# regaining typographical control:

the starting point for a more expressive & authentic internet.

written by arjun;
for applications itpg-gt 2000;
25th november, 2025.

**note:**

this essay is intentionally typeset the way it is, as a natural influence of its contents. to oppose strong disagreements early on about its style, i justify the following:

the whole text is set in lowercase-letters, owing to herbert bayer's argument[1]: "*it is inconsistent in language usage to write differently than to speak. we don't speak big sounds, that's why we don't write them either. and: doesn't one say the same thing with one alphabet as with two alphabets? why does one merge two alphabets of completely different characters into one word or sentence and thereby make the written image inharmonic? either large or small. the large alphabet is illegible in the typesetting. therefore the small alphabet*".

secondly, while reading an essay with in-text citations, it is impractical to expect a reader to shuffle between the page that they are on and the page containing the source cited. so, two columns out of the six on every page are reserved for in-text citations for that particular page. on page 11, all the references are also available as a list.

lastly, in-text citations in the mla-style require writers to only mention the author's last name; i.e, yadav 55 or yadav (55). i will refrain from doing so, simply out of creative respect. when my contributions are acknowledged in the real world, i am not boiled down to my family name; but individually recognised with my full name — arjun yadav made this contribution. therefore, i will mention the full name of the authors that i cite, and use 'et al.' along with the primary researcher's name when the contributors are more than two.

1. Writing in Small Letters. https://www.bauhaus-bookshelf.org/bauhaus_writing_in_small_letters_lower_case_only.html. Accessed 25 Oct. 2025.

## introduction:

as of february 2025, there exist more than 5.25 billion social-media 'user' identities in the world[2] — 63% of the world's population is expressing itself online.

while interaction over the internet remains largely multimodal, more than a fourth of all interactions deal with the display of textual information[3]. in fact, i would reasonably argue that most communication between strangers over the internet happens via the exchange of latin alphabets.

this presents an interesting juxtaposition; i wonder — how can 5.25 billion unique personalities be forced to express via the same nondescript typeface?

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previous research over the years strongly suggests that small, concrete changes in typography can influence larger, more abstract perceptions about a piece of communication & its source. for example, xiaobing xu et al. have shown that changing the letter-case of a wordmark can make a brand *feel* more or less authoritative & friendly[4]. aekyoung kim & sam j. maglio have shown that letter-casing directly shapes the perception of a messenger's gender; with lowercase letters *feeling* more feminine than uppercase ones (and vice-versa)[5]. finally, dawn shaikh & barbara chaparro have shown that even people who are not typographically sensitive — such as the "*casual consumers of onscreen information*" — *also* attribute personality descriptors to typefaces (such as 'courier-new' *feeling* more cool, stiff, passive, as opposed to 'poor richard', which *feels* more active & exciting)[6].

however, perhaps in pursuit of efficiency, the purpose of typography on screens — especially in places where people express their personality — has been reduced to mere legibility. in fact, dawn shaikh & barbara chaparro explicitly highlight this norm in their study: *perception of fonts: perceived personality traits and appropriate uses*[6], by showing that people normatively choose expressively-neutral, but legible, typefaces as more 'appropriate' font for digital screens; ultimately stripping letterforms off their innate expressive abilities.

this essay attempts to fight for that ability in digital-interfaces, and argues against the idea of letterforms simply being a vessel for storing & transporting semantic content. furthermore, it proposes that control over typography (and its environment) could, perhaps, lead to a more expressive & authentic internet.

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in *graphic devices: narration and navigation*, johanna drucker introduces the term 'graphic devices'. she writes — "*in my usage, the term graphic includes all aspects of layout and composition by which elements are organized on a surface*". then, she presents the argument that graphic elements do more than simply structure narration — they affect the narrative itself in substantive ways[7].

early in *the assimilation of text by image*, david (jhave) jhonston argues that

2. Digital 2025: Global Overview Report — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report? Accessed 24 Nov. 2025.

3. Li, Toby Jia-Jun, and Brad A. Myers. "A Need-Finding Study for Understanding Text Entry in Smartphone App Usage." arXiv:2105.10127, arXiv, 20 June 2021. arXiv.org, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2105.10127.

4. Xu, Xiaobing, et al. "The Effects of Uppercase and Lowercase Wordmarks on Brand Perceptions." Marketing Letters, vol. 28, no. 3, Sept. 2017, pp. 449–60. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-016-9415-0.

5. Kim, Aekyoung, and Sam J. Maglio. "Text Is Gendered: The Role of Letter Case." Marketing Letters, vol.32, no. 2, June 2021, pp. 179–90. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-021-09556-w.

6. Shaikh, Dawn, and Barbara Chaparro. "Perception of Fonts: Perceived Personality Traits and Appropriate Uses." Digital Fonts and Reading, by Mary C Dyson and Ching Y Suen, WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2016, pp. 226–47. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814759540_0013.

7. Drucker, Johanna. "Graphic Devices: Narration and Navigation." Narrative, vol. 16, no. 2, May 2008, pp. 121–39. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0004.

typography speaks to the body at a lived level. he writes — (while speaking about illuminated manuscripts from the 5th-15th century) "*they physically emulate forms of choreography …. the curlicue swirls that adorn these letterforms are the typographic-equivalent of the death flourishes of Sarah Bernhardt or the guitar licks of Jerry Garcia: torsional excess, magnetic vortices seeking to entice … what these features share is that they are all primarily attributes of matter. they reference the world directly in ways that do not require literacy; they are read by experienced embodied subjectivity. as humans, we have tasted honey, known or heard of gold, walked a labyrinth (or studied a curl of smoke), and held things in our hands. so the typography is speaking to the body at a lived level. it is engaging with the energy of our hands, muscles, and tongue*"[8].

8. The Assimilation of Text by Image. https://electronicbookreview.com/publications/the-assimilation-of-text-by-image/.

the above two examples provide enough inertia to re-examine the power of typography in digital environments, and seeing how perceptible expressive-changes could *actually* be. in my study, i use the context of a personal-messaging-interface, something like a mock dating application, where people *have* to make a judgement about the messenger's personality (who is also a stranger).

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## setup of the experiment:

the objectives of the experiments were to: (a) see what graphic elements people would change in a typographically-heavy interface, if tasked with making the display of a message feel like certain personality traits; and (b) how accurately these changes translated into perception by other strangers.

borrowing drucker's definition of graphic elements, a bare-minimum-personal-messaging-interface would contain the following:

- text (content) + its letter-case
- container-color
- font-color
- font
- font-size
- font-weight
- container-padding
- container-roundedness
- leading
- kerning
- background-color

currently, most messaging-platforms allow people the power to change 1/10th of the available elements — the content (and its casing, which is set as the phone's default). so, an interface was designed with a standard text-message (borrowed from apple's imessage design), which allowed people control over the different graphic elements (fig. 1).

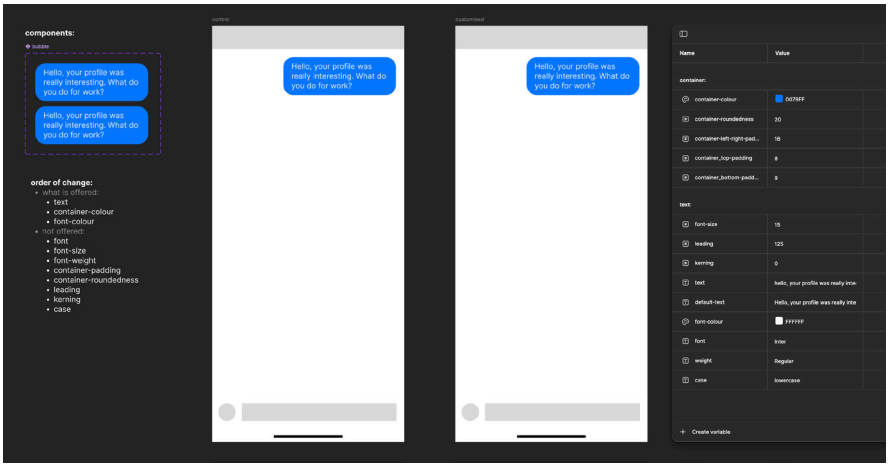


fig. 1: the interface (figma) & the variables available for change (on the right).

in experiment (a): a person was brought into a closed room, and asked to list 5 personality traits that they'd want their digital identity to give off on a dating application. they were then asked to craft a two-line message (shaping the content). then, control was given over each graphic element sequentially, with the sole task of making the message *feel* as close as possible to the previously stated personality traits. for every graphic element, participants could either change the parameters or refuse to change them.

fig. 2: a photo of one of the participants changing a variable using the interface.

after the changes were made, participants were asked about what traits they felt were communicated by the display of their message and why they couldn't get certain traits across. this experiment was carried out with 4 participants.

in experiment (b): a person was brought into an open space, and was quickly instructed about the premise of experiment (a) — that a person had made certain changes to the display of a message to communicate certain aspects of their personality. their task was to list personality traits reflected in that message, based on their perception. this experiment was also carried out with

4 participants, but each participant was shown all 4 experiment (a) outputs; one after the other; with a control (initial state of the messaging application).

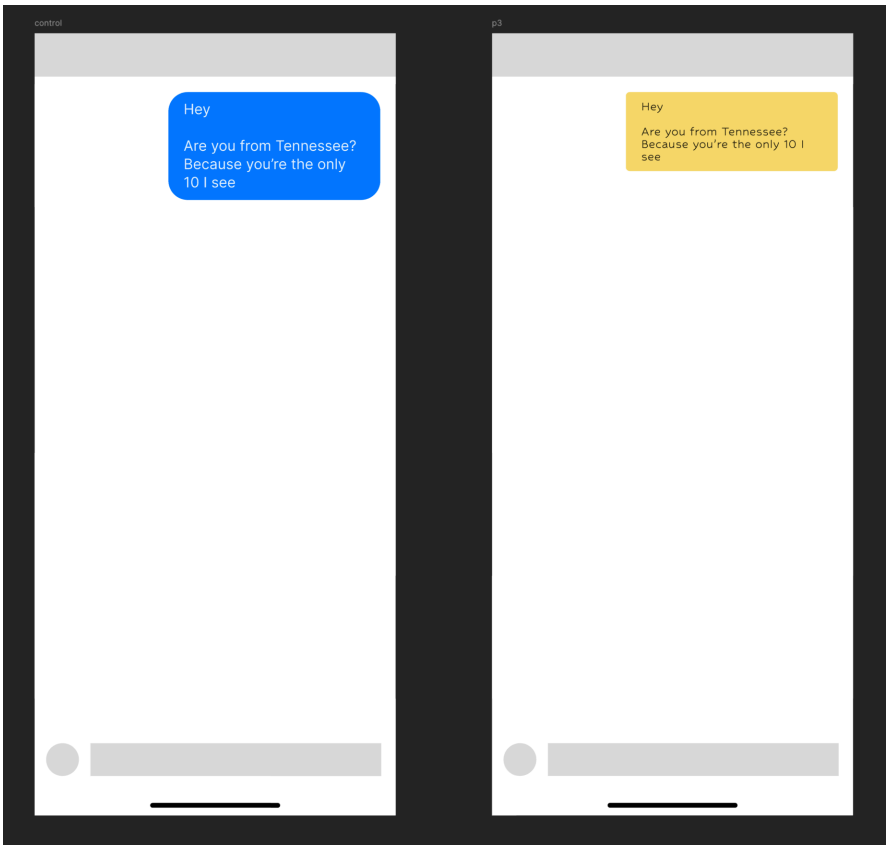


fig. 3: an example of what was shown to a participant in experiment (b): control (left), changed (right).

## results:

### experiment (a):

all participants changed the container-color, followed by font and / or leading. no participant decided to change the kerning of the letterforms.

| factors (across) particpant-change (down) | words: | container-colour | font-colour | font | font-size | font-weight | container-padding | container-roundedness | leading | kerning | case |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| p1 | energetic, genuine, athletic, funny, pretty / cute | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| p2 | sweet, caring, energetic, passionate, silly | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ |
| p3 | adventurous, caring, kind, up-for-anything, fashionable | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ |
| p4 | adventurous, experimental, fluid, care-giver, interested / passionate | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ |

fig. 4: parameters changed across all participants. refer to appendix # for a pdf.

via conversations, i could establish that certain traits are easier to communicate via typographical change than others. for example, participant-1 (p1) said: “i don’t know what i can change to make it feel more ‘energetic’”.

interestingly, the sole ability to make a change made many participants want to try the change. most of them said “can i see” / “can i try”, for more complicated graphic elements such as ‘leading’.

### experiment (b):

very few traits come off as 1:1 matches between expression and perception.

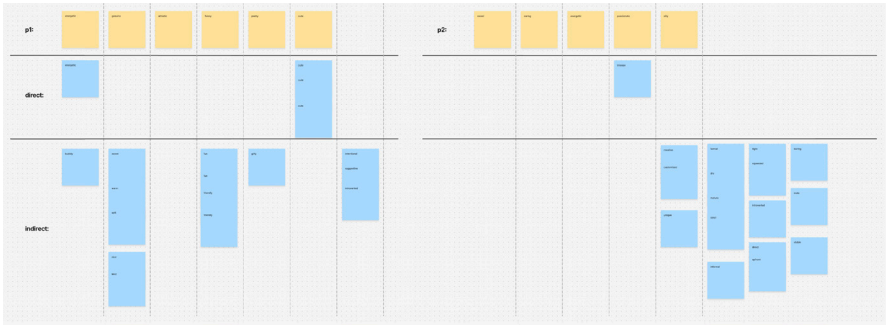


fig. 5: 3 direct (1:1) matches in p1 & p2.refer to appendix b & c for the full file.

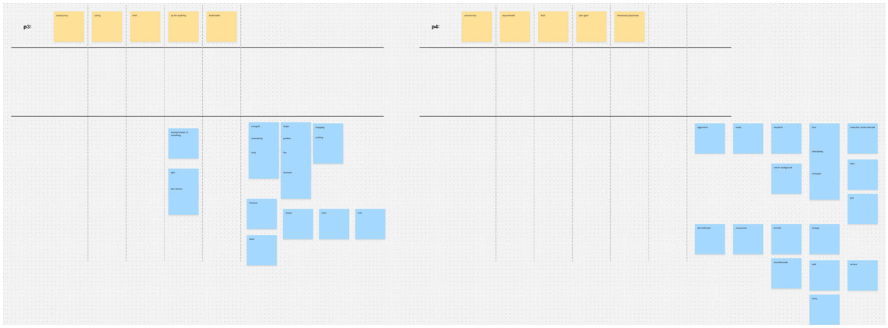


fig. 6: 0 direct (1:1) matches in p3 & p4. refer to appendix b & c for the full file.

this, i would argue, displays an inability to translate the abstract into concrete (personality trait into graphic element). however, the data immediately becomes more interesting when you let go of trying to match intention to result.

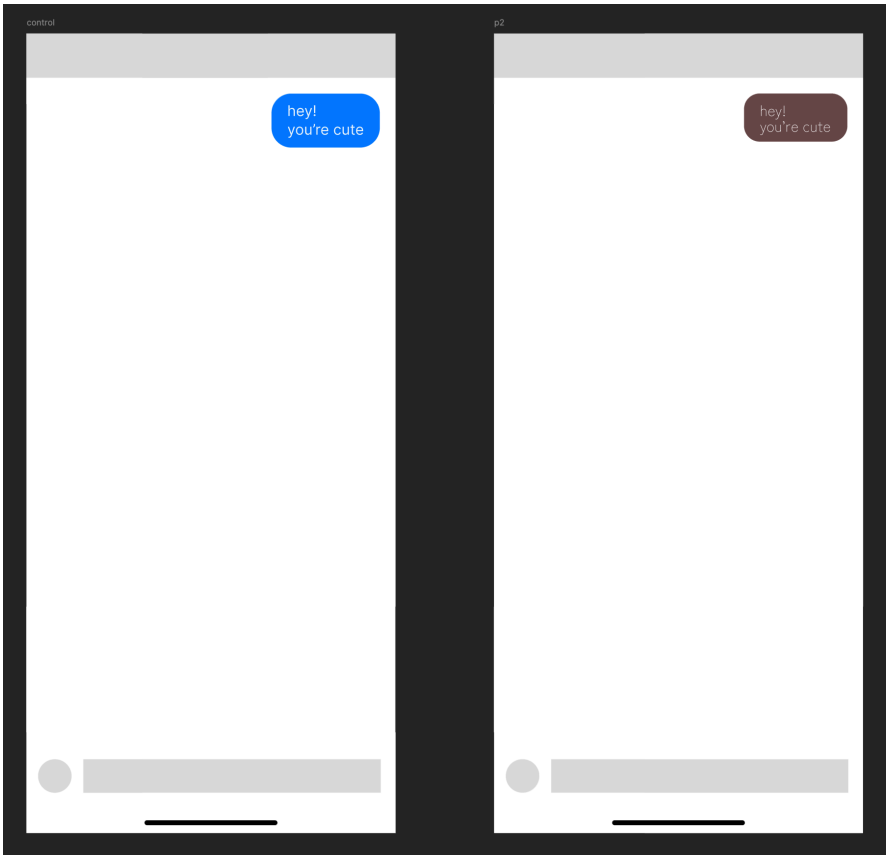


fig. 7: p2's graphic-element changes. their intended words were: sweet, caring, energetic, passionate, silly.

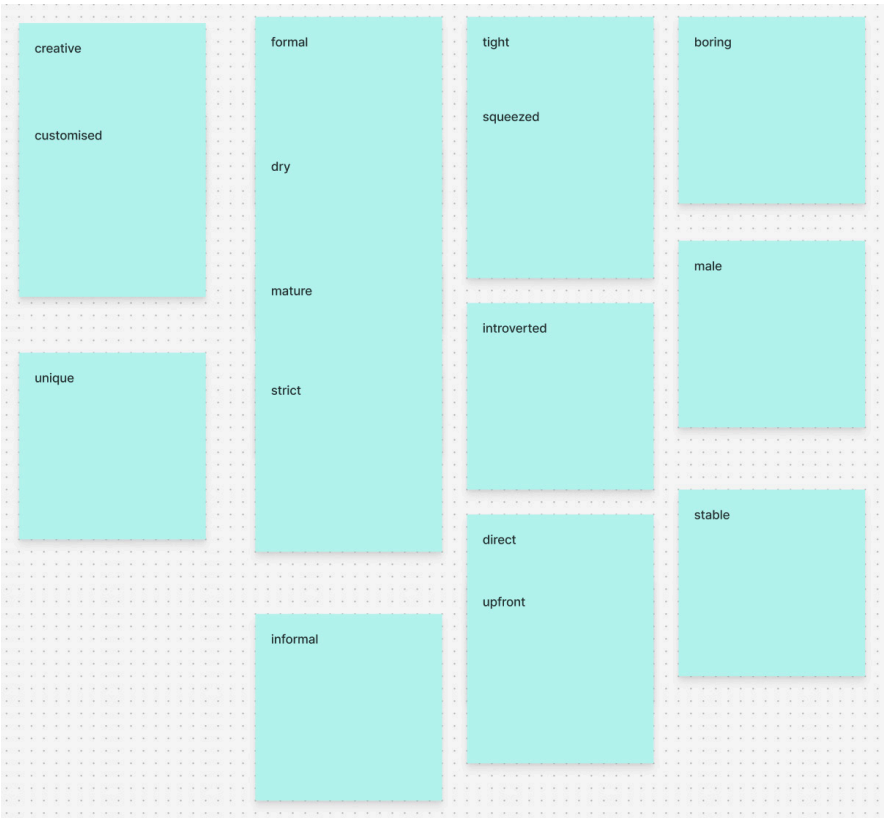


fig. 8: words given to p2 in experiment (b).

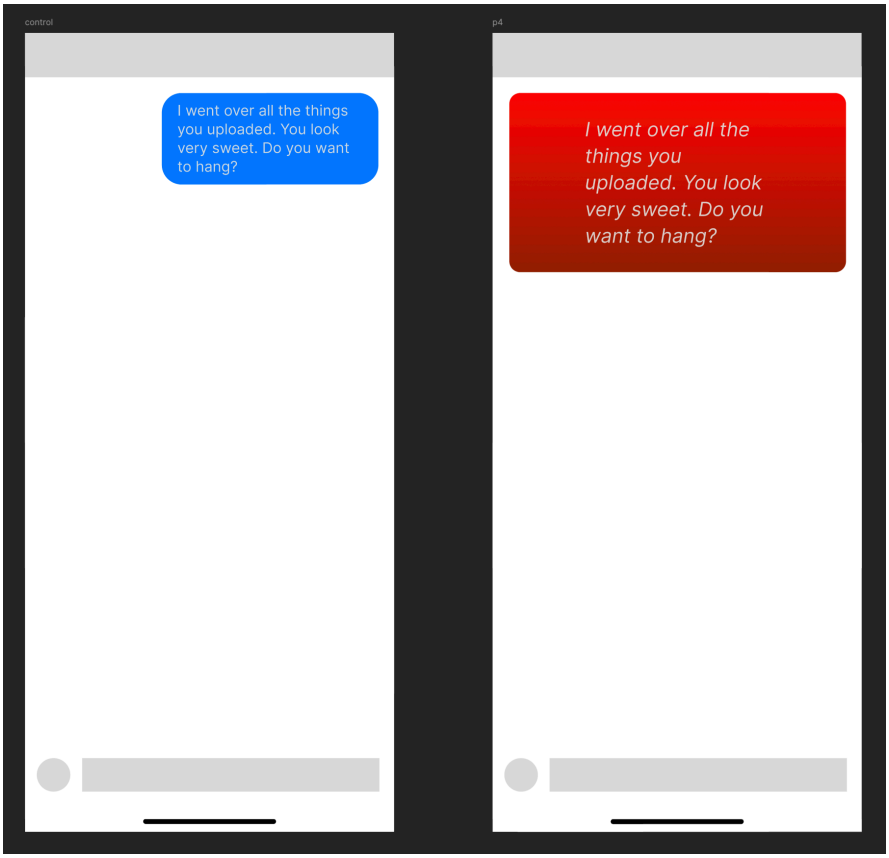


fig. 9: p4's graphic-element changes. their intended words were: adventurous, experimental, fluid, care-giver, interested / passionate.

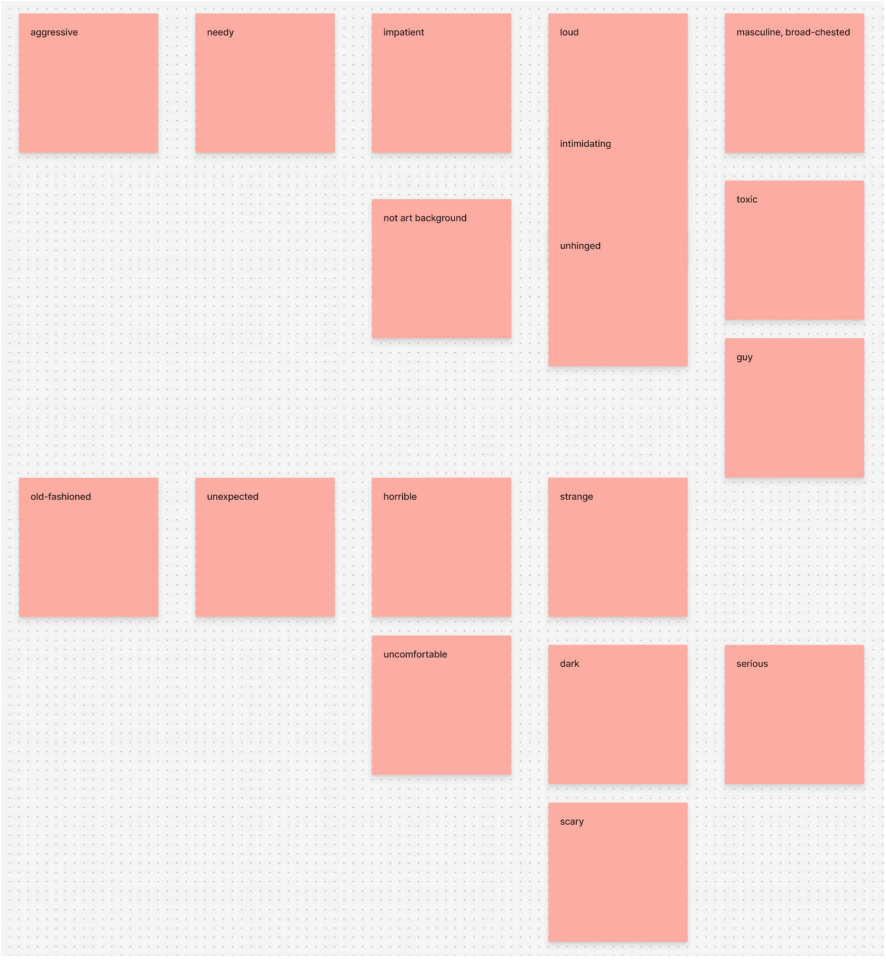


fig. 10: words given to p4 in experiment (b).

there is a clear general image that is largely congruent across participants — i.e, most people can get a sense of *what* this person is like; even if it is different from what the person intended. now, *that* is powerful — people have the ability to perceive a stranger, simply based on the aesthetic choices that they make; that too over something often considered 'trivial' like typography (and its environment).

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**conclusion:**

experiment (a) shows that it is difficult to manipulate typography. since all users of a digital-interface may not be artistically capable, it is too big of an ask for them to reflect abstract things —such as a personality trait — via something so specific; such as leading on their messages.

however, experiment (a) also shows that people do make *big* changes, in, atleast, an attempt to communicate who they are (or who they want to be), by ways of changing the font & container-colour. arguing for the notion that users of a digital-interface should be given more control over graphic elements, i propose looking at the results of experiment (b) more closely.

there is a certain degree of innate authenticity in the aesthetic selection of graphic elements to communicate personality. a person may have problems articulating who they are, and even manage to lie about it[9]; but, the task of making the display of their content *feel* more like them, and receivers having a

9. Confessions of a Catfisher: Fake Identities, Online Relationships and Lies | SBS Insight. https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/article/confessions-of-a-catfisher-fake-identities-online-relationships-and-lies/fyyttvwlc. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

visceral reaction to it, suggests the possibility of a more authentic relationship between the messenger & its receiver, than existing pre-fabricated personalities.

the fact that a person would choose red over all the other colours available to them suggests something about them. some of the validity of correlations between aesthetic preferences & personality traits are presented in the work of kalia cleridou & adrian furnham, in their article: *personality correlates of aesthetic preferences for art, architecture, and music*[10].

in an internet-world where heaps of expression are based on selective self-presentation[11], i wonder what difference an ask to make aesthetic choices — such as changing how your messages look for someone else — could make. my gut trusts these intuitive judgements — there is, perhaps, an unharnessed power in the ability to communicate without words, that the internet refuses to actively use.

10. Cleridou, Kalia, and Adrian Furnham. "Personality Correlates of Aesthetic Preferences for Art, Architecture, and Music." Empirical Studies of the Arts, vol. 32, no. 2, July 2014, pp. 231–55. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.2190/EM.32.2.f.

11. Fox, Jesse, and Megan A. Vendemia. "Selective Self-Presentation and Social Comparison Through Photographs on Social Networking Sites." Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, vol. 19,no. 10, Oct. 2016, pp. 593–600. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0248.

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**limitations:**

this was a three-week-long assignment, from formulating an enquiry to conducting experiments & writing the paper. i am well aware that i have cut corners on academic rigour, and that drawing conclusions on such a weak dataset (and an underdeveloped experiment) is not ideal.

however, i still believe in the potency of my enquiry. there *may* be something there; something powerful; that i should examine more closely at a later stage in my life.

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**acknowledgements:**

suman bhandary for introducing me to type-design. shobhan s. for introducing me to herbert bayer's small-alphabet proposal. allison parrish for introducing me to johanna drucker & david (jhave) jhonston's work.

sharon de la cruz for pushing me to find an 'application'.

devan wardrop-saxton for helping me translate bayer's original text from german.

jaye du, shloka mohanty, matthew blanco, aram pundik, gabriel guttierez, ruiying (noora) zhang, brian bishop, chuan tsai for contributing to my experiment.

**bibliography:**


1. Writing in Small Letters. https://www.bauhaus-bookshelf.org/bauhaus_writing_in_small_letters_lower_case_only.html. Accessed 25 Oct. 2025.

2. Digital 2025: Global Overview Report — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-global-overview-report? Accessed 24 Nov. 2025.

3. Li, Toby Jia-Jun, and Brad A. Myers. "A Need-Finding Study for Understanding Text Entry in Smartphone App Usage." arX- iv:2105.10127, arXiv, 20 June 2021. arXiv.org, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2105.10127.

4. Xu, Xiaobing, et al. "The Effects of Upper- case and Lowercase Wordmarks on Brand Perceptions." Marketing Letters, vol. 28, no. 3, Sept. 2017, pp. 449–60. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-016-9415-0.

5. Kim, Aekyoung, and Sam J. Maglio. "Text Is Gendered: The Role of Letter Case." Marketing Letters, vol.32, no. 2, June 2021, pp. 179–90. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-021-09556-w.

6. Shaikh, Dawn, and Barbara Chaparro. "Perception of Fonts: Perceived Personality Traits and Appropriate Uses." Digital Fonts and Reading, by Mary C Dyson and Ching Y Suen, WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2016, pp. 226–47. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814759540_0013.

7. Drucker, Johanna. "Graphic Devices: Narration and Navigation." Narrative, vol. 16, no. 2, May 2008, pp. 121–39. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0004.

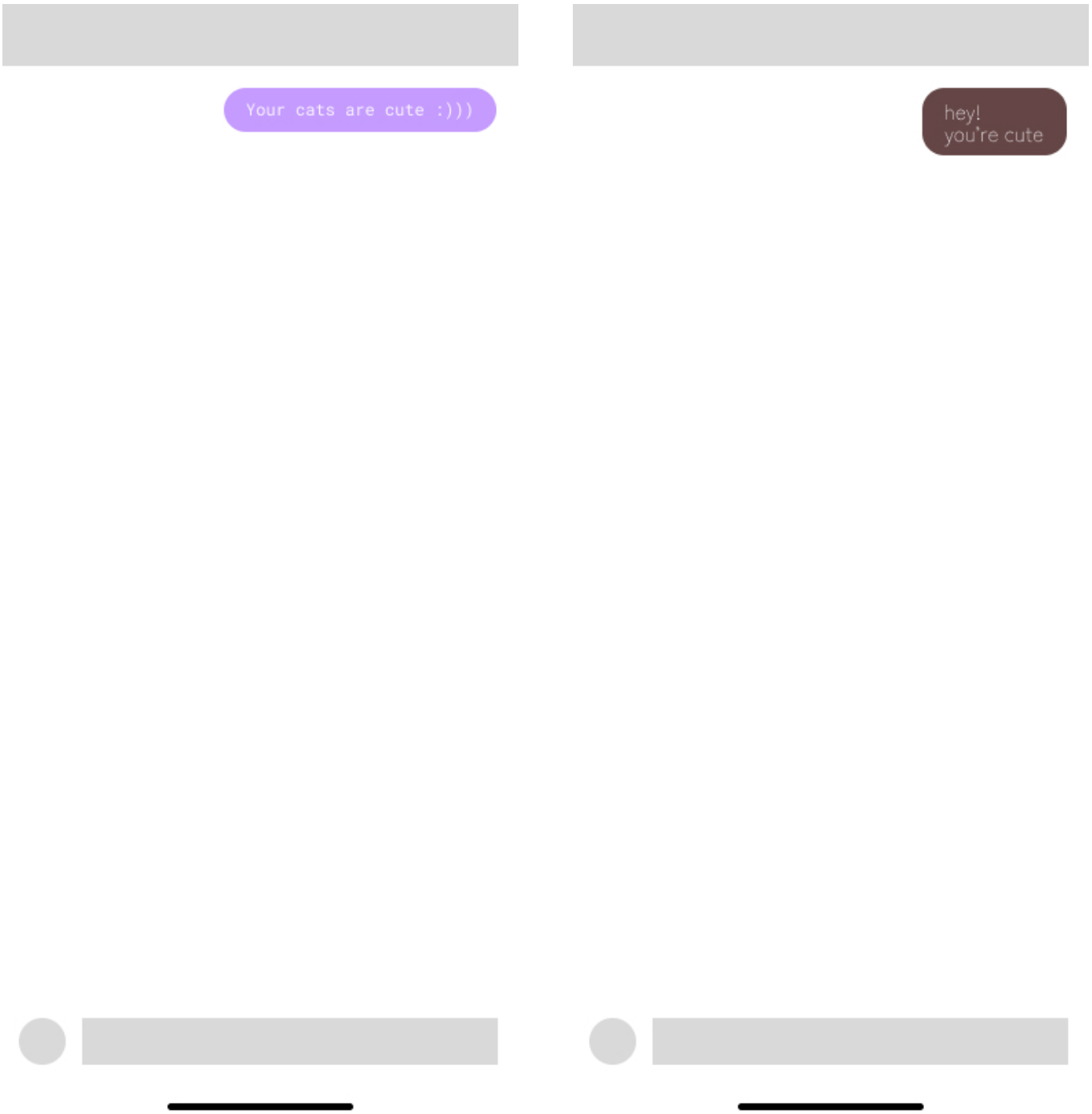
8. The Assimilation of Text by Image. https://electronicbookreview.com/publications/the-assimilation-of-text-by-image/.

9. Confessions of a Catfisher: Fake Identities, Online Relationships and Lies | SBS Insight. https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/article/confessions-of-a-catfisher-fake-identities-on-line-relationships-and-lies/fyyttvwlc. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

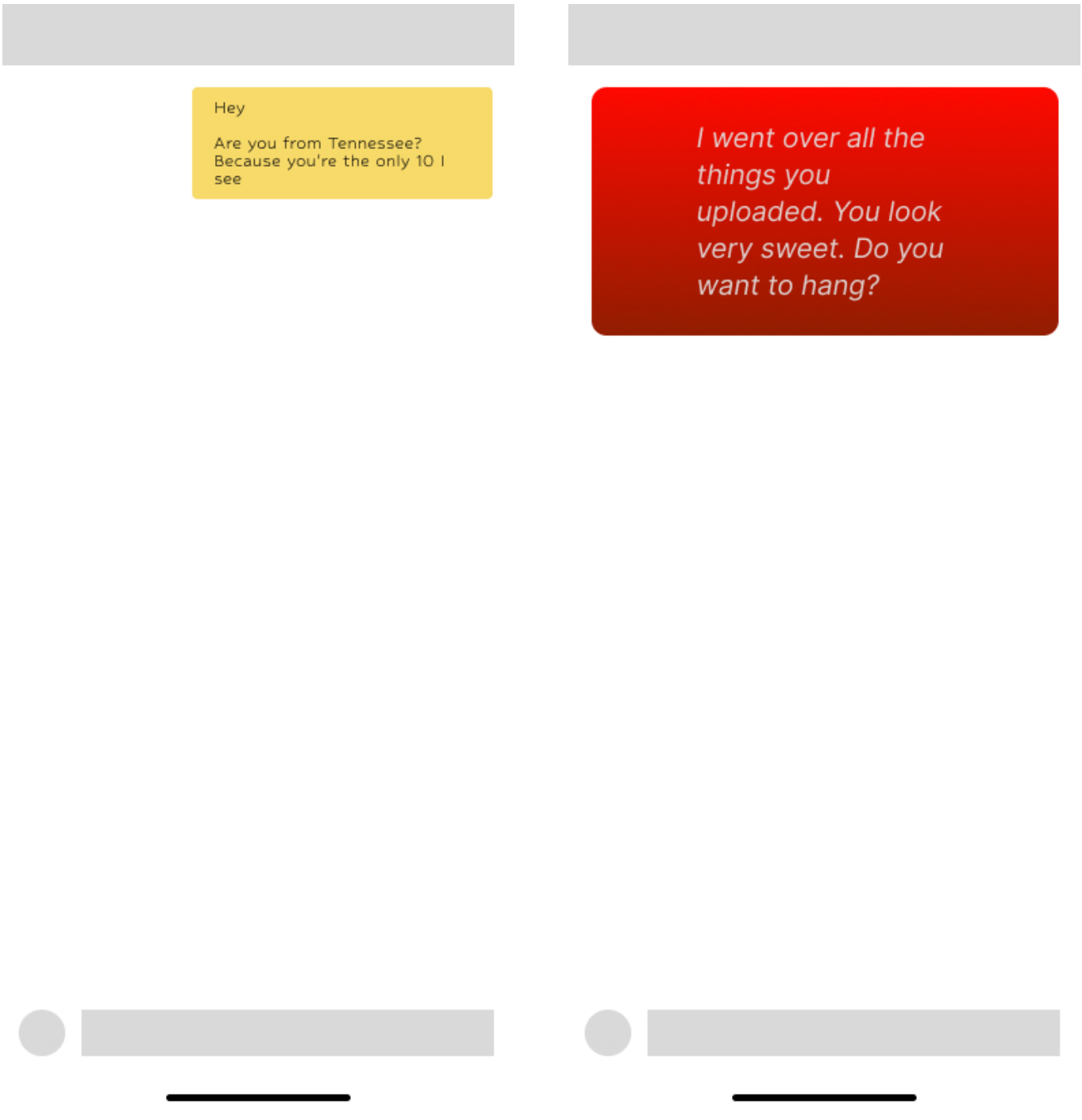
10. Cleridou, Kalia, and Adrian Furnham. "Personality Correlates of Aesthetic Preferences for Art, Architecture, and Music." Empirical Studies of the Arts, vol. 32, no. 2, July 2014, pp. 231–55. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.2190/EM.32.2.f.

11. Fox, Jesse, and Megan A. Vendemia. "Selective Self-Presentation and Social Comparison Through Photographs on Social Networking Sites." Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, vol. 19,no. 10, Oct. 2016, pp. 593–600. DOI.org (Crossref), https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0248.

**appendix a: p1 responses:**



**appendix a (contd.)**

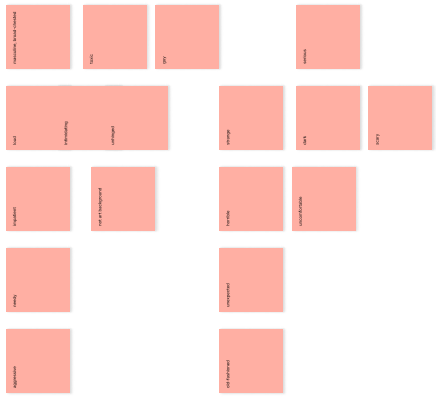


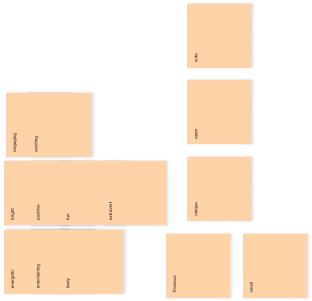
## appendix b: experiment results—(a) (left) & (b) (right):

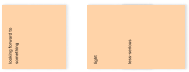
| factors (across) particpant-change (down) | words: | container-colour | font-colour | font | font-size | font-weight | container-padding | container-roundedness | leading | kerning | case |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| p1 | energetic, genuine, athletic, funny, pretty / cute | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| p2 | sweet, caring, energetic, passionate, silly | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ |
| p3 | adventurous, caring, kind, up-for-anything, fashionable | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ |
| p4 | adventurous, experimental, fluid, care-giver, interested / passionate | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☑ | ☐ | ☐ |

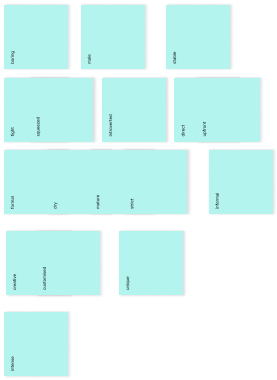
| factors (across) particpant-change (down) | intended words: | o1: | o2: | o3: | o4: |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| p1 | energetic, genuine, athletic, funny, pretty / cute | cute, intentional, suggestive, fun, bubbly | sweet, friendly, energetic, girly, introvert | cute, soft, nice, warm | friendly, cute, fun, kind |
| p2 | sweet, caring, energetic, passionate, silly | upfront, direct, customised, unique, creative | mature, stable, introvert, male | strict, formal, dry, boring | tight, intense, informal, squeezed |
| p3 | adventurous, caring, kind, up-for-anything, fashionable | open, engaging, exciting, looking forward to something, bright | cute, positive, extrovert, unique, energetic | fun, lively, entertaining, less serious | frivolous, light, small |
| p4 | adventurous, experimental, fluid, care-giver, interested / passionate | aggressive, needy, impatient, loud, toxic | old fashioned, unexpected, not art background, masculine broad chest | scary, dark, intimidating, unhinged | strange, guy, serious, uncomfortable, horrible<br><br>“i don’t like this colour” |
| | | | | | |
| changes: | | font, bubble colour, font colour, font-size, kerning, width of the bubble | bubble-colour, font-colour, font-weight, font, bubble-size, kerning, font-size | bubble-colour, maybe the fonts (?), maybe the size, arrangement | font, bubble-colour, kerning, leading, font-weight (italic) |

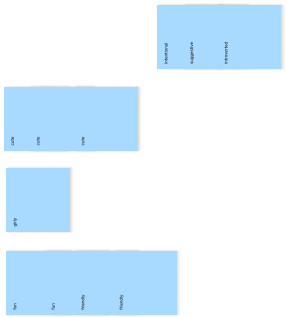
## appendix c: experiment (b) clusters:




**appendix d: process-blog(s):**

documentation-blog: https://arjunmakesthings.github.io/itp-blog/applications/essay_progress-log

draft(s): https://arjunmakesthings.github.io/itp-blog/applications/essay-writing

**appendix e: chat-gpt log:**

used solely for finding references to substantiate inklings that i had: https://chatgpt.com/share/6925d8e4-90ec-8012-831f-64f0e6b5d11d