

Student Name: Jessica Elisabeth Pritchard

P Number: 2109765

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Lecturer: Donna Williams

Essay: Can Graphic Design Really Save Your Life

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Can Graphic Design Really Save Your life?

Graphic design is everywhere. There is no getting away from it. Everywhere we look design is there to help us find where we are going, know if food has any ingredients that we are allergic to and how to use equipment in a safe way without causing any harm. With all these different ways graphic design is working around us I think the only way to answer this question "Can graphic design really save your life?" is by saying, it already is and I would even go further and say it is and has the power to improve lives.

To support this statement, I will look at this idea through three different areas where graphic design is already working, and in my opinion, is already saving and improving lives. Firstly, I will look at data visualisation in medicine and how it aids communication between medical professionals and patients, which could result in improved knowledge and allow them to provide a higher level of care. Secondly, I will look at the importance of the healing environment and how it can have positive or negative effect on the healing journey. Finally, I will look at how design is working to improve our well-being and increase happiness levels, which has been scientifically proven to improve our health.

In society we are seeing an increase in data and information being presented in a visual form rather than simply using words. This means information that is complex can be

presented in a quicker and more effective manner to allow for quicker understanding.

However, data visualisation is not a new concept. As an example of this, map making was created to help gain understanding of the world. Nowadays, due to the advancement in technology, more data can be gathered and shared to make it more accessible than ever (Engebresten and Kennedy, 2020).

One area in which data visualisation plays an important role is within the field of medicine and medical research. When reading a book or a journal your eye is naturally drawn to figures more than words and numbers in a table. Therefore, graphs are largely used to add clarity to the data given to make sure it is clearly communicated between health care providers making the decisions and the service users receiving the care (Duke et al 2015).

However, there is a risk that if this information is not interpreted clearly, it could cause confusion as each person could interpret the information in a different way than intended. Another risk of data visualisation is that it could come across as manipulative which might not have the effect or make the impact the designer intended, it could even have the opposite effect which could be detrimental (Engebresten and Kennedy, 2020).

One method of data visualisation used in healthcare, of which there is a long history of use, would be infographics to help improve communication between patients and professionals. It is crucial that patients have a clear understanding of their illness, to ensure they know

how to take care of themselves, and they are answering the health professional's questions accurately. This is especially helpful when working with those who have low literacy levels or limited English, as the illustrations would be universally understood. This increases the chance of those individuals receiving the care they need and removing more barriers in health care (Arcia et al 2019).



In fig 1 we see an example of an infographic from a campaign from Lorraine Kelly to increase awareness of breast cancer symptoms.

The infographics show women that what they might be experiencing is not normal and is in fact a sign of cancer. They might have also heard the symptom before but aren't aware of what it looks like so this poster would clear that up as well and, hopefully, save a life (Pearson-Jones 2019).

Another method of data visualisation that is used within healthcare to benefit both practitioners and patients is Graphic medicine. This is the visual method of storytelling which helps to explain a variety of different procedures and issues within the medical community. They help to challenge the usual views of medicine and medical conditions as formalities and helps people to see them as solutions to problems and complications that people need to live with. (Nickerson 2018).

However, one criticism of this would be that graphic medicine cannot cover all the experiences that are felt by everyone suffering with certain illnesses or going through certain experiences. This then increases the risk of marginalised voices being marginalised further as their thoughts and experiences might not be considered in the comics. There is also a risk that those who see health care systems as prejudice would have more reason to believe this as not everyone's experience will be illustrate and would cause them to question why certain groups are being excluded (Venkatesan and Suresh 2022).

One drawback of data visualisation overall is that it that all designs are not created equally, and as mentioned above they could cause confusion, and this could lead to negative effects, if not done correctly. This puts a lot of pressure on designers to ensure that thorough research has been carried out to ensure that the correct target audience is being reached and the images are clear and understandable (Arcia et al 2019).

Research is a key aspect of graphic design and needs to be given the same level of importance as the design work. If there is a lack of the background knowledge designs will not meet the purpose for which they are intended (Walker 2017).

Another visual consideration that needs to be considered in a medical setting is the environment in which patients heal. Research has shown there is a strong relationship between healing and the environment in which this takes place and that one can strongly

influence the other. It has shown to be more prevalent amongst children as they are more sensitive to what is around them, compared to adults, so it stands to reason that they would be more effected by the environment when they are healing. Research carried out in hospitals in Malaysia show that there was a positive trend in the healing journey of children when the physical environment of the ward was considered which resulted in newer hospitals taking this into consideration when designing wards (Abbas and Ghazali 2012).



One designer who worked in this area was Dick Bruna, the creator of the character Miffy. He originally created this character to entertain his young child, but when he noticed children were fond of them and found the designs comforting, he donated them to health organisations. An example of one of his works that was donated to a hospital can be seen in fig 3 (Schrauwen et al 2017).

Looking at his designs psychologists have stated that young children would find them comforting as the characters he created have characteristics of young children. It is important that children see themselves in the stories as this would help them to normalise the situations they are going into. One story that does this well is "Miffy in Hospital", as it tells the story of how he went into hospital, was scared to go but everything was in okay in the end. Telling children about a scenario can be helpful but to see a character they relate

to going through it can help reinforce the comfort which supports the argument of having illustrations and designs in a paediatric ward (Anonymous 2000).

However, designers should not simply focus on medical settings, this needs to be considered in all other areas. Research has shown that the presence of happiness and a focus on well-being in each stage of our lives can impact the next. For example, if a child has a positive home life, then they are far more likely to see school in a much more positive manner, which would usually result in more effort being put into work and socialising with other children. This research shows the importance of happiness in every aspect of our lives and how one simple change can impact our entire life (Clark et al 2019).

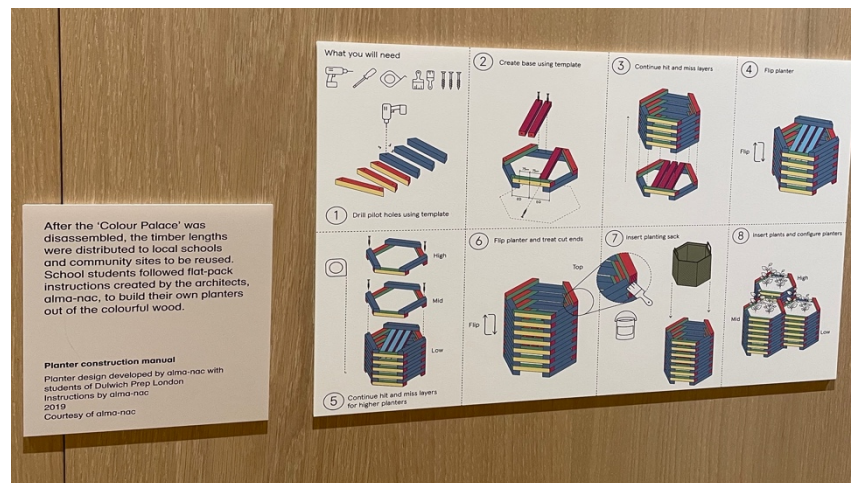
One designer who agreed with this principle and has made attempts to put it into action is Yinka Illori. His work is filled with an intent to promote joy to those who see it and that paired with his vibrant aesthetic does just that. After visiting his exhibition "Parables of Happiness" earlier this year, it is clear to see his work is not simply there to be colourful and to have a strong aesthetic but there is a large amount of research that goes into it the work to answer the question can design help us to lead happier, and as a result, much healthier lives (Parables of Happiness 2022).



Figure 4 shows an example of his work taken from the exhibition titled “The Colour Palace” which was intended to brighten the area in which it was placed and to highlight the beauty of multiculturalism within London.

As well as this being a great exhibition for

people to visit and to take in, it was not permanent. When the exhibition finished Illori did not waste the materials, instead they were distributed to local schools to build planters to decorate their schools. Figures 5 & 6 shows the plan they were given and the result of following the plan, which meant these schools all had a part of this exhibition, celebrating multiculturalism, and sharing the joy of it between the schools (Parables of Happiness 2022).



When creating his work, a large influence was looking at the research of Weill Cornell Medical College into the sixteen types of happiness. This research showed that there is a close link to happiness and susceptibility to diseases, which highlights the importance of the unique role that emotions, that we experience daily, play on our health. This research showed that those who experienced a larger range of positive emotions in a day had a reduced chance of suffering from certain diseases (Ong et al 2018).

However, there were limitations to this research, especially that the sample taken were relatively healthy, middle-aged adults which means that the results have not considered a variety of different experiences. The results also depended on the participants honestly noting their emotions each day, which you cannot guarantee as human error must always be assumed. As valuable as this research is, and there is clearly evidence that a positive attitude can help our healing, we need to ensure that we are not associating the experience of one small group of people to every person who looks for help (Ong et al 2018).

However, this does not take away from the principle behind Illori's research and work. He set out to create work that would bring people together to result in a more inclusive society. This exhibition was brought together to tell a story through visual language, but also to get us to ask the question how to do we want to live as part of the community we live in. This was all based on a parable Illori was told as a child, which led him to believe

that design is "trying to create a memory, so it lives and can be passed on (Parables of Happiness 2022).

In conclusion we can see from this essay that graphic design is already saving lives in the medical field, and there are many other areas that have not been mentioned. Without graphic design in medicine there would be less ability for professionals to effectively communicate with their patients, which could lead to correct care not being given and further issues caused. Medical professionals work very hard to learn the science behind the diseases and issues they are treating, but if they are unable to communicate the information correctly, then that can all be for nothing.

It is also clear to see from this essay that health is not just reliant on medicine and doctors, but the environment in which they are healing is just as important. There can be issues with creating an environment to heal in and it can lead to other practical areas being overlooked. However, I have learnt that we can overcome practical issues quickly, but the effects a negative environment, or the lack of a positive one, can delay and even hinder the healing process of an individual. Looking into this topic did make me think, why do well designed environments need to be limited to paediatric wards? We can see from the research carried out that it has a positive effect on children, then surely it would stand to reason that it would benefit adults as well.

Finally, my belief that graphic design can positively impact each area of our lives has grown even more. From seeing examples of artists who strive to make the area they live a better place through their designs, and the thought that goes into each project, I want to strive to do the same thing. I believe that each designer can improve the lives of those around them with their work, and if we are not striving to do this, then what is the point.

Bibliography:

Primary research:

Yinka Illori - Parables of Happiness (2022) [Parables of Happiness] Design Museum, London

15th September 2022 – 25th June 2023

Secondary research:

Figure list: