

MOTIF MATRIX

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ABSTRACT:

The project I propose to present suggests that an improved model of trend analysis could be created for student use. Such a model should better reflect the shared consciousness of the design community and offer more effective tools to support contemporary (cross disciplinary) design practices.

At present the trend and forecasting industry offers little differentiation of models, artificially compartmentalizing information and data which is often out of synch with this generation of students' design and research methods. A new model would address these problems and positively impact on the design development within both the academic and the commercial sector.

This project is part of my academic research and professional design practice over the last six years. A prototype of the proposed model has been produced and is now at a stage when it can be formally tested and developed, identifying the ideal digital platform and anticipating its subsequent curriculum impact.

Keywords: Motif, Trend, multidisciplinary

What follows takes the form of an explanation and rationale behind the proposed visual presentation format.

The presentation will be a designed power point that will fully illustrate the visual outcome of the primary research undertaken over the last 6 years. The construction of this presentation will be the major part of the preparation to support my contribution to the conference.

The paper outlines this journey of practice based research through an introduction to the context followed by the stages of development, finally outlining potential applications and future research opportunities represented by this body of visual analysis.

Context

In the wake of the digital revolution, changes in the ready access to a vast library of design solutions, the heightened profile of design trends and the constant commentary on 'fast fashion' have all resulted in fundamental changes in the design process itself. The Web (and the tide of images it has released) has heavily influenced the nature of inspiration and coloured the development of design outcomes. The profile of trend tracking (in both printed and digital media) has increased enormously with the number of informal platforms, articles and blogs documenting every turn of trend events is growing year on year. This vast shared digital library has magnified the impact of common consciousness and created a need for student designers to push for greater variety and a more timely response to trend.

My observation is that there has been a seismic shift in student's behavior in relation to trend. They no longer act as individually as previous generations (striving for uniqueness), but are responding in a more tribal pattern, using trend as mark of membership and as a way of anchoring their designs to the 'now'.

Added to this is the altered nature of design school communities. The partial erosion of disciplinary boundaries in the curriculum development in the last decade (and subsequently in the increased students' perceptions of the synergies in trend across design) means that the trend research models traditionally used by students now seem artificially segregated. They lack complexity in the analysis of the motifs and trend stories they present, and the interpretive structure often runs at odds with the natural design development process of contemporary students.

After 24 years in Design Education and free-lance design, I have developed a professional perspective on trend responsiveness both as a practitioner and as an academic. The nature of this body of work is coloured by that experience and aims to develop tools that can support the difficult balance between originality and adherence to trend in the design development practice of undergraduate students.

Trend is a concept that has an altered meaning and an increased impact on the work of students today. Contemporary students' relationship to trend exists on a heightened level, positively in terms of influence, but also often negatively by seemingly validating weak levels of invention and risk. This generation's increase trend awareness can act as an obstacle, particularly when mistaken as a signifier of good work. Yet it is in their blood and though trend is still perhaps something of a 'dirty word' in the minds of previous generations, obviously no design work evolves in a vacuum. All ideas and development are influenced by

'common consciousness', however subliminally, and so knowledge of trend is key, if only to know how to avoid it. This study seeks to reflect the real value of trend responsiveness as understood by the contemporary design community.

Given my background in graphic and applied design, my focus falls on motif (and associated colour), particularly the application/evolution of motif in outcomes across the full design landscape (not just occurring in a single design discipline). It uses 'motif' to refer not just to graphic-led logos/icons or to interior/fashion and surface patterns, but rather to images that transcend both these and other definitions and results in an "on trend" use of 'motifs' across a broad arc of design contexts.

In the last few years, I have accompanied my design process by formally archiving my trend observations on a monthly basis [twelve months X six years=72 plus motifs]. After six years of accumulating data, I have consolidated this body of work into a more organized format to map these trends and their potential trajectories. While predominantly visual in nature, the work also articulates the cultural referencing and associations of each individual motif in terms of the questions: "why this?" and "why now?". This initial personal practice has subsequently developed into the basis of a broader analytical study.

Stage 1 Initial objectives (2008-2009)

So, based on the premise that a better model of trend analysis could be developed (one that more effectively reflects 'common consciousnesses and better supports contemporary design practices), I set about formalizing the archive amassed over the previous half a decade. My objective was to construct a visual data base and research model (with enhanced analytical routes) that would address some of the following issues;

- 1) The inconsistent and tardy nature of trend adoption within contemporary product development (Graphics, illustration, fashion, knitwear, surface pattern, textiles, furniture , product, etc) and student design practice.
- 2) The lack of originality in response to trends, resulting in the homogenization of motif use in the student community and beyond.
- 3) The limited nature of the methods and services that support anticipation and interpretation of motif. The forecasting industry has evolved to offer information in a very narrow format, with little differentiation. This form of information seems out of synch with new design practices by artificially compartmentalizing trend information. Instead it should reflect the multidisciplinary adoption of trends across the full spectrum of design practices.

A new module should reconfigure design information in line with broader design processes of the contemporary "post-digital" creative community, challenge current configurations of trend information and provide a platform for curriculum development in the teaching of design research and commercial practice.

Stage 2 Development (2009- 2011)

Prompted by the observations outlined above, the next stage was to develop the informal personal archive and identify a more public platform. This work progressed through two key stages;

1) Collation of Motif trends across a sample period of six years (Sample time frame prompted by activities undertaken over the last six years, see Stage1).

At this stage the initial analytical 'Motif Map' was created: A comprehensive visual database that charted the constellation of motifs as they appeared on the trend radar over the last 6-7 years. As previously mentioned (Context), the criteria were defined as motif trends that had a meaningful impact across a full arc of life style products. It included any design context where the application of motif would influence the purchasing decision. Examples of trends that were restricted to singular design contexts were not included, resulting in a new methodology, which effectively filters trend information in a manner that better reflects contemporary working practices.

2) Subsequent analysis of routes and topographies of motif. Both the relationship between shape and narrative and the investigation of the contribution that core motifs make to the final design will be illustrated.

The initial archive then became a new type of prediction platform, one which better reflects current generations of students' concept of inspiration and trend. This unique way of assembling trend information allows for a broader time frame perspective, charting long term progression of a trend, while also pinpointing short term solutions. The resulting model is more intuitive, able to prompt keener analysis, accelerated interpretations and more innovative responses.

To illustrate this process of tracking motifs, I offer the following example tracking the shifts of a single shape across four years as it is influenced by key trend stories;

- 1) Twig is the new Pylon. (Urban to Natural)
- 2) Antler is the new Twig. (Natural to Woodland)
- 3) Coral is the new Antler. (Woodland to Nautical)

This evolution of a repeated organic form reflects a changing pre-occupation with key design narratives—"urban," "woodland," and "nautical." The model's data-base 'motif map' would chart such evolution by visually grouping key design motifs revealing such trend driven transformation. The resulting constellation of evolving motifs allows new motif families to be identified, new narratives to be revealed, and creates opportunities to track aspects of contemporary consciousness within the design community.

The “Motif Map” will act as a diagnostic tool that predicts new image interpretations, while also facilitating design development and the emergence of new hybrids. It would enable users to produce better informed and more timely design outcomes. It would support their working practices (through access to a ‘live’ model) by interpreting the design landscape in a way that is more familiar to their generation, working parallel with their understanding of trend.

The visual power point that this paper supports will illustrate this stage of development fully through the presentation of a proto type forecasting model.

As suggested above this new model is at a stage where it has already identified three key areas of interaction; Motif Families, Motif sequences and Motif hybrids (as outlined in the visual presentation). These three key points of analysis provide a triple opportunity for interaction with the model, supporting the students improved interpretation of, and responsiveness to, trend. As the model develops my intention is that a fully interactive digital version will function as a complex online tool, available to all design students across the school and industry subscribers.

Stage 3 Application (2011- 2013)

The next stage of the project is to demonstrate the validity of the mechanism that the model database offers by conducting case studies and interviews. By so doing, I will identify the educational, industrial and commercial applications of the Motif Matrix and test its key functionality and contribution. The outcome of this research will help to identify the ideal platform for the model and its associated services. In the future the model would rely on the contribution of future trend observation by the combined design faculty, as well as by broader student community. Both of them would have joint ownership and participation by contributing updates and commentary on the 'live' digital platform. The potential impact and advantages to the host institution could include;

- 1) Cross discipline synergies and student project alliances fostering an enhanced sense of being a member of the wider design school, creating barriers against a more myopic programme driven experience.
- 2) Improved understanding of the debate about the common need for an agile commercial trend awareness balanced with the application of a unique interpretation through a personal aesthetic.
- 3) Improved employability, vocational skill base and a model that promotes a shared dialogue between the student body and our industry partners.
- 4) Opportunity for this innovative trend analysis service to translate into meaningful consultancy and third stream income activities of value to the local and international commercial design community.

So far this body of work has been primarily conducted as part of ongoing personal research, but has recently taken the form of a book proposal and an approved PhD proposal. Each of these contexts will allow for the increased theoretical and commercial research required to take this from a personal and informal body of work to one that is formally constructed in a rigorous format.