

Question 2: 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.

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Can Graphic Design Really Save Your Life?



fig. 1

The concept of creativity has gained immense popularity in the last decade or so, but history shows that visual art originated much earlier. It has always played a crucial role for the human species. The incredibly prehistoric paintings in Sulawesi are among the oldest pieces of rock art. (Griffith University, 2024).

They depict visual instructions that were essential for survival at the time and may have influenced the lives and safety of ancient tribes.

So, after a historical introduction, my research begins with an attempt to explore the question: does graphic design really save your life? At first glance, it's obvious that we're talking about the psychological aspect here. To illustrate my point, I'll draw on Lytton's idea that art and creativity can have a therapeutic effect on individuals, allowing them to express emotions and build an artistic identity, which subsequently results in a greater sense of control (Lytton, 1971). Can we then say that by saving our psyche and soul, we save ourselves? This intriguing and crucial insight has piqued my curiosity for further research. This work will focus on three aspects, which I will attempt to explore.

Through analysis, we'll take a closer look at how emotions and their influence affect our sense of security and agency in the world of art and design. In the second part of the essay, we'll delve into the concept of visual art and its influence, during one of the most notorious propaganda campaigns of the 20th century, concluding with an analysis of contemporary designers' efforts to ensure that their campaigns truly bring salvation and equality. To conclude the above topics, I will attempt to answer a crucial question. I would like to add that this is a very exciting topic for me personally due to its complexity in the field of design. The phrase "save a life" will not be merely a metaphor here; it will constitute an active concept, and moreover, it plays a very powerful role, which is why I will attempt to demonstrate this in this academic work.

1. Individual Emotions in the World of Design



fig. 2

What exactly is emotional design? Simply put, it's the concept that a designer, by creating their work, evokes a positive or negative emotional response in the user.

There are three cognitive pillars: behavioral, visceral, and reflective, which allow the viewer to experience the intense feelings evoked by a given work.

"Everything has a personality, everything sends an emotional signal" (Interaction Design Foundation, 2025), says UX design pioneer Don Norman. It's hard to disagree, especially in situations where those feelings produce quite intense and lasting effects.

Conflicts have always stirred a vast range of human emotions, awakening extremes such as fear and hope for help. In the photograph used from (International

Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.), we see the chasm between destruction and an attempt at rescue. I would like to discuss these two extremes in the first part of my essay.

Let us therefore examine a very intriguing perspective presented through the collection entitled "Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?",

curated by Lucienne Roberts and Rebecca Wright, accompanied by Shamita Sharmacharja, an activist from the Wellcome Collection (Wellcome Collection, 2017).

The event took place in the heart of London and ran from 2017 to 2018.

The exhibition was divided into several sections, its aim being to demonstrate and raise awareness of the significant impact graphic design can have on physical and mental health, as well as on life in public spaces.

The extensive exhibition presented by Wellcome is a fascinating example, helping us to understand the question I decided to explore. It's no coincidence that it shares the same name as the demonstration I chose.

The approximately 200 interesting objects in the collection will not only inform us about health and safety but will also have connotations, influencing our feelings and emotions in psychological and social dimensions.



fig. 3

Let's take a closer look at a private collection included in the exhibition, presenting a very rare combination of powerful and significant symbols, such as the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, and the Red Crystal.

These symbols, combined together, convey a very important message for the modern world, helping society understand who they are and what they do.

If this trio were to be described in a single word, it would be (protection) (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2017), or (don't shoot), depending on the context. Literally, graphic messages in this case save lives, both physically and emotionally.

From a semiotic perspective, the viewer can sense the gravity of this connection, sense impending protection, and feel emotionally saved. Relief, literally, because their symbolism alludes to neutrality, in military conflict zones, natural disasters, and crisis situations. Looking more broadly, I would like to add an important point regarding the entire analysis of this symbolism and its meaning. However, the indicated emblems come at a price in public space. Research shows (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024) that there is a risk that a significant number of people will associate these graphic symbols with anxiety and a sense of threat. This may prove difficult given the frequent occurrence of these symbols in the world.

This finding reveals how the content of an image can significantly influence subsequent associations with personal history and have a destructive impact on life. This raises the question: does visual communication in emergency services, despite the enormous and undeniable benefits of rescue, not simultaneously lead to ambivalence?

2. Historical Propaganda rescue or manipulation?



fig. 4

The ambiguity of propaganda in the history of visual communication can be seen as early as ancient Egypt.

The enigma posed by the bas-reliefs found in the Great Temple of Ramesses II was responsible for their propaganda function.

Glorifying the pharaoh's power was widely used as a form of manipulation, and these techniques constitute strategies for the contemporary political scene (Brewminate, n.d.). The bas-reliefs depict Ramesses II as the chosen one, who, thanks to his divinity, is a strong and invincible king.

In reality, it appears that the then 34-year-old ruler manipulated his subjects in this way, as the sculptures depicting supposedly victorious battles were most likely completed before Ramesses II became king. These clever actions of the Pharaoh emphasize that already in the times of ancient Egypt it was perfectly known how strong and dominant visual communication was for a state that was permanently in the zone of external enemies.

In the 20th century, we experience a similar pattern; it was then that an era began in which graphics and visual art emerged as the primary tool of power and influence over the population.

Austere simplicity, bold colours, and geometric shapes made a powerful impact in what was then Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg), creating a distinct aesthetic known as constructivism in Soviet propaganda.

The revolution was born in 1917, and visual posters became its backdrop (Comrade Gallery, n.d.).

This example is relevant in terms of the impact of visual communication on an individual, as strong and emotional images were deliberately used instead of text due to the partially illiterate society.



fig. 5

One of these is a poster by Aleksei Radakov, created in 1920. He titled it "The Illiterate Man is Blind." Radakov created it to mobilize the population of the Soviet Union to learn to read and write (Radakov, n.d.), in order to increase the nation's awareness of the political scene.

This author's manifesto illustrates the crucial role played by literacy. Using detonation, the poster depicts a bearded man dressed in striped trousers and a red rag, walking toward a cliff, unconsciously, as his eyes are covered by a white scarf.

Connoting one of the main colors of this visualization first, we encounter the vibrant red, associated with color psychology as a strongly attention-grabbing shade, evoking mobilization and revolution. These feelings may vary depending on the context of the illustration (van Braam, 2025).

In turn, the clothing and beard are simplifications that allude to backwardness, and combined with the abyss, they represent a thin line and a threat. The visualization itself is a play between education as new and illiteracy as old, backward. At this stage, one might be tempted to quote Hollis, who believes that design is not neutral; according to him, it can hurt or heal us (Hollis, 2021). That's why so many designers are perfectly aware of this, turning it into a rescue mission like Radakov. The key characteristics of propaganda are deliberate persuasion, and as long as it's positive, we shouldn't worry about it. The National Health Service (NHS), representing the United Kingdom, is a positive example of propaganda, where design encourages regular screening and the fight against cancer. Engaging campaigns that emphasize conscious color and typography will consistently resonate with us.

Despite this, we still consciously "steer" someone else's intentions and choices. The exact same pattern applies to white walls in museums and art galleries, because they have the intended purpose of isolating our minds so that the austerity and absence can maximize the experience and impact of art on the viewer (Wonderful Museums, 2023).

I think Norman's opinion is relevant here (Norman, 2013, p. 291). There's no single, concrete answer to where all this is really headed.

So, are designers who undeniably and consistently influence our decisions, regardless of their form, still behaving ethically ?



fig. 6

3.From Propaganda to Altruism: Contemporary Digital Campaigns

In today's world, it's much more difficult to maintain a viewer's attention because we're exposed to thousands of stimuli daily. This means the entire creative industry is currently undergoing a massive transformation in its structure.

We notice changes in the nature of contemporary campaigns primarily in their form. From persuasive messages, which were primarily intended to benefit the sender, as a society we are rapidly shifting towards altruistic social activities. Today's digital campaigns, in the era of social media, are significant for audiences due to their increasingly ethical nature.

Research conducted in 2025 by the Edelman Trust Institute (2025) shows that we currently place the greatest trust in personal brands.

It is intriguing that in this respect, they have caught up with institutions such as public media, government, and even NGOs.

Texas artist Dena Nguen perfectly demonstrates the power of personal branding and contemporary visual communication. Her surreal campaign garnered 1.5 million likes and 614,000 social media shares in just a few days (EDeMilked, 2020).

The artist drew attention to a very pressing issue concerning race and gender. She created a series of dynamic and imaginative illustrations, which ultimately evolved into a campaign called "This is America."

Through her work, Dena condemned the actions of those who committed mass racially motivated attacks, claiming that Asians were to blame for the coronavirus epidemic. A Pew Research Center study (Ruiz, Im, and Tian, 2023) found that one-third of Asian Americans reported fearing for their safety and lives as of 2021. This demonstrates how supportive Dena's actions proved in the context of this threat and the power of modern digital campaigns. More recently, in 2005, a Reebok project

deemed it necessary to change the company's existing font due to negative associations (Pater, 2026, p. 41).

The font was changed from Blackletter, also known as Fraktur, to the modern sans serif Monospaced because it was too strongly associated with Nazism and evoked negative associations, especially since the use of this typeface was even taboo after World War II. A good and moral campaign in the 21st century must also take responsibility for the cultural context of every visual form. This classic example of a campaign demonstrates the importance of conscious decisions free from burdensome associations, which, instead of evoking fear, effectively influence a positive change in its reception.



fig. 7



fig. 8

Current projects like the Social Awareness Poster demonstrate that an emotionally charged and thoughtful typographic style can significantly influence human behaviour and even decisions. The project, called Claustrophobia, is aimed at a group of people suffering from anxiety-spatial disorders, which consequently negatively impact their lives. Designed to highlight the issue, the posters feature a strong typographic layout in a tightly compressed position, which is further cleverly emphasized by their 3D form. The author thus addressed this pressing issue while simultaneously seeking to facilitate access to specialist help.

This is therefore consistent with Mike Montiero's 2017 Code of Ethics for Designers (Monteiro n.d.), which teaches creators to take full responsibility for every social activity they contribute to the world through their creative endeavours. Montiero not only regularly reminds the industry about ethics but also mentions the undeniable responsibility of visual artists. Using the methodology described in the book (Noble and Bestley, 2005), designers should be constantly engaged in the creative process, inquisitive, and critical. Using tools such as semiotics, sematic, and communication theory, they create a narrative that not only informs us but also influences our decisions and feelings. Through questioning and in-depth analysis, they significantly influence the development of campaigns that now, more than ever before, serve the common good, bringing salvation to those in need.

Summary:

This work aimed to provide a thorough and objective examination of whether graphic design can truly "save lives." I wanted to address every dimension of "saving," encompassing emotional, psychological, physical, and socio-ethical issues. This allowed me to expand the analysis to address this question more broadly.

The study demonstrated that although design doesn't act directly, its influence and the role it plays in the world are of immense importance in shaping human behaviour.

The multidimensionality it brings has been used for centuries for graphic and informational purposes, but not exclusively.

Often, as it turns out, it has been an essential tool for survival. Design is more than just aesthetics; its influence is not neutral; it can warn and mobilize us, it can also evoke historical propaganda and leave traumas. The power of visual communication carries a tremendous responsibility. Contemporary visual communication significantly shifts these boundaries toward empathy, with a greater awareness of its consequences. Designers not only avoid persuasion but also genuinely expand their social activities for the benefit of others.

Building community through ethical digital campaigns proves crucial, consequently strengthening a sense of security and trust. In conclusion, the role of the designer is based on their awareness and intentions, because "saving lives" does not only mean physical form but also a sense of security, protection, and psychological support.

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List of Illustrations:

Figure 1. George, A. (2019) *Small figures attacking an anoa, a buffalo native to Sulawesi, Indonesia* [image]. Available at: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24432604-300-44000-year-old-hunting-scene-is-earliest-painted-story-ever-found/> (Accessed: 24 November 2025).

Figure 2. International Committee of the Red Cross (n.d.) *Fundamental principles of the Red Cross* [image]. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/article/fundamental-principles-red-cross-commentary> (Accessed: 25 November 2025).

Figure 3. Archipanic (2017) *Red Cross, Red Crescent and Red Crystal banners displayed at the Wellcome Collection exhibition “Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?”*, London [image]. Available at: <https://www.archipanic.com/portfolio/can-graphic-design-save-life/> (Accessed: 5 December 2025).

Figure 4. ArtRewards (n.d.) *The art of propaganda: Visual storytelling in times of war* [image]. Available at: <https://www.artrewards.net/editorial/the-art-of-propaganda-visual-storytelling-in-times-of-war> (Accessed: 2 December 2025).

Figure 5. PBS (2025) *These Soviet propaganda posters meant to evoke heroism, pride* [image]. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/these-soviet-propaganda-posters-meant-to-evoke-heroism-pride> (Accessed: 3 December 2025).

Figure 6. Sethuraman, S. (2021) *Artist draws surreal portraits to break race and gender stereotypes: “Hate is the real virus”* [image]. Upworthy, 9 April. Available at: <https://scoop.upworthy.com/artist-draws-surreal-portraits-to-break-race-and-gender-stereotypes> (Accessed: 1 December 2025).

Figure 7. u/blenderart (n.d.) *Social awareness poster series – “STUCK”* [image].

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