

## 14. THE ENGLISH ALPHABET AND ABSTRACTISM: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF TEXTS TO SYMBOLS

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**Abstract:** *The 26 letters of the English alphabet are undoubtedly, within the scope of the most recognizable forms globally even some of the non-English speaking communities. The English alphabet has been subjected to varied elements from speaking to writing. The words used in most local parlances are formulated and written by means of the letters of the English alphabet. However, this English alphabet from the design perspective, as this paper intends to unravel, there is so much to be extracted from the letters of the English alphabet, which has not been addressed. Digital applications were used to harness the abstracted design concepts that emanated from this study. Finally, the recurrent issues of concept generation will be given a significant boost as intrinsic findings from this study show that the methodical exploitation of the letters of the English alphabet can be used to generate infinite thematic genre of abstracted art or flourishes worthy of a variety of elucidations.*

**Key words:** *English alphabet, non-English speaking communitie, the methodical exploitation*

### 1. Introduction

Innovation in this milieu is basically about seeking out something (new) from what has been (old). In line with this context therefore, the word “innovation” is hereby presented as defined by various authorities. In tandem with the foregoing, Onwuakpa, (2018) sees innovation as a means of “giving new interpretation and new meaning”. On the other hand, Ntagu (2015) views innovation as the “application of creative imagination in a design context”. In the quest to achieving this aim, this study adopts an exploratory means of manipulating the very familiar English alphabet and transforming same into versatile and ingenious hybrid design concepts. In doing this, the researchers applied the explorative as well as digital/practical methods of studio research.

In the course of this study on the English alphabet derivation and manipulation, it was discovered that a particular alphabet can be used in unlimited ways in order to achieve infinite results. Van Leeuwen (2006) agrees with this as he observes that “typefaces may be condensed, narrow, or they may be expanded”. He went on further by asserting that: The metaphoric potential of this feature, which is, again, a continuum, relates to our experience of space. Maximally condensed typefaces make maximal use of limited space. They are precise, economical, packing the page with content. Wide typefaces, by contrast, spread themselves around, using space as if it is in unlimited supply. But the values of the contrast may be reversed. Wide typefaces may also be seen in a positive light, as providing room to breathe, room to move, while condensed typefaces may, by contrast, be seen as cramped, overcrowded, restrictive of movement.

The preceding statement is further buttressed by the illustrative analyses as

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presented in (Fig 1) which is aptly titled the **Flexibility of the English Alphabet**. It is important to note that the singular typeface used in these analyses is exclusively Times New Roman, albeit, manipulated.

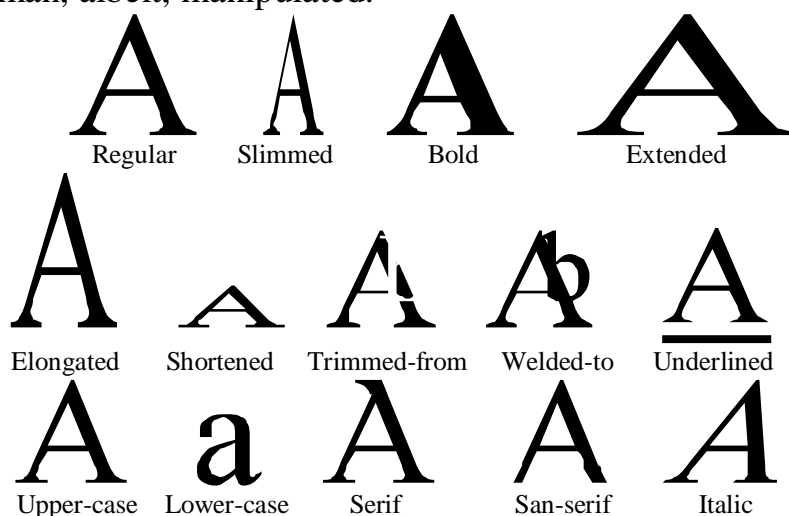


Fig. 1 Title: Flexibility of the English Alphabet Artist: The Researchers Medium: Digital Art Year: 2016  
Source: The Researchers

It would be observed from the illustrations as seen above, that a particular letter of the English alphabet can be used in several forms to achieve a desired design concept, it can be slimmed-up, boldened, extended, elongated, shortened, trimmed-from, welded-to, used as upper- or lower-case types, as serif, as sans-serif, italicized, underlined and so on. Each of all these derivations and assemblage modes will generate myriad outcomes. These writers are of the opinion (as this study is out to prove) that the English alphabet has stepped beyond the barrier of simply being seen or used as a tool for merely writing and speaking purposes.

The letters of the English alphabet having been subjected to various levels of manipulative tendencies have been seen to have birthed very abstracted symbolic images otherwise coined as “*alpha-basics*” because the resultant effect as is observed in this study is a dynamic marriage between the elements of basic designs and the letters of the English alphabet.

### Empirical Review

For a thorough study on the issue of the English alphabet and Abstractism as well as the unambiguous metamorphosis of texts to symbols, as set out in this study, it is relevant to briefly review some available literature on related concepts, visible and implied, explicit and implicit. The literature reviewed for this study is classified into:

- English Alphabet as Concept for Creating Art
- Texts and English Alphabets as Forms of Art
- English Alphabet inspired Artworks
- Art forms as Texts and Alphabet
- English Alphabet Derivation as Logo Brands

## 2. English Alphabet as Concept for Creating Art

In the course of this study, it was verified that the use of the English alphabet has indeed grown beyond mere writing and speaking as indicated by Bellantoni and Woolman (2000), who argued that the “printed word has two levels of meaning, the ‘word image’, i.e. the idea represented by the word itself, constructed from a string

of letters, and the ‘typographic image’, the ‘holistic visual impression’. Riazman, (2003) made reference to the work by Kneeland Green titled ‘Cheerio’ thus “that he used stenciled typography of varied sizes to create dense printed patterns for fabrics and wall paintings”.

### **Texts and English Alphabet as Forms of Art**

The use of texts, alphabet and letters as forms of arts has been in practice from time past. Princenthal (2008) insisted that “a number of American artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer as well as German artist Lothar Baumgarten, began using words in their art to explore visual and verbal conventions”. The statement went on further to assert that “the legacy of conceptual art is a belief that thought expressed in words can be art”. As a result of the foregoing, some contemporary artists who have used the English alphabet in its various forms as a medium to express their works of art are hence discussed. These works cut across several specialties and were created by means of several media but one common denominator is the application of the letters of the English alphabet.

### **English Alphabet Inspired Artworks**

Australian Artist Jeffery Shaw is well known for being the creator of a variety of influential projects, in the field of digital installation art. His works exemplify the accurate rendition of three-dimensional (3d) artworks on two dimensional (2d) surfaces. His landmark masterpiece digital installations, titled “The Legible City”, which are in a series, were used to address vital issues of navigation in connection to architecture.



Plates: 1 and 2 Artist: Jeffery Shaw Title “Legible City 1” and “Navigating Legible City”  
Medium: Digital Art Installation Year: 1990 Source: Digital Art, Thames and Hudson, Ltd

The series consisting of colossal computer-generated three-dimensional letters are arranged to form walls of words as well as sentences and is assessed by riding (navigating) a stationary bicycle in between and around the texts. Commenting on the Legible City series, Christian (2003), notes that the architecture or installation which is based on maps of actual cities, were entirely comprised of texts, which are projected onto a large screen (or monitor), situated in the front of the viewer.

Christian, (2003) averred further that in the other versions of the series, such as *Amsterdam* (1990) and *Karlsruhe* (1991), the scales of the letters were so colossal that they actually correspond to the proportion of the buildings they represent, and the texts are assembled from archived documents describing actual historical events. In the “Legible City” series of alphabet architecture or installation, Jeffery Shaw undoubtedly, has shown that textual content can be used effectively in various contexts for artistic and creative purposes.

Jaume Plensa is an artist from Spain, whose major area of specialization is sculpture. One of his significant installations, titled *Nomade* which when translated

into English language means Nomad, is a colossal, patinated steel as well as a symbolic sculptural installation, reminiscent of an unidentifiable or faceless human figure. The figure assumes a seated but beggarly position with folded feet and knees towards the chest or breast.

The work is termed faceless, because there is no significant rendition of the image's face, hands or feet, due to the fact that the artist left those parts uncompleted. As a result, viewers are given the opportunity to express and navigate the sculptural surrounding within and without. Conversely, the most intriguing aspect of the entire art work is the fact that the gigantic 8-meter high sculptural edifice is basically typographic in nature. The letters of the English alphabet are replicated on the several steel plates that made up the entire surface, leaving both positive and negative spaces through which sunlight and wind have easy passageways. In reference to this work, the creator, Piensa, (2002) has this insight to share with spectators, admirers and perhaps critics:

I always imagined that our skin is permanently tattooed with text – our life, our experiences – tattooed, but with invisible ink. And then suddenly, somebody is able to decipher these tattoos; that person becoming a lover, a friend. That is probably why I work with sculptures like this, this human form composed solely of letters, like cells. It's almost biological.



Plate: 3 Artist: Jaume Piensa Title Nomade Medium: Patinated Steel Year: 2012  
Image source: [www.mymodernart.com/jaume-piensax](http://www.mymodernart.com/jaume-piensax)

### 3. Art forms as Texts and Alphabet

Flag signaling methods such as the semaphore system, according to Lievrouw (2009), were once used by the military to communicate from a distance at sea and on land.

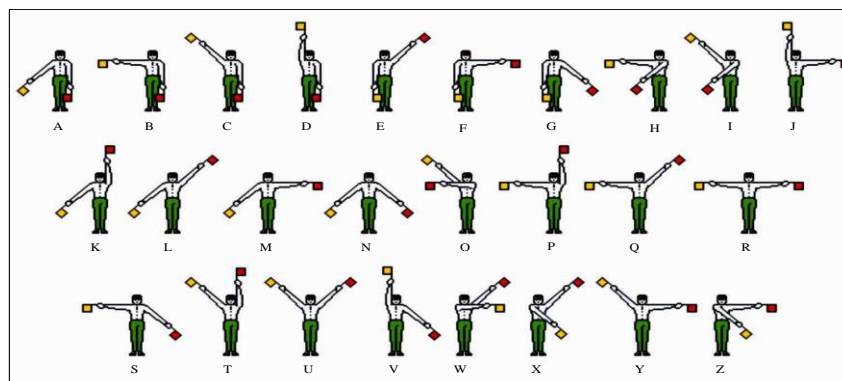


Plate: 4 Artist: Unknown Title: Semaphore Alphabet Medium: Digital Illustration Year: 2016  
Unknown Image source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

The flag positions represent the 26 letters of the English alphabet. Semaphore has been defined as a system for sending signals in which you hold your arms or two flags in particular positions to represent different letters of the alphabet. Basically in semaphore, various gestural positions depict different letters of the English alphabet and in so doing, commands and instructions are communicated. It is noteworthy that the semaphore system being a military signaling system is classified and as such, is coded and not meant to be understood by non-military personnel or civilians.

### English Alphabet Derivation as Logotypes/Brands

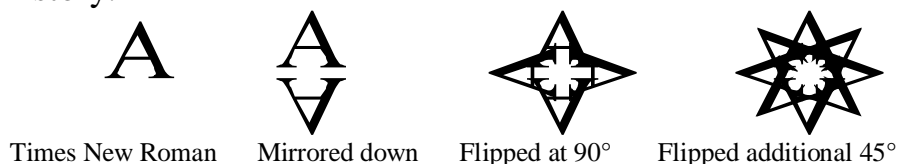
The term Logotype connotes designs used by organizations on their letterheads, advertising materials and signs as emblems by which the organization can easily be recognized. A logotype according to Arens, (2006): Is a special design of the advertiser’s name (or product name) that appears in all advertisements. Logotypes can also be called signature cuts. They can be likened to trademarks because they give advertisers individuality which also provides quick recognition at points of purchase. Similarly, a brand is a trade name for a product or service produced by a particular company.

Brand could be combinations of name, words, symbols, or design that identifies the product and its source and distinguishes it from competing products-the fundamental differentiating device for all products. Generally, brand and logotypes are terms most often used interchangeably in the fields of graphic design and advertising. Logotypes come in various formats such as text-only, text with image, as image-only, as realistic and or as abstract. These diverse forms of logo exist within the confines of every organization.

### 4. Alphabet Manipulation

Frankly, the various forms of art pieces as discussed above by various artists all have something to do with the English alphabet, directly or otherwise. The illustrations of the English alphabet derivations/assemblages depicted below (Fig. 2) from the simple to complex were formulated from the upper case letter “A” from the probably, most commonly used font: Times New Roman. Despite the fact that the images, forms or symbols depicted below are all from the same alphabet, however, according to Kress & Van Leeuwen, (1996), “each of the ‘characteristics’ has its own visual identity, its own bullet point, and at the same time visually resembles the other characteristics, creating a visual ‘classification’ syntagm”.

Contextually, the abstracted symbols generated from the English alphabetic letters as illustrated below, is in tandem with the assertion of Moszynska (1990), who opines that In fact, abstract art exists in varying degrees and forms. Some abstract art is ‘abstracted’ from nature; its starting point is the ‘real’ world. The artist selects a form and then simplifies (or modifies) it until the image bears only stylized similarities to the original or is changed almost entirely beyond recognition. This tendency, Moszynska concludes, has been evident in the art of many cultures throughout history.



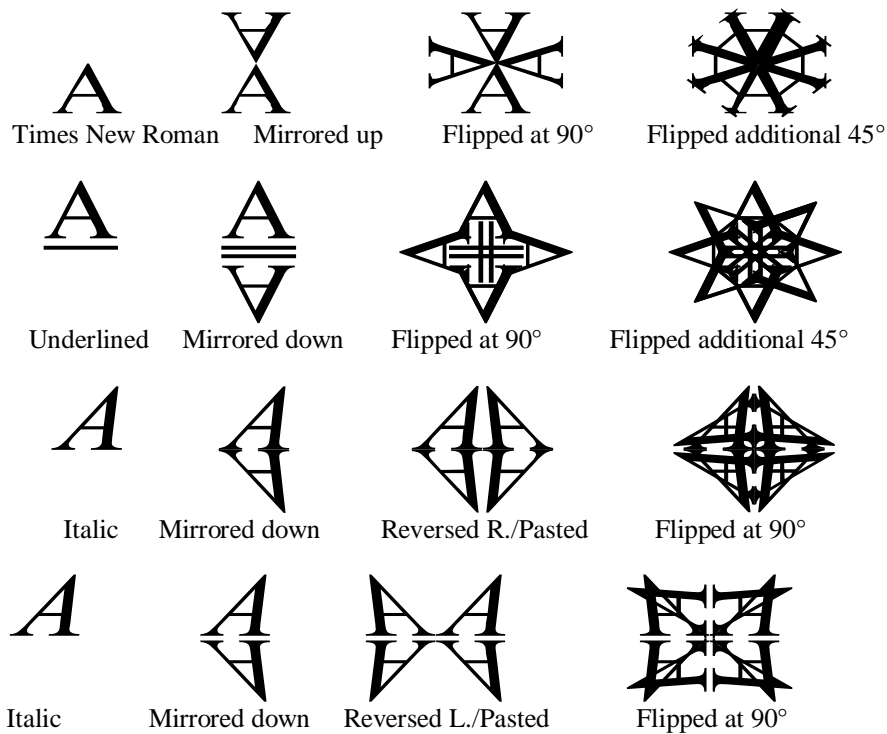


Fig. 2: Title: Alphabet Manipulation Artist: The Researchers Medium: Digital Art Year: 2016  
Source: The Researchers

### From the Known to the Unknown

The structure of the English alphabet manipulations depicted above begins with identifiable typeface or letter but ends up as an abstract form, a motif, or as a symbol, this signifies a grand departure from letters as we know them. It rather, translates to motifs or design, which can also be effectively used to achieve several alphabetic concepts as exemplified in Fig. 3, below:

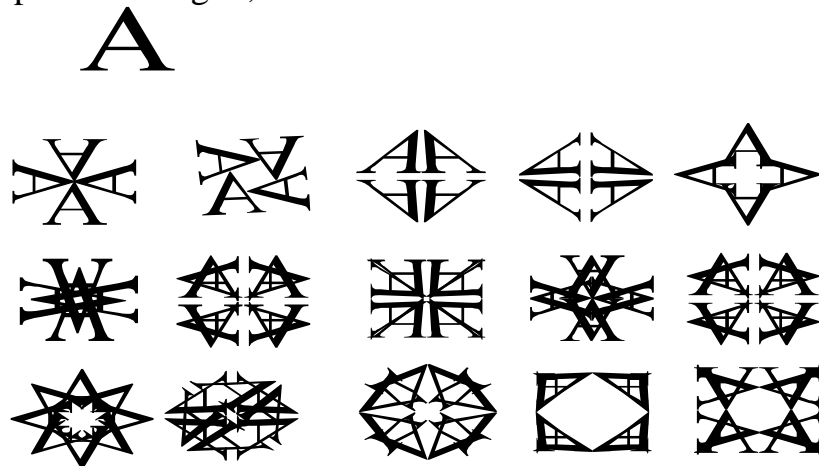


Fig. 3 Title: From the Known to the Unknown Artist: The Researchers Medium: Digital Art Year: 2016  
Source: The Researchers

### The Concept of Alpha-Basics

In this section, significant effort has been made to visually present a few alphabetic derivatives into abstract symbols that have been created from various fonts and characters drawn from the English alphabet. These alphabetic derivations have been successfully translated into design concepts such as creation of hybrid symbols, motifs and forms. However, for dearth of space only five (5) depictions represented by letters A – E, will be shown.

Lending credence to the aforementioned, Van Leeuwen (2006) insists that A new typography has emerged which no longer sees itself as a humble craft in the

service of the written word, but as spearheading innovation in graphic design, and which no longer sees typography as an ‘abstract art’, but as a means of communication in its own right. The sequential analyses of the metamorphosis of the letters of the English alphabet from recognizable texts to abstract symbols otherwise referred to as *Alpha-Basics*, by these writers and creators, are hereby presented:

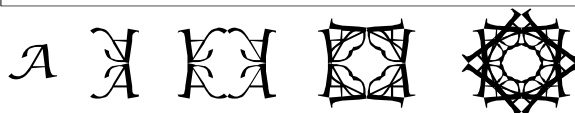
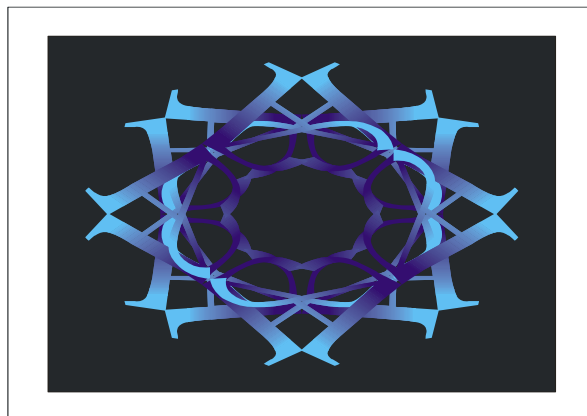


Plate: 5 Title: Axiom Artist: Nwabuoku Kennette Dikens Medium: Digital Art/Alphabet Derivation  
Technique: *Alpha-Basics* Font: Lucida Calligraphy (Letter A, upper case) Year: 2016

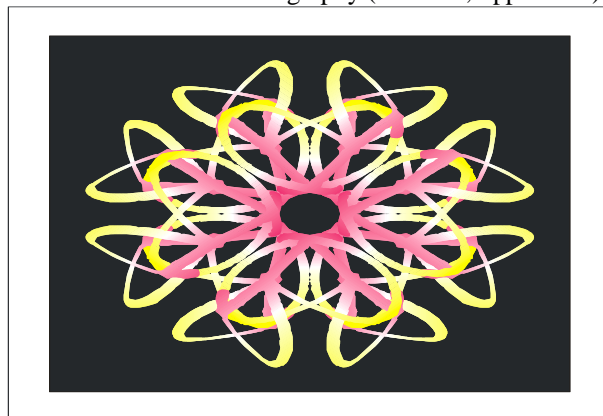


Plate: 6 Title: Blandish Artist: Nwabuoku Kennette Dikens Medium: Digital Art/Alphabet Derivation  
Technique: *Alpha-Basics* Font: Lizzielongstocking (Letter B, upper case) Year: 2016

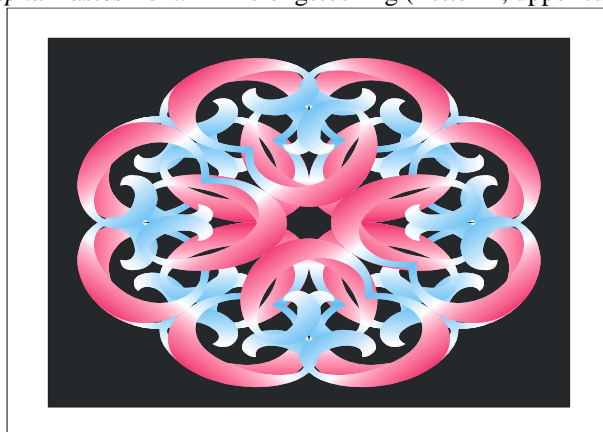


Plate: 7 Title: Candour Artist: Nwabuoku Kennette Dickens Medium: Digital Art/Alphabet Derivation  
 Technique: *Alpha-Basics* Font: Script MT Bold (Letter C, upper case) Year: 2016

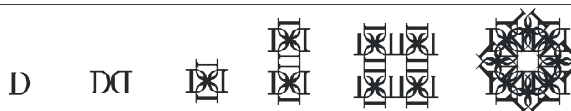
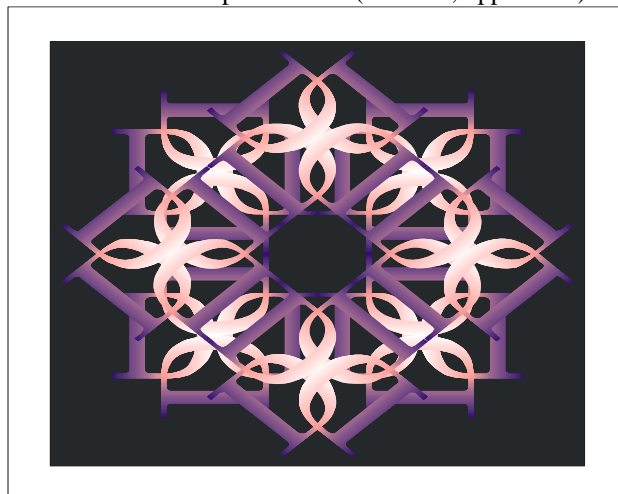


Plate 8 Title: Discovery Artist: Nwabuoku Kennette Dickens Medium: Digital Art/Alphabet Derivation  
 Technique: *Alpha-Basics* Font: Lucida Bright (Letter D, upper case) Year: 2015

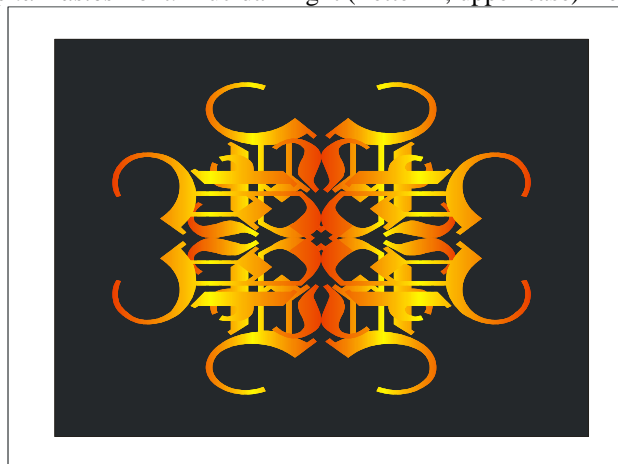


Plate: 9 Title: Enigma Artist: Nwabuoku Kennette Dickens Medium: Digital Art/Alphabet Derivation  
 Technique: *Alpha-Basics* Font: MariageD (Letter E, upper case) Year: 2016

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined the design potentials inherent in the English alphabet as a tool for making art. Precisely, the study is an inquiry into harnessing the design potentials inherent, though latent in the English alphabet, which had from time past, been a veritable tool in pursuance of acute knowledge in the academic areas of writing and speaking. This study also delved into the need to pursue the possibility of generating new modes or concepts thereby adding to as well as expanding the usage and scope of the English alphabet beyond its restricted mode. The field of arts is a multi-faceted discipline and the quest to keep creating is also not dormant, as a consequence therefore, the need to come up with diverse modes of creativity kept unfolding on daily basis. In the field of arts as it applies to every other discipline, there will always be new ideas that may be a catalyst for others.



### **Implication of Findings**

Based on the conclusions drawn in this study, the following issues have come to light:

1. The basic design potentials inherent in the English alphabet, which was grossly under-utilized by artists generally, have been brought to the fore.
2. The use of the English alphabet as a tool for making art will henceforth be given the seriousness it deserves.
3. The scope of the alphabet as a tool for speaking and writing purposes alone has been extended to accommodate design.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study is designed to be a metamorphosis of the English alphabet into symbols, images and forms which can be used to create art. The study's major aim is to transform the simple, familiar and common letters of the English alphabet into complex, abstract or hybrid symbols which will become art in its own right. Ordinary letters of the English alphabet will end up as abstracted symbols or flourishes. The resultant or eventual design output will be versatile as to becoming a tool for creating basic design principles to be used in almost every conceivable area of the arts discipline and even extends to technological spheres. As a result, this study therefore has further extended and expanded the use of the English alphabet beyond merely writing and speaking purposes to include the generation of simple, complex and hybrid symbols, signs, images and forms for the field of the creative arts, design and beyond.

### **Further Recommendations**

This exploratory and manipulative study on the English alphabet derivation as a concept development tool will usher in endless possibilities in creative design. Since alphabet in the form of fonts and typefaces exist in millions, the result or outcome of this experiment on alphabet derivation, re-organization and reconstruction will therefore be infinite. The conceived designs that will emanate from this study will cut across areas of specialty. These concepts can be used for several production lines such as textile fabrics, wall and floor tiles, carpets, rugs, formica just to mention a few.

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