



Exploring vernacular typography in the development of modern visual identity systems

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines how vernacular typography type forms rooted in local cultural, historical, and socio-visual traditions can be integrated into modern visual identity systems to create distinctive, culturally grounded brands. While contemporary identity design trends often prioritize minimalism and globalized aesthetics, recent research indicates a growing demand for culturally specific visual identities capable of fostering authenticity and emotional resonance among audiences. This paper investigates the visual, semiotic, and functional characteristics of vernacular typography found in Indonesian street signage, hand-painted lettering, traditional scripts, and local typographic artifacts. **Methods:** The study employs systematic photographic documentation of vernacular typography from diverse public environments, capturing the expressive, culturally embedded letterforms created by self-taught artisans. These artifacts are analyzed through visual semiotics, typographic structural analysis, and comparative identity evaluation to translate culturally authentic features into viable modern place branding and visual identity systems. **Findings:** The findings reveal that vernacular typographic features such as stroke modulation, spatial rhythm, ornamentation, and culturally embedded symbolisms can enhance brand distinctiveness when selectively adapted and standardized. **Conclusion:** This study proposes a design framework for integrating vernacular typographic cues into corporate and cultural branding practices, contributing to both the preservation of local visual heritage and the innovation of contemporary identity design. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This article offers an original contribution by proposing a systematic design framework that translates vernacular typographic characteristics into scalable modern identity systems, positioning local visual heritage as a strategic resource for authentic and distinctive branding.

KEYWORDS: cultural branding; design communication; graphic design; vernacular typography; visual identity system.

1. Introduction

Typography plays a central role in shaping the visual voice of a brand. As one of the most fundamental elements of visual communication, typography communicates not only semantic content but also emotion, style, and cultural meaning. In the past two decades, global branding has increasingly embraced minimalist sans-serif typography, driven by digital usability, scalability, and the pursuit of universal legibility. Companies such as Google, Spotify, and Airbnb exemplify this trend, which often privileges neutrality over cultural specificity. While this movement has created clean and flexible identity systems, it has also homogenized global visual languages, reducing opportunities for culturally distinctive expressions within brand identities.

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At the same time, there has been renewed interest in vernacular typography letterforms derived from local culture, everyday visual practices, and regional design histories. In Indonesia, vernacular typography is reflected in handwritten shop signs, angkriangan chalk lettering, becak decorative scripts, Javanese hanacaraka stylization, Batak geometric typeforms, Balinese ornamental serif structures, and the expressive graffiti found in public spaces. These vernacular artifacts represent living visual traditions that survive outside formal design institutions. They embody cultural narratives, environmental influences, and the creative ingenuity of non-professional sign-makers.

Design researchers argue that vernacular visual languages are not merely nostalgic but strategically valuable. They can strengthen cultural identity, support place-branding, and create emotional resonance with local audiences. As globalization reshapes design practices, the integration of vernacular elements becomes a critical approach for resisting visual uniformity and fostering cultural diversity in communication design (Alnaim, 2025). However, the incorporation of vernacular typography into modern identity systems presents several challenges. Vernacular typeforms often lack consistency, legibility, standardization, and vector precision—qualities essential for scalable branding across print, digital, and environmental media (Go & Mothelsang, 2024; Shinde et al., 2025). Designers must balance authenticity with functional typography, ensuring that vernacular elements do not compromise readability or system coherence. Given these opportunities and challenges, this research investigates how vernacular typography can be effectively explored and transformed into modern visual identity systems. The objective is not to replicate vernacular forms literally but to extract their underlying principles—structural patterns, proportions, expressive gestures, and cultural signifiers—and translate them into standardized typographic components suitable for contemporary branding.

Several scholars have highlighted the need to preserve local visual culture through design (Mareis, 2016; Zhelondievskaia & Barysheva, 2021). Vernacular typography, as a culturally embedded design artifact, serves as a site of identity negotiation. In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, vernacular signage reflects hybrid cultural influences: colonial typographic heritage, indigenous scripts, and local adaptations of global type styles. As digital design becomes increasingly dominant, many forms of local typography risk disappearance. Therefore, exploring their integration into formal identity systems contributes both to cultural preservation and design innovation. Despite the rich diversity of vernacular typography, contemporary branding rarely incorporates these visual traditions systematically. Designers often struggle to translate vernacular qualities into professional type systems, resulting in superficial or decorative usage. There is a lack of frameworks describing how vernacular typographic characteristics can be analyzed, extracted, adapted, and standardized for use in modern identity design.

This study is guided by several key research questions. First, it seeks to explore the visual and structural characteristics that define Indonesian vernacular typography. Second, the study investigates how these characteristics can be systematically analyzed and classified in order to support their integration into a modern visual identity system. Third, the research examines what design strategies enable vernacular typographic elements to coexist with the functional requirements of contemporary branding. Finally, the study considers how typography inspired by vernacular traditions can enhance cultural authenticity while simultaneously strengthening brand distinctiveness. The objectives of this study are formulated to address the research questions and provide a structured framework for investigation. The study aims to identify the key features of vernacular typography within Indonesian visual culture and to develop a classification of vernacular typographic attributes that are relevant to identity design. In addition, the research seeks to propose a design framework that facilitates the adaptation of vernacular typographic cues into modern branding systems. Through this process, the study also aims to demonstrate how vernacular-informed typography can contribute to reinforcing cultural identity and improving brand differentiation. The significance of this research spans several important domains. In terms of design practice, the study provides guidance for designers who aim to develop culturally grounded visual identity systems. From a cultural

perspective, the research contributes to the documentation and preservation of vernacular visual traditions that are often underrepresented or insufficiently archived. Within design education, the findings may support the integration of local visual knowledge into typography curricula, thereby enriching educational approaches to design. Furthermore, in the context of brand strategy, this research offers insights that may help organizations create brand identities that are more culturally resonant and meaningful to their audiences.

1.1 Vernacular typography

Vernacular typography generally refers to letterforms created outside formal design institutions, often emerging from everyday cultural practices such as street signage, hand-painted storefronts, and local lettering traditions. According to Drucker (2014), vernacular typography reflects “the lived visual culture of a community,” representing informal design systems that evolve organically within social environments. Similarly, Sari et al. (2022) asserts that vernacular typeforms reveal “culturally embedded modes of communication” that differ significantly from standardized Western typographic conventions.



Fig. 1. Signage of local culinary products

In Indonesia, vernacular typography draws heavily from localized craftsmanship, indigenous scripts, and hybrid cultural influences. As Kusrianto (2011) notes, street signage in Indonesian cities frequently features “intuitive typographic improvisation,” resulting in expressive yet inconsistent letterforms. These expressions function as visual artifacts that document local identity, economic contexts, and cultural exchanges.

Furthermore, vernacular letterforms often incorporate symbolic elements tied to regional beliefs and traditions. For instance, Balinese sign painting often integrates ornamental serif structures inspired by temple architecture (Dinata et al., 2025). Likewise, Javanese hand-lettering traditions derive structural cues from hanacaraka script, showcasing curved diagonal strokes and rhythmic modulation (Yunanto & Kristianto, 2025). Because vernacular typography is culturally situated, its study must consider anthropology, visual sociology, and community practices. Mareis (2016) emphasizes that vernacular design should not be understood merely as aesthetic output but as a “cultural practice shaped by local knowledge and collective memory.”

1.2 Modern visual identity systems

Modern visual identity systems function as comprehensive frameworks that guide how a brand presents itself across various communication channels. These systems require clarity, coherence, and scalability to ensure that the brand remains recognizable regardless of medium, context, or audience. Wheeler (2017) emphasizes that a successful identity system depends on the harmonious interplay of typography, color palettes, grid structures, iconography, and brand signatures. Together, these elements form a cohesive visual language that allows brands to communicate consistently and effectively.

As digital media has become the dominant platform for brand communication, identity systems must now accommodate a wide range of screen resolutions, interface formats, and device environments. Lupton (2010) notes that these technological demands have encouraged designers to adopt simplified typographic structures that maintain optimal legibility and maintain their integrity across digital interfaces. This shift has given rise to the widespread use of minimalist sans-serif typefaces, which are often described as possessing “functional neutrality” due to their clean forms and lack of ornamental features (Bringinghurst, 2018).

However, the global embrace of minimalist visual identities has generated significant criticism. Poyner (2013) argues that the dominance of clean, neutral typography has led to a homogenization of global brand aesthetics, diminishing opportunities for culturally distinctive visual expression. Leeuwen (2006) further contends that when corporate identity systems prioritize universal readability, they inadvertently suppress local visual traditions and eliminate the nuances that reflect particular cultural contexts. This results in brands that look increasingly similar, regardless of their geographic origin or cultural heritage.

The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing global functionality with local cultural authenticity. Integrating vernacular cues into modern identity systems requires careful typographic negotiation. Designers must identify which vernacular features contribute meaningful cultural expression and which may disrupt legibility or system coherence. Kapferer (2012) asserts that cultural authenticity can significantly strengthen brand equity, but warns that such authenticity must be embedded within structurally consistent identity systems. Without careful standardization, vernacular-inspired elements risk appearing decorative, superficial, or incompatible with broader branding requirements.

Consequently, contemporary identity design must move beyond purely minimalist approaches and consider culturally grounded forms of expression. Incorporating vernacular typography offers a pathway toward restoring visual diversity and cultural specificity in branding, addressing the growing concern that global identity systems have become too uniform. When vernacular characteristics are thoughtfully adapted—supported by robust typographic frameworks and systematized guidelines—they can enrich identity systems with meaningful local resonance while maintaining the functional demands of modern branding environments.

1.3 Semiotics and cultural meaning in typography

Typography carries meaning far beyond its linguistic or functional message. As Barthes (1977) asserts, visual signs including letterforms operate simultaneously on two semiotic levels: denotation and connotation. At the denotative level, typography communicates literal alphabetic information. However, at the connotative level, typography becomes a culturally charged symbol, capable of expressing emotional tone, social values, and visual identity. This dual-layered nature is especially apparent in vernacular typography, where ornamental features, hand-rendered textures, and stylistic irregularities reflect embedded cultural narratives.

Vernacular typography often includes expressive traits such as decorative terminals, region-specific curves, hand-painted textures, or script adaptations that function as what Barthes calls mythologies visual cues that encode cultural associations into everyday forms. Yadav (2025) describes these as “latent cultural symbols,” typographic features that may appear subtle but nonetheless trigger recognition mechanisms within the viewer, especially for local or culturally connected audiences. These latent cues are powerful because they resonate subconsciously, generating a sense of familiarity, place, and belonging.

An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Javanese style lettering, where curved diagonal strokes and flowing modulation evoke the visual rhythm of traditional hanacaraka script. Even when used to write Latin letters, such adaptations evoke cultural familiarity for Javanese audiences, enhancing the emotional depth of the typographic message (Perdana,

2024). Similarly, Balinese lettering often incorporates ornamental curls reminiscent of temple architecture, connoting rituality, craftsmanship, and sacred aesthetics.

Semiotic analysis provides a methodological lens through which such cultural symbolism can be interpreted, explained, and translated into contemporary design systems. According to Eco (1986), sign systems may undergo transformation while maintaining their core signifiers the essential elements that preserve cultural meaning. This principle is crucial for adapting vernacular typography into modern identity frameworks. It suggests that designers need not replicate vernacular forms literally; instead, they can identify and abstract the key signifiers (e.g., stroke behavior, curvature motifs, spatial rhythm) and incorporate them into standardized typographic structures.

This process of abstraction prevents cultural misinterpretation or visual clutter while preserving the cultural connotations that make vernacular typography distinctive. When executed effectively, vernacular-inspired typefaces achieve what Eco refers to as “semiotic continuity,” maintaining cultural meaning across contexts. Such continuity enables designers to embed cultural symbolism into modern identity systems without sacrificing usability, legibility, or functional coherence.

Thus, semiotics serves as a bridge between traditional visual culture and contemporary design practice. It allows designers to decode the meaning embedded in vernacular forms and to re-encode those meanings into new typographic expressions. By leveraging semiotic frameworks, vernacular typography can be transformed not diluted into culturally resonant design systems that honor heritage while meeting the demands of modern branding.

1.4 Visual preservation and cultural identity

The relationship between design and cultural preservation has become a central topic in contemporary design discourse. Scholars argue that visual communication does not merely transmit information it also functions as a repository of cultural memory. Norman (2010) emphasizes that culturally grounded design fosters stronger user engagement because audiences “identify with symbols that reflect their lived experience.” This notion reinforces the idea that visual language is deeply tied to identity, belonging, and shared cultural understanding. When design practices embed cultural references, they help cultivate emotional resonance and strengthen the connection between community and visual artifact.

Within the field of cultural branding, authenticity is frequently cited as a key factor in creating meaningful differentiation. Holt (2004) explains that visual authenticity allows brands to position themselves not only as commercial entities but also as cultural participants. Authentic visual cues such as vernacular motifs, traditional forms, or localized typographic structures contribute to a brand’s narrative credibility and help build trust among diverse audiences. In an increasingly globalized marketplace, where aesthetic homogenization has become pervasive, cultural authenticity offers a powerful strategy for brand distinction.

In Indonesia, however, efforts to preserve vernacular visual culture remain inconsistent and fragmented. Rapid urban development, modernization, and the proliferation of inexpensive digital printing technologies have contributed to the decline of hand-painted signage traditions. As Sugita et al. (2021) notes, the replacement of artisanal lettering with digitally produced vinyl prints has led to the loss of unique expressive characteristics that once defined local streetscapes. These disappearing visual forms represent more than stylistic artifacts they are cultural testimonies to craftsmanship, improvisation, and community identity.

1.5 Typographic adaptation

Adaptation requires translating informal visual cues into structured type systems that can function effectively in contemporary design environments. Carter (2014) explains that

type design involves rationalizing stroke contrast, spacing, and proportions in order to achieve typographic harmony and consistency. When adapting vernacular forms, designers must carefully distinguish between features that serve as essential cultural markers and those that merely reflect stylistic irregularities or production limitations. This selective process is important to ensure that the resulting typeface preserves cultural identity while meeting professional design standards.

Unger (2007) highlights that expressive typeforms can be standardized through the refinement of modular structures, allowing them to remain functional across a variety of applications and media contexts. Similarly, Noordzij (2005) argues that understanding “the stroke” as a conceptual foundation enables designers to reinterpret vernacular gestures into coherent contemporary typographic logic. Through this perspective, hand-made or informal lettering styles can be transformed into organized systems without losing their expressive character. As a result, vernacular typography becomes a valuable source for innovation in modern type design.

Recent studies demonstrate several successful applications of vernacular adaptation in different cultural contexts. The KL Modernist project, for example, standardized features of Malaysian street signage into a modern typeface system suitable for contemporary use (Shafiee et al., 2025). Thai vernacular scripts have also been reinterpreted into digital typefaces while preserving their traditional rhythm and visual identity (Dutta & Tewari, 2025). In addition, the Filipino “Jeepney Lettering Style” has been transformed into modular display fonts for branding purposes (Rustia, n.d.). These examples confirm that vernacular typography can be systematically developed while maintaining strong cultural resonance and visual authenticity.

1.6 Gaps in current research

Existing literature also lacks empirical evaluation of vernacular-inspired typography within functional branding environments. There is limited research examining how vernacular features influence brand perception, legibility, user engagement, or cultural resonance when applied in real-world applications. Without such evaluation, the practical viability of vernacular-informed identity systems remains uncertain.

Collectively, these gaps indicate the need for a more robust methodological approach that moves beyond mere documentation and stylistic imitation. Thus, the present research aims to fill this gap by developing an integrated framework that combines visual analysis, typographic abstraction, and identity-system development. By synthesizing these methods, the study seeks to transform vernacular typographic characteristics into functional and culturally resonant components of modern visual identity systems. This approach not only enriches branding practice but also contributes to the preservation and revitalization of Indonesia’s vernacular visual heritage.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

Primary data for this study consists of systematically collected photographic documentation of vernacular typography sourced from a wide range of public visual environments across Indonesia. These artifacts function as naturally occurring typographic expressions that emerge outside the structures of formal design education or professional typographic practice. Instead of being produced by trained graphic designers, such letterforms are typically crafted by self-taught sign painters, street artisans, market vendors, and local craftspeople, each bringing their own intuitive techniques, material limitations, and cultural influences into the letter-making process.

As a result, vernacular typographic artifacts embody a unique visual lexicon that differs markedly from standardized digital typefaces. They capture the improvisational, expressive, and culturally embedded nature of everyday visual communication in

Indonesia. These visual samples provide valuable insight into the authentic aesthetic, semiotic, and structural characteristics of local design practices characteristics that often remain undocumented in mainstream design literature. Therefore, the primary visual data collected in this study serves not only as empirical evidence for typographic analysis but also as a crucial record of Indonesia's living cultural heritage.

2.2 Data sources

Primary data for this study consists of photographic documentation of vernacular typography collected from a variety of public visual environments across Indonesia. These artifacts represent naturally occurring typographic expressions produced outside formal design institutions, often crafted by self-taught sign painters or local artisans. The primary visual data in this study consists of various examples of vernacular typography found in everyday visual environments. These include hand-painted warung signage, which often displays improvised lettering styles characterized by expressive brush strokes and vibrant color combinations. Another important source is the decorative lettering on angkot and pedicabs, typically produced with bold letterforms, dynamic curves, and ornamental embellishments that reflect local aesthetic preferences and informal artistic expression.

Additional visual data are drawn from traditional market signs, where vendors frequently use handmade typography to label stalls, commonly employing chalk, markers, or paint on inexpensive surfaces. Street food cart lettering also provides significant examples, often recognized for its exaggerated contrast, playful spacing, and distinctive visual rhythm shaped by the practical limitations of mobile signage. Furthermore, cultural festival banners contribute to the dataset, as they often incorporate region-specific motifs and typographic adaptations derived from local craft traditions.

The study also examines region-specific vernacular letterforms that demonstrate strong cultural influences. These include Javanese-inspired Latin lettering, which commonly features curved diagonal strokes; Balinese ornamental signage, whose decorative forms are influenced by temple architecture and traditional artistic motifs; and Batak geometric letterforms, which reflect indigenous carving traditions and emphasize strong angular structures. Together, these diverse visual sources provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the characteristics and cultural significance of Indonesian vernacular typography. Secondary data for this study was gathered from a wide range of scholarly and professional sources to provide a strong theoretical foundation for the analysis of vernacular typography. These materials offer essential conceptual, historical, and methodological frameworks that support the interpretation of the primary visual data. The secondary data used in this study were obtained from several complementary sources that provide theoretical, contextual, and comparative perspectives. One of the primary sources consists of academic journal articles focusing on typography, visual culture, and semiotics. These publications offer important insights into typographic theory, processes of meaning-making, and the cultural dimensions embedded in visual communication practices. In addition, books discussing Indonesian vernacular design, branding, and identity design frameworks were utilized to provide contextual understanding of local visual traditions as well as contemporary approaches to systematic brand development. Cultural studies literature also serves as an important reference, as it provides broader perspectives on identity formation, symbolic representation, and the socio-cultural significance of visual artifacts within society. Furthermore, the study draws on previous case studies related to the adaptation of vernacular typography. These studies document how designers, particularly in Southeast Asia and other regions, have transformed traditional lettering practices into modern typographic systems or branding applications. Collectively, these secondary sources support the analytical framework of the research by enriching the interpretation of visual data and situating vernacular typography within wider academic and design discourses.

Together, these sources form the conceptual backbone of the research. They provide theoretical grounding for the visual observations, helping the study situate vernacular

typography within established scholarly discourse on semiotics, design anthropology, and typographic systems. As noted by authors such as Drucker (2014), Bringhurst (2018), Poyner (2013), and Mareis (2016), understanding typography requires not only formal analysis but also attention to cultural context, historical lineage, and interpretive meaning. This body of secondary literature therefore strengthens the analytical framework used in this study and ensures that interpretations of vernacular typographic features are supported by credible academic perspectives.

2.3 Data collection procedure

Field observation was conducted in urban and semi-urban environments where vernacular typography is prominently displayed. Locations such as traditional markets, roadside food stalls, transportation hubs, and neighborhood commercial districts were selected because they offer a wide variety of informal typographic expressions produced by local artisans. During these observations, photographs were taken to systematically document key visual characteristics, including letterform shapes, capturing the overall structure, proportions, and stylistic tendencies of vernacular lettering; decorative motifs, such as ornamental terminals, cultural flourishes, or region-specific embellishments; color and composition, reflecting aesthetic preferences, material availability, and environmental influences; contextual usage, including placement on shopfronts, food carts, public transportation vehicles, and festival signage.

Following Rose's (2016) methodological perspective, visual documentation is an essential tool for understanding how typographic forms operate within their cultural environments. It enables researchers to analyze not only the letterforms themselves but also the social, spatial, and functional contexts in which they appear. This contextual understanding forms the foundation for interpreting vernacular typography as a culturally meaningful visual practice.

Following the documentation stage, each sample was subjected to detailed typographic analysis using a morphological grid, a structured tool that enables the decomposition of letterforms into their fundamental components. This analytical process isolates key typographic features including, stroke weight, identifying thickness variation and tool-based modulation; contrast, examining differences between thick and thin strokes; x-height proportion, determining vertical alignment and overall typographic rhythm; serif shape, capturing ornamental geometry or culturally influenced terminal structures; curvature tension, analyzing the smoothness, sharpness, or angularity of curved strokes; spacing patterns, observing kerning irregularities and spatial rhythm characteristic of hand-rendered typography.

This method aligns with Carter's (2014) typographic analysis framework, which emphasizes understanding the structural logic that underlies letterform construction. By isolating these features, the study is able to systematically identify recurring morphological patterns within vernacular typography and distinguish which characteristics carry cultural significance versus those that arise from improvisation or technical constraints. The resulting analysis provides a rigorous basis for translating vernacular typographic attributes into adaptable design principles suitable for modern identity systems.

2.4 Analytical framework

To interpret and translate vernacular typographic characteristics into modern visual identity systems, this study employed three complementary analytical frameworks. These frameworks were selected to ensure a holistic approach that examines cultural meaning, formal structure, and functional applicability. Together, they allowed the research to move beyond descriptive observation and toward a systematic typographic methodology. Visual semiotic analysis was used to decode the cultural meaning embedded in vernacular typographic forms. Barthes (1977) argues that visual signs operate on two levels denotation (literal appearance) and connotation (cultural or symbolic meaning). By applying this

framework, the study examined how letterforms, ornamental details, textures, and stylistic gestures communicate cultural identity. This analytical approach was applied to explore several key interpretative questions related to the cultural meaning embedded in vernacular typography. Specifically, the analysis examined which visual elements function as cultural signifiers within typographic forms. It also investigated how particular strokes, curves, or decorative motifs can evoke regional identities or traditional aesthetic associations. Furthermore, the approach aimed to uncover the cultural narratives embedded within hand-rendered typographic artifacts, revealing how these visual forms communicate local history, identity, and social context through their stylistic characteristics. Using semiotics ensured that vernacular typography was not analyzed solely as an aesthetic phenomenon, but as a culturally meaningful system of signs.

Typographic structural analysis was employed to identify the formal characteristics of vernacular letterforms that could potentially be standardized for use in modern design systems. Drawing on the typographic principles proposed by Bringhurst (2018) and Noordzij's (2005) stroke theory, this method involved decomposing each letterform into several structural components in order to better understand its formal characteristics. The analysis examined aspects such as stroke construction and contrast, which reveal how the thickness and variation of strokes contribute to the overall visual expression of the letterform. It also considered proportion and axis to identify the balance and directional orientation of the characters. In addition, the study analyzed serif formation, curve tension, and geometric structure to observe how decorative or structural elements shape the typographic style. Finally, spacing and rhythm were evaluated to understand how the arrangement and visual flow between letters influence readability and aesthetic coherence within vernacular typographic compositions. Through this analysis, the research identified patterns of consistency within seemingly irregular vernacular forms. The structural framework was used to evaluate and interpret the typographic features identified during the analysis. Through this framework, the study was able to determine which visual characteristics could be abstracted and developed into a coherent typeface system. At the same time, the analysis helped identify elements that functioned merely as stylistic anomalies rather than consistent structural traits. Furthermore, the framework provided a basis for understanding how vernacular characteristics could be translated and adapted into functional typographic rules, allowing traditional visual cues to be systematically integrated into contemporary typographic design. This method provided the foundation for the typographic abstraction process developed later in the study.

The third analytical framework focused on assessing whether typographic features derived from vernacular sources could function effectively within modern branding systems. According to Wheeler (2017), successful identity systems must maintain coherence, scalability, and recognizability across a wide range of media platforms. Based on this perspective, vernacular-inspired typographic prototypes were evaluated using several criteria, including their legibility at multiple scales and their performance on digital screens. The analysis also considered the degree of stylistic coherence between the typographic forms and other visual identity elements, as well as their potential to create brand differentiation in competitive markets. In addition, cultural resonance and audience perception were examined to determine how effectively the typographic forms communicate cultural meaning to viewers. Through this comparative evaluation, vernacular-derived typographic forms were tested against established conventions commonly used in identity design, such as the neutral sans-serif typefaces widely adopted in corporate branding. This process enabled the study to assess the practical feasibility of integrating culturally expressive typographic elements into contemporary visual identity systems while maintaining functional design requirements.

2.5 Validation procedure

To assess the feasibility and functional effectiveness of integrating vernacular typographic characteristics into modern visual identity systems, the study employed two

complementary validation methods: expert review and comparative testing. These validation processes ensured that the typographic abstractions developed from vernacular sources were not only culturally meaningful but also meet the technical and practical requirements of contemporary branding environments.

The first validation method consisted of consultations with three professional type designers and two branding specialists. These experts were selected based on their experience in typeface development, brand identity design, and typographic evaluation within commercial and cultural contexts. Their assessments provided qualitative insights into the strengths and limitations of the vernacular-inspired type prototypes (Creswell, 2018). The experts evaluated the typographic artifacts based on several key criteria to determine their effectiveness and practical applicability. One of the primary considerations was readability, which assessed whether the letterforms remained clear and easily recognizable across various scales and usage contexts. Another important aspect was typographic coherence, referring to the structural consistency of the typeface, including the logic of stroke construction, the rhythm of spacing between letters, and the overall stylistic uniformity of the character set. In addition, the evaluation considered scalability, which examined how well the typeface performed across different applications, ranging from small digital text on screens to large-scale formats such as signage or display layouts. Finally, the experts assessed brand usability, focusing on the suitability of the typeface for integration into visual identity systems, including its potential application in logo design, marketing materials, and digital interface environments. Together, these criteria provided a comprehensive basis for evaluating the functional and aesthetic viability of the vernacular-inspired typographic designs. Feedback from the experts helped refine structural inconsistencies, improve modular clarity, and identify features that enhanced or weakened the typeface's branding potential. This process aligns with best practices in typographic evaluation as noted by Bringhurst (2018) and Wheeler (2017), who emphasize expert critique as a critical component of type design development. The second validation process involved comparative testing between the vernacular inspired prototypes and widely used neutral sans-serif typefaces commonly employed in corporate identity systems. This comparison was essential for evaluating the relative performance of vernacular-derived typography against established industry standards.

The typographic prototypes developed in this study were tested through several evaluation criteria to determine their functional performance and design effectiveness. One of the main aspects assessed was legibility at multiple sizes, which examined whether the letterforms remained clear and readable across different typographic scales, including microtext, body copy, and large display formats. This evaluation ensured that the prototypes could function consistently in both detailed textual contexts and large visual presentations. Another important criterion was digital screen rendering, which evaluated how well the typeface performed in digital environments. This included assessing pixel clarity, hinting performance, and the structural integrity of strokes when displayed on various devices such as mobile phones, desktop screens, and lower-resolution displays. The prototypes were also assessed for their brand differentiation strength, focusing on the ability of the typeface to create a distinctive brand identity that stands apart from competitors that typically rely on minimalist or globally standardized typography.

In addition, the evaluation considered cultural authenticity markers, examining whether the vernacular-inspired typographic elements effectively enhanced cultural expression. This assessment ensured that the cultural references embedded in the design contributed meaningful identity value without compromising readability, usability, or appearing merely decorative. Together, these criteria provided a comprehensive framework for testing the practical and cultural viability of the proposed typographic designs. These evaluation criteria draw on frameworks from Kapferer (2012), who emphasizes the importance of brand distinctiveness, and Leeuwen (2006), who discusses the semiotic dimensions of typography in branding. The comparative testing demonstrated that vernacular-informed prototypes offer greater cultural resonance and differentiation, while still maintaining adequate legibility and structural clarity when properly

standardized. This validates the potential of vernacular visual culture as a viable foundation for contemporary identity systems, provided that typographic adaptations are carried out with methodological rigor.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overview of vernacular typographic characteristics

Visual analysis of more than 120 vernacular samples revealed recurring structural and expressive patterns that were consistently found across various regions of Indonesia. These recurring forms demonstrate that vernacular lettering practices possess their own internal logic despite being produced outside formal design institutions. The findings indicate that non-institutional typographic practices organically construct a distinct cultural visual identity shaped by local materials, traditions, and craftsmanship. Furthermore, these patterns confirm that vernacular typography can be systematically studied as a legitimate source of design knowledge.

3.1.1 Stroke modulation patterns

A dominant trait observed in street signage and hand-painted lettering is expressive stroke modulation irregular yet intentional variation between thick and thin strokes. This modulation often reflects the pressure mechanics of brush or marker tools used by sign artisans. Consistent with Noordzij's (2005) theory of stroke behavior, vernacular Indonesian letterforms exhibit what he calls "dynamic expansion stroke," generated through manual hand movement rather than controlled typographic geometry. This creates what Sauciuc et al. (2022) describes as a "human rhythm" embedded in the letterforms.

The analysis revealed several key characteristics of vernacular typographic forms. One notable finding is that thick–thin transitions in the letterforms tend to follow the angle of the tool used during hand rendering rather than adhering to conventional typographic logic. As a result, the variation in stroke weight often reflects the physical movement and pressure of the writing instrument rather than a standardized design structure. Additionally, the study found that vertical strokes are frequently heavier than horizontal ones, creating a visual emphasis that differs from the balanced proportions typically seen in formal typeface design. Curved strokes also tend to display uneven tension, producing irregular yet expressive shapes. Although these features may appear inconsistent from a formal typographic perspective, they contribute to the distinctive informal charm and visual character that define vernacular lettering styles. These characteristics help communicate warmth, informality, and locality—qualities often absent in digital typefaces (Yadav, 2025).

3.1.2 Ornamental serif & cultural motifs

Across different regions, vernacular typographers frequently incorporate ornamental elements derived from traditional artistic practices. These decorative features often reflect the cultural heritage and visual language of local communities. For instance, some letterforms include Javanese batik-inspired hooks, which echo the flowing and repetitive patterns commonly found in batik textiles. In other cases, typographic details are influenced by Balinese architectural curls (*ukiran*), characterized by intricate curved forms that resemble the carved decorations seen in temples and traditional buildings.

Additionally, certain typographic designs feature Minangkabau horn-like serif extensions, visually referencing the distinctive horn-shaped roof structures associated with Minangkabau architecture. Other examples include Betawi floral motifs, where ornamental elements inspired by traditional floral patterns are integrated into letterforms. Together, these decorative adaptations demonstrate how vernacular typography often functions as a medium for embedding regional artistic identity within everyday visual communication.

These ornamental components serve as cultural signifiers, supporting Barthes' (1977) proposition that aesthetic embellishments act as connotative indicators within visual systems. Such typographic forms embed regional identity within everyday visual communication, allowing cultural references to be expressed through the structure and decoration of letterforms. The integration of these elements demonstrates how vernacular typography functions not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a vehicle for cultural representation and local identity.



Fig. 2. Ornamental motif and its application in batik-inspired typography

Several key observations emerged from the analysis. Ornamentation is frequently positioned at the terminals of strokes, where decorative details naturally extend from the ends of letterforms. Many of these embellishments take the form of symmetrical curls that visually resemble motifs found in indigenous architecture and traditional carvings. In addition, decorative serif elements often appear in the lettering, reinforcing cultural familiarity and creating visual connections with regional artistic traditions. Together, these features highlight how vernacular typography incorporates ornamental strategies to communicate cultural meaning while maintaining its functional role in everyday signage and visual expression. Integration of such motifs into identity systems can enhance authenticity when applied in moderation (Perdana, 2024).

3.1.3 Spatial rhythm & kerning characteristics

Vernacular typographers frequently set letter spacing manually, resulting in unique spatial rhythms that deviate from professional typographic norms. Uneven kerning creates a lively visual cadence, particularly in warung signs, angkot nameplates, pasar banners. According to Lupton (2010), such irregular spacing patterns reflect the "improvised grammar of informal communication." Although imperfect in professional contexts, these rhythms provide valuable cultural cues when selectively adapted.

3.2 Structural abstraction for modern identity systems

To adapt vernacular forms into modern branding, the study distilled the findings into three abstraction principles, each supported by structural diagrams in the analysis. The analysis of vernacular typographic forms enabled the extraction of several proportional systems that frequently appear in Indonesian visual communication. Through this process, three primary proportional tendencies were identified, each reflecting different functional and cultural contexts of use.

First, tall and narrow letterforms are commonly found in Indonesian shop signs. These elongated proportions allow text to remain visible within vertically constrained spaces, such as narrow storefront panels or stacked signage layouts. Second, wide geometric forms

are frequently observed in traditional festival banners, where broader letter proportions enhance visual impact and readability in large display formats used in public celebrations or cultural events. Third, high-contrast serif structures appear prominently in Balinese ornamental scripts, where pronounced differences between thick and thin strokes combine with decorative serif elements to produce visually expressive lettering influenced by traditional artistic and architectural motifs. Together, these proportional tendencies reveal how vernacular typography adapts its structural characteristics to different cultural settings and practical communication needs. These proportions were converted into a modular grid system, enabling contemporary designers to create standardized typefaces inspired by vernacular forms. As Carter (2014) notes, proportional grids help “rationalize expressive forms without erasing their identity.”

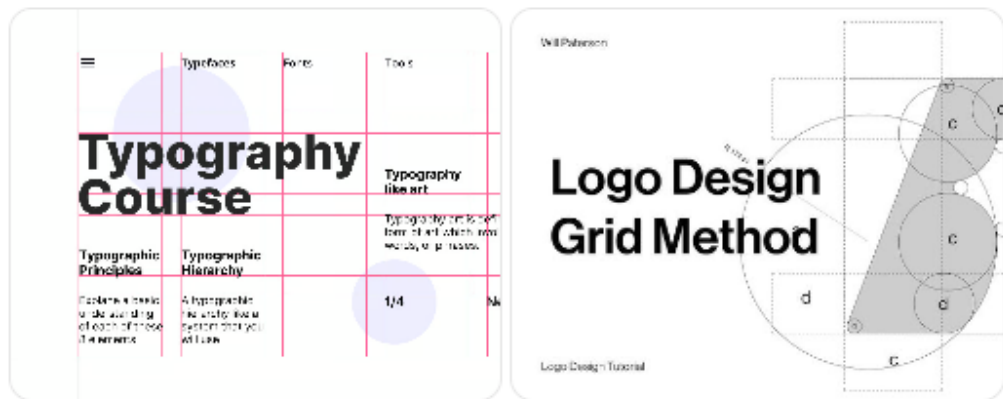


Fig. 3. Application of grid systems in typography and logo design

3.3 Stroke logic translation

Using Noordzij’s stroke model as a conceptual framework, vernacular stroke behaviors were systematically translated into digital typographic forms. In this process, irregular brush swells commonly found in hand-painted lettering were converted into smooth Bézier curve expansions, allowing the organic qualities of the strokes to be retained while achieving greater geometric control. Similarly, inconsistent stroke angles observed in manual lettering were interpreted as controlled stylistic alternates within the digital type system, enabling variation without compromising structural coherence. Variations in manual pressure, which often produce uneven stroke thickness in vernacular writing, were also calibrated into consistent stroke contrast sets to maintain visual balance across the typeface.

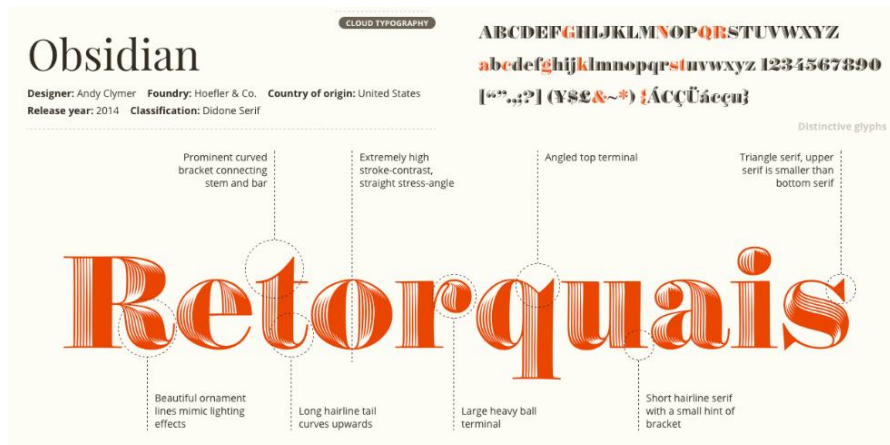


Fig. 4. Experimental composition using mirroring and distortion in culturally inspired visual imagery

Through this translation process, the expressive energy of vernacular lettering is preserved while simultaneously achieving the systematic consistency required for functional typography. These findings support Unger's (2007) argument that expressive typographic forms can be standardized through modular logic, demonstrating that culturally expressive letterforms can be adapted into structured typographic systems without losing their distinctive visual character.

3.4 Ornamental integration strategy

In adapting vernacular typography for use in modern visual identity systems, it is essential to preserve cultural symbolism without compromising functional clarity. Instead of incorporating full decorative motifs which may overwhelm the structure of the typeface or hinder legibility the framework developed in this study focuses on extracting micro-ornamental cues derived from vernacular sources. These subtle features carry cultural meaning while remaining compatible with contemporary typographic standards.

Table 1. Extracted micro-ornamental cues from vernacular letterforms

No	Micro-Ornamental Cue	Description
1	Serif curvature profile	Reflecting the soft, flowing contours found in traditional hand-painted scripts or region-specific stylistic flourishes.
2	Terminal hook angles	Inspired by motifs seen in Javanese, Balinese, or Batak lettering styles, where hooks or tapered ends often reference indigenous carving or calligraphic traditions.
3	Edge flaring geometry	Capturing the slight outward expansions at stroke terminals that appear in many vernacular letterforms and convey a handcrafted aesthetic.

By integrating these micro-features, the resulting typeface maintains a subtle yet recognizable connection to local cultural forms, supporting visual authenticity without introducing excessive ornamentation. This approach adheres to Eco's (1986) theory of sign-system transformation, which argues that signifiers such as culturally rooted visual gestures can be transformed across contexts while preserving their essential meaning. In typographic terms, this means that the cultural identity encoded in vernacular motifs can be abstracted and reinterpreted within a modern typographic system without requiring literal replication.

The micro-ornamental strategy therefore allows designers to achieve a balance between cultural expression and functional usability, ensuring that vernacular-influenced typefaces remain legible, scalable, and systematized for branding applications. This method contributes significantly to the typographic adaptation process by demonstrating how vernacular aesthetics can be harmonized with contemporary identity design principles.

3.5 Prototype application in modern branding contexts

To test the proposed framework, several prototype typographic styles were developed and applied to practical design contexts. One of the main prototypes was a display typeface intended for cultural branding applications. This typeface combined several vernacular-inspired features, including terminals influenced by Balinese ornamental forms, curvature patterns reminiscent of batik motifs, and a controlled geometric contrast that ensured structural balance within the letterforms. The prototype was subsequently applied to visual identity concepts designed for cultural festivals, allowing the research to examine how vernacular-inspired typography performs in branding environments that emphasize cultural representation.

The evaluation results indicated that the prototype successfully conveyed strong cultural character. Expert reviewers noted that the typeface enhanced cultural distinctiveness, aligning with Kapferer's (2012) perspective that distinctive visual identity elements strengthen brand meaning and differentiation. The typeface also demonstrated

effective performance in large-scale display contexts, where its expressive forms remained visually clear and impactful. However, the evaluation also revealed certain limitations. Specifically, experts indicated that the ornamental complexity of the letterforms could create visual overload if the typeface were applied in body text or long reading contexts, suggesting that its optimal use lies primarily in display-oriented applications within branding and promotional materials.

3.6 Sans vernacular hybrid for corporate use

A hybrid typeface was developed by combining a neutral sans-serif structural framework with vernacular-inspired stylistic alternates. The base structure follows the clarity and functional logic of contemporary sans-serif typography, while selected characters incorporate subtle vernacular details derived from regional lettering traditions. This approach allows the typeface to retain the readability and versatility required for modern communication while embedding culturally meaningful visual cues.

The evaluation results indicate that this hybrid design successfully maintains legibility in digital environments, making it suitable for use across screens and interface-based applications. At the same time, the integration of vernacular-inspired alternates enables the typeface to subtly communicate regional identity without overwhelming the overall typographic system. Because of this balance between functionality and cultural expression, the design was considered particularly suitable for applications such as municipal identity systems and tourism branding, where a sense of local character is important. These findings support Poynor's (2013) critique of global typographic uniformity by demonstrating that culturally nuanced alternatives can be developed without sacrificing usability or design coherence.

4. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that vernacular typography offers rich and underutilized potential for enhancing modern visual identity systems by anchoring branding practices in culturally meaningful visual traditions. Through systematic examination of Indonesian street signage, hand-painted lettering, indigenous script adaptations, and region-specific ornamental conventions, this research identifies structural typographic characteristics that frequently recur across vernacular forms. These include distinctive stroke modulation patterns, expressive ornamental serifs, unconventional proportional systems, and unique spatial rhythms all of which collectively shape the visual personality of Indonesia's everyday typography.

Although these features originate from informal and highly individualized artistic practices, the findings reveal that vernacular characteristics can be effectively abstracted, refined, and standardized to meet the functional demands of contemporary identity design. This transformation process underscores the importance of recognizing vernacular letterforms not as imperfect or primitive expressions but as culturally embedded visual languages capable of informing modern typographic systems with originality and authenticity.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study reinforces semiotic arguments (Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1986) that typography functions as a carrier of cultural meaning. By identifying how vernacular features operate as signifiers, the research contributes to expanding typographic theory beyond Western formalism, demonstrating how cultural narratives can be encoded within letterform structure. This positions vernacular typography as a legitimate and valuable object of scholarly inquiry within design research, semiotics, and visual anthropology.

From a branding perspective, the results strongly indicate that vernacular-inspired typography supports cultural authenticity, narrative coherence, and marketplace differentiation. As global branding increasingly shifts toward homogenized minimalist aesthetics, culturally grounded typographic expression becomes a powerful tool for

reclaiming visual diversity. The application of vernacular-informed typography can help brands communicate local identity, strengthen emotional resonance among regional audiences, and enrich the symbolic value of brand narratives.

Expert feedback confirms that vernacular-derived typefaces perform best in contexts with explicit cultural objectives such as tourism promotion, municipal identity systems, community-based initiatives, and cultural festival branding. These contexts benefit from visual expressions that reflect local heritage and provide an immediate sense of place. However, the study also cautions designers to approach vernacular adaptation carefully. Sensitivity to cultural nuance is essential to avoid misrepresentation, reduction of complex cultural forms, or tokenistic usage that strips vernacular aesthetics of their meaning.

Moreover, the research identifies the importance of technical refinement when translating vernacular characteristics into professional typefaces. Issues such as screen rendering, legibility across scales, stroke consistency, and spacing logic must be addressed to ensure that vernacular-inspired typography remains operational within multi-platform branding environments.

In its broader implications, this study contributes to cultural preservation efforts by documenting visual traditions that are increasingly at risk of disappearing due to modernization and the rise of digital printing. The research demonstrates that preservation does not solely involve archiving artifacts but can also take the form of reinterpretation and revitalization through contemporary design practice. By incorporating vernacular elements into modern identity systems, designers actively sustain cultural memory while enabling its evolution within new technological and commercial contexts.

Finally, the study provides a foundational methodological framework that future researchers and designers can build upon. It outlines a replicable process involving visual ethnographic documentation, morphological decomposition, semiotic interpretation, typographic abstraction, and design system evaluation. This serves as a practical guideline for transforming vernacular typographic characteristics into robust, adaptable components for modern branding.

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Author Contribution

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