

Global design trends often prioritise Western aesthetics, eroding local cultural identities in visual communication

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Abstract

Design is the visual language that is used to tell stories about who we are, where we come from, and what matters to us. But somewhere along they the stories tend to blend and speak a single language.

Such designs might look refined, clean and professional, but at a cost, many local identities, traditions and art styles have been pushed into the shadows.

This paper also explores how colonialism has shaped visual communication in India, a country where identity and aesthetics are deeply rooted and tied to culture and heritage. It also looks at how the design education institute reinforces Western ideas and designs, creating a growing gap between traditional knowledge and the design practices taught today.

Keywords: Globalisation, Visual Communication, Western Aesthetics, Cultural Identity, Design Trends, Indian Design, Local Narratives, Cultural Roots, Design Education, Colonialism, Design systems, Indian artforms, Design Education, Reinforcement of Western ideas, Heuristics.

Introduction

Culture is one of the strongest media through which we understand a civilisation. Its art, music, and design visually and materially communicate the stories, values, and beliefs of that society.

Every colour palette, typeface, motif, and shape we see carries a message. These small visual choices quietly tell us what a brand believes in and what it stands for. When done thoughtfully, it transforms the designer into a storyteller. Storytelling is an essential skill in design, and some of the strongest examples of visual storytelling can be seen in Indian art forms such as **Madhubani, Kalamkari, Warli, Pattachitra**, and others. We get to know about the stories of mythological events, cultural memories, emotions, and beliefs. This is translated with the help of patterns, symbols, and colours used in the art.

Shilpa Shastra is an ancient text that explains art and crafts. This can be one of the oldest handbooks explaining design systems. This text plays a very important role in explaining the principles of Indian design aesthetics.

Design is a combination of art and science; it isn't just about visuals, it's a language that carries emotion, memory, and identity and acts like a bridge between the masses and the world. It acts as a visual language to convey meaning and emotions that are beyond aesthetics. But in recent years, global design trends have taken over the world, which are mostly influenced by Western aesthetics. This has led to creating a homogeneous language, visual language and a very predictable style. And one design language is not relevant to all the cultures in the world.

Before the colonial period, Indian paintings thrived with funding from local artists and royalties. Each region had its own unique and vibrant style. But soon after the expansion of the British empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian artists found themselves pressured and forced to adopt the European artistic style and values through institutions like the Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and Lahore art schools. These schools prioritised Western techniques and aesthetics, setting them as the new standard of artistic excellence, which led to India's traditional art forms being pushed into the shadows.

Another important factor to consider is how Western aesthetics have quietly shaped the way we see and create art and design in India. Colonial education systems promoted European art styles as a "superior" way of creating art **this had led to influencing and altering our visual mindset; it didn't just change artistic techniques but also changed our perception of what good design looks like.** As a result, many designers today unconsciously prioritise Western aesthetics and global design trends in their work. **When designers go back and study their own culture and its unique art forms, draw inspiration from it and then design, that's when their work naturally becomes more relatable.** People connect more deeply with visuals that feel familiar, which also carry the cultural context they grew up with. This shift has created a noticeable gap, and this cultural expression and design language has been overlooked.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative interpretive research design to understand the symbolism of Indian visual communication and the experience is of designers who created and interpreted such symbols.

Participants

The group comprised 40 students, divided into 8 groups, and within that, 5 students were selected based on their engagement with the traditional craft of Madhubani. There were 8 crafts which were included in the module, namely **Madhubani, Pattachitra, Gond, Sanjhi, Warli, Phad and Pichwai.**

Data Collection Method

The study used **qualitative research methods.**

Procedure

The following steps were followed in the procedure:

Planning

- This activity and curriculum were very peculiar, which aligned with the collaborations of the artisans.
- Selection of art styles with strong visual languages.

Acting

- Conducting the workshop at Dilli Haat.
- Collaboration between the students and the artisans to explore craft techniques, design elements and the symbolism within the art pieces
- This workshop also included studying basic design elements like blind dot colour, texture, space shapes and other elements in each of the crafts and what they convey.

Observation

- Visual documentation of the workshop
- Formal interviews with the artists
- Thematic sheets, exploration boards and collaborative artworks were created, demonstrating design elements.

Reflections

- A visual analysis was done of students' outputs, comparing them side by side with the traditional craft forms.
- The reflection on innovation, cultural resonance and the integration of craft principles was emphasised.
- Students' interviews were taken to understand the outcome and their learning.

Conclusion

This methodology approach integrates traditional Indian crafts into design education using **classroom action research (CAR)**. This methodology can effectively shape the student's perception of cultural aesthetics.

In this methodology, the students were not only observed but also given hands-on assignments, which included crafts and design elements and also gave them the chance to engage with the artisans.

Through this activity, it was revealed that the students develop a strong **cultural sensitivity and a deep appreciation for the local arts and the different Indian visual languages.** The designs were much richer and were rooted in authenticity and culture. This methodology successfully filled the gap between traditional craft and contemporary design practices.

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Semiotic Analysis

A semiotic analysis was carried out on samples from:

- Branding projects
- Public awareness campaign
- Digital interfaces

The goal here was to identify symbols, motifs that are culturally relevant and as to how they function in contemporary design.

Data Collection Method

This study used a **qualitative interpretive research design**

Ethnographic Interviews

Ethnographic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with practising designers and visual artists from advertising agencies, social campaign teams, and digital product design.

Case Study Contextualization

- Sampling method - Purposive sampling
- Participants- Practising designers from various domains.
- Duration- 40 to 60 minutes

Focus areas

- How designers actually interpret cultural symbols
- To understand the semiotic analysis in a cultural context, these case studies involved
 1. Madhubani
 2. Warli
 3. Gond

To ensure the findings were trustworthy, the study brought together insights from all three methods-

- Semiotic analysis
- Designer interviews
- Folk art case studies

Quantitative Research methodology may not apply to this particular subject.

Literature Review

Semiotics and Communication Semiotics examines meaning-making through signs, as theorised by Saussure's dyadic model (signifier and signified) and Peirce's triadic model (representamen, object, interpretant). Barthes (1977) extended these theories to cultural myths, where everyday visuals acquire ideological meaning. Visual semiotics has since been applied across fields such as advertising, film, interface design, and political communication. Scholars argue that images are never neutral but embedded with cultural values that influence perception and interpretation (Chandler, 2017). Through cultural motifs and symbols, it becomes easy to understand the semiotics of Human-Centred Design (HCD) IN India Cultural contexts at the core of design. However, in India, HCD cannot be separated from semiotics, given the symbolic richness of everyday life. For instance, colours and motifs carry layered meanings: saffron may indicate spirituality, courage, or political affiliation; green signifies prosperity, but also religious identity. Effective communication must therefore account for these associations to avoid misinterpretation. Indian HCD research increasingly highlights the importance of culturally embedded design practices, especially in rural and multilingual contexts (Raghavan, 2019). I agree that cultural context built a foundation for design in India. Guidelines for the Indian design language- the Shilpa Shastra

The Shilpa Shastra is India's ancient guide to art and craft, where creativity meets science in a beautifully balanced way. It teaches that art isn't about skills but is also deeply rooted in spirituality. Ancient texts describe a vast system of knowledge, encompassing sixty-four arts and thirty-two disciplines, all linked to Vishvakarma, the divine architect. Shilpa Shastra reveals how deeply Indian design is intertwined with culture, symbolism, and a holistic approach to creation. Shilpa Shastra can be included in design curricula as well to take design from a broader point of view of the Visual semiotics of visual communication. Research demonstrates the utility of semiotics in decoding persuasive strategies in advertising (Williamson, 1978), multimodal campaigns (Machin and Mayr, 2012), and digital environments (van Leeuwen, 2005). In India, advertising scholars note that brands often embed cultural codes—such as festival imagery, mythological references, and folk motifs—to build authenticity and trust (Kumar, 2020). Studies on political communication also highlight the mobilisation of visual semiotics in election campaigns, where colours, emblems, and icons become vehicles of ideology (Dutta, 2016).

Conclusion

The biggest takeaway from this research is how effortlessly beautiful modern design becomes when it reconnects with Indian art forms. It's not just about creating a motif on the screen, but also when our contemporary tools and traditional aesthetics truly blend, the result is more than just visually pleasing, it feels meaningful, rooted, and completely genuine and most importantly, it connects with the masses. This fusion opens up entirely new spaces for creation, giving us designs that honour where we come from while still working perfectly for today's world.

It also highlights how important it is for designers to stay connected to their own cultural background. Instead of only looking outside for global trends, there is so much inspiration from our own stories, crafts, and visual traditions. The study also reminds us that India's traditional craft practices shouldn't be seen as old or outdated they are living traditions with so much potential to influence and enrich modern design.

Future Implications

- Integration of Indian art forms and crafts and visual languages in contemporary design education, which will also help in designing products that are relevant and relatable to the culture and its people
- Future studies can be done in Indian design in design spaces and cross-cultural spaces, such as AR/VR
- Engaging students and practising designers to engage with traditional design and art forms to shape a sense of cultural Pride and responsibility towards design practice

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