

Why

make

us

feel

fonts



neurons

x

Monotype.

Can fonts really affect our feelings?

A scientific study exploring the emotional impact of type.

We've all had an experience like this: You get an offer to refinance your mortgage or perhaps switch to a new insurance company. It seems legitimate at first but something about the letter or email feels strange. The type looks... cheap? Is that Arial? You immediately ask yourself, could this be a scam?

Brands rely on type to convey trust, sincerity, and reliability. Even if the logo, photography, graphic design and UI are flawless, the second the type breaks down is the second that doubt or concern creeps into someone's mind.

Designers and brand experts have known for years that type affects how people feel, even if they can't explain exactly why. Consumers can instinctively sense when a typeface isn't hitting the mark, and it has a subconscious emotional impact that's hard to quantify. Would you follow directions from a motorway sign set in Comic Sans? Or take out home insurance from a company using Papyrus? And if not, why not?

Monotype partnered with applied neuroscience company Neurons to put our deepest held beliefs to the test and find out if different typefaces really do affect our emotional state. We wanted to understand how fonts drive experiences, associations, and feelings, and assess the effectiveness of different typefaces in unique situations.

Can fonts influence our response to taglines and slogans? Can they encourage us to perceive a company logo in a more positive way? Do they really build trust between brands and consumers?

“A challenge we often face in typography is, why does it really matter? To the wider population, to your out-of-industry friends or family, to the C-suite you’re trying to help steer or influence. That’s what this is all about.”

—James Fooks-Bale, Senior Director, Brand, Monotype.

Bring in the neuroscience.

To explore all of the above, Neurons used decades of experience in data collection and consumer neuroscience to measure people's subconscious and conscious reaction to type. We tested three contrasting typefaces: FS Jack, a humanist sans; Gilroy, a geometric sans; and Cotford, a languid serif.

Each design has distinct DNA, rooted in typographic and design history, allowing us to compare the granular details of letter shapes and their impact. We based these choices on extensive experience creating custom work for brands, with the aim of questioning all of our biggest assumptions. Each of these typefaces conjure up just the right amount of recognition – they look similar to brands you've seen but aren't associated with well-known businesses, avoiding subconscious associations already established by brand design systems.

“Finding the right connection between brand direction and typeface choice is something type designers know inherently themselves, inside out. We wanted to put that to the test, and to shine a light on the value that typography brings to brands and their audiences.”

—James Fooks-Bale, Senior Director, Brand, Monotype.

Elevated stroke contrast.

Ornate serifs.

Cotford Display.

Fashion/Luxury.

Ornate ball terminals.

Quality.

Expressive, fluid stroke qualities.

Made with hand and brush.

Closed terminals.

Circular, round and open.

Gilroy Bold.
Tech/Auto.
Innovation.

Smooth stem connections.

Single-storey 'a'.

Open terminals. Squarer curves.

FS Jack.
Banking.
Trust.

Double-storey expressive 'g'.

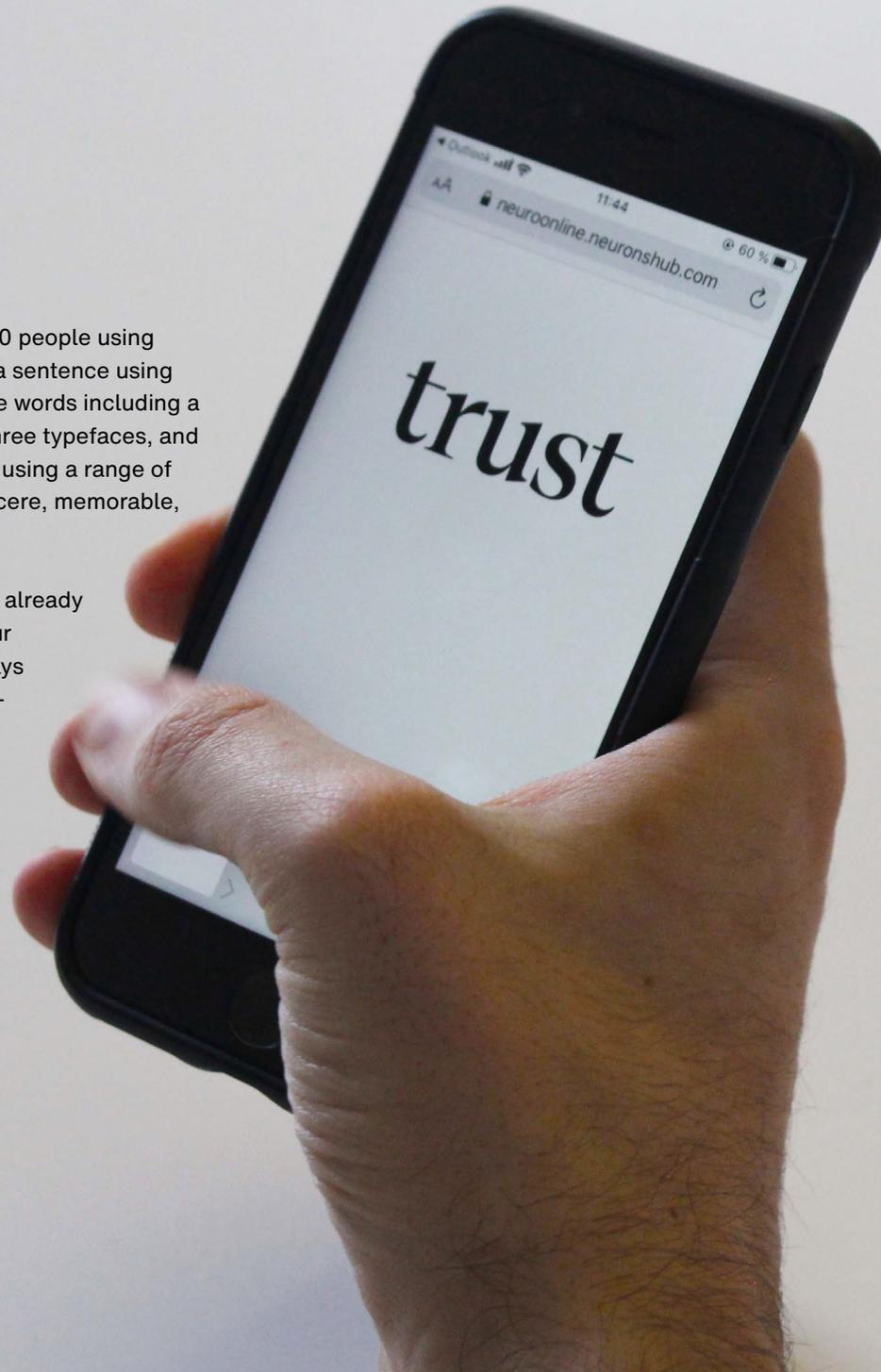
Double-storey 'a'.

Angular stem joins. Squarer curves.

How it worked.

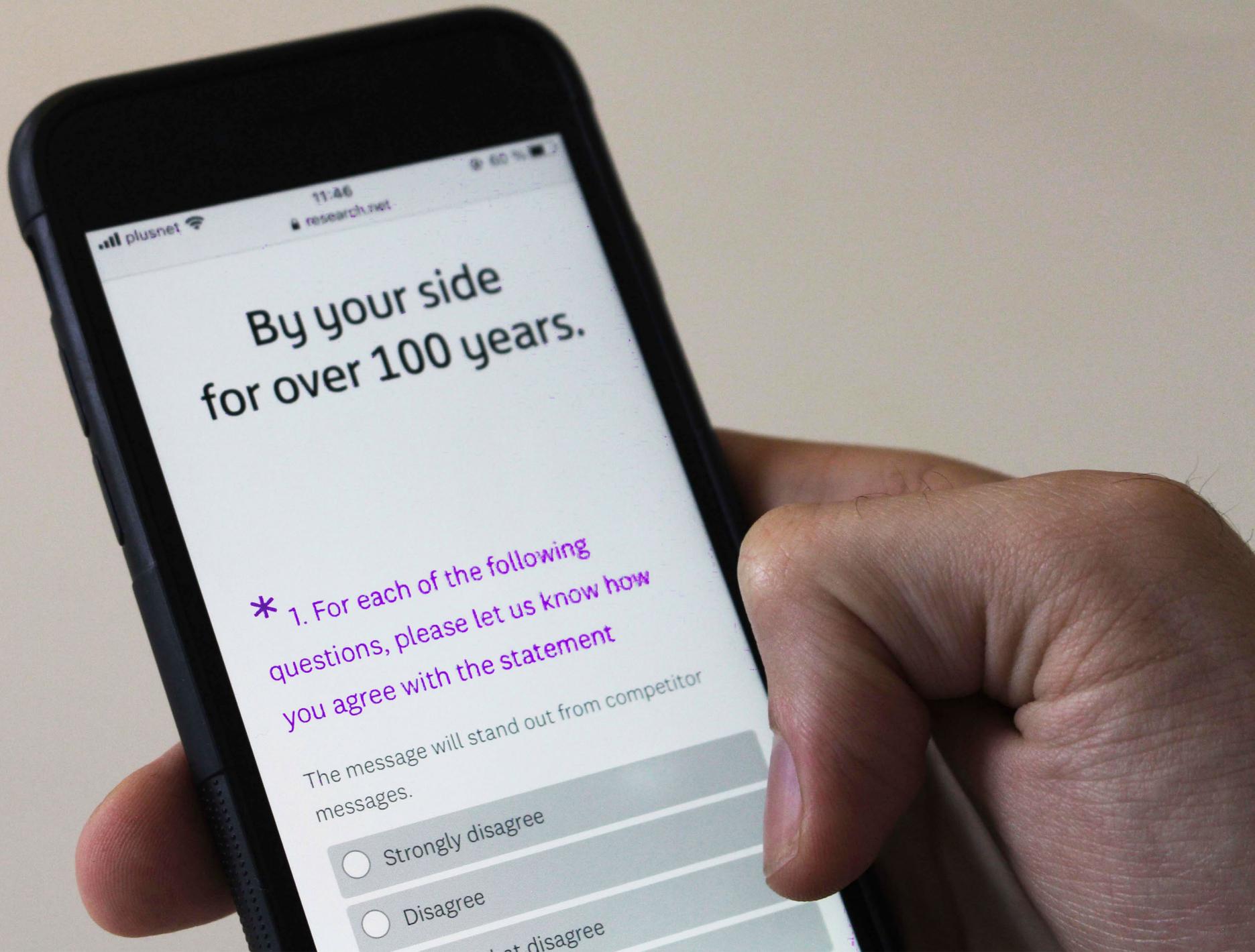
Monotype and Neurons surveyed 400 people using three kinds of stimuli: single words, a sentence using those words, and a sentence with the words including a brand. Each of these was set in all three typefaces, and respondents rated the combinations using a range of emotional metrics – such as how sincere, memorable, trustworthy or confident they felt.

The results confirmed everything we already believed about how type taps into our emotions. Typeface choice alone plays a significant role in how people feel - boosting their positive response by up to 13%. Even Neurons was surprised by how compelling the results were, as they typically see results between 0-5%.



“We typically expect results between 0 and 5% and responses reached up to 13% here. This confirms the power of type and proves it truly impacts peoples’ emotions, which is quite fascinating.”

—Mike Storm, COO, Neurons.



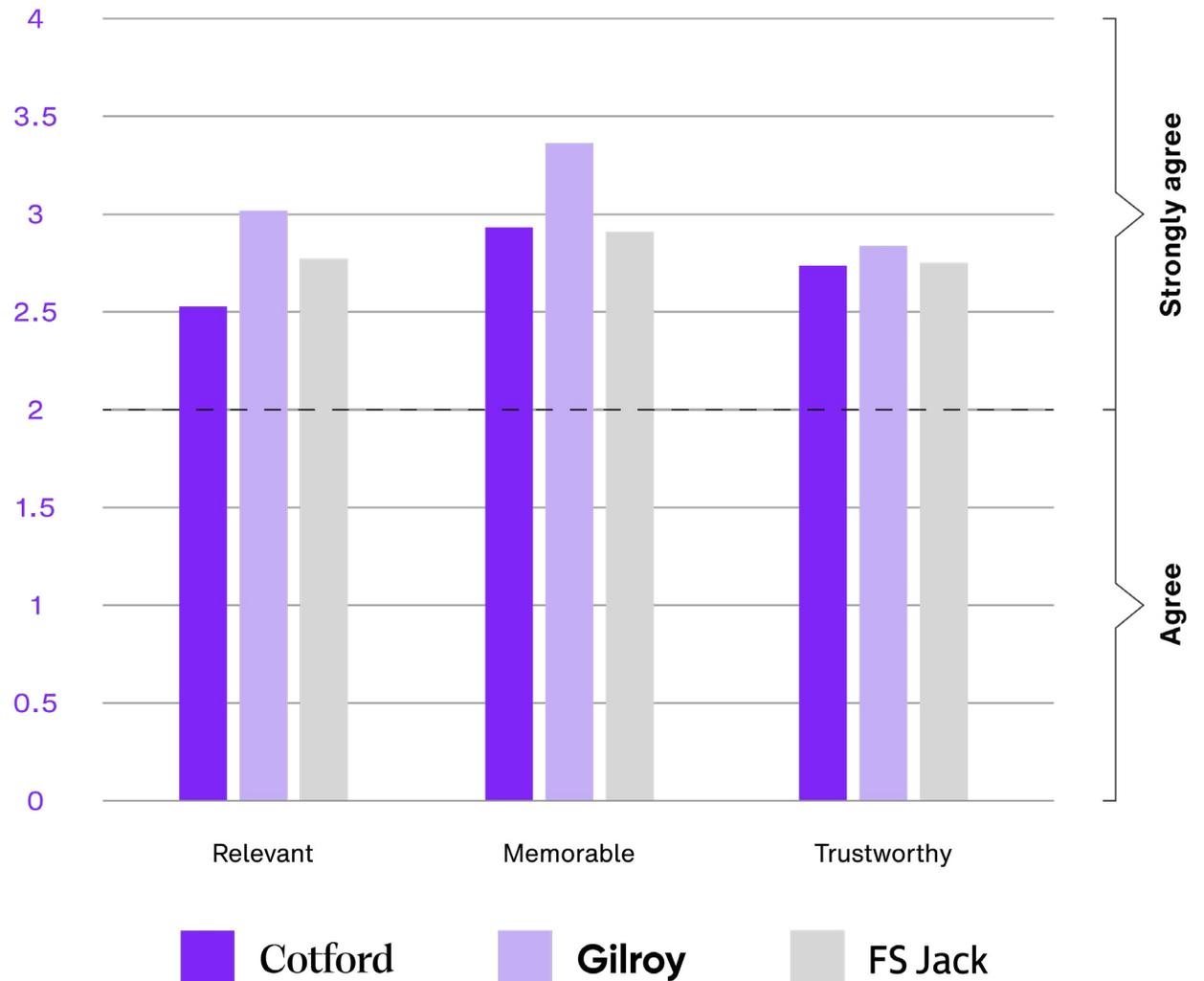
Type makes your messaging memorable.

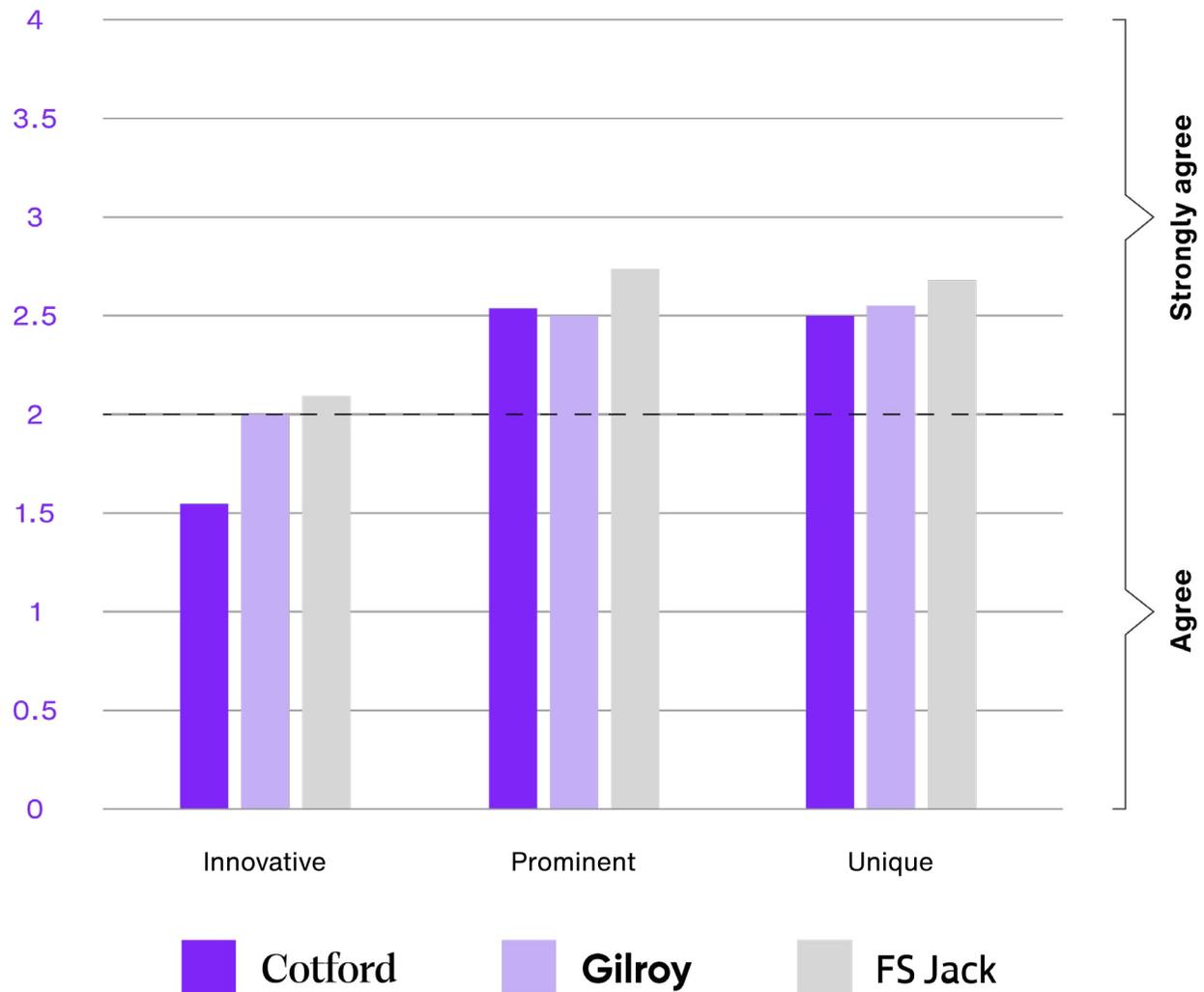
Type is the material that wraps around language, but no type choice can be judged without taking into account the message itself.

To test how type affects our reaction to language, we chose words conveying core brand values, including quality, trust, and innovation - keywords that come up time and again in brand mission statements. No banking business could operate without implicit trust between them and their consumers, and no fashion label would succeed without clear ties to innovation.

And just as we expected, when applied to single words, typeface choice boosted people's positive responses, affecting the attributes they'd assign to that word.

Setting 'quality' in Cotford Display Regular sparked a 13% increase in people's judgement of relevance, a 10% increase in how memorable it was, and a 9% increase in trustworthiness.





Serif designs such as Cotford have long been associated with the world of fashion and luxury, meaning people’s subconscious reaction is driven by years of cultural association. It’s perhaps no surprise that our research showed Cotford Display Regular boosted people’s positive perceptions of the word ‘quality’.

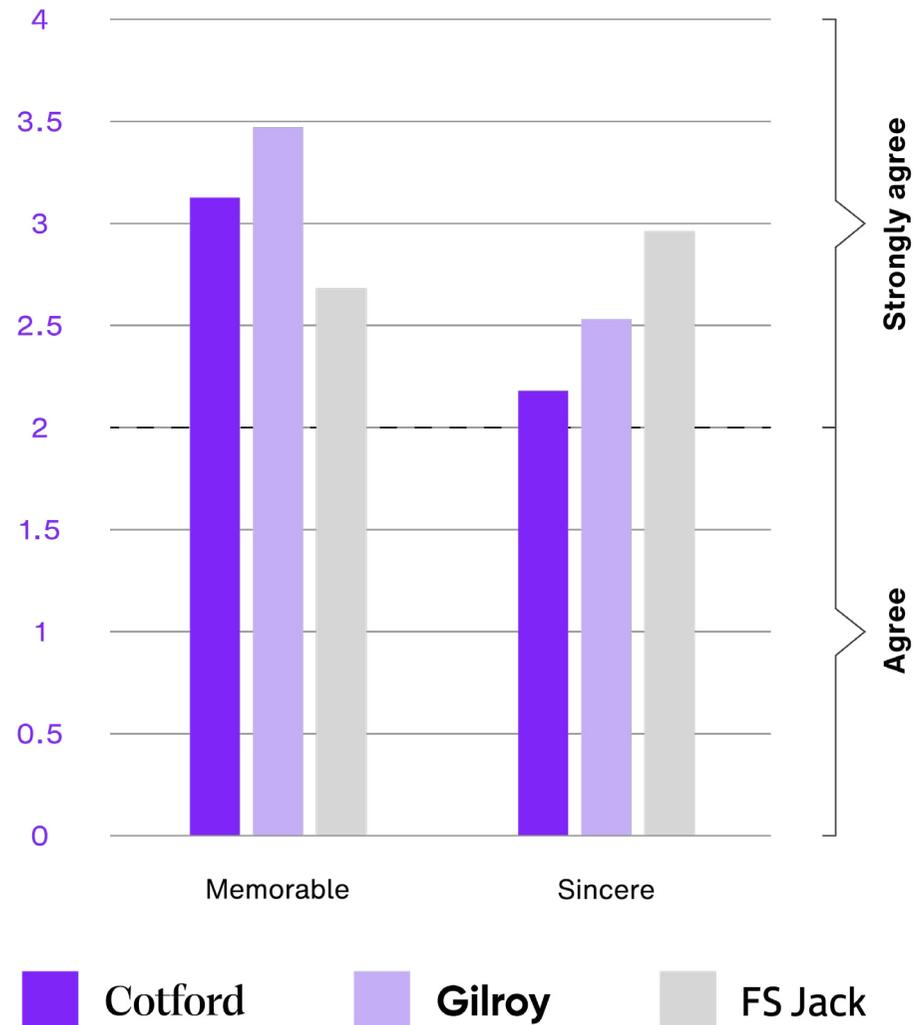
FS Jack, while a sans, has a double-storey a and g, which ties it to a more humanist way of constructing letters. This could explain the uplift in how prominent, innovative, and unique people judged a single word set in FS Jack Regular to be. It also backs the assumption that styles rooted in calligraphy, or that somehow still retain its logic, prompt a deeper, instinctive emotional reaction.

FS Jack Regular created a 9%, 7% and 3% increase in how innovative, prominent and unique a single word is perceived as being.

As expected, typefaces also affect how people respond to slogans or taglines. We found that font choice has a significant impact on people's response to longer messaging, with different designs influencing how much respondents felt the type corresponded to the statement, as well as how relevant the statement itself was.

Gilroy performed particularly well for longer messaging, beating FS Jack and Cotford in many of our tests. This could be because more complicated sentences require more time to process, and readers appreciate the simplicity and legibility of Gilroy's geometric forms.

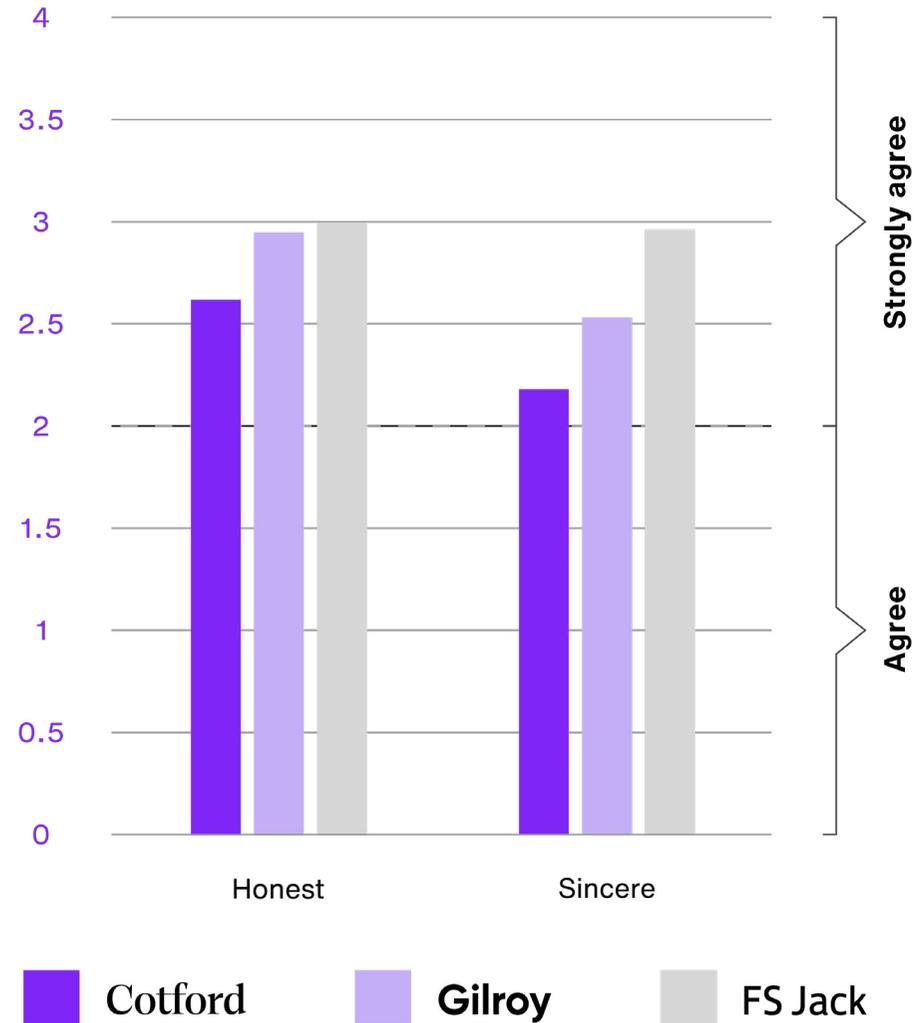
Type choice increased people's assessment of how memorable and sincere a sentence was by 6%.



Type makes your customers feel secure.

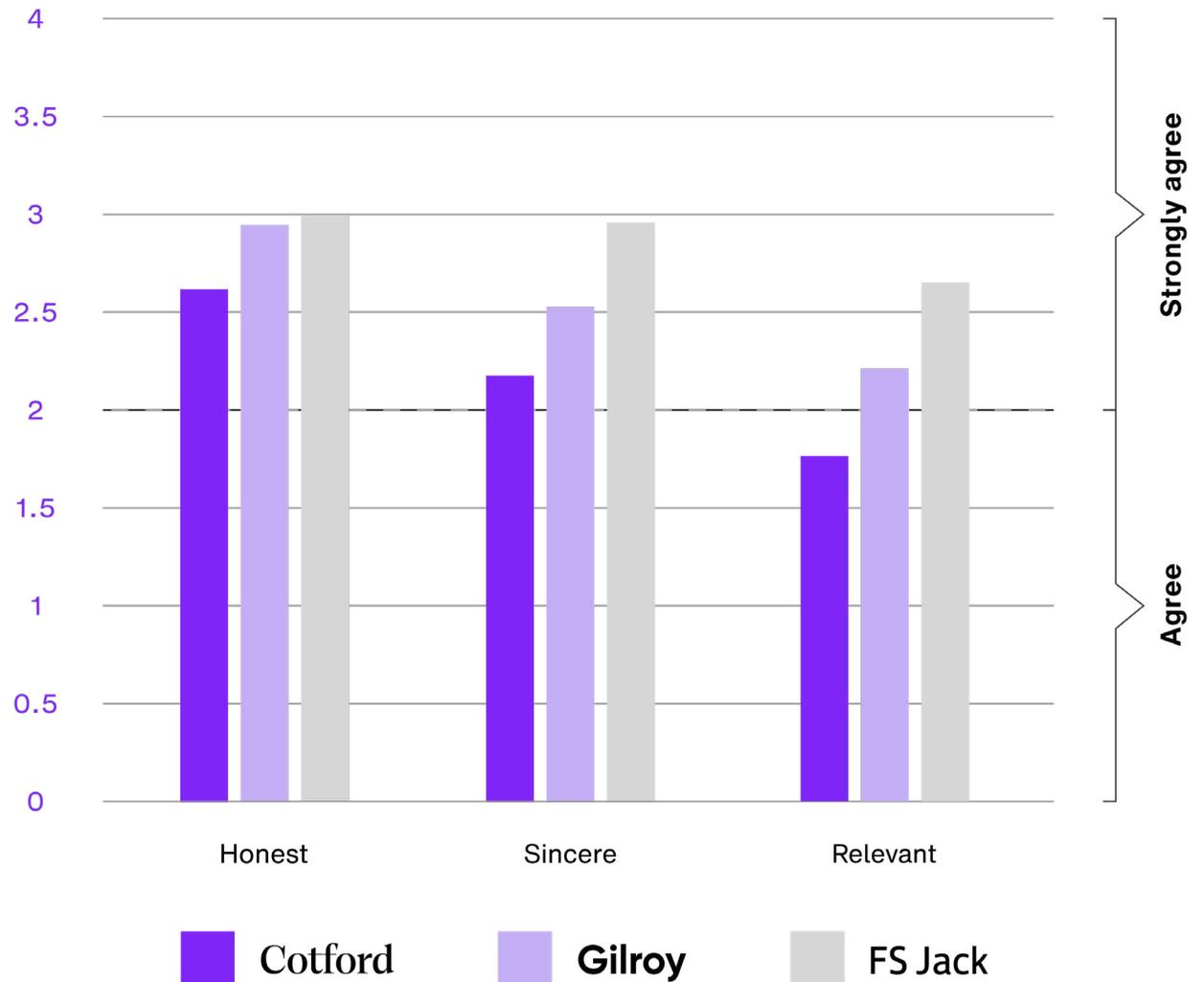
Typeface selection doesn't just reassure people that what they're reading is relevant, it also affects how reliable a brand's messaging feels. By setting 'trust' in FS Jack Regular, our research showed significant increases in the level of sincerity and honesty respondents attributed to that word. This again demonstrates how a typeface with strong roots in calligraphy can elicit an immediate sense of trust in the reader.

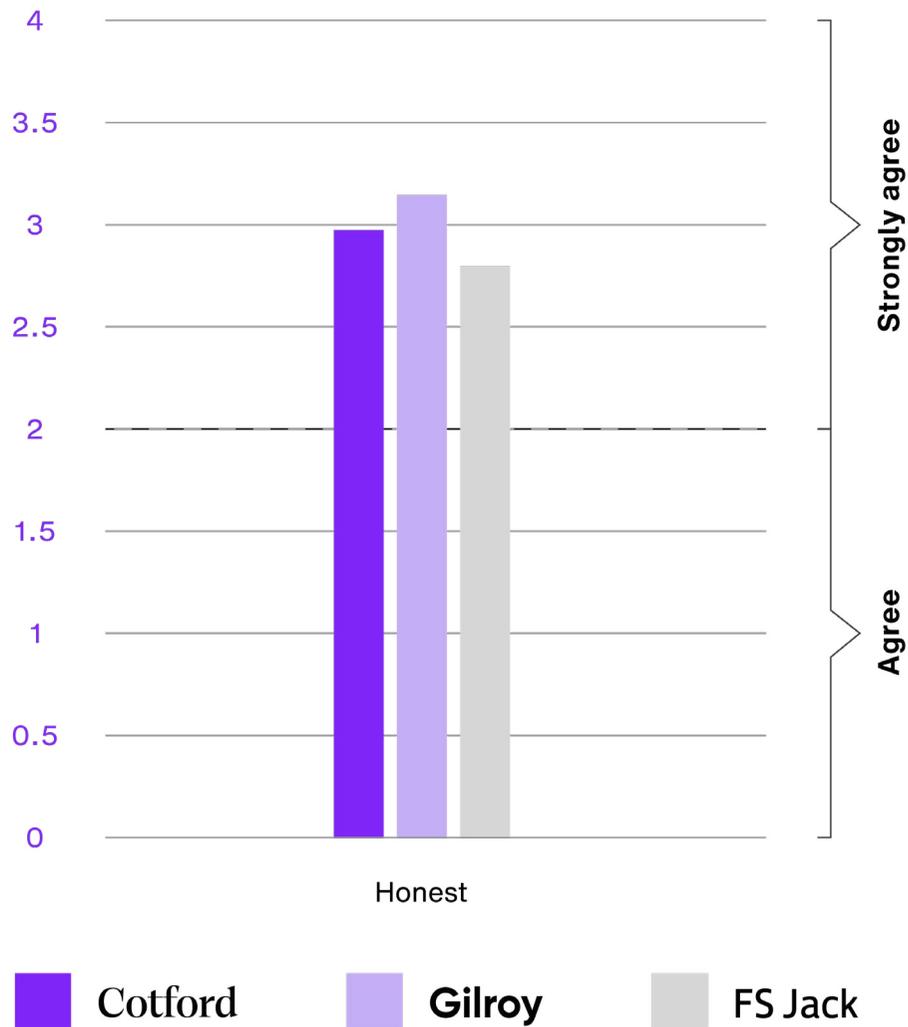
FS Jack Regular boosted sincerity and honesty by 10% and 5% respectively.



FS Jack Regular also boosted confidence by up to 12%, showing how a typeface can be foundational for building a strong relationship. We might attribute this to FS Jack's overlap with the world of contemporary branding, which is heavily steeped in geometric sans serifs. While its letter shapes feel familiar – and reminiscent of brands people interact with on a daily basis – they have more obvious ties to the human hand than a typical geometric sans serif. Its low contrast appearance and lack of aggressive angles may contribute to people's higher feelings of sincerity, honesty and relevance, compared with other typefaces.

FS Jack Regular boosted people's sense of sincerity, honesty and relevance by 10%, 8% and 7% respectively.





Our research confirmed that the geometric sans serif still has a powerful effect. Our deep familiarity with this style of typeface, as well as its use by a long list of household brands, mean that geometric sans serifs have become visual shorthand for reliability and success. Our research showed that taglines set in Gilroy Bold prompted increases in how honest, relevant and trustworthy respondents felt the statement was, suggesting that brilliant type choice only elevates the hard work that good copywriting does in the first place.

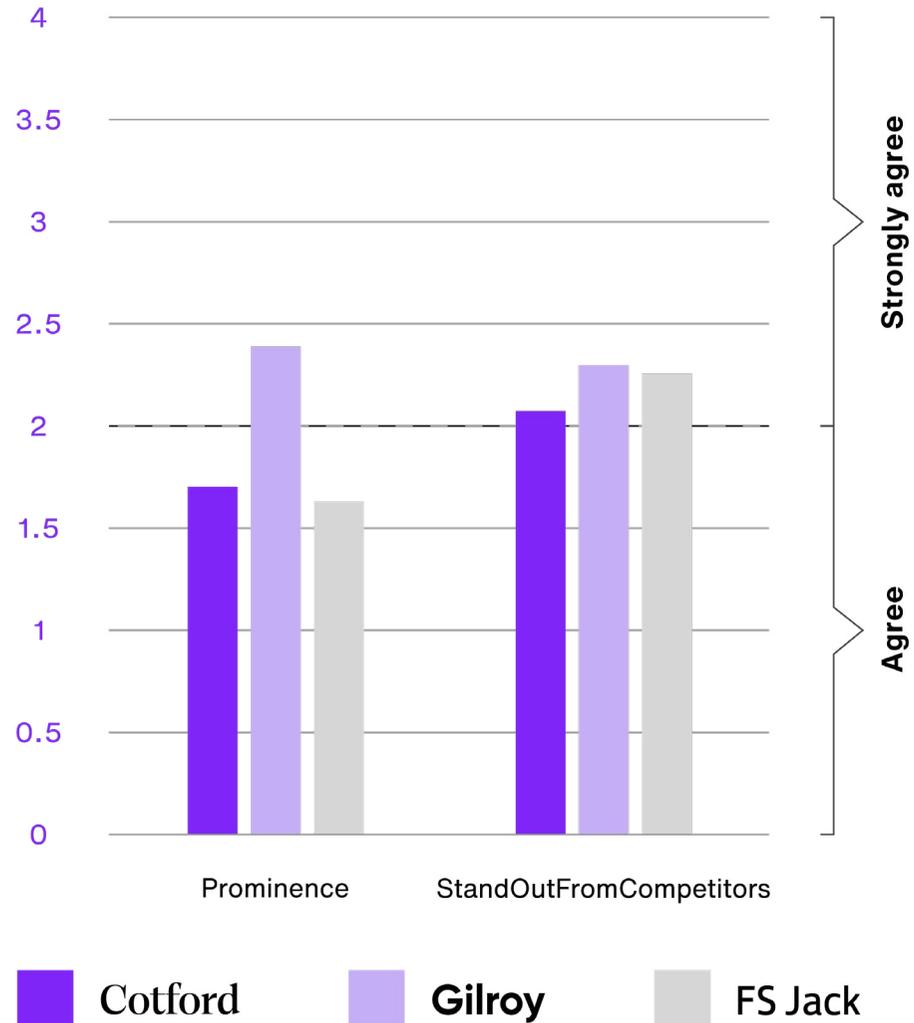
Gilroy Bold showed a 5% increase in how honest respondents felt a slogan was.

Type gives brands a competitive edge.

As well as creating an emotional connection, our research showed that type choice can help businesses stand out from competitors. Despite the prevalence of geometric sans serifs, respondents still felt that Gilroy Bold made for a more prominent slogan.

Statements set in the typeface tracked increases in competitor standout, uniqueness and innovation. The bold weight is likely to be a contributing factor, as well as the prevalence of this style of typeface - particularly in the tech and startup world.

A slogan set in Gilroy Bold showed a 12% increase in prominence and a 5% increase in competitor standout.



Why does it matter?

In the absence of color, logo, movement, or any other element of a coherent visual identity, type still has a powerful effect on people. It's astounding to think that just the simple shapes of a letter can spark a cognitive and emotional reaction, leading to a subconscious judgement of how honest, or sincere, or innovative a brand or statement is.

The flip side of this is that a poorly chosen typeface has the potential to negatively impact the metrics that so many companies hold dear - in particular trust, or the ability to stand out from competitors.

“Selecting appropriate typefaces was of paramount importance in ensuring conclusive data. It’s invaluable to have research supporting what we type designers have known all along: type gives brands the emotional edge. Typographic features, the granular details found within letter-shapes and overarching tonal themes in fonts, connote real meaning and appropriateness, and have the power to directly influence emotions.”

—Phil Garnham, Creative Type Director, Monotype

It's more than a design choice.

Our relationship with type is an emotional one, whether we realize it or not. Decades of research and thought have gone into branding and the psychology of color, but far less attention has been paid to the science of type and emotion.

Proving that our brains have such a significant response to letter shapes should put type choice at the top of the branding agenda. And it supports our belief that fonts influence not just how easily people understand something but the way it makes them feel. There's plenty more work to be done, but this report is the first stage of ongoing research into how typefaces impact us on a deeper level.

“We are only just scratching the surface, the breadth and depth of possibilities of testing sentiment and the value that type holds is vast, and we'd like to continue to share with you all as we uncover more.”

—James Fooks-Bale, Senior Director, Brand, Monotype

Thank you.



About the research.

All data in this report was collected by Neurons and Monotype as part of a survey on the emotional impact of type. The research was conducted online in November 2021 among 400 participants, aged 18-50, with an even gender split, in the United Kingdom. When citing data from this report, please credit Monotype and Neurons.

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