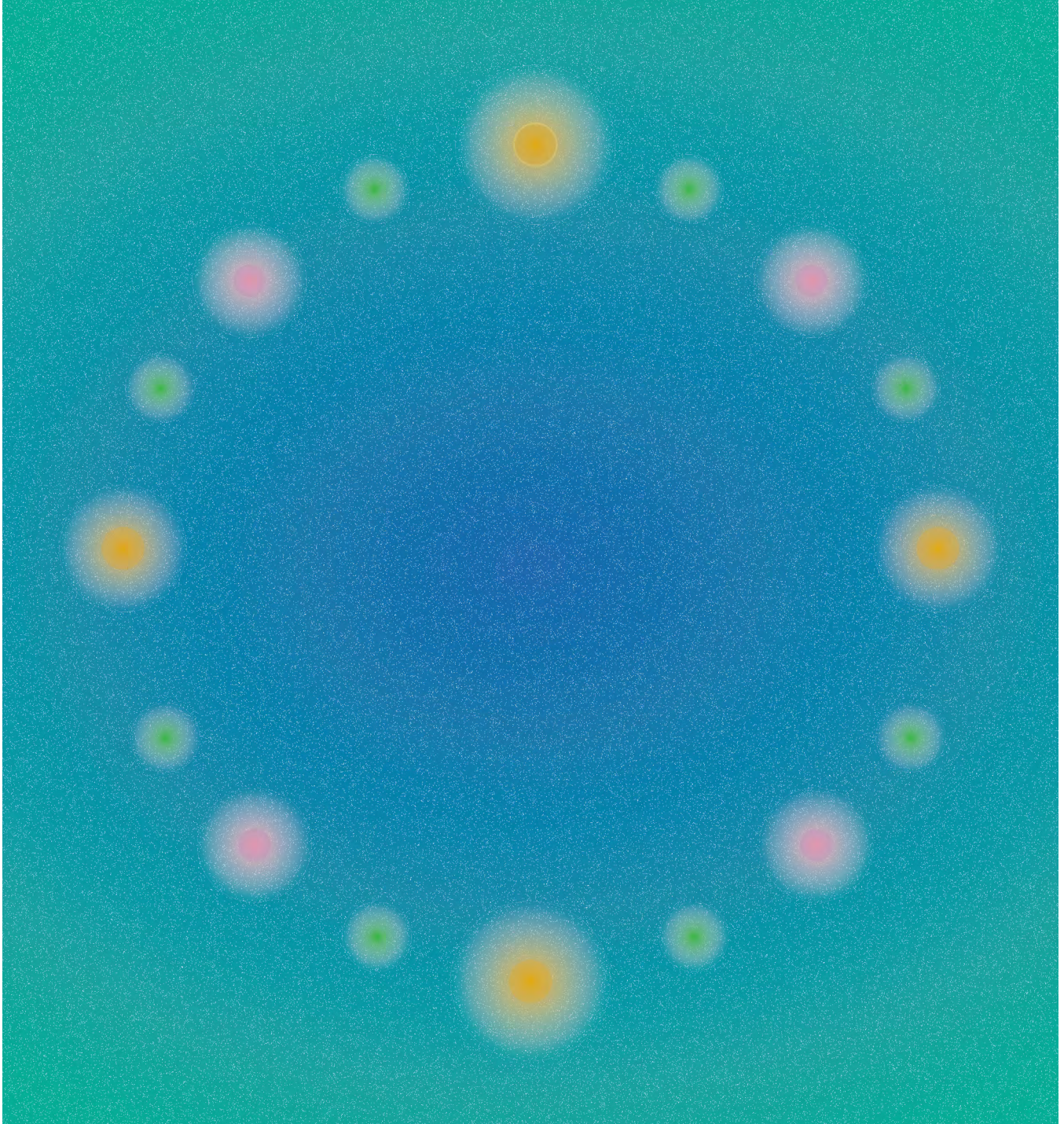


Exploring the Role of Communication Design in Supporting and Enhancing Emotional Wellness in Youth



by Xi Qiu

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Design in Supporting and Enhancing
Emotional Wellness in Youth**

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Bachelor of Design
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Wishing you good health, much more prosperity and happiness.

Abstract

This research examines the role of communication design as a catalyst to support emotional wellness among youth experiencing anxiety in varying degrees. It centres around the question: “How might design-based practices that encourage mindfulness help young people address internal and external challenges to their well-being?”. The excessive use of social media poses mental and emotional challenges, heightening levels of anxiety and depression in young people in their early 20s. This may result in a vicious cycle of negativity and low emotional states. Through auto-ethnographic reflection of my design-based practices and interviews, this study demonstrates that leveraging the power of visuals through a mindful and empathetic lens can amplify physical sensations, uplift emotions, and promote a healthier mindset. In this thesis, I use visual metaphors and design-based activities to explore youth experiences with anxiety and possible design-based strategies that might engage youth in critical reflection for emotional well-being. The design work is concerned with local communities, offering insights into the shared experiences involved in supporting adolescents during their developmental stages. Through harnessing mindfulness with empathy, we as designers have the opportunity to enhance and amplify momentary experience of positive emotion, while nurturing a more compassionate relationship with oneself.



Keywords

- Balance and symmetry
- Communication Design
- Well-being
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- Mindfulness
- Youth education

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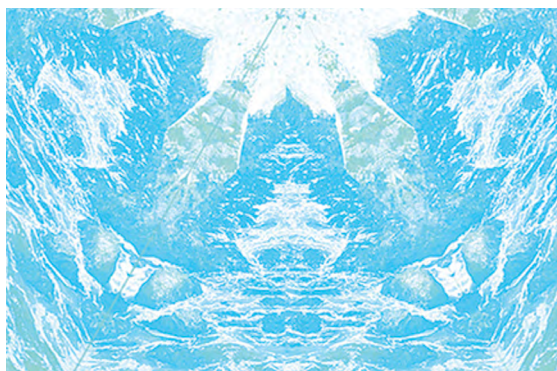


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Glossary of Terms

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

It aims to help individuals manage and navigate through present-day challenges such as anger issues and anxiety (Telford, 2020). It explores the link between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, aiming to help individuals develop more adaptive thinking and behaviours.

Ecological Approach

A comprehensive framework by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-American developmental psychologist. Bronfenbrenner's work underscores that individual wellness is a multifaceted experience shaped by the interaction of personal, relational, and societal factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Mindfulness

It is a heightened sense of awareness, aiming to “avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by learning to observe their thoughts, emotions, and other present-moment experiences without judging or reacting to them” (American Psychological Association, 2025).

Playfulness

The use of playful design elements incorporated into design outcomes that offer fun and engaging experiences to users. This style involves using design techniques in design processes such as gamification and themes that are reminiscent of childhood.

Positive Youth Development

A research-based approach and framework that helps young people reach their potential by developing certain skills and building their strengths.

Resiliency

The ability to adapt and navigate through adversity while continuing “to function reasonably well or get back to functioning reasonably well and also learning from it” (Hone, n.d.).

Stigma

Stigma is an association of disgrace or stereotypes that society may hold toward certain aspects of mental health, physical health, or personal well-being.

Tacit Knowledge

Intuitive and inarticulable knowledge that is accumulated through a designer's personal experience, skills and abilities.

Well-being

This research focuses on the wellness type of emotional well-being. It refers to individuals being in a state of feeling healthy, happy and a sense of meaning or purpose. Emotional well-being is “about recognizing, experiencing, and managing a wide range of thoughts and feelings in a constructive way” (Boston University Student Wellbeing, n.d.).

1. Introduction

1.1. Stories of Where Everything Began

In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement and competitive environments, the presence of anxiety and depression in younger generations is becoming more pervasive in North America (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). This may manifest in feelings and behaviours related to apathetic attitudes and isolation, which delimit everyday in-person social interactions. Consequently, this phenomenon of increases in the intensity of anxiety and depression may impact social and familial relations that create tension from emotional strain to potential for growth among young people. Anxiety can be rooted in many forms, for example, the pervasive use of social media has resulted in the potential for teens to be immersed in or exposed to social interactions twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Simultaneously, researchers of emotional challenges have noted a decrease in youth resilience— “the capacity to adapt and navigate through adversity while continuing to function reasonably well and also learning from it.” (Hone, n.d.). According to the report authored by Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Making Caring Common (2024b)¹, young adults report significantly higher rates of anxiety (36% vs. 18% of teens) and depression (29% vs. 15% of teens). Particularly, many research have shown that smartphone and social media use can lead to the increase in mental distress, self-injurious behaviour and negative thoughts among youth. According to Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020), the effects of screen activities have been “correlated negatively with self-reported happiness, life satisfaction and self-esteem”. Social media use can create benefits among youth such as perceiving social support and news, however, an unbalanced and excessive use can also pose drawbacks. Therefore, there is an emphasis on interventions and strategies to help young people navigate the challenges and harms in order to maximize these benefits while safeguarding their mental health (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020).

The Making Caring Common project proposes that youth need to be supported to develop the moral and emotional capacities necessary for healthy relationships and well-being. In *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt investigates the decline of youth mental health in the age of digital media. He claims that the current epidemic of anxiety and depression is linked to the “great rewiring”, of younger generations particularly amongst millennials and Generation Z (Haidt, 2024). Haidt believes

¹ Making Caring Common is a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education focused on raising children who care for others and for the common good. Their mission is centred around elevating collective welfare within school, at home, and in communities. They address various topics including access and equity, bias, bullying, mental health, and moral development to foster empathy and connection.

² A term promulgated in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, which is a 2018 book by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt.

that the combination of social media, overprotective parenting and the culture of safetyism², which the author defines as “a culture or belief system in which emotional safety has become a sacred value”, have prioritized the emotional safety and comfort of young people over their resilience and autonomy. Consequently, one of the root causes of screen-induced anxiety in younger generation comes from a lack of coping mechanisms when perceiving threats (Lesh, 2024). The decline in mood potential triggers “distorted thinking patterns often elicit uncomfortable physical symptoms, which then induce feelings of fear and worry, which then trigger more anxious thinking, perpetuating a vicious cycle ” (Haidt, 2024, p.67).

All of these researchers appear to concur that it is important to understand the nuances of the physical, emotional and social changes that are occurring in these generations of young people. This understanding lays the groundwork for strategies that may be effective in assisting these generations of young people to more effectively navigate life challenges. How can we design learning practices that will help support today's youth to sustain behaviours and mindsets in adulthood that fosters more resilience and well-being. This leads me as a designer to ask: *How can I use design practice to encourage mindfulness and empathy amongst youth? How might design in a mindful approach help young individuals develop better balance?* To begin with, I used the Iceberg Model introduced by anthropologist Edward T. Hall as an initial tool to brainstorm the underlying factors beyond the surface-level events of youth emotions and behaviours impacted by social media use. According to Hall, this model distinguishes visible aspects, those observable aspects such as behaviours including beliefs, values, norms, and the unspoken communication patterns that operate beneath the surface (Luehring, 2024).

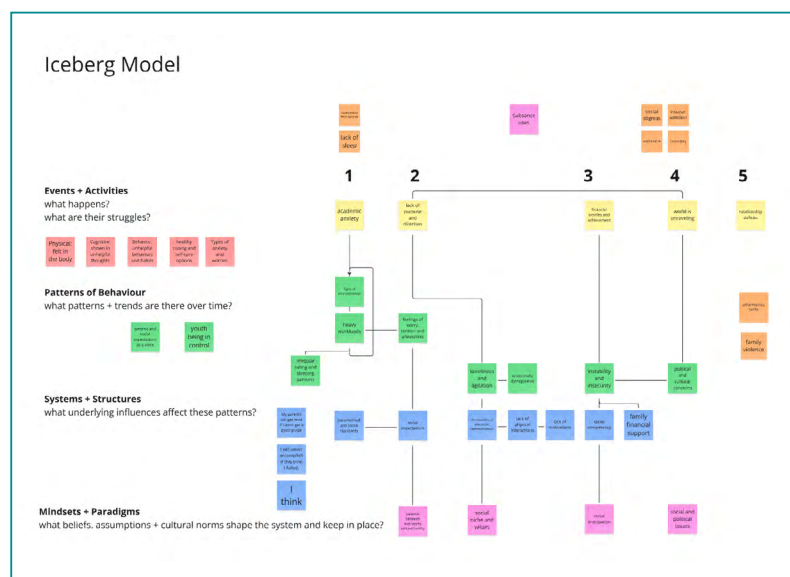
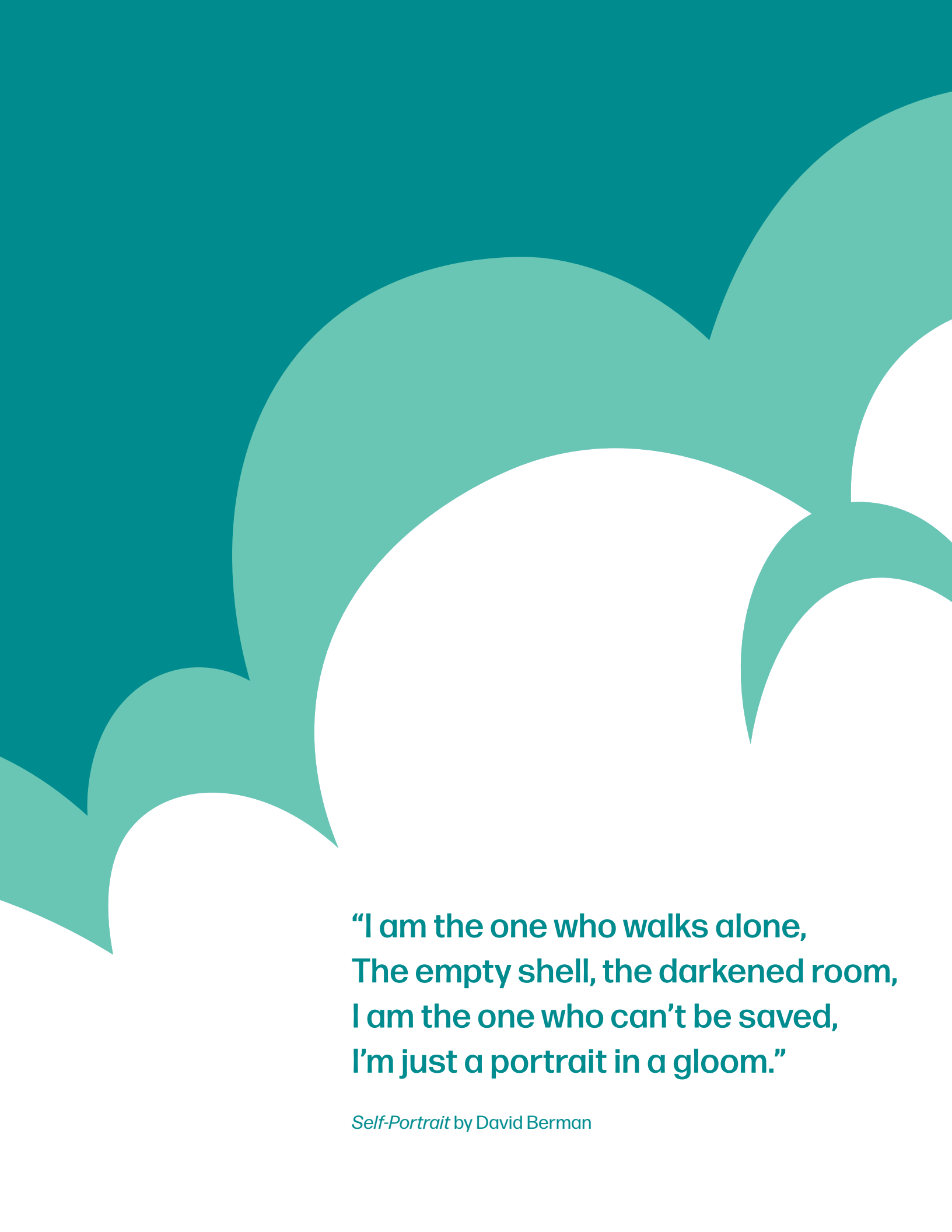


Fig 1 : Iceberg Model.



“I am the one who walks alone,
The empty shell, the darkened room,
I am the one who can’t be saved,
I’m just a portrait in a gloom.”

Self-Portrait by David Berman

1.2. Correlation with poetry

Life transitions, such as moving from adolescence to adulthood, are critical periods for cultivating resilience, self-reflection, efficacy, and personal identity (Cashin, 2024b). In humans brain development continues into the mid to late 20s (Jensen & Nutt, 2016), as a result of rapid physical and social changes during adolescence, and young adulthood, many youth may also experience greater mental and/or emotional challenges. Young people often report increased feelings of loneliness or alienation (Finn, 2024) and representations of this among people in their teens and early 20s is common in popular culture. In the previous page of David Berman's poem, *Self-Portrait* (1999), the author uses metaphors such as "empty shell" and "darkened room" to elicit an atmosphere of a broken soul. The poem explores the theme of existential solitude using visual metaphors. The poem has powerful emotional resonance and may be a more effective way of illustrating the impact of anxiety or emotional turmoil than statistics or conventional theory. Tapping into emotion through images and stories sometimes helps people to open up, to share and to feel less alone. The despair and helplessness evoked in the lines of the poem may resonate deeply with young people, who may be encountering anxiety, uncertainty, and despondency. In this thesis, I use visual metaphor and story-based activities to explore anxiety and possible design-based strategies that might engage youth in critical reflection for well-being. In the following section, a discussion of my mixed media artwork *Tender Embrace* serves as an introduction to the series of visual narrative explorations that I conducted for this thesis work.

1.2.1 Tender Embrace

Tender Embrace (Fig. 2, 2024) is a mixed-media work that I created as an initial way of tension with anxiety. Clouds made from cotton felt serve as a metaphorical representation of emotions. The gentle feeling of clouds is evocative of emotions, which can be filtered easily. The sedentary creates opportunities to influence their emotions, and over time, potential distress may accumulate. In *Tender Embrace*, nails piercing the cotton felt impersonates the constraints from the external environment, which imprint scars on the emotional landscape in youth. Nails, those fasteners used in construction, can be interpreted positively as constructive objects that hold things together, but in reverse, they can become harmful echoes. Verbal abuse online, as a form of digital abuse, poses substantial threats in the realm of online harassment, with name-calling and rumor-spreading being the most common forms (Anderson, 2018).

Social stigma around anxiety may arise that can contribute to feelings of fear, alienation and disconnection among youth experiencing anxiety, potentially leading to a further decline. Exposure to screen time can unfortunately lead to cyberbullying, feelings of inadequacy and sleep disruption (Maras et al., 2015, p.136). For instance, youth facing these challenges might be hesitant to express their struggles due to fear of being judged by others. This fear of judgement can hinder their willingness

Introduction

to seek help and support. *Tender Embrace* uses tactile techniques to represent emotional experiences and reflection that arouse senses, while tapping into one's emotions. Emotions have qualities similar to clouds, with aspects of filtering and condensing; the metaphor encapsulates the characteristics of emotions with tactile visuals. Artists have employed the metaphorical expressions of clouds, such as Berndnaut Smilde's *Nimbus series* (2013), in which the cloud sculptures made of smoke and water hover inside tiled interiors or industrial workshops. Different types of spaces in which the clouds appear within the series may change the connotation of the clouds and how a viewer might interpret them. As Smilde explained, "(a) cloud isn't durable, it changes, grows, and breaks apart" (Ebert, 2024).



Fig. 2: 'Tender Embrace'.

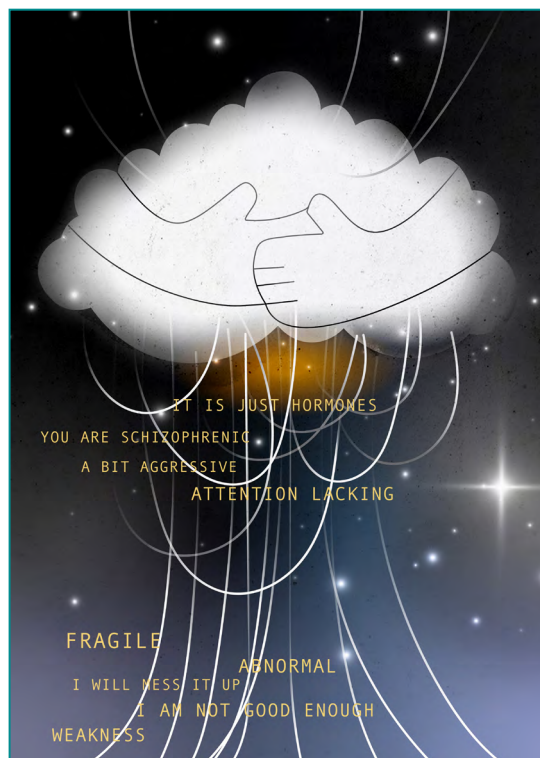


Fig. 3: Digital 'Tender Embrace' (an illustration comprising partial stigmas attached to anxiety and depression (from multiple online articles)).

2. Context & Framing

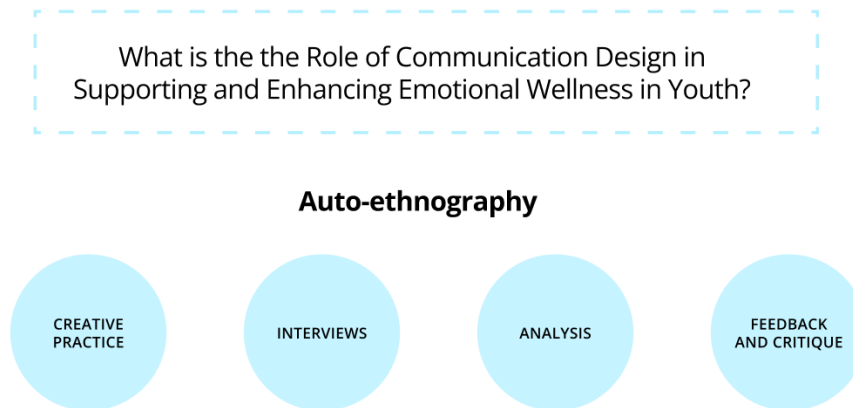


Fig. 4: Lens of inquiry.

2.1. Theoretical Positioning

This study delves into using communication design as a catalyst to support emotional wellness among youth experiencing screen-induced anxiety. It inquires into communication design research processes informed by ecological development theory might be used to support emotional well-being. *Can design thinking and design-based exploration activities be used to support youth experiencing anxiety or depression?* Ecological Systems Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-American developmental psychologist, provides a comprehensive framework for my research trajectory. Bronfenbrenner's work underscores that individual wellness is a multifaceted experience shaped by the interaction of personal, relational, and societal factors (1979). This theoretical framework allows me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how various aspects of a young person's environment interact to mutually reinforce each other. If according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, wellness is shaped by a combination of personal, relational, and societal factors that intersect and change over time depending on an individual's environmental contexts, then: *might providing opportunities for individuals to explore and reflect on these interactions be helpful in improving well-being?*

Mindfulness is a field of wellness practice that has become popular in the past ten years. It takes a perspective similar in its attention to how personal, social, relational and environmental factors intersect and impact our well-being. In my research into addressing youth anxiety, I delved into the field of mindfulness. Originating from Buddhist traditions, this field has gained popularity within the realms of creative endeavors. Mindfulness is a heightened sense of awareness, aiming to "avoid destructive

or automatic habits and responses by learning to observe their thoughts, emotions, and other present-moment experiences without judging or reacting to them” (American Psychological Association, 2025). Some design-based activities embody the attributes of mindfulness, such as engaging in the creation of mandalas. These practices promote a sense of tranquility and alleviate the cycle of negative thought patterns that contribute to anxiety. On the other hand, designers cultivate balance and controlled-attention by channeling their focused-attention and creativity (Au, 2018). Therefore, I perceived an opportunity to leverage design-based processes as means for promoting mindfulness for a healthier lifestyle.

2.2. Rationale

Design plays a vital role in shaping how individuals perceive, engage with, and navigate their surroundings and the world. Communication design language holds the power to subtly impact our emotions through subconscious and non-verbal means, affecting our overall emotional sensations. Therefore, *might mindful approaches to design help to develop experiences that promote balance, harmony, and positivity?* As the development of the prefrontal cortex in teens and young people is still developing, it often can lead to implications for behaviour, decision-making and emotional regulation (Jensen & Nutt, 2016). Given that addressing and reflecting on complex emotions and life experiences in a direct way using logical verbal or written analysis may be difficult or off-putting for many people, the visual and metaphoric aspects of design language may be a more effective means of engagement. By combining these, communication design has the potential to become an impactful tool, “offering solace, understanding, and support to those in need” (Linde, 2023). My design practice and design-based research offers another lens through which to explore and address emotional wellness, while generating personal reflective insights through design. The demographic population of youth varies based on societal and cultural contexts. In this study, my audience is individuals aged 15 and above, extending into young adulthood. I intend to explore design-based practices and visual metaphors to harness the power of communication design, providing insights that inspire this specific audience to embark on a similar wellness journey. This research topic might be relevant to sociologists, counsellors, parents, educators and teachers who are committed to the fields of health and education, and stand as influential advocates to promote paths towards healthy futures. These practices may be practical and implementable to engage with among small individuals to communities. This research is also relevant to designers and artists who seek tangible roots in designing for wellness.

2.3. Research Objectives and Questions

In combining auto-ethnographic reflection of my design-based practices and interviews, this study showcases my collection of explorations to leverage the power of visuals through a mindful and empathetic lens, which, in turn, can amplify physical sensations, uplift emotions, and promote a healthier mindset. Furthermore, this study champions the role of communication design in fostering an environment that promotes mindfulness, alleviates anxiety, enhances positivity and cultivates stronger resilience among individuals. Whether this be through colours that trigger us, the shapes that calm us, or the spaces that support us—design has the capacity to resonate with us. It empowers us to feel balanced and immersed, which in turn, encourages us with varying sensations that may affect our emotional states.

Research Questions:

How might design-based practices that encourage mindfulness help young people address internal and external challenges to their well-being?

- What is the role of communication design in supporting and enhancing emotional wellness in youth?
- What kinds of design research methods may be appropriate for eliciting youth reflections on wellness?
- What kinds of tools would be useful for supporting youth?

3. Research Methods

3.1. Auto-Ethnography

This project employs auto-ethnographic reflection to explore strengthening emotional wellness in youth from a design research perspective. According to Ellis et al., (2010), auto-ethnography combines autobiography (personal experience) and ethnography (cultural analysis) to understand cultural experiences through personal narratives. As scholar Adams et al. (2017) notes, “auto-ethnography, as method, humanizes research by focusing on life as lived through in its complexities; showing that you as readers and we as authors matter; and demonstrating to others who are involved in or implicated by our projects that they matter, too” (p.8). I use auto-ethnography to generate “critical awareness, disturb the status quo and probe questions of identity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 418). This research approach allows me, as a designer, to produce personal experiences and viewpoints within the local communities of the City of Vancouver. By blending personal narratives with critical reflection, this method enables me to develop personal stories that offer nuanced perspectives and insights. The outputs of *Kaleidoscope*, see Section 5.1 for more details, along with community engagement and interviews, have shaped my personal experiences and responses to the emerging questions. *How might empathy and mindfulness be applied to my design practices?*

3.2. Ethnographic Interviews

As a form of narrative inquiry in my research, interviewing enables “the democratization of knowledge or the belief that (almost) everyone has a perspective to contribute” (Glesne, 2006, p.106). To gain contextual understanding of the broader implications on emotional well-being among young people, I interviewed Ms. Carlene Jang in November 2024, who is a high-school art educator, specializing in teaching grades 10-12. Through the use of open-ended questions and inquiry, I gained valuable insights into her expertise in the creative fields and her perspectives on supporting the emotional well-being of students in a school setting. This interview also revealed practical ways to develop guidelines for supporting young students experiencing emotional challenges.

3.3. Research Context and Constraints

This study uses auto-ethnographic reflection and interviews rather than quantitative processes or user trials. The conduit of knowledge acquisition is generated through practice-based research and local information exchange. This study is conducted in the neighbourhoods and communities of Vancouver.

4. Initial Design Investigations

My research trajectory comprises interdisciplinary projects that serve as conduits of knowledge acquisition and narrative inquiry on personal practice to elucidate personal, cultural and social responses to promote emotional well-being in youth. At their core, these design projects enact visual explorations to support the development of self-awareness, empathy, and critical reflections, skills that promote resilience. Communication design plays a crucial role in distilling complex information into simple structures that not only enhance understanding but also inspire action and influence behaviour. Its narrative dimension is especially powerful in forging emotional connections with diverse issues, prompting deeper reflection. Moreover, communication design has played a significant role in shaping both contemporary media and physical environments, influencing how we interact with the world around us.

4.1. “Youth” Fill-in card pamphlet

YOUTH
/yooth/

Definition: Uncountable noun. The period of life from puberty to the attainment of full growth. The quality or state of being young
(Cambridge Dictionary)

Could you share some of your top memorable moments in your 20s?

Write down the words that arise when thinking of your joyful recollections.

What was the biggest challenge you faced and how did you overcome it?

Share an unforgettable moment of self-transformation.

What wisdom or qualities have you gained from the transition, or have been the most important to you?

Fig. 5: ‘Youth’ pamphlet design.

Initial Design Investigations

As one of the five projects presented, I developed a fill-in card pamphlet design, in the form of an exploratory and open-ended questionnaire. With this activity in January 2024, I invited my cohort to participate in an informal sharing of narratives. These topics included memorable moments and encounters experienced during the transition years to young adulthood. The qualitative data collected from this activity revealed the characteristics and attributes that are typically associated with this transitional period. Following this activity, it was possible to identify recurring themes in the responses provided by my cohort. Here are the common themes listed by my cohort:

- ▶ Experiencing joy and excitement. Being fascinated by the hidden treasures in natural settings and engaging in activities they enjoyed.
- ▶ Having confidence, characterized by a sense of control and certainty. Achieving fulfillment and satisfaction through recognizing their own abilities and ideas.
- ▶ A sense of wonder: the desire, joy, and unbridled spirit to explore moments in the neighbourhoods and community.
- ▶ Isolation and loneliness: the sense of being neglected and being separated by others. A sense of debonding.
- ▶ Self-identity: Who am I? A sense of identity confusion and the role played in society.
- ▶ The importance of cultivating awareness: the mindset being conscious of thoughts, emotions and feelings. The awareness that hints at personal growth.



Fig. 6: Reflective moments.



Fig. 7: Reflective moments.



**“Colour, in a very primal way,
is a sign of life, a sign of energy.
And the same is true of
abundance.”**

“Where joy hides and how to find it”
by Ingrid Fetell Lee

4.2. Mirror's Whisper

Following the questionnaire, I developed *Mirror's Whisper*. Screen-based activities could lead to cycles of negative thinking patterns and struggles. To address this, I explored mindful concepts by understanding what it means to be mindful and cultivating self-love. At the beginning of this project, I gathered a group of five undergraduate students, and together, we examined the practice of drawing mandalas while collectively reflecting on the essence of mindfulness, shifting the focus from tension to self-love. Engaging with this art form induces a flow state that promotes mindfulness in the present moment. Creating mandalas opens a space for individuals to explore their inner thoughts and emotions, fostering a deeper sense of self-awareness. Through the process, the repetitive act of engaging in symmetrical patterns and design tools, allows participants to enter into a low-stake situation which reduces the feelings of anxiety (Duong et al., 2018).

Iteration 1: The first iteration began with a collection of mindful imagery. Inspired by the repetitive process of engaging with mandalas, this visual representation embodies the concept of “wholeness,” which is closely tied to the ego. The ego is our sense of self; a healthy ego “is grounded, confident, resilient, and understands its own value” (Schirm, 2023). Through visual graphics, I sought to explore self-love as a motivator for positive behaviours, fostering a greater sense of self-confidence and compassion.

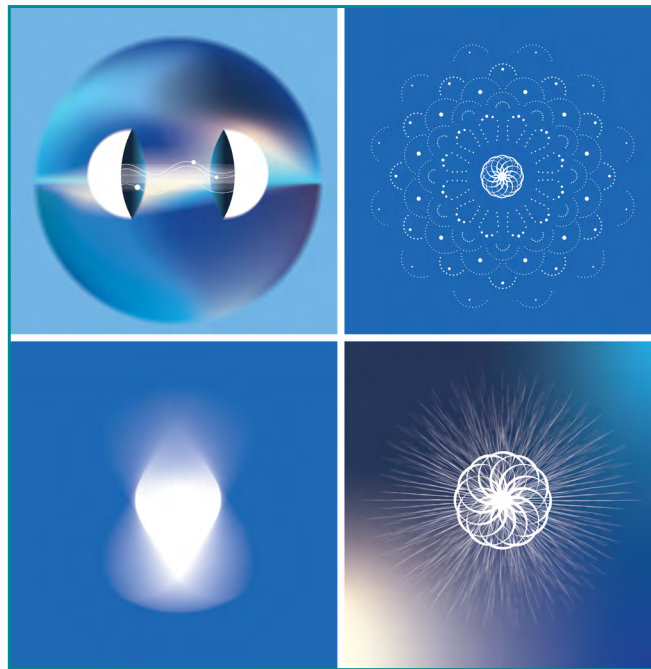


Fig. 8: 'Mirror's Whisper' iteration one.

Initial Design Investigations

Iteration 2: The subsequent iteration was developed as a puzzle game designed to raise awareness and encourage positive self-talk. *Mirror's Whisper* creates a mindful space for participants to play, reflect and response to their inner world without judgment. The outcome incorporated gamified elements, allowing players to feel a sense of accomplishment as they completed the game. *Mirror's Whisper* was structured as a puzzle-solving experience, offering a creative and mindful path where players took turns answering prompt cards and earning puzzle pieces to complete their mandala image. To enhance engagement and promote focus and calmness, a coastal green-blue colour palette was used to refine the overall aesthetic. The concept of “flow” was popularized by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, which describes an optimal state of experience where individuals tapped into a state characterized by complete engagement (Ramsey, 2007). By integrating this sense of flow into the design of *Mirror's Whisper*, participants were guided through an experience that was both intuitive and reflective, starting with self-awareness and extending to their surroundings and relationships.



Fig. 9: 'Mirror's Whisper' iteration two.

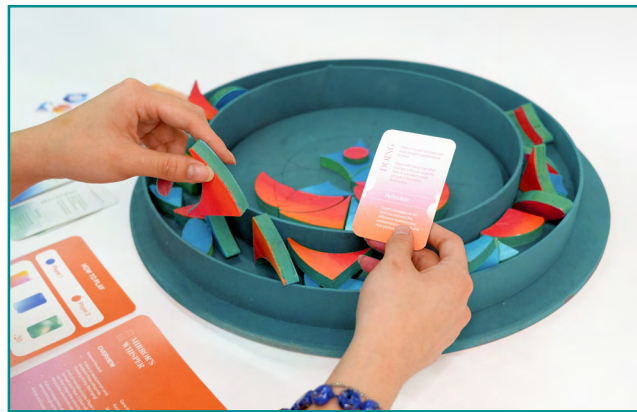


Fig. 10: 'Mirror's Whisper' iteration two.

Initial Design Investigations



Fig. 11: 'Mirror's Whisper' iteration two, close-up views.



Fig. 12: Mock-up of 'Invisible Visible'.

4.3. Invisible Visible

In May 2024, I created *Invisible Visible*, a mindful workbook encapsulating playful activities designed to help individuals externalize their thoughts, emotions and feelings. The objective of the workbook was to provide design tools aimed at minimizing the propensity to engage in negative thinking patterns, encouraging individuals to step away from screen-based activities and fully immerse themselves in the present moment. The chapters within the workbook included written exercises, dialectical prompts such as journaling, and pictorial prompts including doodling and stitching trace marks. Emphasizing the principles of balance and symmetry, *Invisible Visible* encouraged participants to feel a sense of delight, orderliness and balance. Participating in these activities aimed to challenge unhelpful thoughts through pragmatic and goal-setting approaches (Telford, 2020, p.28). Brooklyn-based designer Ingrid Fetell Lee, who explores tangible roots of joy in our surroundings, suggests that “order in nature frequently suggests the presence of life, and is often associated with well-being and safety”. The symmetrical shapes and geometric patterns of the harmony counteract a sense of disorder in the world, allowing a smooth flow of daily life, both physically and mentally (Lee, 2025). By doing so, *Invisible Visible* inspires individuals to cultivate a more positive mindset, while encouraging the adoption of healthier lifestyle behaviours and habits.



Fig. 13: 'Invisible Visible' physical book design.

5. Design Outcomes



Fig. 14: 'Kaleidoscope' mini exhibition (ECU, 2024).

5.1. Kaleidoscope

Kaleidoscope is my fourth design-based practice, where I began to use communication strategies in creating and amplifying a mindful natural environment, pertaining principles of balance and symmetry. Through the exhibition, visual elements became part of the methodology to foster mindfulness, while encouraging social interactions among youth. In its aim to create a mindful experience, this exhibition project was inspired by Ana Montiel's *Visual Mantras* (2013), in which Montiel explores repetitive drawing as a form of meditation, taking the concept of mantra as repetition that liberates us from



Fig. 15: Ana Montiel's 'Initiation'.



Fig. 16: Ana Montiel's 'Visual Mantras'.

Design Outcomes

thoughts and aids in transcendence. Montiel's perception of the chromatic spectrum evokes transcendent sensory experiences, guiding the viewers into the meditative state. Her careful manipulation of colours creates resonance allowing a rhythm of serenity, which inspired the ways I manipulated colours for *Kaleidoscope*.

The *Kaleidoscope* exhibition was on display at Emily Carr University (Nov 18-21st, 2024, Nook B3161). In it, I featured natural landscapes of the world, captured through layers of curated mindful writings and photography that encapsulate simple delights in the everyday. Gratitude is a socially driven emotion that helps build and maintain social bonds (Bartlett et al., 2011). Visitors coming to the space were prompted to reflect about present-moment thoughts, emotions and memories, encouraging them to share these cherished moments with their dear ones. In addition, from the perspective of youth, the poetic language in the writings was inspired to narrate positive attributes of growth and resilience. During the exhibition, undergraduate students revisited past memories and emotions, discovering a profound sense of belonging in those moments. Their reflections encompassed personal nostalgia, expressions of gratitude, and emotional responses to the environment. By adding a sensory experience, the layer of sound offered the exhibition a more diverse and immersive viewing experience to a broader audience. Accompanied by a curated nature sound projection, *Kaleidoscope* offers a mindful, multi-sensory journey, inviting visitors to engage, reflect, and respond to their social connections within their surroundings. Many responses blended drawing and text, characterized by a playful and nostalgic tone. Establishing connections is crucial in recognizing individual worth, providing a sense of direction and significance. In those moments of being lifted, "colour represents an emotion or mood, but colour could—under optimum circumstances—lead people toward experiencing that mood" (Lupton, 2017, p.108).



Fig. 17: 'Kaleidoscope' instruction panel.



Fig. 18: 'Kaleidoscope' accordion book design.

Design Outcomes

Highlights emerged from visitors' creative responses (age 18-22):

- ▶ “Even if the wind continues to blow forward, I will save it in a jar to feel the air for the future.”
- ▶ “I worry sometimes that I don’t know where to go after graduating. My heart is torn between my home and my career. I hope that when the time comes, I will know what to choose.”
- ▶ “I hate being a slave to nostalgia. It hurts to be the one who remembers each summer I yearn for before.”
- ▶ “Remember when we used to run around with our bare feet on the red earth of grandma’s backyard? I miss you.”
- ▶ “Sometimes we forget to realize that the life we have now is an answered prayer. Another man’s trash is another’s treasure.”
- ▶ “I think that even between all the hardships of the world, there are a lot of small things left unappreciated. I want to appreciate all of what makes my life now worth living and I wish to express it and give it back so they know.”
- ▶ “I am grateful for the peace and comfort in my life right now. And to be able to share that with my friends.”
- ▶ “I am grateful I finally have something to look forward to. Right now, I feel in control of my life.”



Fig. 19: Participants' moodboard.



Fig. 20: 'Kaleidoscope' writing station.

**“As one teen said about his parents:
‘Don’t only look at me through the
keyhole. Open the door.’”**

Caring for the caregivers, Making Caring Common.





Fig. 21: 'Fresh Spark' wellness campaign

5.2. Fresh Spark

The fifth of my design-based projects, *Fresh Spark*, began as a wellness campaign concept including environmental and digital design components, tailored for integration within local communities and neighbourhoods. This wellness campaign collection was designed to embody the positive attributes of self-growth that encourage and inspire youth in prosocial actions and behaviours. As well, the outcomes aimed to narrow the gap and break the shame of seeking external support. The creation process was inspired by my site visit to Broadway Youth Resource Centre (BYRC) in November 2024, where I met with Jas, who is the administrator of the Resource room. BYRC is one of the Vancouver youth service providers for social, health, education and housing, substance use support, employment and life skills services. Jas highlighted their efforts in mapping out the centre to enhance social bonds, which in turn can foster closer proximity and strengthen the sense of belonging and security among individual youth. Many young people have been actively participating in their programs and social events, thereby building competence and establishing pro-social norms while actively engaging in the community. He also highlighted a great amount of youth nowadays continue to experience downsides in society.

The emotional wellness of youth is not only dependent on meeting basic daily needs, such as food, shelter, security, and hygiene, but also on the presence of supportive adults, access to resources that offer appropriate support, and the provision of quality care and supervision. *What are the pillars of making joy and purposeful moments among youth? How might I leverage design tools to empower individuals living in challenging environments where access is restricted to open resources?*

This recalls my interview visit with Ms. Jang, a high-school art educator dedicated to teaching youth art and design. Through open-ended questions and conversation exchange (*Appendix A*), I asked Ms. Jang about her insights on monitoring emotional challenges in students in a classroom setting. Ms. Jang emphasized the significance of fostering self-efficacy through scaffolding and personalized instructions. She believed that effort from teachers, parents and social workers each comes into play. For instance, parent involvement in parent-teacher conferences plays a crucial role in supporting students to perform well. Social workers collaborate to create positive outcomes and environments. Anxiety among students was also addressed during the interview, particularly their reliance on technology. Ms. Jang pinpointed the fact that the young generation has things so easily available and accessible, which sometimes limits their abilities of learning alternative ways of doing things. As Haidt (2024) mentions, digital under-protecting is leading to addiction in the young generation, coinciding with the rise in anxiety and depression, while struggling to handle setbacks in part of everyday life. Ms. Jang's emphasis on life-long learning inspired me profoundly. Whether helping students find joy and intrinsic motivation in creative pursuits, as exemplified by one of her students, or fostering an open-minded mindset to embrace new challenges and experiences, Ms. Jang paved an empathetic path to understanding the needs of the youth she deeply cares for. Bring those insights together in my auto-ethnographic reflection in the local communities, and this channels into the progression of my summative project, *Fresh Spark*.

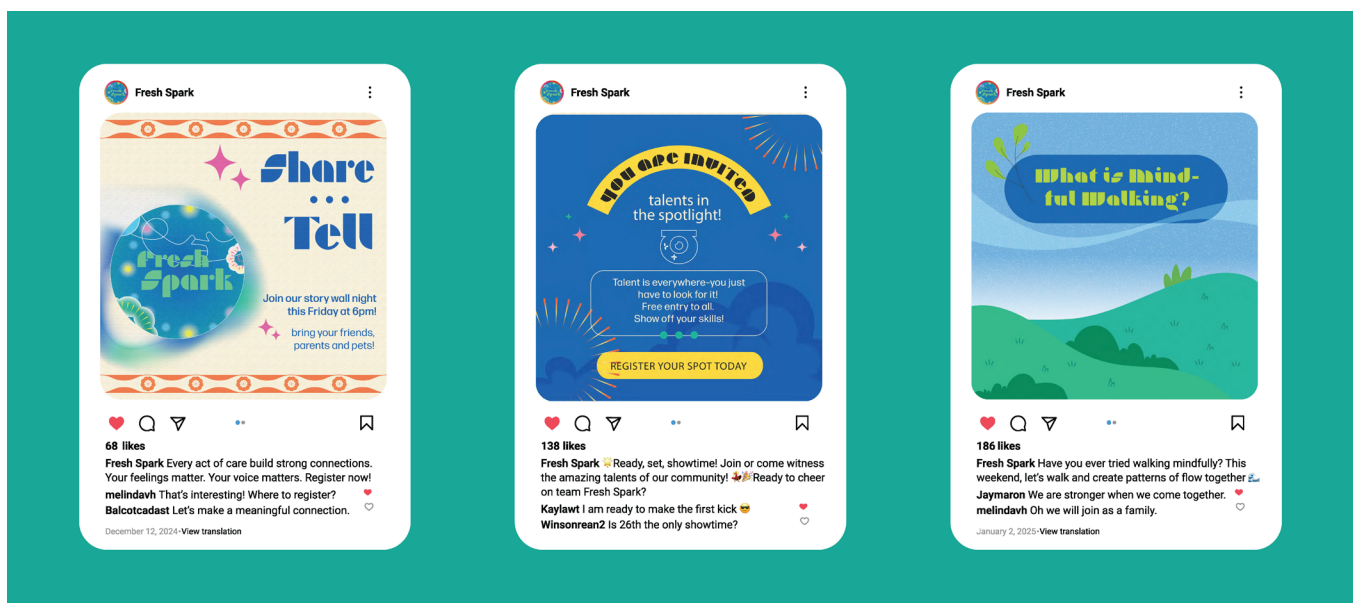


Fig. 22: Mock-up of 'Fresh Spark' media posts.



Fig. 23: 'Fresh Spark II'.

5.3. Summative Project “Fresh Spark II”

Reflecting my connections above with local neighbourhoods, *Fresh Spark* further deepens the use of communication design to promote mindfulness, and amplifying momentary experience of positive emotions among young individuals. Building *Fresh Spark's Personalized Care Kit*, I drew inspiration from the ideas of *Aesthetics of Joy* (2025) by Ingrid Fetell Lee, a designer and author dedicated to discovering greater joy in our surroundings through design. As highlighted by Ingrid Fetell Lee, she believes that “focusing on joy is more accessible because it is visceral and measured in small moments, allowing for deliberate creation of joyful experiences”. This concept revolves around the persona of Amelia as an illustrative example.

Fresh Spark offers me a framework to design a customized care service tailored to Amelia's motivations and goals. By engaging with her emotional care kit received from *Fresh Spark*, in the quiet moments of reflection, this toolkit serves as a collection of joyful and mindful practices that inspires Amelia to navigate distress while shifting her focus towards a more mindful approach. This project motivates users to incorporate physical tools into their daily routines, moving away from digital dependencies and integrating meaningful actions into their everyday lives.

Fresh Spark

Your Personalized
Emotions Care Kit

Users embark their emotional well-being journey by personalizing their emotions care kit through the Fresh Spark website.

The screenshot shows a web form titled "Customizing Your Emotions Care Kit". It is divided into several sections: "DELIVERY INFORMATION" with fields for name, email, address, and country; "SELECT PRODUCTS" with radio button options for Recordable Music Gift Box, Eco-Friendly Paper Wrapped Gift Box, and Classic Fresh Spark Gift Box, plus size options (Small, Medium, Large, Custom); "SPECIAL ITEMS/THEMES" with radio button options for Private Spaces, Heroes, Motivations & Goals, Hobbies & Passions, Custom Theme, Holidays, Scents, Dreams, Connections, Celebration, and Nature; and a "PERSONALIZED MESSAGE FOR THE RECIPIENT" text area. The Fresh Spark logo is on the right, and the website URL and "ORDER FORM" label are at the bottom.



Design tools include an array of nature-inspired imagery, nature soundscapes, social stamps and mindfulness exercises for mood enhancement, to promote shifting towards a healthier mindset.

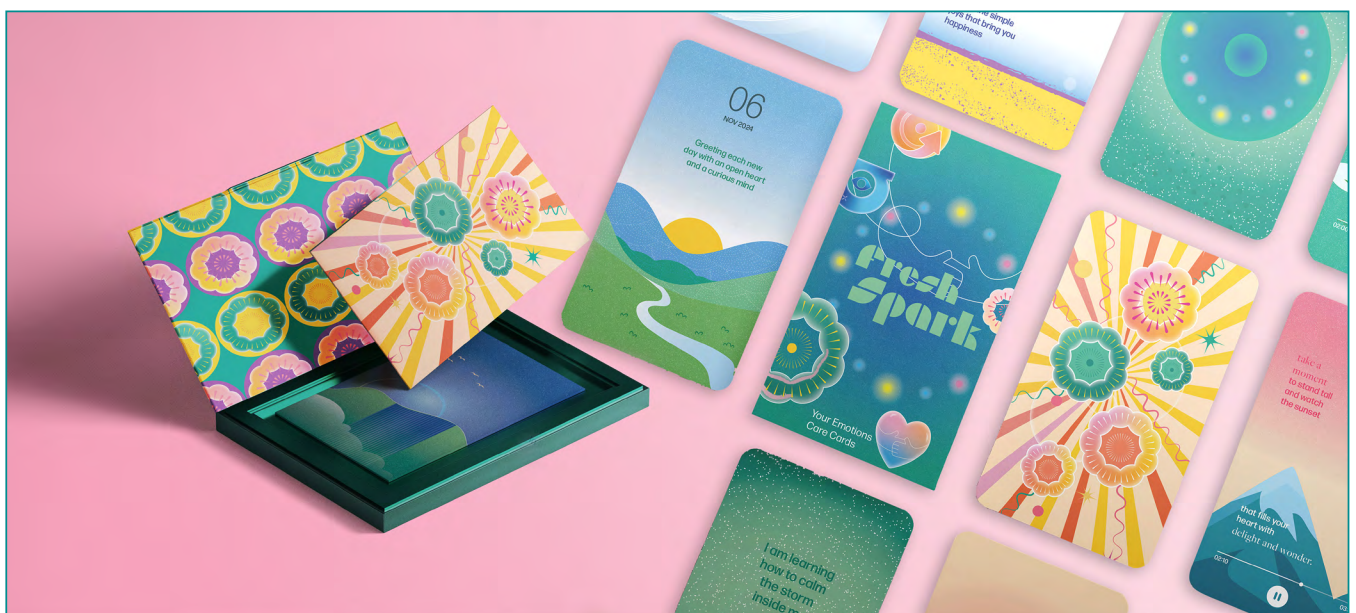


Fig. 24: Mock-up of 'Fresh Spark II'

6. Reflections and Future Directions

Throughout the present study, several limitations are presented. Firstly, studio work is reframed to emphasize on self-driven emotional resonance, integrating elements of empathy and mindfulness into the design process. The work aims to enhance subjective well-being, though it is acknowledged that the extent to which this goal can be achieved may vary across individuals. Secondly, the generation of work relies on conducting interviews and discussions, alongside information gathered from classmates. It is important to note that the collected data serve primarily as inferences rather than definitive conclusions. The reference to this age group is based on current generational trends and developmental changes, along with historical shifts such as technological advancements. Given the unique experiences and diverse backgrounds of individuals, it is difficult to establish a universal theoretical framework that can explain all phenomena. Lastly, this research has been undertaken from the perspective of a designer, possessing heightened visual literacy and sensitivity. It is noted that both physical and emotional responses by the author may introduce subtle biases and motivations into the work. Furthermore, my educational background and cultural upbringing can have an impact on my design choices.

In reflecting on my design-based methods and activities, building on those developed for the *Kaleidoscope* exhibition, the theme of writing prompts could be adapted by participants to achieve higher flexibility and outcomes. For instance, a curated space to facilitate participant engagement through physical tools for sketching and mapping. Participants could have the option to share or conceal their responses, preventing any potential influence their responses may have on others. Regarding future research directions, there is considerable potential to integrate co-creation and other methods into the development of work similar to that presented above. These studio explorations also indicate the opportunities for developing wellness apps or events aimed at both parents, social workers and youth, with the objective of supporting emotional well-being, as well as other aspects of their social lives. Furthermore, *Fresh Spark* presents a potential avenue for an online ordering platform targeted at potential users. From a design perspective, the opportunity exists to adopt the work in a more integrated way with local communities, becoming embedded within youth centres to produce environmental and educational design tools. The formats of *Invisible Visible* workbook and puzzle game design have the potential to reach higher levels of refinement and move into larger-scale interactions and engagement with youth that is accessible to a specific community, such as a youth centre in Vancouver, British Columbia. My design perspective has evolved by emphasizing the values of empathy and mindfulness. This approach transcends mere aesthetics, aiming to create a positive impact on emotional well-being by leveraging design to capture subtle moments that evoke uplifting sensations. This process has cultivated my cross-disciplinary design thinking, with the motivation to improve lives for healthier lifestyles.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this research, my design practice led by auto-ethnographic reflection has enhanced my understanding of how communication design can amplify sensations, uplift emotions, and promote a healthier mindset. Through harnessing mindful design-based activities and visual language, my design practice provides an alternative perspective for exploring and addressing emotional wellness, fostering personal reflective insights through design. We as designers have the opportunity to enhance and amplify the momentary experience of positive emotion, while nurturing a more compassionate relationship with oneself. Creative practitioners have the capacity to craft nuanced yet powerful experiences through design that cultivates joy, which can be “visceral and measured in small moments.” (Big Think, 2020). By integrating mindfulness and empathy into design practices, this method leverages the power of visual elements to facilitate deepening emotional engagement, inspire collective action, and bring accessible everyday delights to young people, alleviating anxiety resulting from screen-based activities. While large-scale, actionable change may be difficult to achieve, preventive efforts can begin by fostering small, supportive connections among social workers, teachers, counsellors, and parents within the local communities. Lastly, this research has led to significant career development and on my design ability to provide care for those in need. The process of forging connections with communities has underscored the need to foster empathy and care for the population under study.

By reading this paper, I hope in some capacity, it brings sparks and inspiration within the hearts of those who have experienced or are navigating tides of anxiety in varying degrees.

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Appendix A

Ethnographic Interview With Ms. Carlene Jang – Media Release Agreement

 Media Release Agreement Date: Nov 22nd, 2024 Project Title: Exploring the Role of Communication Design in Supporting and Enhancing Emotional Wellness in Youth <table border="0"><tr><td>Principal Investigator: Katherine Gillieson</td><td>Other Researchers: Xi Qiu</td></tr><tr><td>Design + Dynamic Media and Graduate Studies Emily Carr University of Art and Design</td><td>Jake Kerr Faculty of Graduate Studies Emily Carr University of Art and Design</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>xqiu26656@ecuad.ca</td></tr></table> Dear Ms. Jang, I am an Emily Carr University of Art + Design graduate student completing my Master's thesis entitled "Exploring the Role of Communication Design in Supporting and Enhancing Emotional Wellness in Youth" I would like to grant permission for the use, publication or sharing of the conversation made by this interview in my thesis. The material will be attributed through APA citation. The electronic full-text version of the thesis will be accessible and downloadable through eCollections at Emily Carr (the university online institutional repository), Library and Archives Canada, and indexed through databases such as Google Scholar. Aside from the partial copyright license I grant to Emily Carr University, these rights will in no way restrict republication of your material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Please find attached a form with further information. By signing the attached form, you confirm that you own the copyright to this material, and that you understand and agree that proper attribution (name, title/position) will be given when the quotations are used in my thesis. Sincerely, Xi Qiu	Principal Investigator: Katherine Gillieson	Other Researchers: Xi Qiu	Design + Dynamic Media and Graduate Studies Emily Carr University of Art and Design	Jake Kerr Faculty of Graduate Studies Emily Carr University of Art and Design		xqiu26656@ecuad.ca	PROJECT DESCRIPTION The central research question guiding this interview is, "How might design-based practices that encourage mindfulness help young people cope with internal and external challenges to their well-being?" To address this question, I will interview Ms. Jang to explore the insights from an educator's perspective and expertise in the creative fields, particularly focusing on supporting students' emotional well-being within an educational environment. Through open-ended questions and conversation exchange, I will delve into Ms. Jang's perspective on effectively involving students in creative expression and fostering healthy relationships. The aim is to acquire in-depth insights through this narrative inquiry, and to facilitate the refinement of design outcomes and subsequent inquiries within the scope of my practice. RELEASE STATEMENT I agree to allow the following identifiable materials to be used in the publication of the research described above. Check all that apply [modify as appropriate]: IMAGES AND RECORDINGS OF ME OR OF MY PROPERTY ☒ Yes, I consent to the use of digital images (photos or video) or audio recordings taken during the research to be used for publication purposes. Images (photos or video) will be framed from the face-down so there are no direct identifiers, however, there may be indirect identifiers. ☐ No, I do not consent to the digital images (photos or videos) or audio recordings taken during the research to be used for publication purposes. Or, ☒ Yes, I consent to my photo being converted to a line drawing, with all personal identifiers removed, as seen in the example provided below. ☐ No, I do not consent to my photo being converted to a line drawing, with all personal identifiers removed, as seen in the example provided below. I agree to the release of identifiable materials as described above for the publications described above. By signing below, both parties acknowledge and agree to the terms and conditions outlined in this Media Release Consent Form. Name: <u>CARLENE JANG</u> Date: <u>November 22, 2024</u> Signature: <u>Carlene Jang</u>
Principal Investigator: Katherine Gillieson	Other Researchers: Xi Qiu						
Design + Dynamic Media and Graduate Studies Emily Carr University of Art and Design	Jake Kerr Faculty of Graduate Studies Emily Carr University of Art and Design						
	xqiu26656@ecuad.ca						

Fig. A1: Media Release Agreement.

Appendix A

Ethnographic Interview With Ms. Carlene Jang – List of Questions

INTRODUCTION AND EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION

What is your artistic background?

I have a Bachelor's of Fine Arts from Emily Carr. I graduated in 1993. I graduated high school where I enjoyed the artistic medium, that is where I first felt that I wanted to be an art teacher. I actually graduated with a degree in printmaking with a studio background. And so, I am actually a stone lithographer, more so a screen printer. I have also worked at Arts umbrella as well.

Could you share with us little about your background and what is your experience working with older youth (13-19)?

Within that range of ages, there are going to be some natural growth developments already you will find. Grade 8 students are energetic but they are at a different maturity level. Grade 9-10 students show improved critical thinking and understanding, making them enjoyable to teach. Grade 11-12 students often have more experience and can work independently. IB program students often demonstrate advanced critical thinking skills and grasp things really quickly. They may have a maturity level that allows them to just be able to explore in a much more, quicker, faster way. How do I give them confidence? It is just them being seen, right, and listened to, and then, they are being known that I am trying to understand what they are trying to do, and that gives them a feeling of belonging.

TEACHING APPROACH

How do you motivate young talent? How do you foster a sense of self-efficacy in them?

I like to focus on some of the most important mediums, like drawing, painting, ceramics, printmaking, textiles, and other artistic forms that come along the way. I always treat everyone equally, regardless of their experience level. Whether you have some experience or none at all, let us start from the beginning where I teach you step by step. Some people call this scaffolding—building upon skills, knowledge, and understanding through practice until everything comes together.

Students gain confidence as they accomplish each small step. When they can apply what they have learned, they feel ready to tackle more open-ended, creative projects. We develop a rapport and understanding of each other, always knowing that approaching anything new involves exploration and the opportunity to grow further. During recent parent-teacher interviews, I met with a student's mother to discuss her daughter in class. This student's work includes an incredible amount of detail and goes beyond anything that I have ever asked for. She does not like to speak in class. While she is reluctant to participate verbally, her mother shared that her confidence in art class is particularly high compared to other subjects. The student finds joy in the creative environment.

I believe in creating a respectful atmosphere with clear understanding, focusing on both creativity and technical skills, while never pressuring students to become "the best artist." It is about fostering lifelong learning through various materials, proper techniques, and enriching experiences like field trips.

FROM AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

In your opinion, what are some of the key developmental challenges that they are facing? What are the challenges you have faced when working with them?

I have been fortunate because I hear, especially from other substitute teachers, that the overall attitude of students at Churchill is quite respectful, pleasant, and kind, and I feel that we have a very wonderful environment here. Number one, there will always be some class management issues. At least in the last 10, maybe even 15 years, I'm going to say anxiety is the big thing—personal student anxiety. I think what it is those parents, those students who are doing well, parent involvement really does make a difference. The reason they are coming to parent-teacher conferences is not because they are concerned about their child more, but because they are always going to be involved in everything they do. They give their children lots of support.

So probably, at least in the last 10, maybe even 15 years, I am going to say anxiety. That is like the big thing. Personal student anxiety. Where is this coming from? I do not know. In general, in society, that has changed, that things have been identified, but the number of kids who do not come to school because they feel overwhelmed has seemingly increased, possibly because we have identified it more. Kids feel that they can enter that space more safely, but sometimes it can be a deterrent, because they do not know how to be resilient anymore. So there is another layer, and have kids changed? I do not want to be those, one of those people who say it is all about the phone, but you know, I am going to say things have become easier, and they have relied on that. This generation has things so easily available and done for them that sometimes they just do not learn alternative ways of doing things.

What approaches do you take in the classroom when you identify warning signs of loss of interest, and negative thoughts in students?

I am kind of like a more one-on-one person. It is only when I do notice when they are talking about being depressed, or when they are talking about they are sad about something, or whatever it is, then those are the negative signs. Sometimes I might even report it to the counsellor. And the thing is, there is a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes that we will never know about family life, etc.

What type of art activities and projects have you designed or been participated in that have helped support students in their personal or artistic development?

Personally, I have always brought in things from my personal life. I am more of a storyteller. If there is anything that is relatable to the kids, or anything funny stories, I would integrate. I think to be open to change and see what is happening at the time, but also really related to students' interests. In art, I can always demonstrate and show.

What are the general themes of interest among students in the art community?

Visually, if students are influenced by anime or gaming, characters of what they are watching, they have heroes. They made their ways into a lot of the images. A lot of projects we do involve self and family by giving them prompts (such as themes of memories and nightmares; What are your personal experiences? What are your interests?). Lately, a lot of them are based on music albums. Imageries from CD, record album, Spongebob, Snoopy making combat, Doraemon. Hello Kitty, Studio Ghibli. It just goes in trends.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

What do you find most rewarding about working with this age group, and what keeps you motivated in this field?

I really like seeing my students learn, the opportunity to explore and can apply it someway. At the end of the day, when I am seeing them enjoying being here, and that is what keeps me going. My job is to get them to become who they want to be. As I move on, I always do things for myself. I really enjoy book binding, especially coming from a printmaking background. I have my own bookbinding business and I wrote the curriculum for a bookbinding course. I love molded things like cakes, cookies and mooncakes. It means how do you find creativity and satisfaction, having some skills, your own interests. I think that is what keeps me going as well within those possibilities. Life-long learning, that is all what is about, not the end of the day.

Appendix B

Fresh Spark – Wellness Campaign Concept



Fig. B1: Fresh Spark–Wellness campaign concept posters.



Fig. B2: Fresh Spark–Icons design.



Fig. B3: Fresh Spark—Wellness campaign concept posters.

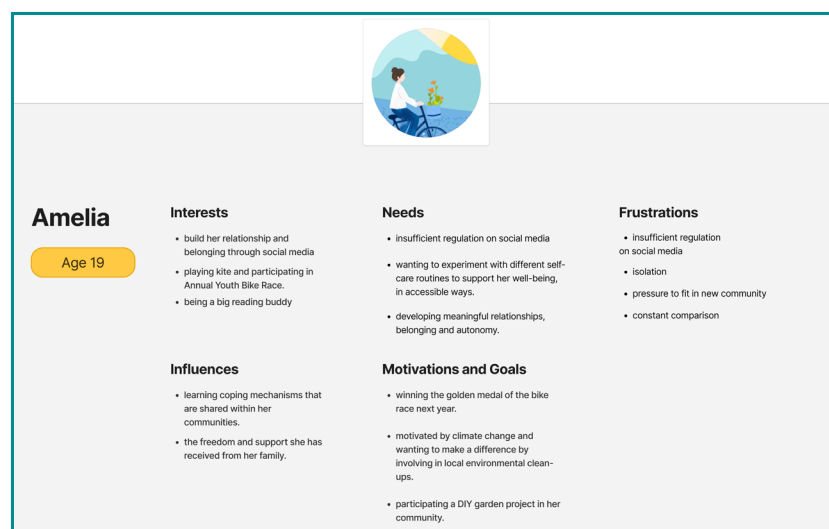


Fig. B4: Fresh Spark—Amelia's persona.

Appendix C

Invisible Visible – Editorial Design



Fig. C1: 'Invisible Visible' inner pages.

Appendix D

Kaleidoscope Exhibition (ECU, 2024) – Accordion Book Design

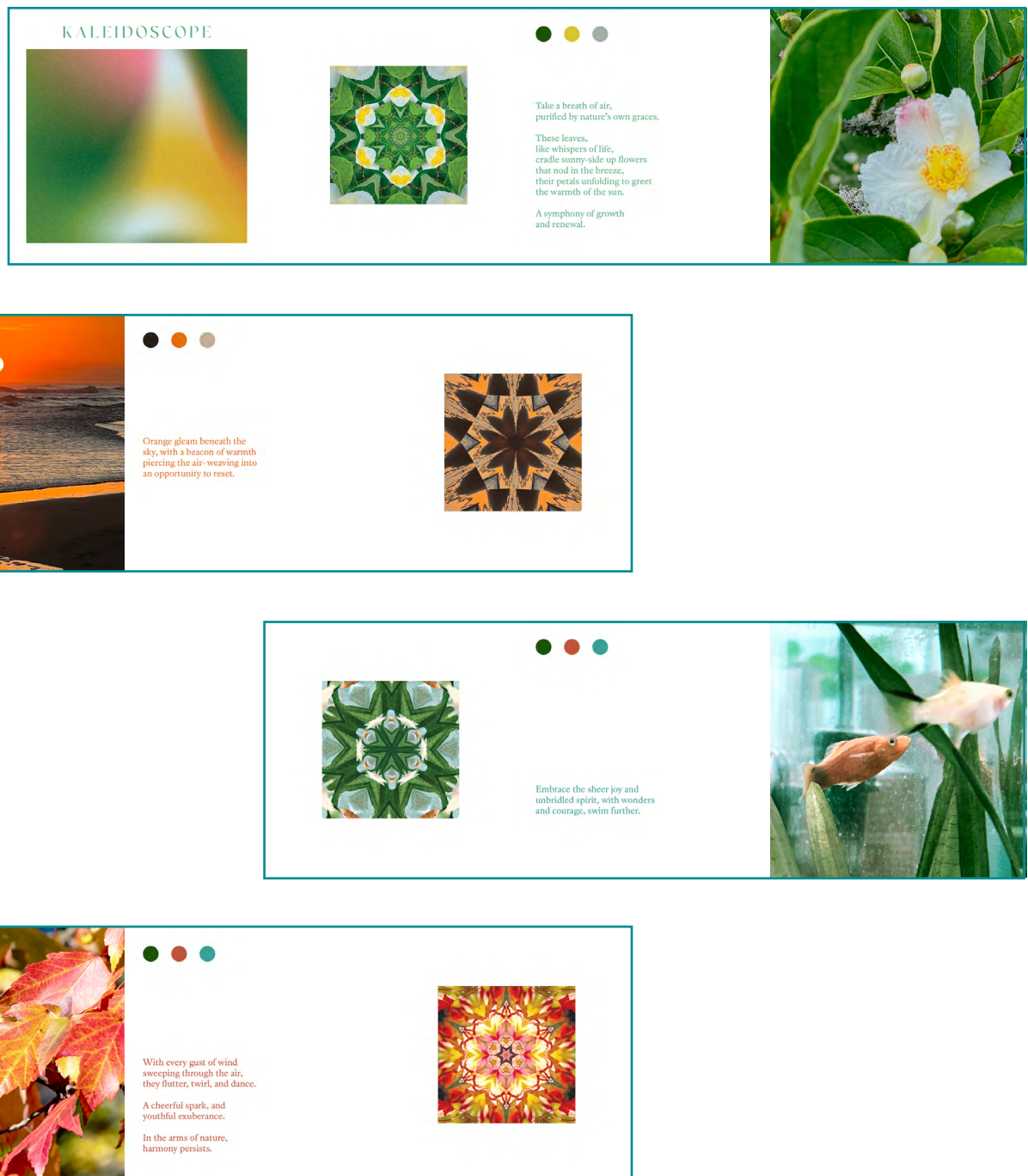


Fig. D1: 'Kaleidoscope' accordion book design.

Appendix D—Kaleidoscope



Fig. D2: 'Kaleidoscope' accordion book design contd.

Appendix D—Kaleidoscope

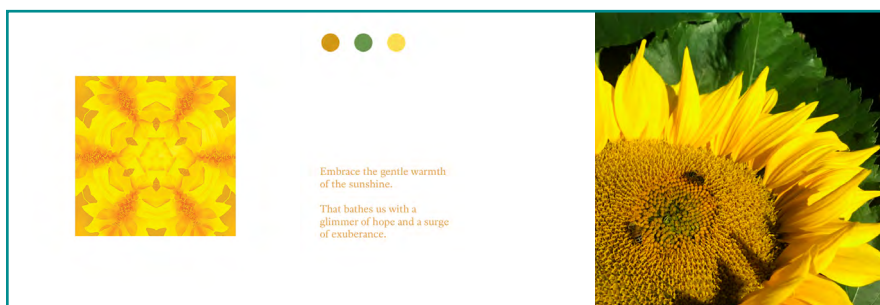
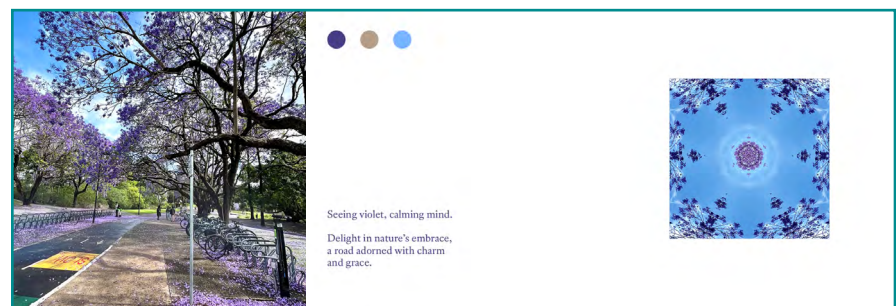
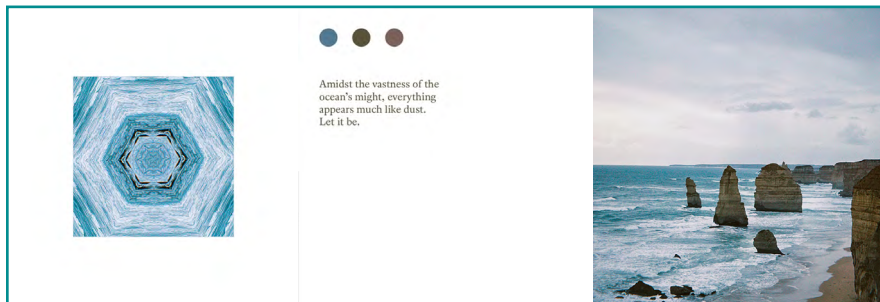
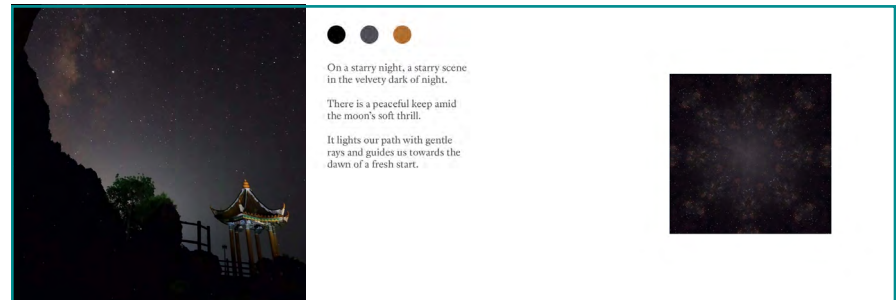


Fig. D3: 'Kaleidoscope' accordion book design contd.

Appendix E

Mirror's Whisper – Card Deck Design



Fig. E1: "Mirror's Whisper" visual cue cards.

Appendix F

TCPS Core 2 Certificate



Fig. F1: Research Ethics Board approval certificate.



**Exploring the Role of Communication
Design in Supporting and Enhancing
Emotional Wellness in Youth**

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