



Typographic Dialogues: Local-Global

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Tough Spots- A 'Glocal' Webcomic Of Subtle Typographic Dialogue

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Abstract: The art of story-telling in comic books, storyboards and graphic dialogue in general has always been made more effective to audiences across local and global cultures through the one element, which ties two visuals together- text! Across local and global cultures it reacts, interjects, makes noise, supports the impact of a visual but at the same time occupies the least visual weightage in each frame. Typography is seldom in the limelight, being restricted to a certain point size, bound to a certain part of the frame, trapped in traditional layout structures, which show frame-by-frame progression of the typographic dialogue, allowing pictures and visuals to take over the responsibility of visual appeal. All in all, typography has been a very subtle and subdued element in the visual storytelling of comics. However, currently when every single platform of typographic dialogue right from the daily newspaper to printed books has reached digital screens, the traditional local comics too have taken the form of webcomics to reach global cultures. Despite the technological evolution, why is it then that the typographic dialogue of this medium is still restricted to old structures of typography? For instance, basic minimum point sizes for convenient legibility are no longer required as the zoom function exists on screens. Frame-to-frame flow of typography can be avoided as one can 'swipe' through multiple frames. Many such factors which previously were a mandate are now hardly necessary. In fact, typography no longer needs to be a supporting element in visual storytelling. Text is capable of continuing visual dialogue even in the absence of visuals.

Like visuals, letters too are forms first. If letters are treated as forms instead of narrative text, which supports visuals, globally relatable typographic dialogue can be achieved. Thus, taking advantage of the global nature of typography and its ability to continue pure typographic dialogue, I created a webcomic called 'Tough Spots' as an experiment to bring linguistics and visual form together, breaking all the traditional rules of typographic dialogue, for social media platforms. This paper discusses the emphasis on the idea of creating a webcomic entirely made up of the narrative text, which is otherwise just a supporting element, creating a 'glocal' (global+local) typographic dialogue. The webcomic is based on 'tough spots', that is, a colloquial term for freckles, perceived to be a deformity on the face. The design concept of subtle typography with experimental layout structures was to visually convey how freckles and skin deformities are a subtle part of one's persona, but are dramatized by the idealists of beauty. The typographic dialogue in this project thus evolves from subtle to dramatic.

This paper also aims at demonstrating the power of using expressive, but non-literal word pictures to subdue the visual harshness while portraying an otherwise hard-hitting subject like social interference and appearance-shaming. The paper also brings to light the fact that to be in focus, typography need not always be full of forced literal expression. Even the subtle can be bold and expressive if one experiments with layout structures.

Key words: Typographic Evolution, Global Webcomics, 'Glocal', Text-Weightage, Word Pictures, Experimental Layouts

1. Introduction

Comic books have been evolving in their form and tone. The dialogue of comic books has always been inspired by the local and global cultures of those particular time periods. As the cultural scenario across the globe evolved, the story-telling of comics didn't just stay restricted to standalone books, but also became a part of weekly magazines, daily newspapers etc. From the images below we see a demonstrated history of how comics from across cultures are inspired by the 'current day' scenarios of that period as well as the culture of a place. One observes a paradigm shift in the way comics are designed. However the typographic dialogue of comic books has remained unaffected by these paradigm shifts in the design language of comics. Typography occupies the least visual weightage in each frame probably because it existed in tangible publishing design, which followed the conventional and less developed methods of printing. The observed typographic dialogue of comics is very local and rarely global since different parts of the world find different type orientation convenient and relate to different functions of typographic dialogue. For example as seen in the images below, in German comics from

1935 to as late as the post-war period, the use of typographic dialogue is sparse- it is used in the form of interjections, made bolder to indicate louder sound. Whereas in Indian comics, each and every frame contains the typographic dialogue in a speech bubble in most cases.



Figure.1 Example of story-telling through typographic intonation in political cartoon comic reel.



Figure.2 Example of typographic weightage in a comic book frame.

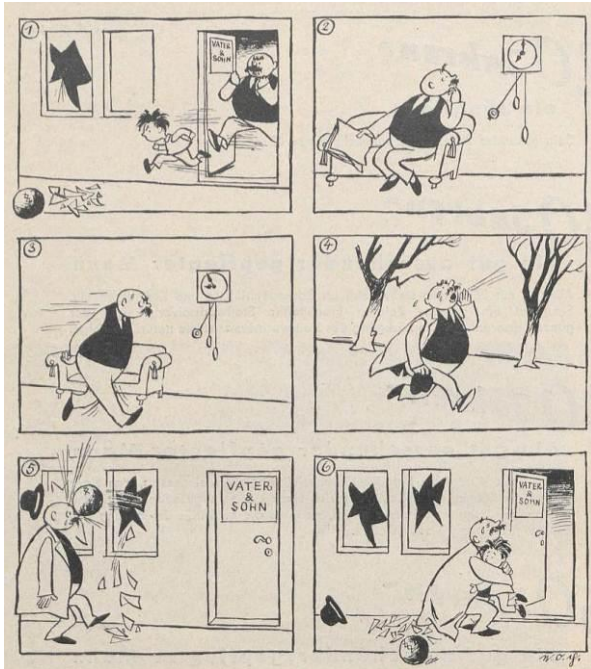
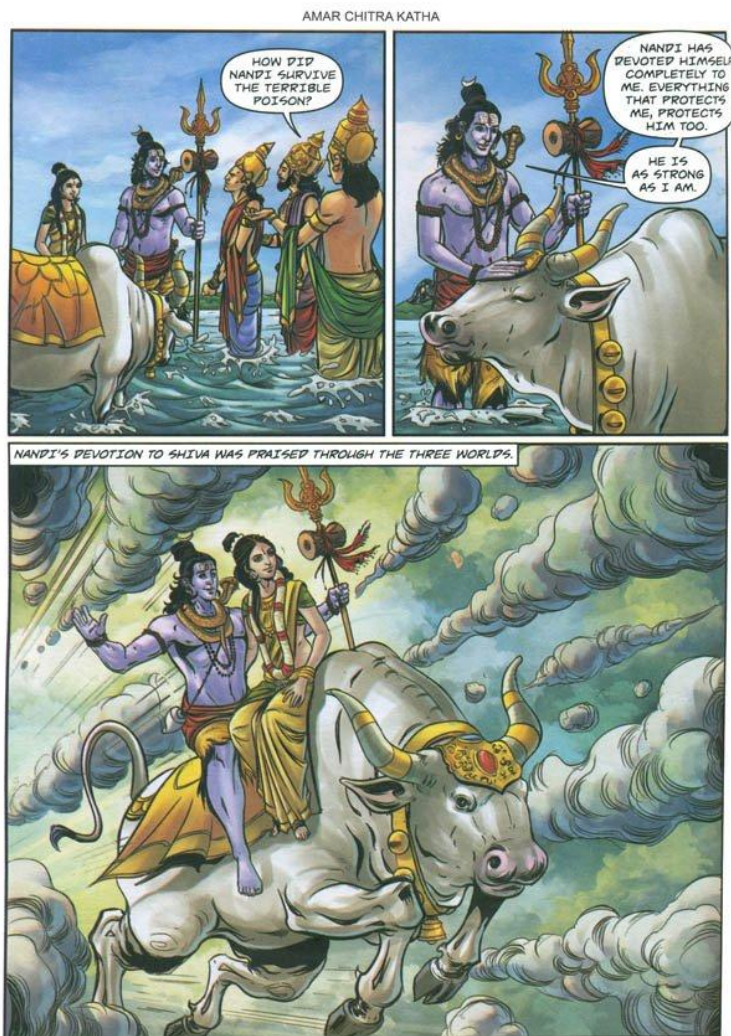


Figure.4 Example of typographic dialogue in German comic 'Father and son' by O.E. Plauen from 1935



Figure.5 Example of typographic dialogue in German comic 'Nick The Spaceman' by Hansrudi Wascher, 1953



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Figure.6 Example of typographic dialogue in an Indian comic 'Amar Chitrakatha' by Anant Pai, 1960

However, the developed printing methods today allow for a lot more flexibility and experiments when it comes to typography. In fact, the application of typography is not just in tangible prints, but in digital screens as well. The traditional comic takes the form of a 'webcomic.' Despite the technological evolution, why is it then that the typographic dialogue of webcomics is still restricted to old structures of typography? In the examples below of popular webcomics in today's era, we still see the old 'comic-ness' of typographic dialogue.

The Problems of Patriarchy



Image Source: Indian Miniature Painting, artindia.com

Figure 7: Typographic dialogue in the webcomic 'The Royal Existentials'

TALES OF THE PEEPER CREEPER

PATRICK SARHAN

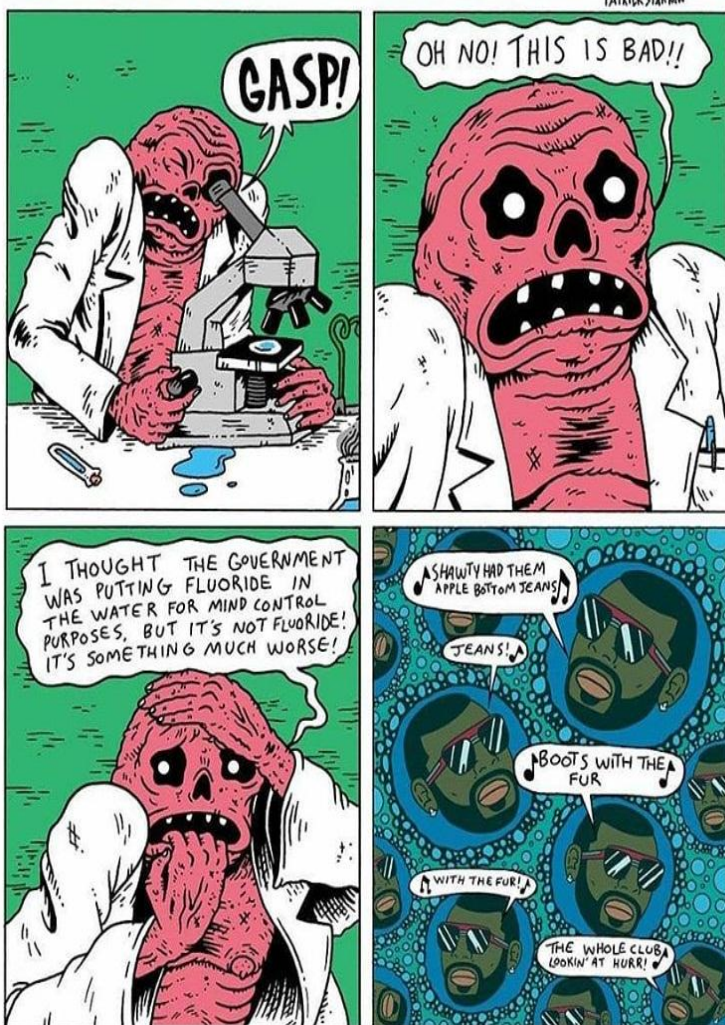


Figure 8. Typographic dialogue from webcomic 'Branded India'

The storytelling is led by visuals. The text is simply a supporting element that enhances the visuals. We can have globally relatable typographic dialogue by treating the letters as what they are - forms first, instead of narrative text that supports visuals.

I created a webcomic called 'Tough Spots' as an experiment to bring typography and visual form together as 'word pictures'. The idea was to have a narrative text-based webcomic and create a 'glocal' typographic dialogue, rather than treating text as a supporting element.

2. Method of execution

2.1 Analyzing the polar opposite of 'subtle' typography to explore typographic treatment:

The term 'dialogue' is associated with messages that are meant to be understood. However, in this project, typographic dialogue was not defined by literal denotation, which potentially causes monotony. Expressive typography if made literal and denotative can sometimes look forced and can kill the typographic dialogue by making the denotative typographic visual the main focus and the rest of the text just a supporting element. The idea was to explore what happens when there is no differentiation between language and visual form. As Massimo Vignelli once said, "I don't think that type should be expressive at all. I can write the word 'dog' with any typeface and it doesn't have to look like a dog. But there are people that think that when they write 'dog' it should bark." For example, in the images below it can be observed that the typographic visual is the literal form of the word, which makes the typographic dialogue too direct and forced.



Figure 9. Example of literal expressive typographic dialogue.

Moreover, in a webcomic it is necessary to engage the viewer in typographic dialogue with curiosity. The 'literal-ness' of expressive typography hence does not serve the purpose in this project.

2.2 Developing the typographic grammar for the narrative

The focus for the narrative was on 'tough spots', that is, a colloquial term for freckles that are stereotypically perceived to be a deformity on the face. The idea of subtle typography with experimental layout structures was to visually convey how freckles and skin deformities are a subtle part of one's persona, but are looked down upon by the social dictators of beauty. The typographic dialogue in this project evolves from subtle to

dramatic with multiple steps in between. Multiple frames together form one unified webcomic containing various short narratives, which form one continuous dialogue.

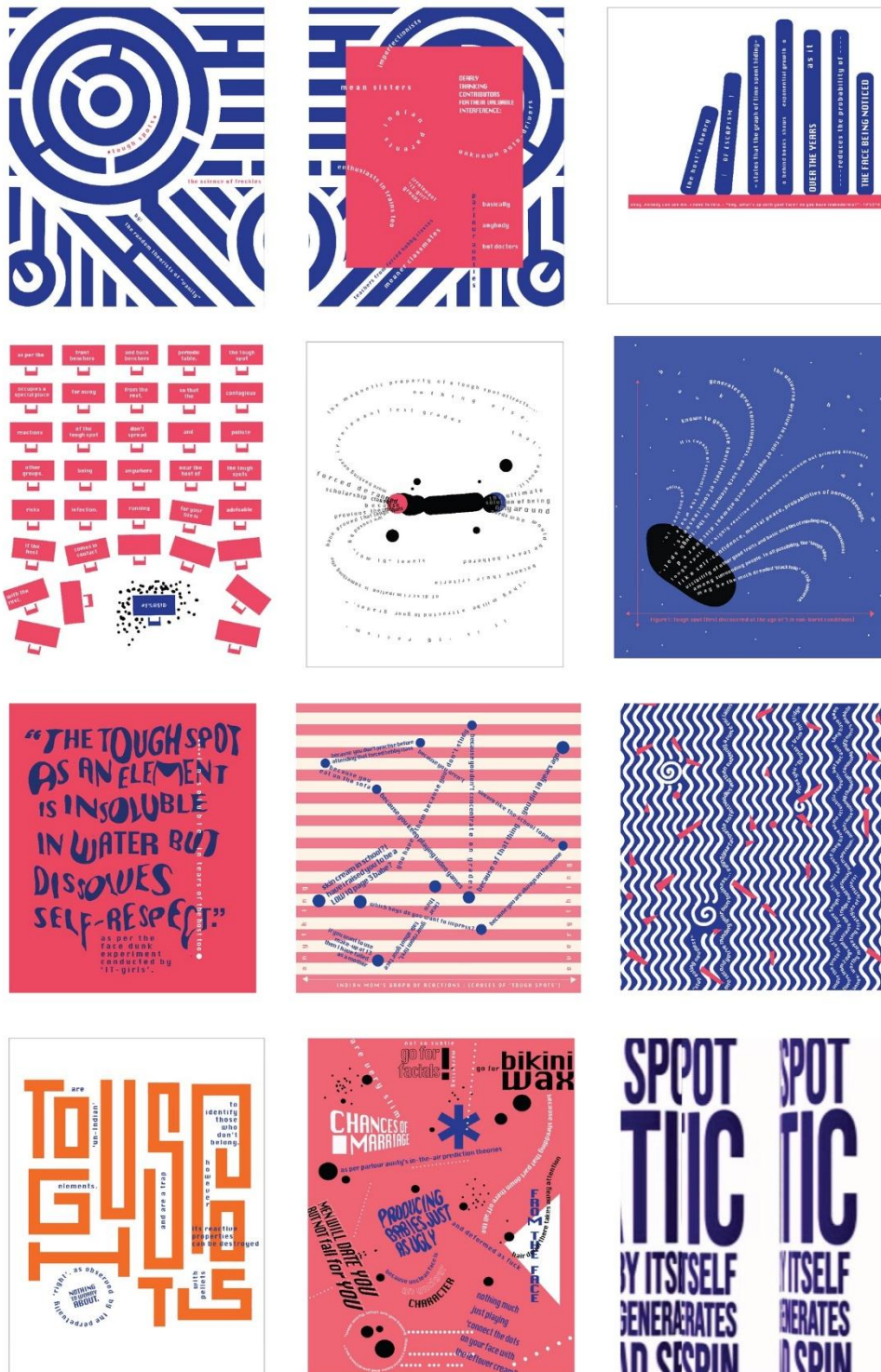


Figure 10. Progression of typographic dialogue from minimal to dramatic.



Figure 11. First frame with minimal and suggestive typographic dialogue.



Figure 12. Slightly expressive, non-literal typographic dialogue in the second.

2.2 Using the scope of webcomic frames and digital media for typographic dialogue

In a conventional comic and for convenience in printing, it can be observed that the whole frame has to be broken down into multiple frames for maximum storytelling in a single page. This results in very less space being available for typographic dialogue and eye movement. However, webcomics are viewed on a digital medium. The entire area

occupied by the screen is available as a frame for experiments with typographic dialogue. This provides scope to offer variety in visual movement.

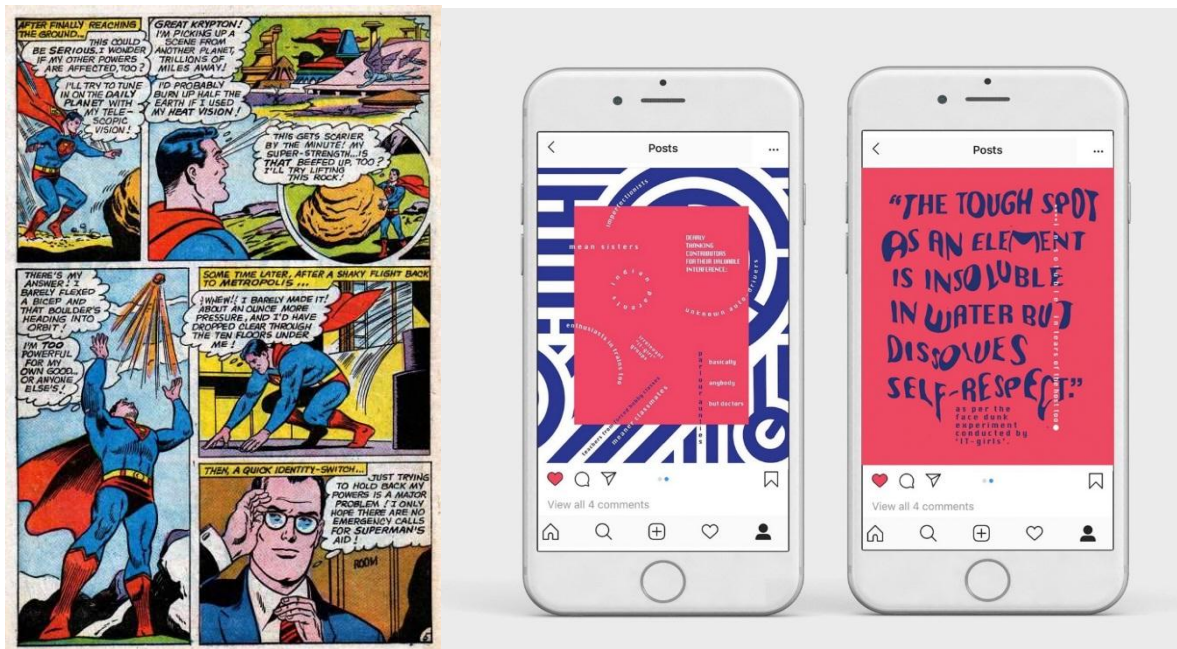


Figure 13. Comparison between layout structures of a comic versus a webcomic

Hence, to build up the narrative of the extremity of the hostile comments and theories of appearance shaming, the layout structures build up the pace of eye movement in each frame of the webcomic through subtle, but bold, dramatic layout structures in typographic dialogue.

2.3 Considering human interaction with gadgets to weave typographic narratives

The aspect of human interaction on digital media is very different from conventional comics. Convenience, legibility, minimum leading and kerning etc are a major concern while creating typographic dialogue in storytelling. However, screens allow for designers to explore various movements of humans like subconscious scrolling, swiping, clicking, zooming in and out of frames when they are viewing a webcomic.

Legibility is not a concern in this project or a bother even when text is as small as 8 point. Visuals on the digital interface are scalable to any size. When the kerning and the point sizes are reduced, the text does not 'bleed' like it does in print media. The viewer can read the text by simply zooming in. Thus, I experimented with the mandate of basic minimum point sizes for legibility of text. The idea was to use the text at small point sizes as forms in a word picture to lead the viewer into reading the text. The method of creating a word picture with irregular, varied kerning and leading between text was hence explored.

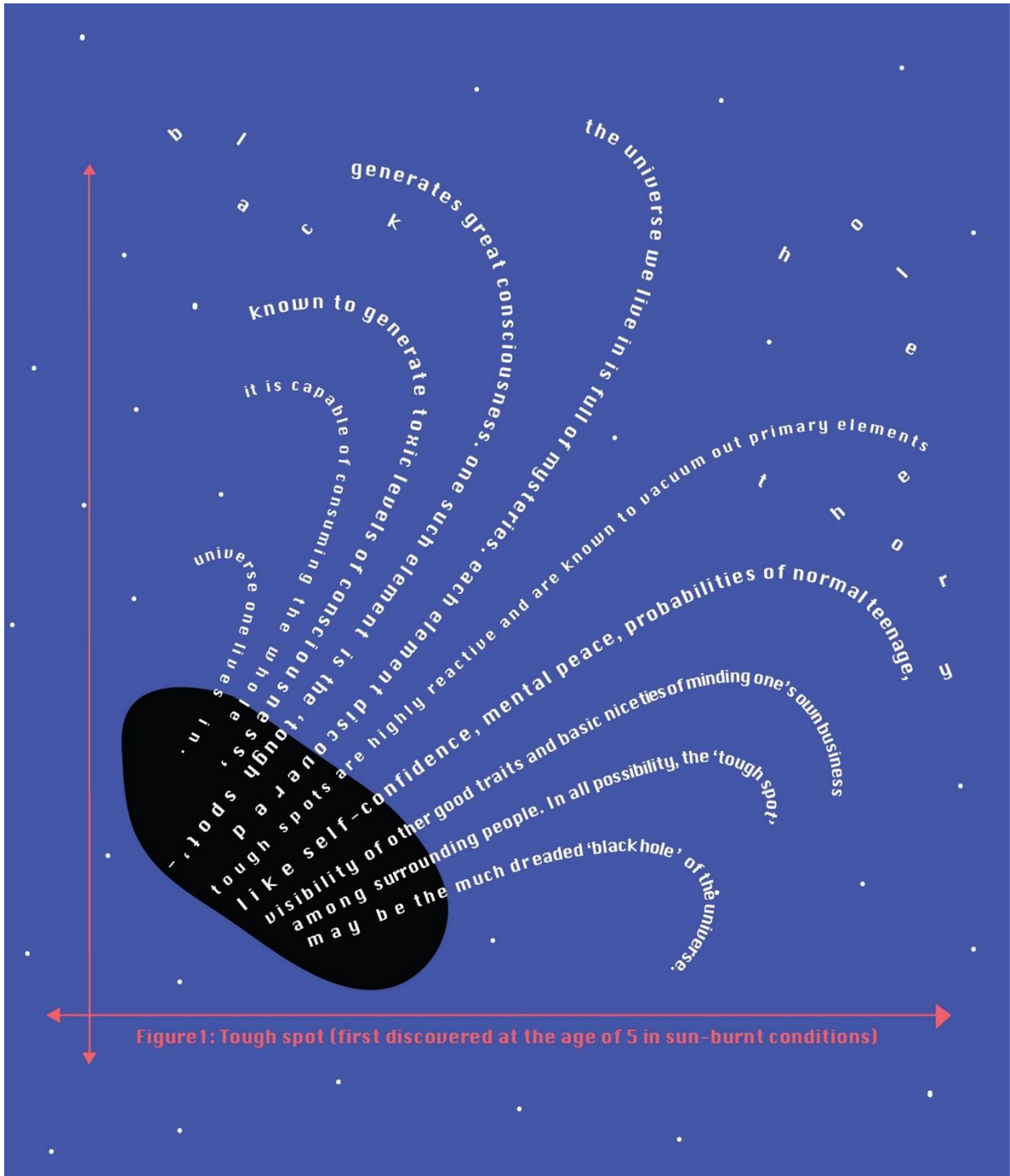


Figure 14. The use of text as a 'word picture' in a frame.

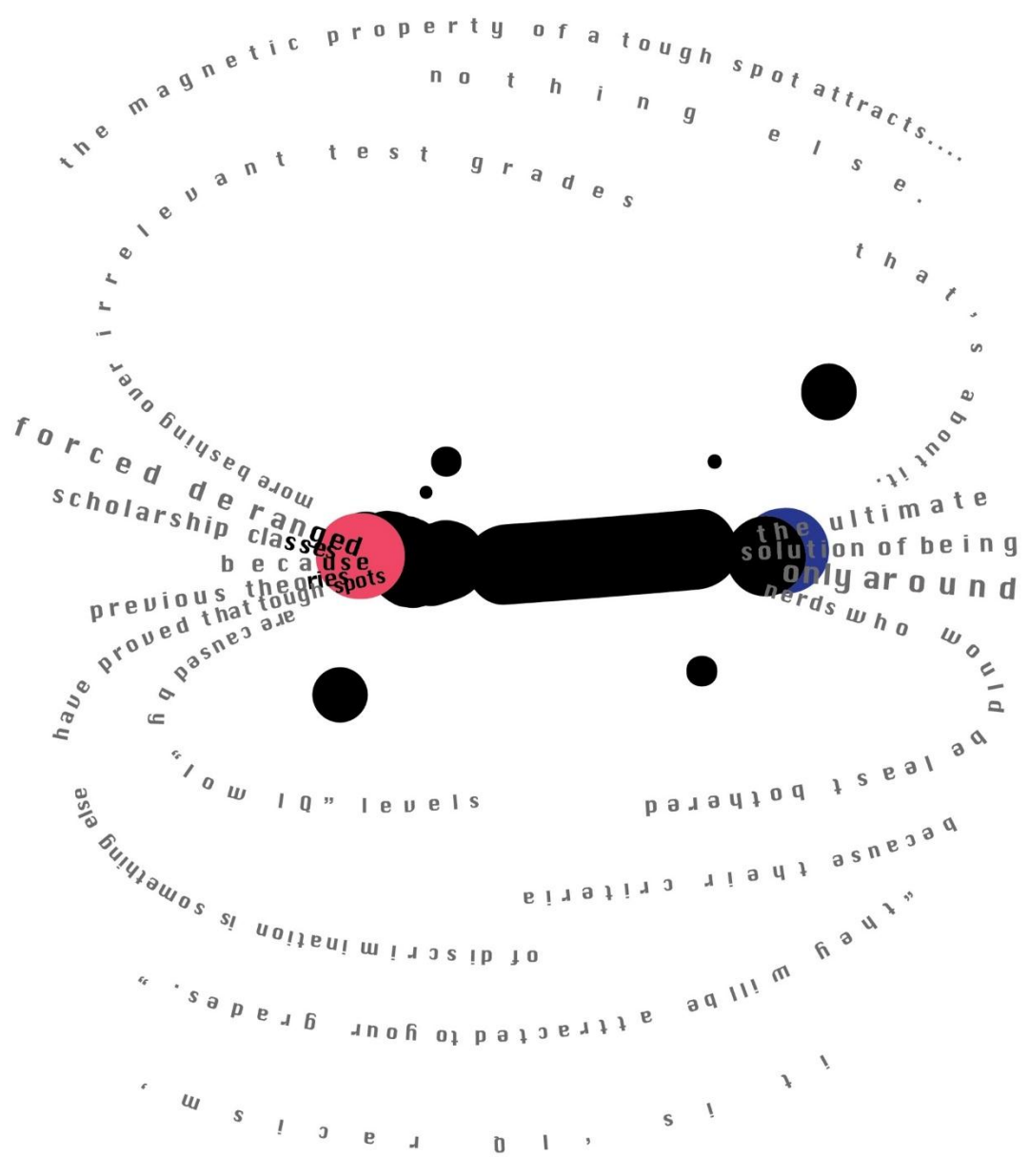


Figure 15. Use of varied point sizes and kerning for an exaggerated word picture.

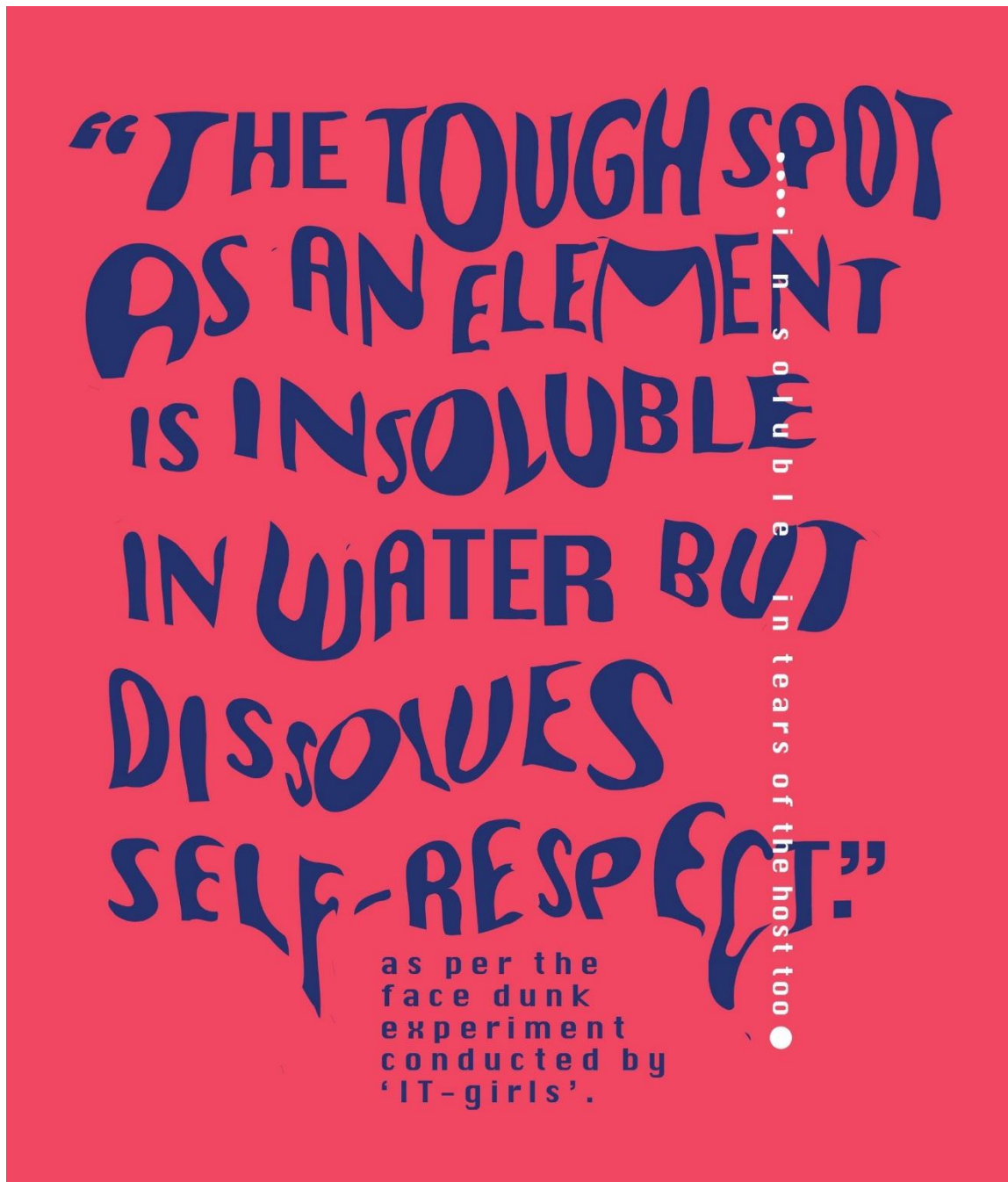


Figure 16. Narrative created by varied point sizes and kerning

2.4 Reversing the role of text and visuals

As visuals have previously been in the forefront to carry on the function of story-telling, typographic dialogue has been a supporting element. Typographic dialogue in most comics uses the form of a thought bubble or a speech blurb. In this project, the attempt was to explore what happens when visuals are used as a supporting element and type is treated as the main element to lead the typographic dialogue. The attempt was to use different visual forms and formats to support the typographic dialogue.

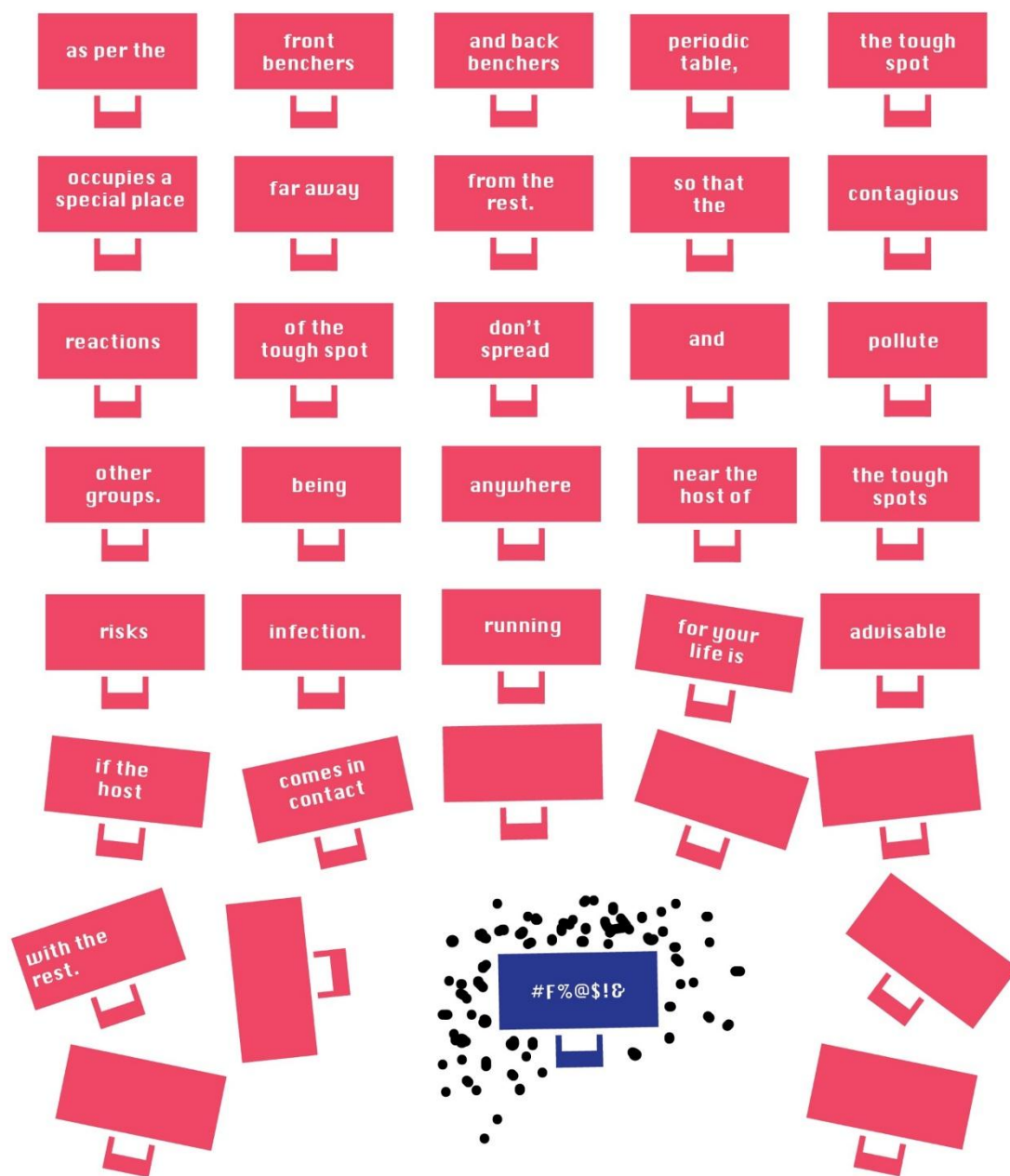


Figure 17. Use of geometric shapes supporting typographic dialogue.

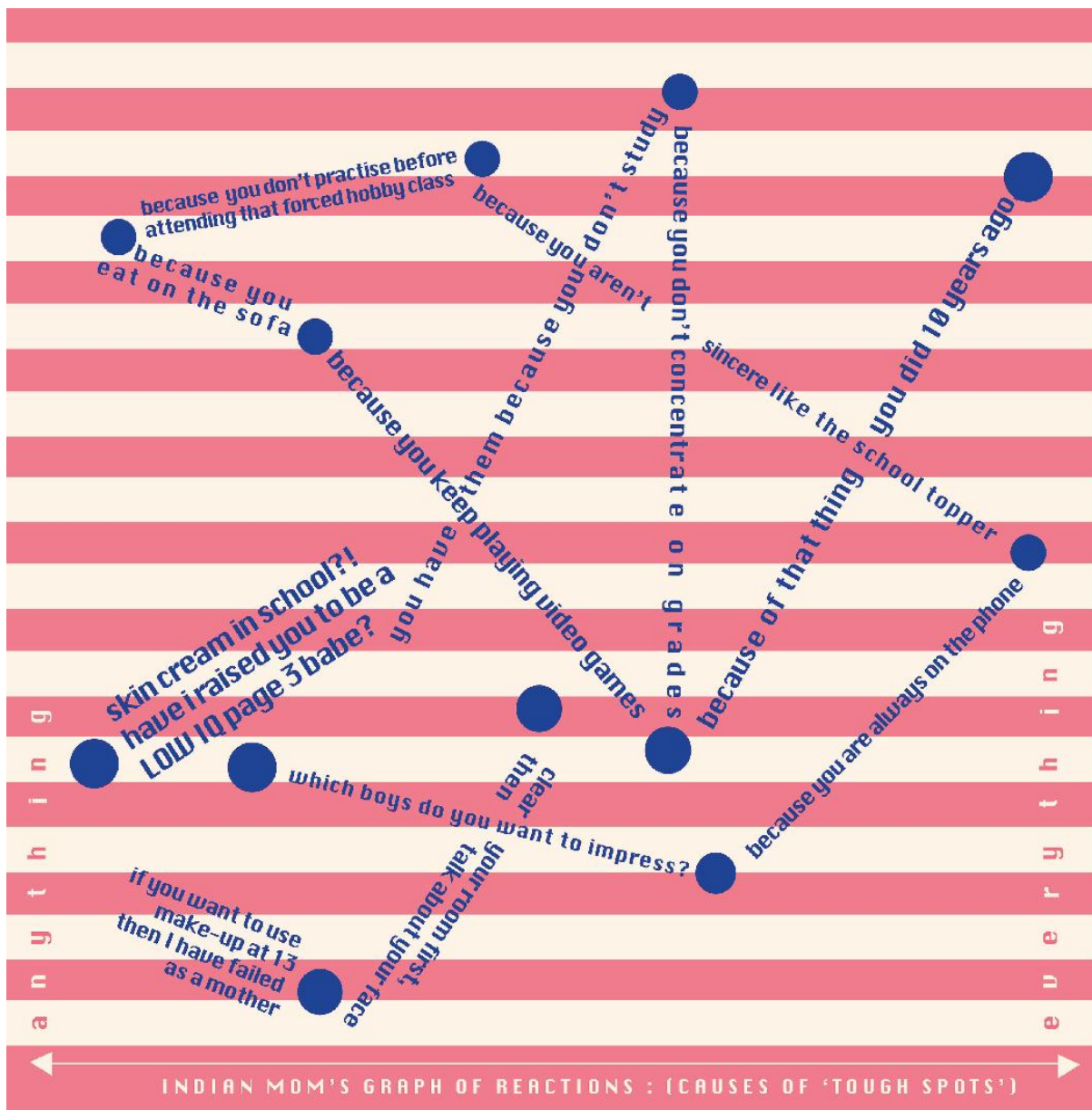


Figure 19. Use of statistical graph format to support typographic dialogue

The observed result however is that when type is experimented with for visual movement, visuals turn into blind spots. For example, in the images below, visual forms too have been given a larger weightage. But the large weightage of forms acts as contrast to allow the focus to be on typographic dialogue.

2.5 Adding dynamism to subtle typography

As they are viewed on a digital medium, webcomics allow the combination of subtle typographic dialogue with motion. A narrative text, even if kept still, has the power to conjure the vision of the story for the viewer. However, digital media are not handled the exact same way by all the viewers as some viewers just scroll through their screens

The conclusion of this project is not a statement, but a series of provoked questions about typographic dialogue: How does typographic storytelling evolve when the design language of comics evolves from local cultures to global cultures? As demonstrated, paradigm shifts in design keep occurring and will continue to do so. Graphic storytelling is constantly evolving. This paper brings to light the possibilities of what happens when typography is pushed to evolve along with graphic narratives. The paper demonstrates how type can take over the responsibility of visual storytelling when linguistics are combined with visuals. This paper also provokes a question about how expressive typography is used for storytelling. Do the terms 'expressive' typography and 'dialogue' have the same definition today? Or do we need to revisit them in terms of meaning? Today's expressive typography can become subtle typography tomorrow as the form of typography keeps evolving from print to screens and then to further developed media. This paper also addresses how subtle typography can be re-addressed as expressive typography by giving it a new dynamism using the scope of new media.

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