Co-creating Happy Moments: A Case Study of Designing for People with Mental Health Challenges

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Co-creating Happy Moments: A Case Study of Designing for People with Mental Health Challenges

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We all have to consider the importance of mental health, which just as with physical health can cause us to feel ill, unwell and ostracized from our community. However, the stereotypes and prejudice that result from misconceptions about mental problems appears to form an impassive and invisible barrier between the people with mental health challenges and the public who is less willing to interact with them. As three researchers respectively from service design, visual communication and art education, we undertook collaborative interdisciplinary design as a strategy, in order to explore a participatory approach to engage with our participants, namely, an anonymous community in Norway that supports mental health and a group of 27 youths in Finland. The aim of our project was to create pleasurable and meaningful experiences for the mentally marginalized individuals, thus potentially having a positive impact on their subjective wellbeing. We conclude the paper with a discussion of how participatory design enabled the participation of those mentally marginalized individuals and eventually catalyzed a positive change.

subjective wellbeing, participatory design, interdisciplinary design, positive design

1 Introduction
Summarizing mental health issues presents a wide range of challenges for those who are affected, for instance, major depressive episode, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder and alcohol dependence (Keyes, 2005). Mental health is further seen as one of the leading factors to almost 800 000 suicide deaths in 2015, within which depression – a mental health disorder – is estimated to affect 311 million people worldwide (Vos et al., 2016; WHO, 2016a). Some argue towards removing mental illnesses from the category of illness and suggests that “they be regarded as the expressions of man’s struggle with the problem of how he should live” (Szasz, 1991, p. 21). However, the majority of people with mental health difficulties seem to have to struggle with the symptoms of the disease itself; moreover, they frequently encounter public stigma and may suffer from self-stigma, which turn them against themselves, and lose self-confidence (Rüsch, Angermeyer & Corrigan, 2005).
Therefore, mental health has been regarded as an important factor in the evaluation of a person’s wellbeing and assesses how the quality of life is affected in regard to the researcher of wellbeing and care practice (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999; Hendriks, Dreessen & Schoffelen, 2016). The basis of comprehending mental health problems should be built on understanding the organic base of impairments and the social model of disability (Albrecht & Devlieger, 1999), which collectively do affect quality of life.

Just as a flu can spread from person to person, Gladwell argues how little things can make a significant difference and then lead to a tipping point where the whole situation can be changed (Gladwell, 2006). Similarly, reducing social stigma attached to mental health problems and making the mentally marginalized individuals feel part of the larger society can both lead to such tipping point.

Although it might be difficult to bring significant and effective changes to those objective factors resulting from health issues and social environments, there has been considerable interest in providing a positive impact on individuals’ level of happiness, that is, designing for subjective wellbeing (SWB) through creating pleasurable and meaningful experiences for people with mental health challenges. There are several variations in the wording of SWB (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Diener, 1984; Okun & Stock, 1987), while the literature generally agrees that SWB includes various affective evaluations of moods and emotions and cognitive judgments of life satisfaction (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013; Diener & Lucas, 1999).

Theoretical efforts have provided explanations to understand the enhancement of quality of life among individuals with mental health challenges and the interventional efforts designed to enable positive impacts and empower these individuals. According to the National Mental Health Development Unit, however,

Two thirds of people with mental health problems live alone – four times more than the general population; more than 50% of people with mental health problems have poor social contact, as defined by the Oslo Social Support Scale, compared with six per cent of the general population; people with mental health problems see fewer friends regularly – between one and three in an average week, compared with the four to six friends reported by the general population. (Campbell & Davidson, 2012, p. 57)

The anonymous community involved in our project was the image of the society of Oslo in microcosm. Therefore, advocating an institutional agenda on helping the marginalized community in the context of Nordic visual environment, we undertook collaborative interdisciplinary design for a consistent disciplinary framework in understanding emergent complex forms of design practice (Dykes, Rodgers & Smyth, 2009) as a strategy. By utilizing and integrating our diverse knowledge, we explored a participatory approach in order to engage with our participants, namely, the mental health service users in the anonymous community in Oslo, Norway and the 27 youths in Porvoo Art School in Finland. Our proposition is that social engagement and care giving will enable positive changes on those who are challenged by mental health issues.

2 Designing for participation

2.1 Forms of Participation

Many efforts have been made to better understand people with mental challenges and find ways to improve their illnesses. For many years, suicide mortality rates in the Republic of Korea have been high compared to other high-income countries, but with intervention the suicide rates have decreased recently. The statistics appeared in Korea have shown that it is effective to have community interventions (WHO, 2016b), improved health care (WHO, 2008), and training and surveillance activities as part of the social care strategy (WHO, 2017). In this regard, the importance of updating both theoretical and physical practice as part of an overall social care strategy has been highlighted.
Participatory design (PD), as a powerful catalyst, has been utilized in practice to address problems faced by marginalized and vulnerable groups in our society, for example, the LAUGH project applied an inclusive participatory methodology to develop playful artefacts that can contribute to non-pharmacological personalized approaches to caring for people living with late stage dementia in residential care (Treadaway et al., 2016); four different participatory workshops were designed to discover ways to deepen Namibian children’s appreciation of literature, and aimed to co-create a stimulating and engaging reading environment for them with different stakeholders (Itenge-Wheeler, 2016); PD workshops were sought to enable ageing people to articulate their core values in relation to their experiences of ageing with others and in the broader communities they inhabit (Leong & Robertson, 2016).

In our case, we chose PD as a development approach for two reasons. One being that PD is a key approach to build understanding and extended by involving our participants and co-designing with them to the initial objective, so that their voices are heard and they have the right to make concrete choices (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2014) in the whole process. For another, the above case practices show that most of PD outcomes are related to either tangible results for users in early PD projects or non-tangible ones in recent development (Kyng, 2010; Whittle, 2014). When seeking for our PD goal of creating pleasurable and meaningful experiences to participants, we explored different design tools and methods to engage with our participants, such as interviews, storytelling, persona, storyboard, craft workshops and digital documentation. In this case, user participation throughout the process was not only emphasized, but also facilitated to enhance the possibility of mutual learning in-between different groups. In other words, the participants co-constructed a solution to open up a dialogue in the two communities in two different countries.

2.2 Incorporating Artistic and Cultural Views

Some work highlighted the challenges for involving vulnerable participants in the design process, including narrow interests or social anxiety (Frauenberger, Good & Bright, 2011; Frauenberger et al., 2013; Makhaeva, Frauenberger & Spiel, 2016) adopted PD process to engage autistic children in developing their own smart objects. The aforementioned authors conducted the PD sessions along experiences with sensory objects and storytelling, which enabled connections to arise through equal participation in art making and shared storytelling. Leaving design space for the vulnerable group seemed to be effective as they did not have access or skills to use sophisticated tools at the time. They therefore pointed out how important to leave design processes open ended and the need to investigate creative potentials in autistic children during the sessions.

Considering the limitations of engaging vulnerable participants in PD process, a large body of research has been dedicated to utilizing both art and culture as pivotal catalyst and initial entry to bring positive impacts to vulnerable people in order to achieve better quality of life. Richardson and his colleagues have demonstrated that art therapy produced a statistically significant positive effect on negative symptoms of chronic schizophrenia (Richardson et al., 2007). An innovative art therapy program was delivered by STEER, a community-based mental health organization in Northern Ireland, to support their users in achieving mental wellbeing (Heenan, 2006). Grocke and her colleagues conducted a ten-week group music therapy project for people with a severe and enduring mental illness living in the community (Grocke, Bloch & Castle, 2009).

Focusing on the special needs of these people with mental problems highlights the limits of various topics to encounter the new group. Especially when our project involved people who were with mental challenges who were identified as a vulnerable group according to World Health Organization (WHO, 2018). We acknowledged from our observation that these participants were less willing to interact with new people and showed little interest in “participation”. The situation, however, was completely different only when involving this community in an artistic or cultural environment in which alternative ways of being creative were positively encouraged. Thus, it was significant to infuse the initiatives with local views of art and culture in order to meet our design objectives. We therefore needed to create safe and customized conditions that could encourage,
enable and motivate those with mental challenges to express themselves fully, explore creative potential as well as open their work for personal interpretation. For the youths in Porvoo Art School, our PD workshops developed from the core idea of co-creating positive experiences for the marginalized community in Oslo, in which collaborative design activities took place. The activities required a playful environment and the PD outcomes made use of physical objects to help make the initial objectives become tangible in the design process. Equipped with multiple PD methods, this case study was characterized by genuine commitments to incorporate community participation and local cultures, therefore infusing them in the design course.

3 The case study

In this section, we will present our project as a community-based case study with a series of design activities that were carried out (for an overview of the project, see Figure 1).

3.1 A Day in “Wonderland”

The anonymous community in Oslo was an activity center for supporting its users in achieving mental wellbeing. We approached to the community with an initial view to exploring its challenges and needs. Instead of offering psychiatric treatment or therapy, the community provides a wide range of artistic activities from media workshops and graphic workshops to providing textile rooms, art studios and galleries, as a relaxing way to engage with people who come to the community. It presents both ethical and aesthetic characteristics: to the public, it appears to be an art gallery; and to its service users, it provides an area for them to practice artistic expressions in different forms of tools and formats.

![Figure 1 Overview of the project](image-url)
As outsiders to the community, we started with a semi-structured interview with a senior staff member to gain a close insight on understanding the community from an insider’s perspective. The findings from the interview highlighted that there was a lack of “participation” in the community. In referring to “participation” in this context, we define it as a term of enhancing communication and interaction in the community, rather than increasing the amount of people to take part in activities in the most general sense. According to the staff, there were approximately 20-25 service users aged 40-60 who regularly participated in the activities provided by the center, on a daily basis. However, the service users spent most of the time in their own comfort zones without actively interacting with one another.

Due to the high ethical standards required in our project and the sensitivity needed towards the service users, it was challenging to directly engage them in normal social conversations, such as, “what is your name?”, “why are you here?”, etc. Thus, a soft way to build understanding with them was required. We then conducted an observation, where we randomly took part in some activities provided by the community, as if we were one of the service users. Interestingly, a number of them initiatively started conversation with us, asking “where are you from?”. Their curiosity was aroused by our exotic new faces in the community, this gave us entry to where we could utilize our Chinese identity in order to interact with them.

We noted from the observation that a majority of the service users took interest in arts, crafts and cultures. There were a number of weekly workshops facilitated by both local artists and professional art educators, where the service users could have the opportunities to enact their artistic expressions, through artistic engagements such as drawing, singing and sculpting (see Figure 2). In our eyes, the mental health service users were talented “artists” living in their own worlds, rather than a group of vulnerable individuals living with mental health challenges. Although marginalized by mental health problems, they showed great artistic passion and talented artistic expression in the community. Therefore, we intended to show our respect to those mentally marginalized individuals by addressing them as “artists” in this paper.

![Figure 2 Examples of some artworks made by the service users in the community](image)

### 3.2 Cultural Sharing Workshop

Having acknowledged that our exotic identity could arouse the artists’ interest, we were inspired to engage them with a cultural sharing workshop, which was carried out in 2017 when Oslo was granted the title of European Forest City. In Chinese characters, three people (人) together become a group (众), three trees (木) together grow to a forest (森). Based on this concept about man and nature from Chinese ideology, the aim of our workshop was to build empathy with the artists through a culture-based and art-led approach, which was to learn several simple Chinese characters with regard to human and nature (see Figure 3) and to try to use traditional Chinese brushes and ink
to draw a picture together. The idea of involving traditional Chinese brushes and ink was to make the workshop more playful and engaging through the use of exotic drawing tools that were new to the participants.

![Figure 3 Chinese characters presented in the workshop](image)

A total of seven participants including one staff member of the community took part in the workshop. We shifted our roles from being an observer to being a facilitator (Spinizzi, 2005). We started by introducing a foreign culture, e.g. Chinese characters, which was entirely new to the participants who then showed curiosity and passion for learning. In doing so, communication and interaction were opened up, as questions related to Chinese culture were coming fluidly and continuously from the participants.

During the workshop, the participants were encouraged to freely show their artistic expression by collaboratively drawing a picture using traditional Chinese brushes and ink provided (see Figure 4). In the end, each of the random and abstract pieces drawn by the participants collectively formed a complete picture, where different stories related to the participants’ personal life stories were found, e.g., a magical tree from a Norwegian fairy tale told in childhood, alphabets in the shape of puzzle pieces from the puzzle games that were played in the community, new branches sprouting under some “bleeding” brushstrokes—which was seen as a metaphor for life.

The workshop closed with hugging (see Figure 5). Hugging, as a normal social interaction, was initially intended to express heartfelt gratitude to the participants for attending the workshop. Surprisingly, it revealed an unexpected scene where one of the participants was petrified and showed hesitation, more precisely, a complex mix of emotions. But finally, the participant decided to give a hug to us – the outsiders who were different from their language, culture and religion.
The biggest outcome of this workshop was that we built an empathetic connection with the participants and found there was an emotional need. The culture-based and art-led strategy served as an engagement catalyst, which triggered the participants’ curiosity to learn those Chinese characters and to understand the exotic notion of human and nature behind those Chinese characters. Then they gradually and initiatively related their own personal stories on their nature – the Norwegian forest – as in this example: “I spent my childhood in forest. It was very nice, but the house was sold...”. Interestingly, one of the participants even revealed jealousy to forests: “They [the Norwegian forest] are always there, never vanish, but who will care about me if I am dead, finished, disappeared...”. This implied that the participants showed an emotional need of feeling being cared..."
about, which then led us to the niche where we could utilize design to create pleasurable and meaningful experiences for them, and hence could potentially improve their SWB.

3.3 Collaborative Art Making Workshop

In order to respond to the artists’ emotional need – feeling being cared about, we conducted another workshop where we engaged the workshop participants in co-creating pleasurable and meaningful experiences for the artists, so as to potentially enhance their SWB. The purpose behind the workshop was to increase social concern around mental wellbeing and build a better understanding in terms of those artists for the public.

The workshop took place at the Porvoo Art School in Finland. It was a one-month workshop consisting of a series of sessions, i.e. introduction, ideation and production. A total of 27 youths aged 12-16 took part in the workshop. Firstly, we introduced the anonymous community in Oslo to the participants. When it came to its service users, we did not address them as people with mental health challenges, but as talented artists. In doing so, we hoped to potentially ease public stigma towards mental health issues. Stigma related to mental health problems are not a rare event and are widely endorsed by the general public (Corrigan et al., 2001). Many people with mental health problems not only struggle with the symptoms and disabilities that result from the disease, but are also challenged by the stereotypes and prejudice that result from misconceptions about mental illness (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). As a result, there appears to be a social distance between people who have experience with mental health issues and the public who are less willing to interact with them (Martin, Pescosolido & Tuch, 2000).

To build an image of the artists for the participants to understand where the design problem was, we applied persona (see Figure 6) and storyboard (see Figure 7) as storytelling design techniques to outline a profile of a middle-aged Norwegian artist and visualize a day in his life. The character was Bjørn, a 45-year-old Norwegian artist who took keen interest in arts, crafts and nature, but did not feel happy about his life. The storyboard was made up of six scenes, starting from having breakfast in his single flat, going to an art gallery for a regular visit, painting in the gallery, having lunch with the other incommunicative artist in the gallery, going for a walk in the forest with mixed feelings and finally heading back to home (see Figure 7). The character was fictional while the stories we used to create both the persona and the storyboard were real, which was based on the research data collected from the community in Oslo. The profile of Bjørn gathered up the features of the artists.

![Figure 6 Persona of Bjørn](image-url)
After gaining an understanding of the artists through the persona and storyboard, the participants were encouraged to step into the role of designer, collaboratively working on tackling the challenge — how to make Bjørn and other artists like him feel happy? This was associated with our research question, namely, how to design pleasurable and meaningful experiences for people living with mental health challenges, thus having a positive impact on their SWB?

Our intention of giving this challenging task to the participants was not to seek a perfect solution, but to spark their creative insights on creating positive experiences for those vulnerable individuals. The participants were divided into several groups and discussed different ideas that would lead Bjørn to happiness. One of the ideas came from the storyboard, as in this example: “His life looks so blank, we could add some colors for him!” Another idea arose regarding a personal life event with a loved one, which was a reaction about gift giving: “I don’t feel happy when my dad has to travel abroad for work because I don’t get to see him for a long time. But he always comes back home with a gift for me, and that makes me happy.” Other ideas such as paintings, crafts, a herbarium book with a collection of plants were proposed, which were inspired by Bjørn’s interest revealed in the persona and storyboard.

Given we had built a deeper understanding of the artists through the conducted observation and culture sharing workshop, our role in this workshop was not just an idea facilitator, but also an idea generator. We joined in the discussion with the participants and contributed an idea of plates. This was inspired by our observation conducted in Oslo, where we noticed that lunchtime was a chance where the artists would get together and enjoy food in the community. This was also visualized as a scene in the storyboard.

The ideation closed with a proposal of crafting a set of colorful ceramic plates as a gift to the artists, where ideas of “colorful paintings”, “handmade crafts”, “gift”, “nature”, “plates” were combined
together. As a sparkling signature for a gift from a Nordic neighbor, nature was proposed as a theme on the ceramics, where the creative outcomes i.e. the plates, could be customized and painted (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 The workshop participants painting on ceramic plates

Figure 9 A handmade ceramic plate with a note
After the ideation, a new phase began where the idea of making ceramic plates started to become tangible. The participants were introduced the instructions and safety precautions of making ceramics, and then they initiatively started to lead their own creative process. Over a series of sessions of shaping clay, firing clay and glazing ceramics, a set of 27 ceramics were created in the ceramic studio in Porvoo Art School.

At the last session of the workshop, we used a camera to record the moment of each pair of hands holding the ceramic plate handmade by the participant (for an example, see Figure 9). Every participant left a note with their ceramic plate, each telling the story of the image and also a message they were willing to deliver to the artist who received the ceramic.

3.4 Exhibiting the Emotional Connections

We then brought the ceramic plates with notes from Porvoo to Oslo. When the artists received the gift, we took photos of each pair of hands holding the ceramic plate they chose. In this way, the same ceramic plate was respectively held by two pairs of hands – one pair of hands belonged to one of the ceramists in Porvoo and the other pair belonged to one of the artists in Oslo (see Figure 10).

To present the connections of those photographs, we held a small-scale exhibition (see Figure 11) in the community in Oslo. The aim of the exhibition was to visualize the emotional connections between the ceramists and the artists in an artistic and subtle way. In doing so, our hope was to fill the emotional need of being cared about through those photographs, to express the emotions that are too difficult to put into words, and to deliver the message from the ceramists to the artists: “You are not alone because we share the same Nordic nature with you”.

During the exhibition, the artists felt excited to see their hands in the photographs and they were also curious to find the paired hands that were holding the same plate. At the end of the exhibition, the staff proposed to take a group photo as a memorable moment of the community, and also empathized that anyone who did not wish to be in the photo was free to leave. It turned out that almost everyone felt willing to show their faces in the photo. The exhibition closed with laughter and hugs from the artists.
Figure 10 Two pairs of hands holding the same plate
4 Discussion
We have presented how we took an PD approach to create pleasurable and meaningful experiences for mentally marginalized individuals, and how our project had a positive impact on their SWB through building emotional connections between them and the public. In this section, we will discuss a number of takeaways of this case study. We hope our discussions will generate insight for designers and practitioners to undertake further actions on designing SWB for marginalized groups.

4.1 Catalyzing Happy Moments
The phrase “happy moments” in this context is defined as positive impacts. The term “happy” is used to express a positive emotional state and such positive emotions, e.g. joy, interest, contentment, love, etc., which have remarkable impacts on human beings (Fredrickson, 2004). Happiness is often used interchangeably with SWB in research literature. The level of how happy one feels can be used to measure his or her SWB (Diener, 1984). Our original intention was to utilize design as a catalyst in order to bring happy moments to the mentally marginalized artists so as to potentially improve their SWB. However, as the project progressed, we surprisingly noticed that our project not only had a positive impact on those artists, but also on the youths and even us, the researchers.

4.1.1 The Happy Moments for the Artists
The culture sharing workshop was said to be an engaging experience for the artists. Taking the culture-based and art-led strategy, we successfully utilized Chinese culture as something new to draw their attention, which catalyzed their initiative in the workshop. During the workshop, the artists raised questions around Chinese culture to the researchers, started discussions with one another, and also interacted with the staff who participated in the workshop. Taking a participatory approach, communication and interaction were enhanced, which therefore helped the artists improve their communication skills, and potentially enhanced their relationship with the mental health service provider.

Although the workshop was planned in an easy and simple way, the artists were happy that they gained some new skills, i.e. knowing how to write Chinese characters and to use Chinese brush and ink, which potentially helped boost their self-confidence (Li, 2016). Additionally, learning a new art,
Using Chinese brush and ink to paint, also provided a new way of expressing themselves, stimulated their creativity skills and enhanced their self-esteem (Staricoff, 2004).

Receiving the gift from Porvoo was also a happy moment to the artists. The ceramic plates handmade by the youths in Porvoo made a significant impact which enabled the artists to feel cared about by the public, as in this comment from one of them: “We had never received anything like this [holding a handmade plate in hand] in the last 40 years”.

The artists were very happy about the exhibition and were proud to be part of the exhibition. More importantly, when the staff proposed to take a photo at the end of the exhibition, most of them were happy to show their faces, as if they finally were a part of the community.

4.1.2 The Happy Moments for the Youths
In the collaborative art making workshop, every youth had a chance to step in the role of designer, giving their creative ideas and making them become tangible. The finalized proposal was combined with ideas coming from each group. The youths felt respected as every voice had been heard. Moreover, confidence was thereby enhanced as they were aware of their ability to contribute own ideas to the design process. In a PD process, it is important to note that every voice needs to be heard, so that participants can feel included in the problem definition, inquiry, discovery, findings and implementation (Pascale, Sternin & Sternin, 2010).

Although it was a slow and effortful process the youths had to spend their spare time to make the ceramics, they showed strong responsibility and were able to self-lead the making process. It was a joyful moment when the ceramics were finally done. The youths felt accomplished as their efforts had paid off. More importantly, they realized they had contributed their share to bring happy moments to the mentally marginalized artists.

4.1.3 The Happy Moments for the Researchers
From a starting point of positive design, we were able to combine our diverse knowledge and utilize PD as a catalyst to enable positive change – in sharp contrast to the early phase of our project, the artists spontaneously started to communicate, hug and laugh with us.

A lovely surprise for us was we received a card from the community after the project, saying they would always welcome us back to the community. Through applying interdisciplinary design to create positive experiences of pleasure, virtue and personal significance (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013), we were no longer just outsiders to them, but who made the community become a better place for them and made them feel cared about by the public.

4.2 PD as a Learning Process
4.2.1 Situated Learning
PD enabled us to step into a learning process where empathy with the artists was able to be developed. As a cognitive definition, empathy refers to “the attempt by one self-aware self to comprehend unjudgmentally the positive and negative experiences of another self” (Wispé, 1986, p.318). This is associated with understanding and contextualizing user’s needs and experiences. The strategy of taking a culture-based and art-led approach enabled us to uncover the artists’ emotional need. Our strategy did not just come out from nowhere, but was inspired by the observation that we conducted in the community in Oslo. By putting ourselves in the artists’ shoes, situated learning enabled us to create meaning from the real activities of the artists’ daily lives (Stein, 1998), where many of the most useful hows were captured, not just the whats revealed in the semi-structured interview with the staff member.

4.2.2 Mutual Learning
As a key part in PD, mutual learning enables different groups of people to understand different ways of reasoning (Simonsen & Robertson, 2012). In the culture sharing workshop, empathy was achieved during the process of mutual learning, where multi-stakeholders i.e. the artists, the service provider
and the researchers, were all empowered to share on equal participation in drawing a picture and learning a new culture together. Learning the technique of using Chinese brush and ink enabled facilitating learning from one another. Additionally, using this new technique to collaboratively draw a picture not only enabled the stakeholders to work together, but also enabled deeper familiarization and better relationships among them. Such a mutual learning environment created a comfortable space where the artists were willing to share their personal stories and experiences – an emotional need of feeling being cared about was hereby acknowledged.

In the collaborative ceramic making workshop, the artists did not involve in directly, but were introduced through the form of persona and storyboard. This storytelling technique was an efficient approach to have the youths quickly learn from the key information embedded in the fictional character. In addition, the making process not only facilitated discussion, but also stimulated learning from one another and sharing of skills and knowledge. We did not teach the youths merely the knowledge of how to make a ceramic, rather, we engaged with them as an involved schoolmaster, to design with them and not just for them (Rahman & Lim, 2016).

4.3 Visualizing Emotional Connections

4.3.1 One-of-a-kind Nordic Nature as a Bridge
Norway and Finland are not only two geographically close Nordic countries, but also share the same love for nature. In our project, nature was utilized as a core medium and emotional catalyst in enabling the connectedness between the artists in Oslo and the youths in Porvoo. Taking a customization approach, the youths were able to make lifeless and ordinary plates become meaningful and symbolic to the artists, by painting a one-of-a-kind familiar element regarding Nordic nature on the ceramics (see Figure 12). Furthermore, in an aesthetic and non-verbal way, the implication behind those one-of-a-kind ceramics as a gift from the public was intended to bridge the social distance and to remind those artists – there is someone in the world who cares about you. Connections between them were visualized through exhibiting the photographs of different hands holding the 27 handmade ceramic plates. Through presenting two pairs of different hands holding a same ceramic plate, our exhibition built a virtual-bridge for the artists to feel emotionally connected with the youths.

4.3.2 Making the meaning behind the modes
Previous researches pointed out that multimodal techniques in PD research helped to rekindle participants’ interests, and even helped designers/researchers discover not only the functionalities and attributes to the underlying motives behind design choices but also to the important values implied in the participants’ outcomes (Derboven, Van Mechelen & Slegers, 2015; Halloran et al., 2009). In terms of the high ethical criteria in this project, multimodal thinking applied in our PD case allowed continual participation from the artists and revisits to the community, which corresponded to the PD methodological principles proposed by Spinizzi (2005). Furthermore, we approached the initial objectives through different modes, either in physical objects or tacit knowledge. The multiple methods went beyond simply reacting to the functionality of a design approach, but functioning to take on the appearance of the PD outcomes as well as catching the participants’ full attention to the design details in the process.

The notion of multimodality was applied in our project in understanding mode and medium and their potential for creating emotional connection. According to Gunther Kress, the term mode is used “for the culturally and socially produced resources for representation”, and the term medium is used “for the culturally produced means for distribution of these representations-as-meanings, that is, as messages” (Kress, 2005, p. 6-7). In the project, the youths made physical ceramics for the artists through identical plates, as modes. The shape, the material, even the color carried by the mode i.e. plate constructed the message – there is someone in the world who cares about you. If we consider the plate in terms of the actual production from the youths, the action of passing their message to the artists is the medium. The physical modes, as material, created emotional
connection, as non-material. The abstract theoretical message is within cultural and semiotic categories, and emerges in and materialized through the resources of modes (Kress, 2014). Some of the youths drew blueberries on the plates, while others used yellow to represent the sunshine or a warm atmosphere. Through these materialized forms they told their personal experiences with regard to nature. How they visually expressed themselves in the ceramic plates was the outcome of ceaseless semiosis as well as a transformation based on their impressions of nature. In this sense, these plates are material means for making meaning – socially shaped and culturally available.

**Figure 12 An image of reindeer on the ceramic plate**

### 4.3.3 Multimodality enabling the emotional connections

Obvious and less obvious modes were both considered in our project (Dicks, Soyinka & Coffey, 2006). In the first workshop, we used modes of hugs, gestures and speech. In the second workshop, the youths delivered their messages through physical materials in the modes of shape, size, texture and color, while facial expression, speech and gestures were repeatedly used in the exhibition, as a close of the project. In this case, we assumed that sensory embodied experiences could be perceived (e.g. through touch) in different modes (e.g. color), in that Pink suggests:

> It is our assumed ability to perceive the world around us – and as such the modes of communication that produce meanings/representations in the form of media – through the five (differentiated) senses that is pivotal for multimodality scholars (Pink, 2011, p.263).

Visual scholarship was employed to rethink the relationship between the meanings, the materials and the values in the workshops. We added values to the visual production i.e. 27 identical ceramics through bringing them from Porvoo to Oslo as a gift handmade by the youths. The intention behind this transnational behavior was to build invisible emotional connections between those two communities and to bring happy moments to the mentally marginalized artists through those tangible modes.

In this way, we found different expressions of sensory experiences in the community. For the artists, it is usually the case that linguistic communication about their embodied and sensory perception is never enough to fully express exactly what they had experienced. Therefore, other sensory routes bridged the possibility to communicate with tactile experience, such as drawing and hugging.
Emotional connections then became evident as the messages carried by the modes were easily shared between the artists and the youths, albeit without any textual message.

### 4.4 Ethical Considerations

From the very beginning of the project, we were aware that the artists were a particularly vulnerable group where ethical dilemmas could easily occur. As such, we have made our best effort to avoid potential ethical issues from arising. Firstly, before the research, we provided project consent forms which state the aim of the project including potential risks and benefits to them. Secondly, during the research, we informed the participants that they had the right to stop any interaction or engagement in the research at any time. Lastly, we discussed the feedback of research findings with both sides of the research participants before publication.

For privacy requirements and ethical considerations, the photos presented in this paper are edited original images that we took during the research. The artists’ involvement is completely confidential, as is all their information such as faces, names, addresses is anonymized. The purpose behind conducting the second workshop across the country was also intended to protect their privacy. Furthermore, by addressing them “artists”, we not only attempt to show our respect, more importantly, we hope to ease social stigma in terms of the mentally marginalized individuals.

On the other hand, we also acknowledge that there were nevertheless lingering ethical concerns with the approach we adopted. It is often advised to “avoid close physical contact” and “maintain physical distance that is neither very close nor very distant” (Davies & Janosik, 1991, p. 167) during the interaction with people with a psychological condition. This reveals the possible reason for the participant’s hesitation towards a hug in the workshop, as either hugging or being hugged by an outsider could be somewhat unfamiliar and challenging to the participant. Our action of hugging the artists although seemingly naive, strengthened the bond, increased comfort and allowed each marginalized member to realize that they are a connected part of society, therefore positivity impacting their SWB.

### 5 Conclusions and future work

While we have vast differences in language, culture and religion, we all have emotions, such as the feeling of caring and being cared about. Our project built an emotional connection between the artists and the public. More importantly, our project brought joy, gratitude, laughter and connection to the community, which became a pleasurable and meaningful experience that could have a positive impact on their SWB and happiness. Thus, we believe such a positive impact can potentially catalyze empowerment in their lives, that is, a feeling of being part of the larger society. Handmade ceramics, although brittle, contain a plethora of emotion and are strong in terms of their story. We hope the strong bond forged in those ceramic plates can give the artists a hint of being cared about, by someone with whom they could feel emotionally connected over whatever distance.

Although the findings from our project are encouraging, we acknowledge that our work is limited by its short duration with a fairly small sample. Further study is needed to investigate if those positive impacts do or do not have a long-term or even lifelong positive impact on the majority of people living with mental health challenges.

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6 References


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