

Title: Outline a current environmental, political, or social issue that requires redesign. Explain how you will solve this issue over the duration of your future design career. Underline the tools and approaches you will use and discuss how and why

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My assignment will explore empathy modelling of disability and how designers can help tackle negative attitudes towards people with a disability by designing products that educate children about disabilities, their effects on those who have an existing disability and to promote equality and diversity. Designing figurines that represent people who have a disability can help educate people and inspire positive change for all. We as designers can help towards raising awareness and support by giving a percentage of any products we make' profit to causes that help improve the lives of those with a disability. Furthermore, designers could also provide information on disabilities, how to spot them, and not to mention; how to help assist or remove social barriers that further disable people with a disability. For example, I could design a figurine/action figure that shows a blind person with a guide stick. This would teach children with no disabilities to embrace the diversity of people a little more. It would also help children with disabilities to feel less left out as there would be toys that include them. The toy could also come with a leaflet/booklet which highlights the disability and how it may affect an individual in a way that is age-appropriate, fun, and easy to read. This, in turn, could encourage the younger generations to be more aware and courteous towards people with disabilities and have more understanding to help tackle prejudice towards disabled people. This idea has been inspired by an incident involving a fellow student who has become a wheelchair user. This experience has encouraged him to see the world differently and recognise the challenges faced by disabled people such as being able to do shopping, not having dropped curbs where needed and the social attitudes and understandings of his needs and capability.

There are around 14.1 million people living with a disability in the UK, many of which are misunderstood and underrepresented in society, contributing to discrimination, inequalities, and major impacts on one's psychological well-being (<https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures/>). According to the Equality Act 2010, a disability is characterised as a physical or mental impairment that has long-term adverse effects on which person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (UK Parliament, 2010).

The social model of disability (SMD) opposes the medical model of disability which focuses on the biological and physiological effects of disabilities but neglects other factors including environmental and social factors. The model emphasises that people are disabled by barriers in society, not necessarily by their impairment. It is important to recognise that barriers can be physical or psychological and social attitudes can have a significant role to play when it comes to further disablement. Physical barriers may include not having dropped curbs or sufficient dropped curbs while trying to cross the road using a wheelchair which creates immense difficulty as disabled people have to find an alternate route or try and hop off their wheelchair, not having access ramps for a building, not having traffic lights with lifted metal plates showing where the crossing is and not having learning materials adjusted to suit the needs of disabled people (such as not having braille textbooks and teachers who are sign language trained).

Psychological barriers may be a result of societal attitudes towards disabled people such as assuming their capabilities, societal attitudes are often influenced by the media, the media are often called out for causing a lot of problems, for instance causing panic buying by reporting in things that aren't major but making it major, there was no shortage originally but media hyping it up and making it sound worse, a

shortage occurred because of everyone rushing to buy it and stockpile. A common conception is that disabled people can't work, have kids, live independently, have sex and have children. The social model of disability addresses the barriers that are often in place due to social attitudes and tries to address these issues to be able to remove them to create a fairer and more equal society giving people with a disability more voice and control and independence to achieve well-being.

I would argue, life is often challenging for everyone, and many factors influence positive or negative outcomes for individuals and of course, society. Societal expectations can be very demanding and even unachievable by most and this can leave people feeling like an outcast from society which may cause disengagement from society which ultimately affects a person's well-being. I believe social media is also a major contributing factor in it all, *Crenna-Jennings (2021) "Social media damages teenagers' mental health, report says"*. It negatively influences people's mental health and acceptance in society. In addition to this, individuals and groups in society who have physiological and/or psychological disorders may feel an ever-pressing strain to live up to seemingly impossible social expectations. This can significantly impact how a person acts in society. Having a greater understanding of disabilities, their effects, and how we can all become more supporting and inclusive can make a colossal difference to those it affects and others around them. With this knowledge and understanding in mind, designers can explore how their products influence positive behavioural changes within those who purchase and interact with the product. An example of how toys can influence social behaviours is Barbie Dolls HOW BARBIE VIOLATED BODY IMAGE, SELF-ESTEEM AND CONSENT (2019) *"It's important to acknowledge that Barbie dolls that portray an unrealistic standard of beauty and body size aren't the best possible toys for kids."* Often people try to look Barbie Doll-like with their body image and often results in unachievable standards and contributes to negative psychological damages. Rather than giving off a negative effect, the design could help establish that people come in all different shapes and sizes and have many other differences such as skin colour or having a disability and are all uniquely different yet should be valued the same.

On Amazon Market Place, some toys resemble people with disabilities, however, do not provide educational information about the disability and cost an excessive amount. Not only this, but they are also harder to find, they aren't in the usual range of toys that everyone looks at, meaning you will have to dig deeper in Amazon to find them. The product also doesn't pay a percentage of its earnings towards worthy causes which can help disabled people. This idea is something that can make a positive difference in people's lives while providing fun toys at affordable pricing. Furthermore, a potential booklet/leaflet with any toy would be bright and colourful with appealing pictures to draw the user's attention.

Superheroes who children often lookup to are very rarely portrayed as disabled, they are always shown as unrealistically strong. Arguably the most famous hero with a very notable disability would be Professor X from the X-men franchise who is in a wheelchair, this potentially gives children who may rely on a wheelchair someone to look up to, this in turn can show other children who would possibly be clueless about disabilities that those with disabilities can often do just as much as those without. Relating to the social context, Stephen Hawking, arguably one of the smartest scientists of all time who was incredibly advanced in his field (*Clark, 2018*), however, even with his exceptional skills and knowledge, never won a Nobel Prize, could this

be due to underlying prejudices? He was a man that did not let his disability define who he was and worked extremely hard and arguably was the best in his field yet was not recognised for his work. Was he fairly recognised for his work? We need to change the way we view people with disabilities and remember that their disability does not define them however, is a part of who they are.

For my idea, I am promoting the awareness of disability and to try reducing ignorance which often results in abusive practices in society. It promotes equality, diversity and inclusion and supports charities and services whose aim is to improve the well-being of people with disabilities. Furthermore, the booklet will look bright and colourful with pictures which speaks to the reader/ viewer while also communicate valuable information in an age-appropriate way. The booklet will allow the child to imagine what it would be like to have a disability and think about the everyday challenges faced. This encourages the child to empathise and therefore may encourage active participation in making the world a little easier. Children learn through observation and imitation and so will benefit by interacting with the toy and looking at the pictures in the book.

If I were to give criticism for my idea for potential improvement or changes is that it can only be useful for impairments that are visibly noticeable and doesn't represent the hidden effects of disabilities. For example, it would be difficult to represent someone with learning disabilities or mental health issues. Furthermore, it would be difficult to represent someone who has a condition like multiple sclerosis as the condition is noticeable by its physiological effects such as the shaking of the hands and lack of proprioception.

Another disadvantage is that the children may not read or even look at the booklet which is a crucial part of promoting awareness. There could be many reasons for why they don't; including the fact that some children just simply can't read yet (Reid Lyon, 2015). There is also the risk that a product that resembles a disabled person may be used to humiliate a person with the disability so they may need to be supervised by a responsible adult. The toys may promote the objectification of disabled and may encourage the view that people are their disability rather than seeing the uniqueness of everyone.

A major reason why I have chosen this idea for a product is that without any representation, it may trigger psychological damage especially when social media and movies appear to show that happiness is only achievable when a person has specific characteristics that are socially accepted as 'handsome', 'pretty' or 'beautiful'. This can leave individuals feeling like they are not good enough and that happiness is only true in movies. Consequently, I have decided to design figurines that represent marginalised or misunderstood groups in society to raise awareness of disabilities and differences to create respect for equality, diversity and understanding of individuals and the challenges they may face. As a part of supporting and raising awareness for disabilities, the toys will also come with a booklet that includes information about the figurine and the disability it has.

In conclusion to all this, there is a lot of prejudices against disabled people and society could be so much more inclusive by raising awareness of the lives of disabled people. My booklet idea will come with positive messages and information that promote the idea that disabled people can live happy and successful lives just like anyone else by removing unnecessary barriers. The product design is simple yet

affective for combatting the social issue and allows for marginalised groups to become represented and heard. What really made me notice just how hard life can be for users in a wheelchair was the simple act of crossing the road, it is so easy for those that can walk, you simply step off the kerb into the road and cross it, you don't think twice about it, but after helping my friend and pushing his wheelchair, you realise they can only cross where there is a dropped kerb, luckily he still had use with one of his legs so he was able to briefly hop up the kerb but it was extremely tedious, inconvenient and potentially dangerous. Imagine someone without legs for example or who just has no use of their legs; they can't hop up the kerb, they would have to completely change their route which can involve turning around and circling back for hundreds of metres if not more (Transport for all, 2014).

Furthermore, the design also includes a percentage of the profits going towards facilities and services that improve the lives of disabled people and so is positively impacting on such an issue, with it going towards charities for the disabled, the idea is constantly promoting the disabled community; giving them representation, educating others, and helping try to fund facilities. I think a major point here is that nobody ever considers all these things and how it can affect them until it happens to someone close to them, this is actually a major issue, it doesn't just apply to disabilities, it relates to anything, whenever someone isn't experienced with something they usually don't care or want to know about it – because they can get away with not knowing, they don't need to in their eyes, but then there is hardly any raising awareness of disabled peoples disabilities. I believe my idea would be beneficial and have put a lot of consideration into it and how it might work and its implications.

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