

Student Name: Luke Wingrave

Student ID: 2203882

Course: BA Graphic Design

Module: Research in Context (ADAD5003)

Tutor: Donna Williams

Word count: 2,415

Research in Context

'Can Graphic Design really save your life? Explore the association of wellbeing and personal growth in design. In your discussion focus on a maximum of three specific areas.'

Introduction

Over the last few years, the demand for mental health services has increased significantly. More people, specifically young people, are facing mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and research now estimates that around 1 in 4 people aged 17-19 suffer from some form of mental illness (British Medical Association, 2024). The rise in mental health has led many young people to find ways to cope with their issues, one of them being well-being apps. These range from apps that help with issues like anxiety and depression, screen time and tools to help manage these issues, like mindfulness apps. They are all quick, accessible, and a cheap way for young people to get the help they want, but are these apps effective at what they do? (The University of Edinburgh, 2022). Graphic design plays a significant role in the creation of these well-being apps. Firstly, I will explore how people first perceive a well-being app to see if the first impressions of the design aesthetic increase user retention. I will also explore the connection between colour and mood. Secondly, I will discuss some specific functionalities of well-being apps, such as habit-forming onboarding systems and the use of gamification, to see if they increase user engagement. Finally, I will explore the personalisation of well-being apps to see if they can benefit the user and create

a connection. Finally, I will conclude by considering whether good graphic design is essential for designing a well-being app and is it effective enough to save lives.

First Impressions

For an app that deals with well-being, whether it be for mental health or mindfulness, the user interface needs to be well thought-out and designed perfectly for the user. For many users, the design of an app is usually the first part that makes them want to use it. If the app fails to be attractive to the user, they will not stick to using it, or they won't even download it, to begin with, therefore negating any of the benefits of the app (Chang, Kaasinen, and Kaipainen, 2012, p. 9). The well-being app Calm, for example, is one of the most popular well-being apps on the App Store, and research shows that it can help people reduce fatigue, depression, and anxiety (Huberty et al., 2021). Not only does Calm keep people engaged with the app due to its well-being benefits but also because of its design. Its simplistic design approach, as seen in (figure 1 a, b), allows new users to easily navigate the app and helps them not get overwhelmed when starting a new habit like mindfulness. Alex Tew, the founder of the app, explains that "Simple design is absolutely crucial; you want to be able to show what you are creating in one page, in one screen; people have to get it instantly." (Tew, 2017).

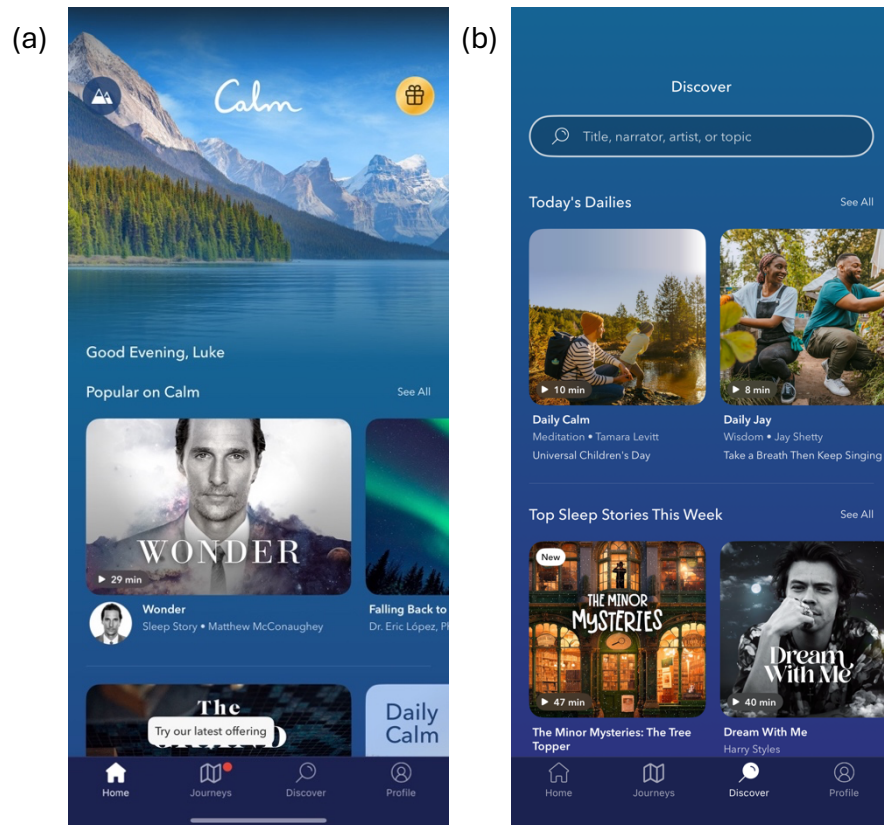


Figure 1: (a) Calm app: Home page design. (b) Calm App: Search page design

Comparing calm to an app like Mood Meter, as seen in (figure 2), which takes the users' phone usage data and compiles it to give them a mood rating. Users disliked the design of the app as they thought the design of the user interface was too childish and creepy (Chang, Kaasinen, and Kaipainen, 2012, p. 7). This flaw in the app's design aesthetic leads to users not trusting the app with their sensitive information and discouraging them from using the app. From comparing both apps, it's clear that the design aesthetic of the app is a clear

indicator of success and has a big impact on first impressions, making a difference in the user getting the help they need.

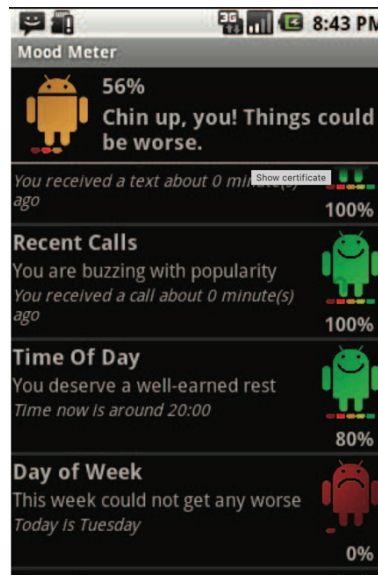


Figure 2: Mood Meter app (Chang, Kaasinen, and Kaipainen, 2012, p. 7)

I think that if an app is designed well aesthetically, it's going to get more attention compared to an app that is designed badly. Today, we are constantly bombarded with new apps and technologies, and the visual appeal of an app can make a significant difference in how it is perceived and used. From my own experiences, I tend to stop using apps that don't match my design aesthetic, even if the app helps me in some way. For me, the way an app looks and feels is beneficial to its success. If I don't like how the app feels to use, whether it's the layout, the colour scheme, or the overall design, I won't use it. Also, if the design is done poorly, I am less likely to trust the app with sensitive information relating to my mental well-being. A poorly designed app might give me the impression that it is not reliable or secure,

which can make me not want to use it. Therefore, I believe that the design of an app needs to have a connection with the user in some way for it to be effective.

Another big part of the design aesthetic is the use of colour in well-being apps. When designing well-being apps, specifically ones that deal with mental health issues, the use of colour needs to be taken into consideration. Colour is another form of visual stimulation for users; it can impact people's psychology, affecting their mood in positive and negative ways (Garrido et al., 2024). Research finds that the colour blue is associated with tranquility and calmness, making people feel peace of mind. The colour blue is also associated with an increase in productivity (O'Connor, 2011). It's no coincidence that the app Calm is called 'Calm', and the main colour in its design aesthetic is blue. The use of the colour blue psychologically changes how the user feels without them knowing; just by looking at a colour on a screen, they feel more relaxed and ready to engage in meditation. The colour also makes the user feel more productive, motivating them to want to meditate and improve their well-being.

Functionality

While the aesthetics of an app may entice users to download the app in the first place, what also keeps the user using the app is its functionality, the key features of the app. (Alqahtani, Winn, and Orji, 2020, p.1) Found that if apps give users the chance to personalise, gain

support and feedback on their progress, and the ability to track their mood, they were more popular than apps that didn't have those features. Headspace, an app founded by Richard Pierson and Andy Puddicombe, who is a former Buddhist monk, features a vast library of content to aid in well-being issues. Its meditations, music, sleeping features, podcasts, and a wide variety of short lessons on topics such as stress related to politics, mindful eating, etc., provide users with the tools they need to help improve their well-being (Steidle, 2022). The functionality is what makes Headspace stand out from other well-being apps. Headspace uses a daily onboarding system which presents the users with daily tasks to complete to aid their well-being, as seen in (figure 3 a, b).

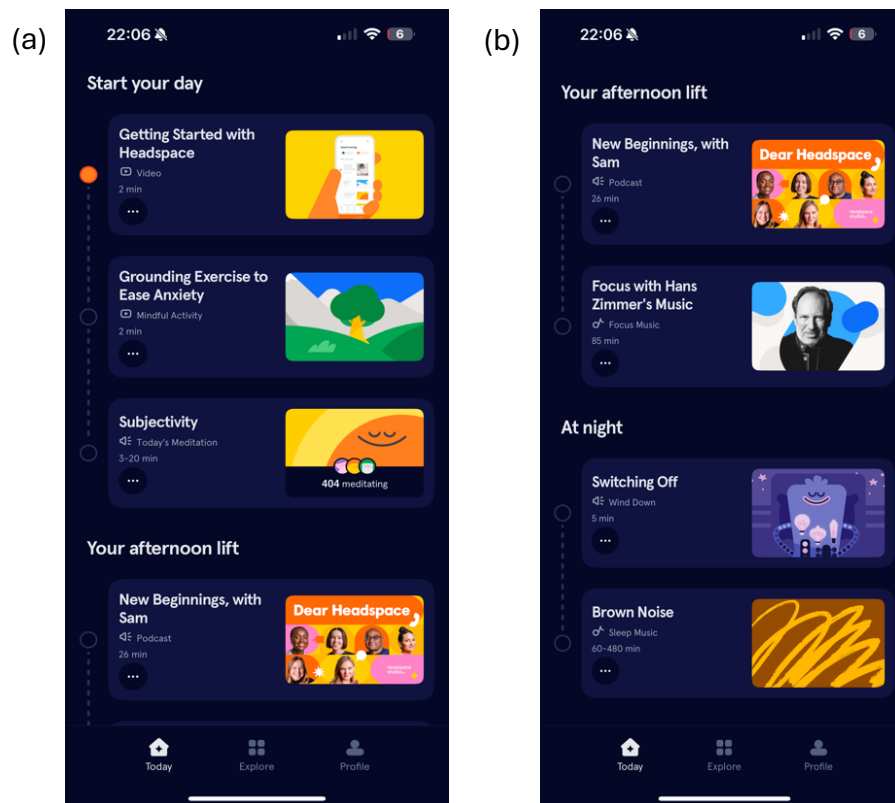


Figure 3: (a) Today page in Headspace App: top of the page. (b) Today page in Headspace App: bottom of the page.

From observation, Headspace's onboarding system uses habit-forming techniques to keep users coming back to practice well-being. According to (Clear, 2018, p. 253), to form a habit, you need to make it "obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying". Headspace's simplistic design makes it 'obvious' to the user what they need to do. The progress circles seen on the side of the screen in (Figure 3 a) make the action 'attractive', as the user wants to fill in the progress. The action is kept 'easy' by keeping the lessons short and separated into different times of the day, and the action of filling in each circle makes the action of engaging in tasks 'satisfying'. Combining behavioural psychology and graphic design in this onboarding system makes it easy for users to start the habit and makes them want to use the app, gradually improving well-being over time.

Another interesting functionality feature that well-being apps use to increase user retention is through the use of gamification. The word gamification refers to the "use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Johnson et al., 2016). A good use of very simple gamification is the breathing activities in the Headspace app, as seen in (figure 4, a). Headspace turns simplistic motion graphics into a visual game to help the user with breathing exercises. As seen in (figure 4, b), the ball stops in the corner of the box when the user is supposed to hold their breath; then the ball rolls down the side of the box when they are supposed to inhale and exhale, as seen in (figure 4, c).

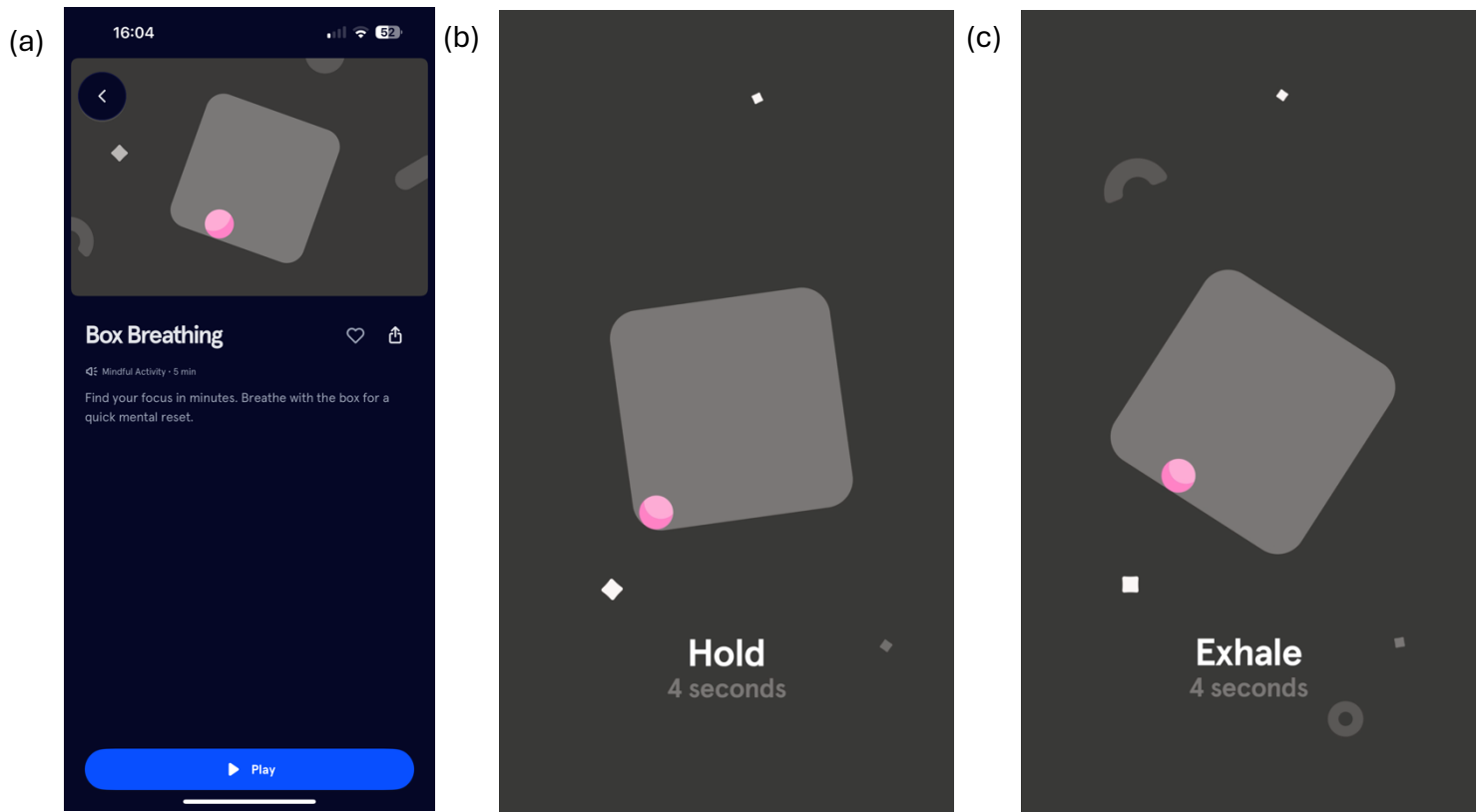


Figure 4: (a) Headspace App: Breathing Activity - start page and Instructions. (b) Headspace App: Breathing Activity - The user holds breath when the ball is in the corner of the box. (c) Headspace App: Breathing Activity -The user inhales and exhales when the ball slides down the side of the box.

Research finds that the implementation of features like this can increase engagement with the app; however, the use of gamification in well-being apps specifically tailored to mental health is relatively new, and more research needs to be done to determine whether gamification can have positive effects (Fleming, Poppelaars, and Thabrew, 2023). I believe that gamification can have its place in well-being apps; Headspace's use of gamification is simple and provides the user with visual help for a simple activity like breathing. However, I

think if gamification were to be implemented for more complicated issues like depression and anxiety, problems could occur if they are not done properly. I think further scientific research needs to be conducted before we implement something like that into mental health apps because it could lead to insensitivity, making users feel like their problems aren't serious. Overall, graphic design is needed to make functionality effective and combining it with behavioural sciences can benefit users by making habits easier to stick to. Also, the use of motion graphics aids in providing the user with visuals, making activities easier and more engaging.

Personalisation

People love to personalise things; it's in our nature to change things to make them match our unique personality. People like to personalise the hardware of their devices, like buying phone cases, but there is also a growing need for the personalisation of their digital spaces, and research finds this is something people are actively looking for when they discover new apps, demanding the chance to make a part of the app their own (Oulasvirta & Blom, 2008). An example of an app with good user personalisation features is an app called Stoic. Stoic is a minimalistic journalling app that provides users with guided journals on various topics, such as stress and anxiety, sleep, relationships, productivity, and more (Stoic, n.d.). The first way Stoic incorporates personalisation into the app is through the design aesthetic, as seen in (figure 5); the app allows the user to change the font, font size, app icon, and colour theme.

Another benefit of this feature is that it is helpful for users with impediments such as blindness and dyslexia. Stoic has two ways to solve these issues. For people with visual impediments, they can change the size of the text by either making it smaller or bigger so it is easier to read. For people with dyslexia, they can change the font on the whole app to the “open dyslexic” typeface, improving readability.

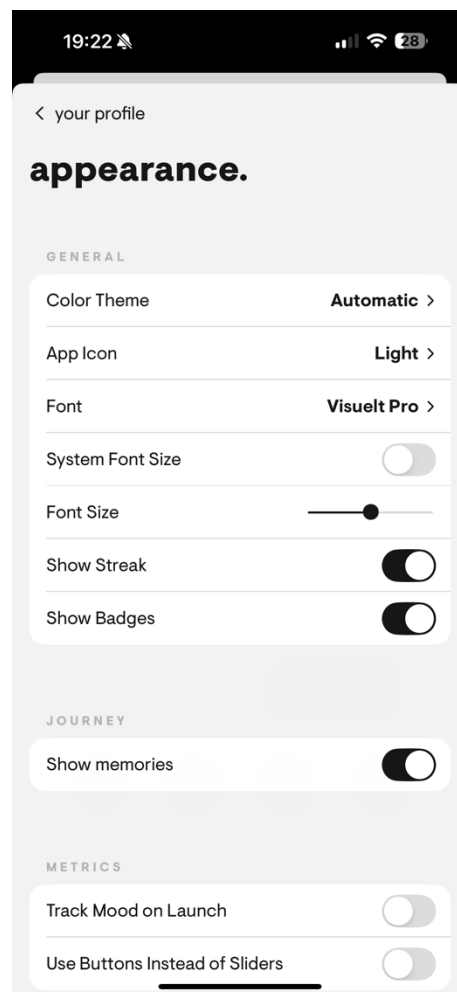


Figure 5: Stoic App: Appearance Settings.

Allowing the user to change these small details increases the personal connection the user has with the application, making it feel more aligned with their personality. Studies suggest

people like to use these customisable features to differentiate themselves from others; it's a way of showing that their personality is different from others around them (Oulasvirta & Blom, 2008). Another way that Stoic incorporates personalisation into the app is through functionality. As seen in (figure 6 a, b, c), the app allows the user to personalise the home page, morning preparation, and evening reflection. They allow the user to add as many items as they want to the morning and evening reflections, allowing the user to determine the extent of the app's functionality.

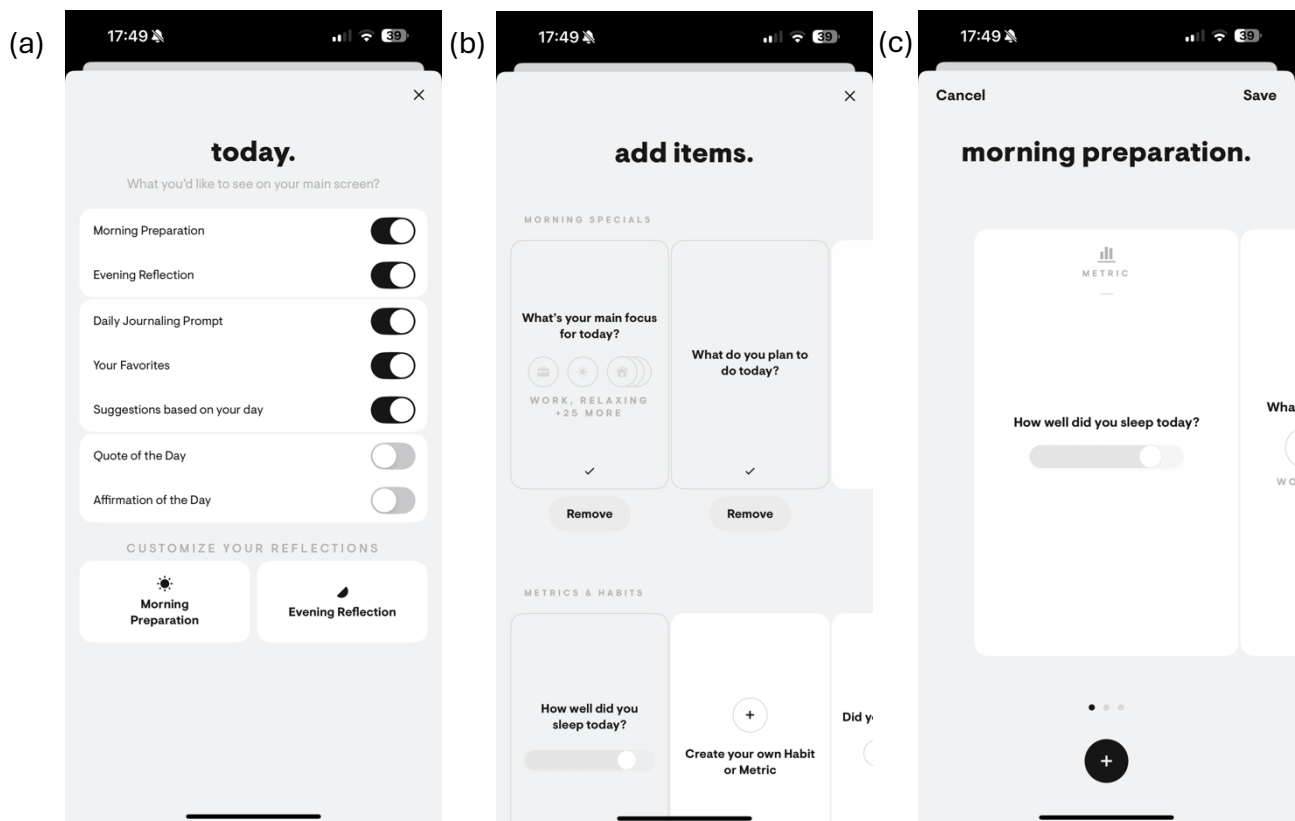


Figure 6: (a) Stoic App: Home screen customisation page. (b) Stoic App: The page allows user to add what items they would like to include in their morning and evening reflections. (c) Stoic App: Page showing the user what items are in their morning reflection and allows them to arrange the order they want to do them.

Allowing the user to change specific items in these reflections lets them align the practice of journaling with their specific goals. For example, if someone has a goal to reduce stress and anxiety, they could add an item to their reflection that lets them track the habit of mindfulness. Allowing the user to specifically customise the reflection items allows them to keep the content relevant to them, thus increasing the likelihood that the user will keep using the app (Bothma, 2023, p. 78). From the research, we can see that apps use two different types of personalisation options for users, allowing them to change the actual aesthetic of the app to align more with their personality and, secondly, by allowing the user to determine the extent of functionality. Both increase the connection with the user even more by aligning it with their personal needs and goals. I use this app from time to time, and as a graphic designer, I find being able to change the font to match my aesthetic is a nice feature to have, making me want to use the app more. I also like the chance of being able to change the reflections as, most of the time, the default goals the apps have don't align with my needs, and that's one of the reasons I would choose this app over other similar apps.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the design of well-being apps needs to be well thought out. Apps that have a simplistic design approach are more effective, streamlining the users' experience so they don't get overwhelmed. Apps that failed to be simplistic were seen as untrustworthy, and the user was less likely to continue using the app. Having a simplistic design makes for a good

first impression and increases the likelihood of the user using the app and downloading it in the first place. Colour also plays a big part in users' moods when using an app. The colour blue is found to have a calming effect on the user and increases their productivity. Secondly, combining behavioural science and graphic design makes it functionally easier for users to start new habits and stick to them. Also, the use of motion graphics for gamification in well-being apps increases users' engagement, but further research is needed in this area before it is implemented into apps that deal with more serious issues. Finally, personalisation is important to users, allowing them to make an app feel part of them. Personalisation also allows users to stand out from the crowd and helps keep content on the app relevant to the user, increasing user retention. From my findings, it's clear that good and well-thought-out graphic design is essential for well-being apps to be effective at benefiting users. Good design increases user engagement and retention, leading to more people using these apps. The longer the user uses the app, the more benefits they can get from it, and this can potentially save someone's life.

Bibliography:

Alqahtani, F., Winn, A. And Orji, R. (2020). *CO-Designing a Mobile Application to Improve Mental Health and Well-being: Focus Group Study*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2196/18172>. [Accessed: 16th November 2024].

Bothma, R. (2023). *Factors that influence user retention in mobile apps*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rick-Bothma/publication/371509912_Factors_that_influence_user_retention_in_mobile_apps/links/64884915b3dfd73b77812f2c/Factors-that-influence-user-retention-in-mobile-apps.pdf. [Accessed: 21st November 2024].

British Medical Association (2024). *Mental Health Pressures in England*. The British Medical Association. Available at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/mental-health-pressures-data-analysis#:~:text=Demand%20for%20mental%20health%20services%20is%20rising&text=For%20children%20and%20young%20p> [Accessed: 15th November 2024].

Chang, T.-R., Kaasinen, E., & Kaipainen, K. (2012). *What influences users' decisions to take apps into use? A framework for evaluating persuasive and engaging design in mobile Apps for well-being*. Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Mobile and Ubiquitous Multimedia, 1–10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2406367.2406370> [Accessed: 15th November 2024].

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. London: Penguin Random House UK.

Fleming, T., Poppelaars, M., and Thabrew, H. (2023). *The role of gamification in digital mental health*. *World Psychiatry*, 22(1), pp.46–47. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21041> [Accessed: 27th November 2024].

Garrido, S., Doran, B., Oliver, E. and Boydell, K. (2024). *Desirable design: What aesthetics are important to young people when designing a mental health app?* *Health Informatics Journal*, 30(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14604582241295948> [Accessed: 27th November 2024].

Huberty, J., Puzia, M.E., Green, J., Vlisides-Henry, R.D., Larkey, L., Irwin, M.R. and Vranceanu, A.-M. (2021). *A mindfulness meditation mobile app improves depression and anxiety in adults with sleep disturbance: Analysis from a randomised controlled trial*. General Hospital Psychiatry. Volume 73, p. 30-37. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.genhosppsych.2021.09.004>. [Accessed: 15th November 2024].

Johnson, D., Deterding, S., Kuhn, K.-A., Staneva, A., Stoyanov, S. and Hides, L. (2016). *Gamification for health and wellbeing: A systematic review of the literature*. *Internet Interventions*, 6, pp.89–106. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2016.10.002> [Accessed: 27th November 2024].

Oulasvirta, A., & Blom, J. (2008). *Motivations in personalisation behaviour. Interacting with Computers*. 20(1), 1–16. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcom.2007.06.002> [Accessed: 21st November 2024].

O'Connor, Z. (2011). *Colour psychology and colour therapy: Caveat emptor*. *Colour Research and Application*, 36(3), 229–234. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/col.20597> [Accessed: 27th November 2024].

Steidle, J. (2022). *Once and for All: Is Headspace Worth It?* VICE. Available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/what-is-headspace-app-review/>. [Accessed: 16th November 2024].

Stoic. (n.d). *About stoic*. Available at: <https://www.getstoic.com> [Accessed: 21st November 2024].

The University of Edinburgh (2022). *Young people want trustworthy mental health apps*. Available at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/2022/young-people-want-trustworthy-mental-health-apps>. [Accessed: 15th November 2024].

Tew, A. (2017). *Calm Alex Tew on the importance of failed experiments, being opportunistic, generating & executing ideas*. YouTube. Available at: https://youtu.be/y9D9s-RYE64?si=GG_TVtfTO4pUgyd0 [Accessed: 16th November 2024].

List of Figures:

Figure 1 a, b: (a) Calm app: Home page design. (b) Calm App: Search page design

Calm. (2024). *Home page and Search Page* [Screenshot]. Available at: <https://www.calm.com>. [Accessed: Monday 18th November 2024].

Figure 2: Mood Meter app

Chang, T.-R., Kaasinen, E., & Kaipainen, K. (2012). *What influences users' decisions to take apps into use? A framework for evaluating persuasive and engaging design in mobile Apps for well-being*. Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Mobile and Ubiquitous Multimedia, 1–10. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2406367.2406370>. [Accessed: 15th November 2024].

Figure 3 a, b: (a) Today page in Headspace App: top of the page. (b) Today page in Headspace App: bottom of the page.

Headspace. (2024) (Screenshot). Available at: <https://www.headspace.com> [Accessed: 16th November 2024].

Figure 4 a, b, c: Figure 4: (a) Headspace App: Breathing Activity - start page and Instructions. (b) Headspace App: Breathing Activity - The user holds a breath when the ball is in the corner of the box. (c) Headspace App: Breathing Activity -The user inhales and exhales when the ball slides down the side of the box.

Headspace. (2024) (Screenshot). Available at: <https://www.headspace.com>. [Accessed: 16th November 2024].

Figure 5: Stoic App: Appearance Settings.

Stoic. (2024) (Screenshot). Available at: <https://www.getstoic.com> [Accessed: 21st November 2024].

Figure 6 a, b, c: (a) Stoic App: Home screen customisation page. (b) Stoic App: The page allows user to add what items they would like to include in their morning and evening reflections. (c) Stoic App: Page showing the user what items are in their morning reflection and allows them to arrange the order they want to do them.

Stoic. (2024) (Screenshot). Available at: <https://www.getstoic.com> [Accessed: 21st November 2024].