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Designing wellbeing: the role of design in developing open-mindedness in mental health

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ABSTRACT According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders are among the leading causes of disability-adjusted life years worldwide. Approximately one in four adults has experienced mental disorders at some point during his or her lifetime. Due to the misconceptions of the illness and its invisible psychological nature, people experiencing mental disorders may not seek help. While psychologists investigate the cause and effect of mental illness to provide treatments, graphic designers may contribute to improving the present mental health situation through a call for open-mindedness. Using the Strategies of Inquiry design research approach developed by Richard Buchanan (2007) that explores the human experience, a role-playing technique was engaged with twelve undergraduate students to explore mental disorders and search for unifying ideas in the design process. Then, creative action, practical thinking, and function, form and materials were investigated to understand how graphic design can encourage: (i) users with mental disorders to become more open-minded towards support services, (ii) society to be more empathetic and accepting of people with mental illness for who they are, and (iii) designers to approach healthcare design with open-mindedness. The initial findings of the project indicated that design has a potential role in the call for open-mindedness in the area of mental health and wellbeing, as graphic design can effectively communicate complex information and issues in meaningful ways. Nevertheless, the absence of actual patients or service users as participants in the study requires a cautious interpretation of results. On this basis, further research is recommended to understand critical factors that could strengthen the association between creativity, design process, mental health patients and service users, as well as the distribution and evolution of design objects.

Keywords: well-being design, design research, visual communication design, strategies of inquiry, mental health

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, mental disorders are one of the leading causes of disability-adjusted life years worldwide, and one in four people has experienced mental disorders at some point during his or her lifetime. There is a long history with regard to prejudice towards patients with mental illnesses and this attitude has continued into today's society. There is a bias associated with patients of mental diseases as they are perceived as sick, incapable, and even dangerous (Subramaniam et al. 2017). Due to these misconceptions of the illness and its invisible mental nature, people experiencing mental disorders may choose not to seek help from health professionals. While psychologists investigate the cause and effect of mental illness to provide treatments for psychiatric patients, how can we, as graphic designers, contribute to improving the present situation of mental health, and how the use of designs can call for open-mindedness towards people with mental illnesses.

Visual communication design has long been used by graphic designers to address social issues. Recent campaigns and projects include: 'We Listen Campaign for Samaritans' by the MullenLowe Group and 'This book will make you stronger' by Mind Journal have successfully targeted the problems of mental health and wellbeing. Building on these experiences, this project draws on the results of twelve student projects to explore the previously unexplored theme of open-mindedness through design. By investigating the participants' design process and various graphic design outputs, this study seeks to understand how graphic design can encourage: (i) users with mental disorders to become more open-minded towards support services, (ii) society to be more empathetic and accepting of people with mental illness for who they are, and (iii) designers to approach healthcare design with open-mindedness. However, a limitation should be noted. This is a project with undergraduate students and thus no patients or service users were included in the research.

Research Design

The research framework

This study employed *Strategies of Inquiry* (Buchanan 2007), a design research approach that seeks to explore the design capacity of the human-made world in the service of human beings. Essentially, it focuses on searching for knowledge and understanding of a specific phenomenon, with the ultimate goal of performing principled actions that are derived from the knowledge. This project engaged three procedural steps: dialectic, inquiry and design science. The first step (dialectic) is the process of data collection, which takes the form of role-playing to search for unifying ideas of mental disorders. Following the data collection step, the perception of mental disorders is explored through two aspects of inquiry as the second step: Rhetorical Inquiry examines the creative action and practical thinking of the participants, while Productive Science considers the function, form, and materials of the design objects. In the last step (design science), underlying meanings are investigated to provide an understanding of the complexities of the design process and the workings of design in the area of mental health.

Sampling

Twelve design-art students from the School of Art, Design and Media at Nanyang Technological University were enrolled as participants to explore creative ways and designs for people with mental health conditions. These third-year students were selected through the purposive sampling technique (Emmel 2013), as this project calls for participants who have knowledge and experience of visual communication design in order to meet the research objective.

Procedures: dialectic

A role-playing technique (Saunders 2016) was undertaken to enable participants to begin by answering this question: What does mental illness mean to a mental health patient, to a medical expert, and to a family member? Firstly, the participants formed a group of three to conduct research on a specific mental health disorder, such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders and depression, stress-related disorders, and disruptive behavioural disorders. Each participant was assigned a role (a patient, a medical expert, or a family member) and was responsible for researching the symptoms associated with the mental illness pertaining to their role. This exercise aimed to obtain different responses from various ways of speaking, listening, and acting, and acting was understood less as performing and more as a way of thinking. Participants were prompted to engage with the data and communicate research findings from the perspective of the role that they played.

Procedures: inquiry

In the second step, the participants' experience of understanding mental disorders was analysed through two aspects of inquiry. First, rhetorical inquiry focuses on the participants' creative and inventive ability and how their thinking contributed to the process of social change. Second, productive science examines how the students made decisions on the function, form, and materials of the design applications. Through this process, numerous sketches—from thumbnails to roughs to comprehensives—were created to develop and illustrate their design ideas. The rationale behind each idea was explained, and refinement and improvement were made consistently before the final critique session. As this project took place in an educational setting, the focus was more on the process of designing, developing, and prototyping, rather than distributing and evolving the design products in society.

Procedures: Design Science

In the last step, underlying meanings were investigated to provide an understanding of the design process and the function of design in the area of mental health. The design outcomes and logic of decision-making will be discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the final designs of two (see G1 and G2 below) out of the four groups for more detailed discussion, including the findings resulting from the role-play, the participants' creative and inventive ability, and how their thinking contributed to the process of social change

G1: Calm-down

The design project 'Calm-down' consists of a light and sound installation, as well as a series of graphic and digital design applications (book, website, and mobile app) that aim to raise awareness among panic disorder patients and assist in lessening their anxiety. These creations are designed to release daily stress, according to the findings of the role-playing exercise which determined that panic attacks occur when one constantly feels fearful and worries to the point of being overwhelmed. The symptoms include hyperventilation, chest pain, rapid heart rates, and tremors (Taylor 2006).

After establishing the design intent, the group explored self-help interventions, such as abdominal/diaphragmatic breathing and books based on cognitive behavioural therapy principles. According to Lewis, Pearce, and Bisson (2012), self-help interventions are a useful option for people with panic disorder. The group then developed colours and graphic elements based on the calming theory. Soft blue was selected as it calms the mind and aids concentration, while pale brown was chosen as it is warm and soft, and people find it quietly supportive (Cherry 2019). The final design outcomes, "breathe" and "Don't panic", were designed to provide a serene and mentally calming outlet for individuals who have panic disorders as a way to note useful information, share stories, and maintain their wellness through mindful breathing and writing exercises.

The light and sound installation 'Typotherapy', in contrast, was designed to express confusion, unruliness, and hysterical emotions, as it aims to reduce the stigma against people with a mental health condition through an immersive experience that seeks to build empathy and educate the public. It also allows the public to experience the uncertain and volatile nature of a panic attack. Three motion graphic animations that mimicked three different intensities of chaos that a panic disorder patient can face were created and activated by ultrasonic distance sensors when an audience entered the space.

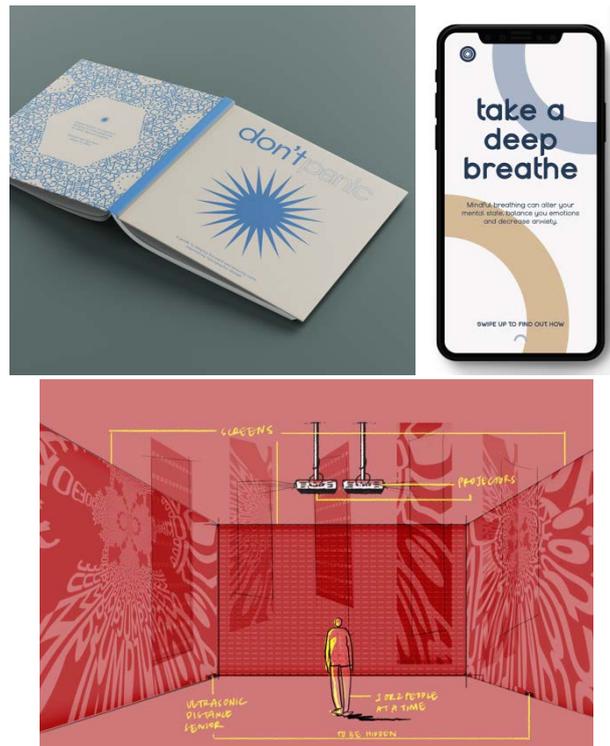


Figure 1: “Don’t panic” book design, “breathe” App design, and “Typotherapy” installation concept.

Limitations observed from the design process of the group showed that there was a lack of challenging components in the decision-making process. In fact, the group tended to settle on the apparent design outputs and did not explore further possibilities once the decision was made.

G2: Tenderealm

‘Tenderealm’ was built upon the idea of people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) feeling calm after being treated with tenderness and in a safe place with therapists. The group learned that PTSD is a mental health condition that is triggered by either the experience or witness of a terrifying event, and that it was an ongoing emotional and social development (Lewis et al. 2019). Besides having flashbacks and severe anxiety, one of the common symptoms includes a loss of interest in life and daily activities (National Institute of Mental Health 2019). Consequently, the group aspired to encourage people with PTSD to go outdoors more often, as even activities like window shopping or tide watching can benefit them.

Based on the project intent, the group posted questions such as ‘How can we help to create a comfort zone to make going out less daunting for PTSD people?’ and “What can be changed to make public places more welcoming and easier to navigate for people with PTSD? Moreover, Gestalt therapy, a treatment of choice for PTSD as it helps patients focus on the present and become more aware of their current thoughts and surroundings, was explored as an underlying theory to stimulate creativity. After a few rounds of discussion, the group decided on a wayfinding idea and a mental and physical health app to encourage people with PTSD to become more active.

The final design outcomes used convivial colours such as warm yellow, healthy green, and organic graphics to express humanity and encouragement. The wayfinding concept, “ALT”, aims to create a joyful and easy wayfinding experience by encouraging users to take breaks and pause in the flurry of navigation. ‘Phases’ was designed to invite individuals to immerse themselves in the tranquility of Mother Nature and to pause and self-reflect. The app seeks to promote wellbeing through connecting with like-minded friends and embarking on nature immersion activities such as stargazing and tide watching.

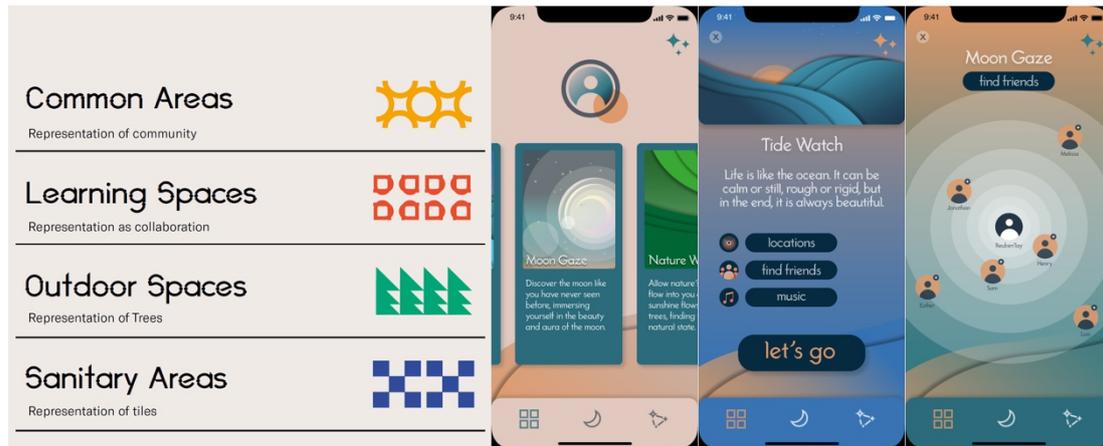


Figure 2: ‘ALT’ Wayfinding concept and ‘Phases’ App design.

The limitations of the design process of this group included confinement to the standard design and branding system, as the student participants hesitated to take risks or step into uncharted fields of inquiry and designing.

The role of design in calling for open-mindedness

This paper has outlined two design projects that positively supported and impacted wellbeing. These projects explored the varied and essential relationships between graphic design and mental health. They also demonstrated how design strategies and visual languages were engaged to support, inform, and encourage people living with a mental or psychological condition. The other two projects not discussed here were related to helping people with behavioural disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Through investigating the design process, we can understand how designers digest a given mental health situation through role-playing, discover what they can do to facilitate mental health, and then strive to realise their design ideas through creative exploration and decision-making that support the development of mental wellbeing. While seeking sustainable design solutions for the mental health situations, there were inevitable limitations for each design group. These might be overcome with reflections and debriefing as the graphic designers gain more experiences.

Owing to the challenging situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the original installation ideas that were to be built for and tested with the public were converted into conceptual designs and the final design outcomes became graphic mock-ups without user testing. Therefore, the following findings were derived mainly from the analyses of the student-participants’ design processes and intents of their designs. The initial results have reasonably demonstrated the

value that graphic design can bring to the area of mental health and wellbeing. Consequently, graphic design has the potential to encourage open-mindedness in these three aspects:

1. To provide a channel of open-mindedness towards support services
Through the targeted wayfinding design and mobile apps, people living with mental disorders can become more open-minded and receptive towards support services because it is easy to understand design and visual languages. These design solutions are created to offer experiences and environments that can help to reduce the chances of losing one's way and to ease anxiety in times of crisis.
2. To open an empathetic window on people with a mental condition
The installation project, 'Typotherapy', seek to offer the public an opportunity to experience the 'actual' feelings and conditions of people with mental disorders. It aims to raise awareness and urge society to be more empathetic and understanding of the perspectives and needs of people with mental illnesses.
3. To embrace open-mindedness in designing
For design students, this project has provided a platform for them to take up a challenge that touches lives and moves beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge to the consideration of societal issues. Students are therefore being encouraged to be more aware of their contextual environment, to be receptive of different ideas and attitudes, and to show concern for the common good through communicating a cause, and collaborating with others.

Thus, design has a potential role in calling for open-mindedness in the area of mental health and wellbeing. In fact, graphic design can effectively communicate complex information and issues in meaningful ways, in this case, the feelings and attitudes of people living with mental illness.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of design as a pathway to support current issues of mental health, which is one of the most urgent topics facing humanity today. The *Strategies of Inquiry* approach has offered insights to the core question: How can design call for open-mindedness? Through the collection of data based on three different perspectives of mental health, integration with the beliefs of the design students, and the use of methods of analysis and creative thinking, exciting ideas have been produced to overcome differences in understanding people with mental health problems, while emphasising and promoting the social and cultural context of design. Whereas psychologists investigate the cause and effect of mental illness to provide treatments, young graphic designers, in this case, have shown the potential of using graphic design to support mental wellbeing.

Because the participants were all undergraduate students, it is acceptable to characterise their design process as less sophisticated or less well developed. Thus, limitations such as lack of in-depth consideration and user testing during the design process might have hindered the attainment of sustainable design solutions to problems. The process of decision-making could be complicated and at times overwhelming to the student participants who could spend

inordinately long periods deliberating on decisions. Educators could provide guidance and techniques to ease the process. Future researchers can conduct a similar study with full-fledged designers in order to better understand the associations among creativity, design process, and mental health patients and service users, as well as the process of distributing and evolving creative products in society.

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