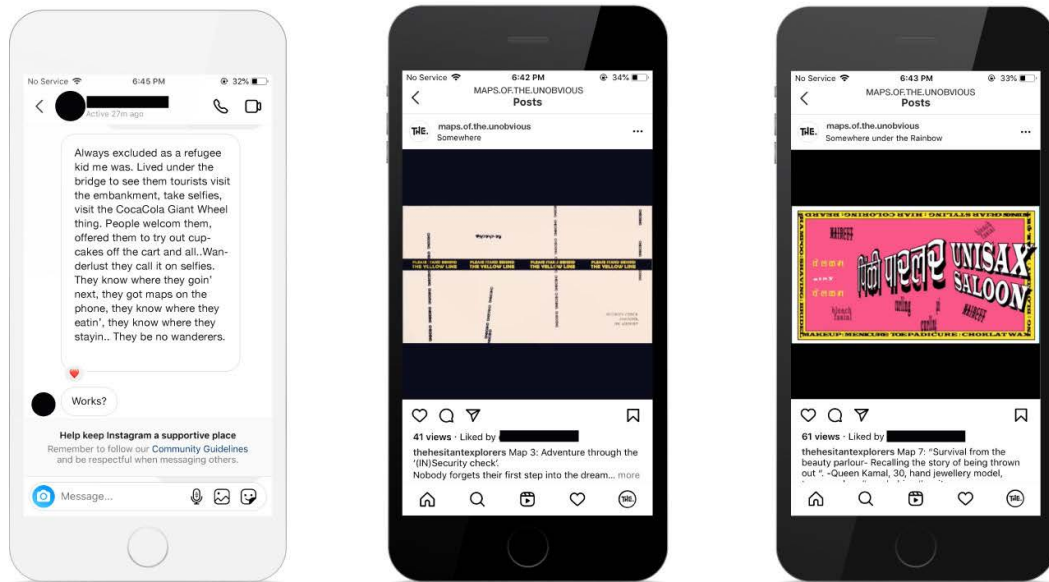


Figure.19 ('Content Generation', Sayali Milind Phadke, 2023)



(Figure 20: 'The homeless wanderluster- stills from AV Webzine', Sayali Phadke, 2022)



(Figure 21: 'A transgender at the salon- stills from AV Webzine', Sayali Phadke, 2023)

Through this example, it is understood that when typographic storytelling is combined with expressive animations, supporting or contrasting audio and placed in an interactive, inclusive, non-book media like digital platforms, webzines, meme channels etc the potential to make viewers included in the cultural storytelling of mindsets, mentalities, ideas and opinions, increases manifold.

4. Conclusions:

Through all the research examples and self-experiments presented in this paper, it is largely understood that cultural storytelling expands its scope multifold through typography as it is an inclusive form of storytelling. In addition, the following observations add to the conclusion:

- Typographic storytelling cannot be limited to the forms of books, poems, scriptures etc as reaching larger audiences demands more inclusive forms.
- To innovate upon more fluid zines and non-book forms of storytelling, it is important to keep 'un-knowing' daily objects and environments to finally see them as a storytelling & communication design tool.
- When typographic dialogue meets fluid zines and non-book forms of storytelling it has a multifold impact on society due as the potential for cultural storytelling and inclusivity grows to influence change and revolution in culture.

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