Impact and Relevance of Design Principles in Magazine Covers: A Content Analysis

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Abstract
Print is the most effective means of conveying useful information to the masses. But just giving information is not enough because that's what every print media source does, how the information is presented is what makes a difference. The presentation of information is an art and the accomplishment of that art is expertized by magazines. Magazines have the ability to sustain their readership only through the use of disciplined standards of design principles. A magazine has the secret weapons of incorporating innovation with the content through the proper placement of all design elements. For every magazine the most prominent factor is the mast head that is the name of the magazine which reflects the strength of the magazine brand. Therefore, a magazine focuses majorly on the apt usage of font style for it. These design principles are not just to adorn a magazine cover with vivid patterns but to provide a sensible sequence of content and a systematic track of how the readers should go with reading of the cover story and then the other stories. The study of the alignment of the cover lines, bar code, pug, masthead, etc, is what brings about the beauty of the cover page. Following a theme is the rule for an ideal cover page. For the production of a successful cover page, there is need of expert hands for fixing the theme, creating the layout, deciding the color and typography, and making the magazine a readable piece for the people.

Keywords: Design principles, presentation, visual hierarchy

Introduction
In this competitive world where print industry is slightly getting overshadowed by the emergence of new media, it needs to maintain its reputation and sustain in the market. Among all the print productions what grabs the attention of readers the most are the magazines because they are the most beautifully presented art of production. A magazine is product which is sheer combination of design, standard style, creativity and innovation. Moreover, to evaluate the credibility of a magazine, it is not just content of the magazine that is taken into consideration but also the layout and design of the cover page. The cover page is like the composition of a master shot with the greatness of cover lines in it. So all the magazines use the design principles very circumspectly to stand out apart from the cover pages and wisely depict the current issue on it. There is no term as an “ideal cover page” but there is a need to create an eye-catching cover page because cover page is the epicenter of magnetism which attracts the readers towards the newsstand and if the cover page leaves an unforgettable impression on the minds of the people in just a glance then it is 100% success. Logically quoting as per the marketing research it has been found that an average person spends about 3-4 seconds on an average on glancing the cover page.

Truly said by Paul Arden, designing a cover page is possible but making the cover page a visual treat for the readers is a difficult job to do. Every cover page differs in terms of the audience it caters to because a fashion magazine would always be filled with the trendy elements and sparkling look whereas a political magazine would be showcasing the latest political issues with a very serious look. The strength of any magazine is its cover page and its designing task is a strenuous job for the designers. Magazines are the collective outcome of a all graphic designers, content writers, cartoonist, etc. On the other hand, magazines especially their cover page form and shape the opinions of the readers. People who are regular customers of the magazine always look forward to the upcoming edition, so keeping this in mind increases the pressure on the magazine makers. Here is an analysis of the well-renowned Indian magazines namely, OUTLOOK, INDIA TODAY, THE WEEK, TIME magazines. This analysis would help in comparing the most competitive magazines in the market and also what helps them to survive in this digitally updated world.

Literature review
There are many literature, thesis, journal articles etc. written on the topic of the use of design principles in general for a graphic product. There is no literature specifically or use of design principles in context of magazine. So here is the review of 3 literature works.

A thesis on “Towards a Quantitative Evaluation of Layout Using Graphic Design Principles” by Daniel J. Mosora (2012 May) focuses on the lack of practical knowledge of understanding of how human visual perception operates. This thesis is more inclined towards the reinforcement of Gestalt principles which are collectively phrased as “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts” because this thesis talks more about how perfect “composition” of all the elements produces a visually beautiful and logical cover with prior importance to visual hierarchy.

“The more strikingly visual your presentation is, the more people will remember it. And more importantly, they will remember
you.” — Paul Arden (Creative director of Saatchi and Saatchi and an author)

Reynolds, G. (2008). Chapter 6 Presentation Design: Principles and Techniques, Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery (pp. - 162). In these lines, Paul referred presentation not only to the slide presentations, he meant how a product, an idea or thought is presented before the audience which is very selective in nature. This thought given by Paul is like success mantra for a magazine because magazines are sold first by their face value of the magazine and a magazine’s face value is its cover page.

Another thesis is on “Enforcing Creativity in Basic Design” by Naciye Derin Erdurak (2002, May) explains that graphic design is not meant only for communicating message to the masses but it is about communicating specific message to specific audience “effectively.” The whole thesis throws light on the production of creativity as a result of a combination of text and graphics. As mentioned in the thesis paper, the great psychologist, De Bono, says “Creativity is a messy and confusing subject. … At the simplest level, creative means bringing into being something that was not there before … but the new thing must have a value” (1992). Uniqueness is what captivates the audience but unique does not always mean the best, therefore innovation in design shall come along with caution. John Dewey defines creativity as the “Articulation of inner experiences in response to outer stimuli” (1992). In that sense, human experience and knowledge combined with imagination results in a balance and unity for production. In this thesis graphic design is taken up as a visual solving problem which is solved by the graphic designers by conceiving and executing the design to convey the required information with much anticipated effectiveness.

Objective

The study of the cover pages of all the above mentioned magazines is a comprehensive one. The major aim of this research was to understand the significance of designing a perfect cover page. How just the magazine cover, not the entire edition contributes on creating a deep impression in the minds of the readers regarding the mentioned issue in the magazine? The broad objectives of the study of the magazine cover are as follows—

a) Proper usage of design principles
b) Cover story holds the reputation of the whole magazine
c) Understanding the importance of the color scheme
d) Indispensable tool of designing – graphic designers
e) Relevance to the cover story
f) Invoking strong influence through effective cover page photo
g) Balancing the color with the text and visual (graphics, illustrations)
h) What role does visual hierarchy play in cover design?
i) A poor design can diminish the standard of the magazine.

These objectives help in establishing the fact that magazine creation is such an extensive job and also under that pressure of bulk of work, the expectations of the readers also worsen that pressure for the magazine makers.

Research methodology

This is an analysis of the design of cover page of OUTLOOK, INDIA TODAY, THE WEEK and TIME magazine. This research paper is based on the study of the edition of these magazines for over past 3 months. The research methodology used in this research is Primary data collection as this is a content analysis. It can be called a qualitative research because the magazine is judged not by the figures of their readership but on the basis of the use of design principles in cover pages. This is a comprehensive study of 3 months span means 4 weekly editions of each of these magazines. The observations are done keeping in mind the objectives of how a magazine maker creates the cover considering all elements like color scheme, theme of the cover page, alignment of the all the elements, etc. The differences in the cover page occurs in terms of use of pictures or graphics, placement of cover lines, masthead and bar codes, typography and many other principles. The design of these decides the aura of the whole magazine. It actually becomes the face of the magazine because it reflects the kind of content it offers to the readers. The research is simply conducted only on the basis of the analytical study of the implementation of gestalt principles. So the collection of data is only from the hard copy of various editions of these magazines.

History/ background

Though in 1600s the first magazine publication was launched in German Erbualiche Monaths Unterredungen but “The Gentleman’s Magazine”, founded in London by Edward Cave in 1731 is credited as the first “modern” magazine. Mr. Cave was the one who coined the term “magazine” derived from the French word “masasin” meaning “storehouse”. It was called so because that magazine was an amalgam of the monthly updates clubbed with editorial content for the first time.

Furthermore, the first successful market magazine was “The Saturday Evening which was published in 1921. This was the first time artwork was used as the main focal element on the cover page, especially the paintings of Norman Rockwell, first appearing in 1916. This was the beginning of the usage of visual as an
 colour scheme on the cover page because otherwise the impact one colour would neutralize the effect of the other. OUTLOOK is majorly written in a serif font style on a red colored strap which is color depicting power, dominance and strength. INDIA TODAY is written in either white or red which depict clarity and anger respectively. Also in one edition it has tri colour to give it an appeal of patriotism. THE WEEK magazine’s masthead is also in white and that of the TIME is white or black representing the seriousness of the issues. In designing, the colour of the text should be in contrast with the background colors to establish emphasis and the color of the pug (sticker like advertisement) then the color of the various cover lines to set dominant, sub-dominant and important line. So this is how the visual hierarchy works for the design of the magazine.

OUTLOOK is in “Bodoni MT condensed” type which has a modern type of curves, THE WEEK which is also a type of modern curve, INDIA TODAY is in sans-serif font- “Aharohi” and so is TIME. These sans-serif font styles are for depicting clarity and providing space for readability and serif fonts add more dramatism to the political magazine masthead. This typography also builds the brand name of the magazine.

Role of computer graphics

Gone are the days when paper, pencil and erasers were the only weapons to design something. The print industry has undergone many changes, from letterpress and linotype to phototypesetting and offset printing and now the emergence of digital printing, print industry has seen it all. In the present scenario, there is a need to produce the best of the design which can be done with help of the computer graphics because simply images are not enough they need to be edited to bring alive the sensitivity of the issue.

Computer graphics for designing the cover page as a whole is the Adobe In design but for the editing of the images Adobe Photoshop is the best option whereas Adobe illustrator and Corel Draw are good alternatives for the purpose of creating graphics. The tools used in these softwares do wonders to the design of cover page.

Computer graphics are the latest indulgence in the printing industry and they seem to have made an immobile place for themselves in the industry. This has led to serious repercussions as digital subscriptions are preferred over print subscription. As per Alliance for Audited Media Research, the digital subscriptions constitute about 3.5% of total subscription. Moreover, the digital subscriptions are increasing at the rate of 36.7% while print circulation is decreasing at the rate of 1.7%. However, the technological advancements have resulted in the simplifying the process of designing the magazine.
Audience

Every magazine has its own audience. That means the readers of every magazine have a different taste and preference of reading something. Especially the loyal readers of political magazines have an inclination towards reasons, politics and being updated with latest happenings. Therefore, such readers are hard to impress because they are very demanding in terms of the content to be read. They want the analytical piece of stories and a convincing portrayal of stories through the best photographs. Planning a cover page that could bring these readers towards the shelf of these magazines is quite a tiring task. Like the depiction of beef ban with help of a picture of animal stained with blood on the cover looks very intimidating.

Audience is like a king without a crown because readers may not be having any authority but it is their readership is actually what runs a magazine in the market.

Analysis/ findings (scrutinizing the use of design principles)

Design principles are not just points or rules to govern a product. Rather they are the tools that add magic to the existing designs. The design of the cover need to follow the guides and templates but that does not mean that the design has to be exactly the same. It needs to have variation in it. The most important principle out of all is the Emphasis because the cover story needs the recognition it gets through the cover page. So the focal point in all of these magazines is the main image with its cover line. Also there is always a set of standard followed by a magazine like INDIA TODAY always has red colored bleed area while others don't. The placement of text is not fixed as well and the dominance factor is followed in the cover. The most important issue (cover story) is in boldest and larger font size on the cover assuring 100% recognition. The less important ones or the sub- dominant factors are in smaller size and different color. The masthead of magazines is overlapped by the main image in most cases and the reason is that masthead’s type and style is already known to the readers so it hardly matters if some portion of it is left hidden but the main cover image is something that demands the attention of the readers, so it needs to be kept on the front. Also the placement of masthead is different as INDIA TODAY, THE WEEK and TIME magazines have centrally aligned masthead unlike OUTLOOK which has a right aligned masthead. Also the bar code is positioned at left top in INDIA TODAY, at the left bottom in OUTLOOK. Also out all editions of over 3 months it is found the cover page generally consists of a photographic image than a graphics. Time is one such political magazine where portrait photographs generally make a place to the cover page. One of the captivating element is to use numbers ad figures in the cover lines “64% Feel Dadri Beef Killing Has Dented Modi Image” in October 19th 2015 edition of OUTLOOK (Cover 3 in appendix). This helps to establish credibility and authenticity of the issue on the cover page.

Magazines covers are of various kinds like image based, illustration based, type based and concept based and out of all of these kinds, image based is the most popular one then the rest 3 are relatively less used. Illustrations are used very rarely but they are quite innovative and different like the depiction of PM Modi as a superman in INDIA TODAY’s edition of 12th October 2015 (Cover 1 in appendix ) and edition of 18th Oct. 2015 of INDIA TODAY where beef killing is depicted (Cover 4 in appendix). Then a very well dignified type cover was designed with the depiction of fire torch formed with the text using text wrap in the 26th October 2015 edition of OUTLOOK about the minimum city (Cover 5 in appendix). In that cover, there is a poem portraying the rage of the writers and their melancholy as well. This intensifies the significance of the issue. Also another complete type based cover was in 28th September 2015 edition of OUTLOOK which says, “Everything you know about cholesterol is wrong” (Cover 6).

a) LINE- It evokes emotions and a sense of peacefulness and disturbance in the mind of the viewer like the edition of OUTLOOK of 10th August 2015 ( Cover 7 in appendix), the 2 straight lines indicate the specification that there is different cover line within that area and since it is straight it has a calm appeal. The vertical lines in the latest editions of INDIA TODAY (Cover 8 in appendix) depict the demarcation between different stories but also create tensions.

b) EMPHASIS – This is like the root of the cover page because this factor is shown mainly by the image chosen for the cover as in OUTLOOK covers. Like the portraits in the TIME, the illustrations in THE WEEK (Cover 8 in appendix) and INDIA TODAY. The 2 cover pages below depict PM Modi’s greetings to the renowned personalities and thus through this the bond between US and India is presented as a strong one. (Cover 2 and 9 in appendix)

c) CONTRAST- The contrast can be in terms of colors, size, texture etc, like the color of mastheads should be in contrast to the background or the strap on which it is placed. The font size of the main selling line has to be bigger than that of the other cover lines. Contrast also helps in bringing emphasis to the main issue of the cover page.

d) COLOUR ,TEXTURE and PATTERNS – This principle is very amazingly used in the edition of 12th October 2015 where Modi’s meeting with Zuckenberg was a great honor or the country and thus Tricolor was used for the background and also the there is pattern
deleting the bond between the 2 in the background. This is also an example of repetition as 1 pattern is being repeated again and again. The edition of 19th October 2015 shows “Politics over beef” through the use red blood stains on the face of the animal (Cover 4 in appendix). In TIME’s edition of 11th October 2015, there is terrific use of monochromatic theme to bring about the seriousness of the cover story on “MIGRATION TO EUROPE” (Cover 11 in appendix)

e) BALANCE – The balance has to be between different elements like text and image. So, mostly it is asymmetrical because more emphasis is given to the main image or graphic. For instance the edition of Indrani mukherjee’s case (Cover 12 in appendix) there a radial balance because Indrani’s photo is surrounded by all those associated with her case. It brings her into more focus.

f) PROPORTION – It is followed in terms of the length and breadth of the cover page, the equation between different elements etc.

g) UNITY/HARMONY – When all the element complement each other and create a perfect piece of art without any flaws then unity is achieved harmony is there in an artwork when all the design principles work well with content and find a commonality with one another.

h) PROXIMITY – The clubbing of elements is very vital because too much clutter hampers readability of the readers. For example, in THE WEEK’s edition of “BEST B- SCHOOLS” (Cover 13 in appendix), all the content was clubbed together on the top and the cover is also type based cover which resulted in too much of text and usage asymmetrical balance.

i) ALIGNMENT - Deciding upon the whole content and image for the cover is not enough placing them altogether in a sensible manner is more important. Magazine is not just an information provider but it provides an angle (perspective) to the issues so it is important to guide the readers in the best way possible.

In the 1st Nov. 2015’s edition of THE WEEK (Cover 14 in appendix), the main cover lines are aligned to the left-bottom and thus it does not disrupt the importance of the cover image. The edition of 5th October 2015 of OUTLOOK (Cover 15 in appendix) where “WHO KILLED BRAND IIT” was the cover story, the text was not much and it was intelligently placed in the bottom-center (not justified). Even less text is shown very effectively. October 13th 2015’s issue of INDIA TODAY uses meager text and center alignment is perfect as it does not stain the desolated condition of the nation (Cover 16 in appendix).

j) REPETITION – All the elements like masthead, folio and barcode etc, are repeatedly used in every edition. Like OUTLOOK always has its masthead in white on a broad red strap, with a pug having “20 outstanding outliers” and 2 less important cover lines on the top. But the layout of OUTLOOK has changed recently on the 20th anniversary of the magazine (Cover 17 and cover 18 in appendix). The masthead is no longer in the uppercase, the red strap on which the masthead was placed and the pug are removed, the placement of less important cover lines with an image on the top is also eliminated. Similarly THE WEEK is also in white and on a red strap with the cover lines beside it in a different coloured box. Repetition does not mean carbon copy of the same elements, slight changes as in THE WEEK removes the monotonous look of the magazine.

k) RHYTHM AND MOVEMENT – The design elements leads the eyes of the viewers so the movement is created through still image. The motion is well established in the edition of INDIA TODAY on “MODI’S GLOBAL PUSH” where PM Modi seems to be actually taking a flight towards the betterment of the nation by making it globally recognized.

All the principles are very aptly used in the cover of magazine. Incorporating all the design principles together in one cover page is not necessary, what's important is that the important information is conveyed to the audience in the best way possible.

Conclusion

1. Design elements are not just to beautify the magazine covers and make them decorative but it provides a sensible display to the vivid combination of the text and visuals.

2. Design principles not only formulate the presentation of the cover but also organize the thoughts in the mind of the readers.

3. Visual hierarchy acts as the driver of the movement of the viewers’ eyes.

4. Design principles add strength and weight to the issue being depicted by the cover page.

5. A skillful mind can only do this tough job of framing interesting cover lines, choosing apt images and placing them properly.
6. Cover page is like a reflection of the whole magazine and the design principles act as a mirror to direct the path towards producing that reflection.

References


APPENDIX

(Covers 1 to 18 – Left to Right)
On the night of June 17, a gunman opened fire in the basement of a church in Charleston. Nine people died. Five survived.

**What It Takes to Forgive a Killer**

Confessing and families tell their stories.