

Trends in Layout Design of Feature Articles in Outdoor Magazines

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Abstract

The outdoor industry has been growing steadily over the past decade, with billions of dollars spent annually and millions of jobs created in the United States alone. Magazines are an ideal form of media to reach this huge market. This study examined the trends in the layout design of feature articles in the top two outdoor magazines. Through a content analysis of the grid system and five categories of layout design, the study compares the publications and analyzes the apparent trends. This analysis found trends in three of the five categories. The author concluded that there are some prevailing trends in the feature articles examined, but further research should continue to explore magazine layout and design.

I. Introduction

This study examined trends in the layout and design of feature articles in outdoor magazines. The outdoor industry has been growing steadily over the past decade, with billions of dollars spent annually and millions of jobs created just in the United States (“Outdoor Recreation,” 2017). Magazines are an ideal form of media to reach this huge market. Outdoor adventure magazines combine storytelling along with gear reviews, profiles of athletes and adventurers in the field, and advertisements for outdoor brands. *Backpacker* and *Outside* cater to the outdoor adventurer. These magazines have large audiences of 1 to 2.5 million total readership, reaching a broad range of consumers via their social platforms (*Outside*, 2017; *Backpacker* Media Kit, 2017). These two magazines are of interest due to their reflection of this growing industry.

The layout of a magazine is of utmost importance to conveying the right message to the reader. This is true of all publications, but due to the way in which readers flip through magazines and their highly visual focus, page design is even more important than a book’s layout. Art directors and graphic designers use systems such as the grid to place items upon a page to create an appealing composition with the text and imagery. This study examined if there are any specific design trends in the feature articles of the two magazines.

II. Literature Review

This literature review will explain the history, purpose, and use of the grid system. This system was used as the basis for the research in this study; therefore, it is important to understand its origins and uses

History of the Grid System

The grid system has been in place for many years, although it has not always been used so overtly or called by that name. Design of printed publications began in the early stages of book creation when manuscripts were hand lettered by scribes. A huge shift in mindset and abilities arrived with the invention of movable type. From the invention of the printing press to the Industrial Revolution, books were the main printed publication and almost all used what we would call a “manuscript” layout today. This was a singular column of text that was positioned on the page according to geometrical principles that determined symmetrical margins, gutters and header spacing (Samara, 2002). Various forms of design created artistic movements, which built upon each other to create the graphic design and typographic principles we have today.

The Arts and Crafts movement, led by William Morris, was key to linking form and function within the design of pages (Samara, 2002). Many twentieth-century artistic movements influenced the creation of the grid as we know it today in an unconventional way. These artistic movements broke many of the previous traditions regarding text and experimented with abstract composition and typographic interpretations (Roberts, 2008). These untraditional and chaotic artistic movements paved the way for new movements that created structure and set the basis for the grid system we know today. Major design and art schools in Europe, such as the Bauhaus and the De Stijl movement, called for minimalism and relied heavily on geometry. Jan Tschichold brought these art concepts to mainstream printers. He advocated for the Bauhaus idea of structure and began using similar vertical and horizontal alignments to structure his designs. Tschichold shared these ideas in his popular typography books. Along with various other German designers, Tschichold was exiled to Switzerland during World War II (Samara, 2002). Swiss designers had a large impact on typography and the installation of the grid system in graphic design (Roberts, 2008). A Swiss student of design, Karl Gerstner, took the grid design further than before to create an almost mathematically perfect grid for his journal, *Capital* (Ambrose & Harris, 2015). The grid uses small enough measurements that can build greater modules while still maintaining equal spacing (Ambrose & Harris, 2008). Since the 1960s, the grid has been a staple in creating cohesive corporate communication design (Samara, 2002).

Explaining the Grid System

The grid system that we know today can be adapted for many uses of layout design. The grid is a tool to support designers in their decision making for creating interesting and visually appealing designs (Ambrose & Harris, 2015). Grids function as a behind-the-scenes structure for designers to achieve consistency, balance, and coherency throughout publications. Various elements in the grid system are important to understand how it is used.

The gridlines can be used to create a variety of standard layouts that designers can manipulate to fit their needs. Grids are created based on the absolute and relative measurements of the page to be designed. Absolute measurements are typically in inches or points and are of fixed values (Ambrose & Harris 2008). Relative measurements are created relative to each individual grid layout. Grids for every layout should be created with the knowledge of what elements (images, text, headlines, etc.) will be included and what the format of the publication should be (paper size, binding, etc.).

The grid system is incredibly useful for creating cohesive designs, especially when working with multiple spreads. There are many components of design and the grid system that must be understood before an analysis of designs can be done. For a basic understanding of terms, refer to Appendix A and B.

Magazine Use of the Grid

The main types of grids in magazine layouts are the column grid, the module grid, and a compound grid, which combines the former two types (Ambrose & Harris, 2008). These types of layouts give optimal allowance for manipulating text and graphic elements. The column grid can be adapted to various amounts of copy in order to display a certain context. In magazines, the standard layout is often a three-column design.

For more in-depth features, two columns can be used to display both images and text easily, or longer amounts of copy (Samara, 2017).

When setting columns on the page it is important to consider the margins and gutters. Beyond the column, some grids utilize the horizontal guidelines, called flowlines, which can break up the page across the column grid to create a module grid.

A module is a unit of space formed by both horizontal and vertical gridlines that are used to house text, image or graphics. A module grid is the structure of gridlines upon which these modules exist. Individual modules can also be combined to create larger blocks and a sense of movement within the page. The mixture of both modules and columns in a grid creates a compound grid (Ambrose & Harris, 200). This is arguably the most versatile grid type, as it allows for less strict guidelines. The compound grid is a grid that mixes modules and columns, or two grid structures at once (Samara, 2017). The compound grid gives designers the most amount of flexibility of all the grid types.

The symmetry of the margins can create a uniform feel to a spread, where an asymmetrical spread could indicate movement and subtly encourage the reader to turn the page. A symmetrical grid is one in which the margins within the spread mirror each other. An asymmetrical grid is one in which the left and right page of a spread have the exact same margins, usually offset to the left or right (Ambrose & Harris, 2008). When working with a symmetrical column grid it is easy to create simplistic and boring compositions. However, these can be enhanced through the placement of other elements on the page such as images, enlarged text boxes, or graphics.

Image placement can have a great impact on the visual aesthetic of a layout. When using large format pictures that take up the whole page, there are two different types of placement. The first would be full bleed, which is an image that takes up the entire page, including the margins (Ambrose & Harris, 2008). An image that was “passepartout” would have borders or white space surrounding the outer edge of a page or image (Ambrose & Harris, 2015). The major difference between these two compositions is the image’s relationship to the edge of the page, which is known as the perimeter. If a layout has an active perimeter, some of the design elements – usually images – occupy the page edge. If the layout has a passive perimeter, the design elements have a distance from the page edge (Ambrose & Harris, 2008).

Besides images, the most important component of a layout is the utilized text. For a magazine article, there are multiple types of text to consider. All articles will have body copy, a headline, and a byline. Many will have a subheading as well and captions for any images. A hierarchy is a logical and visual way to express the relative importance of different elements by way of scale or placement. When designing for a magazine article, it is important to consider the hierarchy of text, especially on the first page or spread which serves as the title page for the article. Text can be presented in many ways; at an angle, vertically, horizontally or broadside. Broadside text is created by rotating text 90 degrees to the spine so that it reads vertically. The composition of a layout can be dramatically altered by text placement, so these elements of design are important to consider. Lastly, when working with text, alignment is important. Within the columns or text boxes of an article, text can be aligned vertically and horizontally. Horizontal alignment is the lining up of text in a field on the horizontal page, it can be aligned center, range right, range left or justified. Vertical alignment is where text is placed within the vertical plane of a field, which can be at the top, bottom, center, or justified (Ambrose & Harris, 2008).

Lastly, there are a few items in the margins and gutters of every magazine spread. The folios are the page numbers. Their placement can draw the reader’s eye across the page and have a dramatic impact on the overall design for such a small item (Ambrose & Harris, 2008). Running headers are text at the top of the page that stays consistent throughout the layout but can be aligned symmetrically or asymmetrically, similar to folios (Ambrose & Harris, 2015). These small elements may seem insignificant, but they should not be overlooked since they can greatly influence how the reader views a layout at first glance.

In this paper, these main design elements were examined within the context of feature articles in an outdoor magazine. The five categories of types of grids, symmetry, image placement, text placement and miscellaneous were explored.

III. Methods

Content analysis was chosen as the best method of research. To determine the top two magazines for the outdoor industry, the author examined social media following, and magazine rate base, and the average circulation level of the magazine (“Rate Base,” 2017). The top two magazines chosen were *Backpacker* and *Outside*. Each magazine published a minimum of nine issues per year. The author chose an issue from each of the four seasons for each magazine in 2017. This resulted in four issues per magazine with a range of topics for each season. Once the magazines were selected, the author chose to examine the first feature article in each. Feature articles were defined as articles that focus on an event or individual with a humanistic perspective. They did not include any product features, nor any article that displays only lists.

The author raised the research question: *How do the two magazines selected utilize the following five design categories in the composition and layout design of their feature articles?*

The articles were analyzed for each of these five major categories. The author counted the appearances of each design principle or grid element. These counts were compared to the total number of pages to calculate its relative occurrence.

The author analyzed the following five design categories that were embodied by the two magazines:

- The Type of Grid: Of the three types of grids, column, module or compound, which was used the most?
- Symmetry: Did the composition, specifically the margins and columns of each spread, mirror each other to create symmetry?
- Image Placement: Were the images placed on the page with an active perimeter, passive perimeter, or passepartout? How many full bleed images were used?
- Typography: Was there consistency between the types of fonts used in each article? Was a hierarchy of text present in the titles? Were there any appearances of broadside text?
- Miscellaneous: What was the placement of folios and running headers?

IV. Findings & Analysis

For this section, the author will describe the findings within each of the five design categories: Type of Grid, Symmetry, Image Placement, Typography and Miscellaneous.

Type of Grid

Of the three main types of grid, the most used was the column grid. Sixty-five percent of the pages of *Backpacker* were columns, while 50% of the pages of *Outside* were, as shown in Table 1. This was mostly likely due to a large amount of copy used in feature articles. The second most popular grid was the compound grid. The use of the compound grid would allow the most flexibility when working with both text and images. Least popular in both magazines was the module grid. Each magazine had a number of pages that did not fit into the three main grid types due to their use of full bleed images. These pages were not included in this analysis.

Table 1. Type of Grid

Type of Grid	<i>Backpacker</i>		<i>Outside</i>	
	Pages	%	Pages	%
Column	13	65%	11	50%
Compound	6	30%	10	45%
Module	1	5%	1	5%
Total pages	20	100%	22	100%

Notes: The total pages refer to the total number of pages that utilized the grid system.

Symmetry

Symmetry was based on each full two-page spread; however, many of the articles only utilized one page of a spread.

Half of the *Outside* articles had some pages facing advertisements, which excluded an opportunity to judge the symmetry of the entire article. *Outside* only incorporated two symmetrical layouts in total.

Backpacker had one article facing advertisements, but there was one spread that showed symmetry in that article. It incorporated three symmetrical layouts and only one asymmetrical in all the articles. Even in the asymmetrical one, the images did not always fall along the exact margin lines, although the text was symmetrical. Symmetrical text and columns may lend themselves better to the legibility of the article for the reader, which may be why it is used most often. A difficulty in the coding of this category arose due to the difference between the symmetry of the columns of body copy and the image placement, which was not always consistent.

Image Placement

Outside had twice as many full bleed images (24%) as *Backpacker*; however, *Backpacker* had twice as many pages with an active perimeter, as shown in Table 2. *Outside* had only 50% more pages with passive perimeters than *Backpacker*. *Backpacker* had two pages with passepartout, while *Outside* had none.

Every title spread had one page of full bleed images, or some had one image spread across two pages. This was consistent across both magazines, but *Outside* used full spreads for three of the four articles examined, while *Backpacker* only used two. *Backpacker* was the only magazine to use passepartout for full images on a title spread; however, *Outside* had more pages with passive perimeters. Both magazines tended to use active perimeters liberally, but *Backpacker* had twice as many pages as *Outside*. This could be due to the greater number of images in the articles in total.

Table 2. Image Placement per Page

Image Placement	<i>Backpacker</i>		<i>Outside</i>	
	Number of pages	%	Number of pages	%
Full Bleed	5	24%	10	48%
Active Perimeter	10	48%	5	24%
Passive Perimeter	4	19%	6	29%
Passepartout	2	10%	0	0%
Total pages:	21		21	

Notes: *Backpacker* had a total of 41 images; *Outside* had a total of 38 images.

Typography

The font of the body copy was consistent across articles of each magazine. Both used serif fonts for the body copy, and sans serif fonts for the captions, but varied the typeface of the title, headings, subheadings, and pullout text boxes, as shown in Table 3. All of the title pages used a hierarchy of size to delineate the importance of the title, subtitles, and bylines/photography credit. Many of the articles included pop-out text boxes that used a similar text to the headings, but sometimes was a larger version of the body copy in a different color. Only one article used broadside text. The use of serif font for body copy was most likely done to increase legibility for large amounts of text on a printed page. The captions lend themselves to a more subtle feel with the sans serif text. *Outside* tended to use more traditional serifs and simple sans serifs when creating titles and headers. *Backpacker* used a specialty font and slab serifs for two articles. *Backpacker's* font pairings tend to work with the visual guidelines they incorporate into the article.

Table 3. Typography

Category	<i>Outside</i>				<i>Backpacker</i>			
	Jan/Feb	Apr	Jun	Oct	Jan	Mar	Jun	Oct
Title	ss	s	s	ss	s	sls	sls	s*
Subtitle	ss	sls	ss	ss	ss	sls	sls	ss
Byline	ss	s	s	s	ss	sls	s	ss
Subheadings	ss	s	s	ss	ss	ss	sls	s*
Captions	ss	ss	ss	ss	ss	ss	ss	ss
Copy	s(ss)	s	s	s	s	s	s	s
Text Boxes	s	sls	s	ss	ss	sls	sls	s*

Notes: s indicates serif; ss, sans serif; and sls, slab serif. * indicates specialty fonts.

Miscellaneous

Both magazines had standard folios with dynamic positioning. *Outside* had the magazine name on the left footer and the issue date on the right footer. *Backpacker* had the issue month on the left footer and the website on the right footer. The image credits for *Outside* were left aligned in the footer with one broadside in the gutter. Both publications used the footer to keep their brand consistently in the view of the reader. The use of the gutter as a place for broadside image credit was consistent in both magazines and lends itself to a discreet line of text. *Backpacker* had running headers for three of the articles, with varying shapes of text. *Backpacker* articles also had a dividing line of different styles to separate the columns or images. Many of the image credits for *Backpacker* were broadside in the gutter.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine trends in the layout and design of feature articles in outdoor magazines. The grid system was used as a basis for examination. The study found many similarities between the two magazines, *Backpacker* and *Outside*, in the type of grid, symmetry, and miscellaneous categories. Some larger differences were seen in image placement and typography.

Further research of magazine layout could look into the progression of layout design over time, or between different genres. There is not much material on magazine design trends and “best practices,” which could be an area for further research as well. This study only looked at the layout of feature articles, which tend to be text heavy. It would be interesting to research the design of various other sections in outdoor magazines such as gear reviews, survival guides, or lists.

This study is important to the field of design because there has not been much literature on magazine design, especially within the outdoor industry.

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Appendix A

				Columns Vertical alignments into which text is flowed.		
Module Individual units of space within the grid used to house text, image or graphics						
		Broadside Layout or text which is rotated 90 degrees to the spine so that it reads vertically.				
Baseline Grid <u>Invisible foundation upon which text is placed to create standard alignment throughout a document.</u>						

Margins
The spaces surrounding a text block at the sides, top and bottom of a page.

Flowlines
Guides that break the space horizontally.

Perimeter
The outer edge of a page or spread.

Active
Page elements occupy the page edge.

Passive
Page elements are placed with a distance from the page edge.

Gutter

Space between the two folds of a spread.

Alley

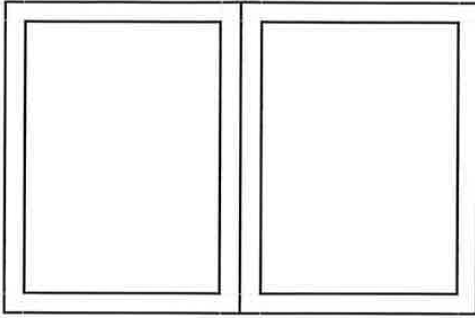
Area between two columns.



Folio

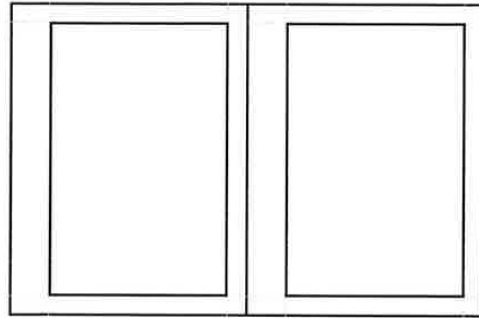
Page number.

Appendix B



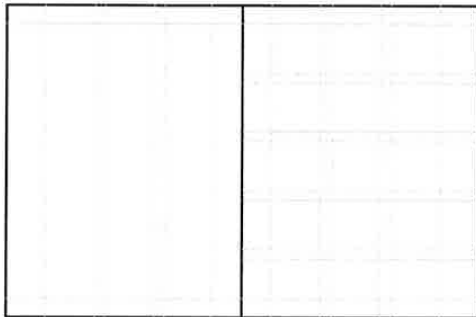
Symmetrical

Grid where the recto and verso pages mirror each other.



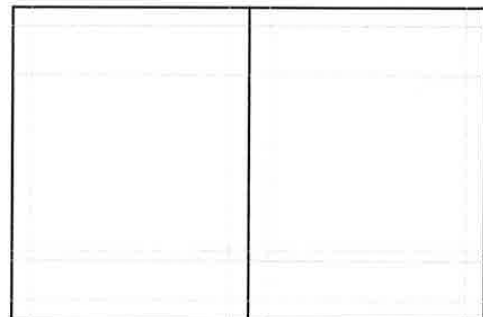
Asymmetrical

Grid where both pages use the same layout, usually with a bias to the left or right.



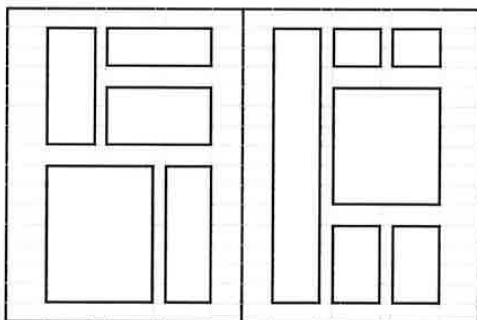
Column Grid

Module Grid



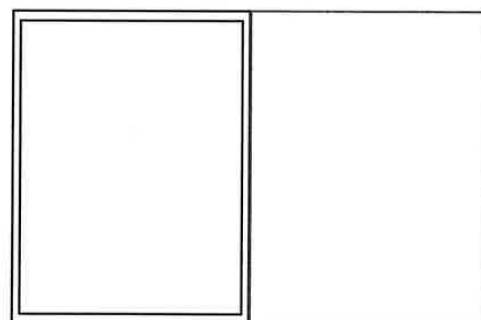
Hierarchical Grids

Grids composed of horizontal columns.



Compound Grid

A grid that mixes modules and columns, or two grid structures at once.



Passepartout

Borders or white space surrounding the outside edge of a page or design element.

Full Bleed Image

An image that takes up the entire page- has an active perimeter.