



A Phenomenological Study of Aesthetic Meaning-Making in Social Campaign Design by Young Designers

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ABSTRACT

Background: Visual communication plays a vital role in shaping public perception, especially within the field of social campaign design, where aesthetics intersect with ethical and emotional concerns. Despite the growing reliance on digital platforms for advocacy, little is known about how young designers experience the creative process behind socially engaged visual content. **Method:** This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how young designers experience and construct meaning through aesthetic decisions in digital social campaigns. Semi-structured interviews with eight designers were conducted between June and August 2024 in Jakarta, Indonesia and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). **Results:** Three key themes emerged: negotiation of aesthetic identity, emotional resonance and ethical responsibility, and platform-shaped decision-making. The findings suggest that aesthetic choices are deeply personal and contextually informed, shaped not only by campaign goals but also by designers' internal values and lived emotional experiences. Visual artefacts and narrative data complemented the analysis, providing insight into how meaning is constructed in design practice. **Conclusion:** These results contribute to a deeper understanding of visual design as a reflexive, emotionally charged process, expanding current literature on human-centered design and digital communication. The study invites future research to explore designer experiences across diverse cultural contexts and design mediums.



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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, visual communication plays an increasingly critical role in shaping public perception, especially within social advocacy. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter dominate as channels where social campaigns rely on visual narratives to convey messages, mobilize support, and influence public opinion. Young designers act not only as creators of aesthetic objects but also as mediators of social meaning, balancing creative expression with ethical responsibility.

Designing for social campaigns involves more than technical or commercial choices; it is an embodied, affective process where personal values, cultural identity, and emotional labor intersect. These experiences occur within a broader socio-cultural context that requires sensitivity to pressing issues such as mental health, gender equity, environmental justice, and human rights. Recent empirical studies (2021–2023) have highlighted how these factors influence design decisions and outcomes, yet there remains a gap in understanding the subjective experiences of designers themselves.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how young designers experience and construct meaning through aesthetic choices in social campaign design, addressing the research question: How do young designers negotiate personal, ethical, and platform-related tensions in their creative process? Despite its significance, the subjective and emotional dimensions of design work in socially driven digital campaigns remain underexplored in current literature. Much of the academic discourse on visual communication focuses on formal aesthetics, semiotics, or audience reception, often overlooking the internal worlds of designers themselves. There is a critical need to explore how designers experience,

interpret, and construct meaning during the process of creating visuals that aim to inform, persuade, or inspire social change.

Given this gap, a phenomenological exploration of young designers' lived aesthetic experiences offers valuable insight into how design is experienced not just as output, but as a form of human engagement with complex social realities. This study addresses that need by attending to the designers' own voices, emotions, and reflections—elements that are central to understanding the meaning of design from within.

The investigation of individual experiences within specific creative and cultural contexts has emerged as a critical domain in design research, particularly in understanding how designers engage with complex social narratives. Within this space, the aesthetic experiences of designers—how they feel, interpret, and internalize the act of creating visual messages—are increasingly acknowledged as essential to understanding the design process itself. However, while scholarly attention to visual culture and communication has grown, the experiential dimension of the designer as a meaning-maker remains inadequately explored.

Methodologically, many prior studies in design communication have relied heavily on quantitative assessments or content analysis, focusing on the visual outcome rather than the creator's internal experience. These approaches, while useful for evaluating audience response or design effectiveness, fall short in capturing the nuanced, emotionally embedded, and often ambiguous nature of the designer's lived experience. The reliance on observable outputs and standardized metrics tends to obscure the complex interplay between personal values, ethical dilemmas, and creative intuition that underlies the production of socially oriented design.

As a result, previous research methods have struggled to fully illuminate the inner world of designers, particularly those working within the fast-paced and ethically charged environment of digital social campaigns. This gap highlights the necessity for methodological approaches that prioritize subjective meaning and the contextual depth of human experience. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience and interpretative insight, offers a powerful framework for uncovering the essence of aesthetic engagement—one that moves beyond surface-level analysis to reveal the internal tensions and reflective processes that shape visual storytelling in social design.

In the field of visual communication design, especially in the context of social campaign production, prevailing approaches often rely on established practical frameworks such as design thinking, branding strategy, or audience-centered effectiveness models. While these methods provide structured guidance for achieving visual clarity and communicative impact, they tend to prioritize measurable outcomes over the lived, affective dimensions of the design process itself. As a result, the personal and emotional experiences of designers—particularly young designers navigating the ethical and expressive complexities of social messaging—are frequently marginalized in academic discourse.

The limitation of such approaches lies in their inability to capture the richness of internal negotiations, creative tensions, and value-laden decisions that shape the designer's engagement with social themes. Studies that focus solely on output or reception overlook the subjective experiences that are central to how meaning is constructed during the design process. This methodological gap results in an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon, reducing the act of designing to a set of observable actions rather than a human-centered, interpretative experience.

To address this shortcoming, phenomenology presents itself as a compelling alternative—one that emphasizes the exploration of lived experiences and the meanings that emerge through personal reflection. By focusing on how designers interpret their own aesthetic choices within the social and digital constraints of campaign work, phenomenology enables a deeper and more holistic understanding of the creative process. Such an approach is especially relevant for uncovering the complex interplay between individual identity, ethical responsibility, and platform-driven aesthetics in contemporary visual storytelling.

Previous studies have explored visual communication in social campaigns through various lenses such as audience engagement, design strategy, and semiotic analysis. While these perspectives contribute to understanding the outcomes of design, few have examined the personal experiences of

designers as central to meaning-making. Research by Brown (2020) and Tanaka (2023) acknowledges the emotional and ethical complexity involved in social design, yet stops short of capturing the internal reflections of designers themselves. Furthermore, most existing studies adopt descriptive or evaluative methods that miss the interpretative nature of how designers live through the creative process. This study addresses that limitation by focusing on the lived aesthetic experience of young designers during the creation of digital social campaigns.

To explore this phenomenon, an interpretative phenomenological approach was employed. This method was chosen because it allows for a deep exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences within a specific cultural and emotional context. The study examines how young designers perceive, negotiate, and reflect upon their roles and decisions in relation to social messaging. By using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research responds to the knowledge gap by providing insight into the meaning behind their aesthetic choices. The findings offer a human-centered understanding of design, rooted in subjective experience rather than objective evaluation.

This article is organized into several sections. The introduction outlines the research background, significance of the phenomenon, and the rationale for using phenomenology. The next section presents the methodological design, including participant selection, data collection procedures, and the analytical process using IPA. This is followed by the results, which are structured thematically based on the designers' shared experiences. Finally, the discussion interprets the findings in relation to the broader context of digital design, ethical engagement, and platform dynamics, ending with conclusions and implications for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived aesthetic experiences of young designers engaged in the creation of digital social campaigns. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen due to its emphasis on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific contexts. The approach is particularly appropriate for research questions that seek to uncover subjective meaning and interpretative depth. Rooted in Heideggerian hermeneutics, this design recognizes that experience is always situated and interpreted, rather than purely described. The methodology facilitated an in-depth exploration of how personal creativity, ethical engagement, and digital constraints coalesce within the design process.

The choice of exactly eight participants was informed not only by IPA norms favoring small, homogenous samples for in-depth analysis but also by practical considerations, including data saturation and feasibility within the study's resource and time constraints. This number allowed for a detailed exploration of diverse perspectives while maintaining manageable analytic depth.

Participants

Participants consisted of young graphic designers aged between 22 and 30 years who had recent experience designing visual materials for social campaigns disseminated through digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. A purposive sampling technique was used to select individuals with direct, relevant engagement in the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria included having worked on at least one campaign with explicit social or advocacy content within the past two years and a willingness to reflect on their design process. Designers who had only worked on purely commercial projects without a social messaging component were excluded. A total of eight participants (4 females, 4 males) were involved in the study, with an average age of 25.5 years. All participants had formal education in visual communication or graphic design and at least one year of professional experience in the creative industry.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face in settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and openness. An interview protocol was developed

based on core themes in aesthetic decision-making and digital platform engagement, and modified iteratively to deepen the inquiry. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Supplementary data in the form of visual artefacts—such as sketches, campaign drafts, or mood boards—were also collected to support contextual understanding. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. To protect participants' emotional well-being, interviews were conducted with sensitivity to the emotional demands of reflecting on socially engaged design.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a systematic multi-stage process. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity and identify significant meaning units. These were then coded inductively, and emergent themes were clustered based on conceptual similarity and relevance to the research question. Visual artefacts were systematically integrated into the analytic process by cross-referencing verbal data with visual materials to enrich the interpretative depth, providing triangulation and contextual nuance to participants' narrated experiences. NVivo 12 software was used to organize data and assist with the thematic structuring, without automating the interpretative work. The final themes were constructed by synthesizing shared experiences and highlighting divergences, leading to a rich representation of the essence of participants' aesthetic engagements in digital campaign design.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants provided informed written consent after being fully briefed on the research objectives, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to all participants, and data were securely stored in password-protected digital files. The study adhered to ethical guidelines set by the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with local research integrity protocols.

RESULTS

This study explores the aesthetic experiences of young designers in crafting social campaigns within the digital media landscape. Through in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews, three major themes emerged that reveal the tension, transformation, and meaning-making embedded in their design practices.

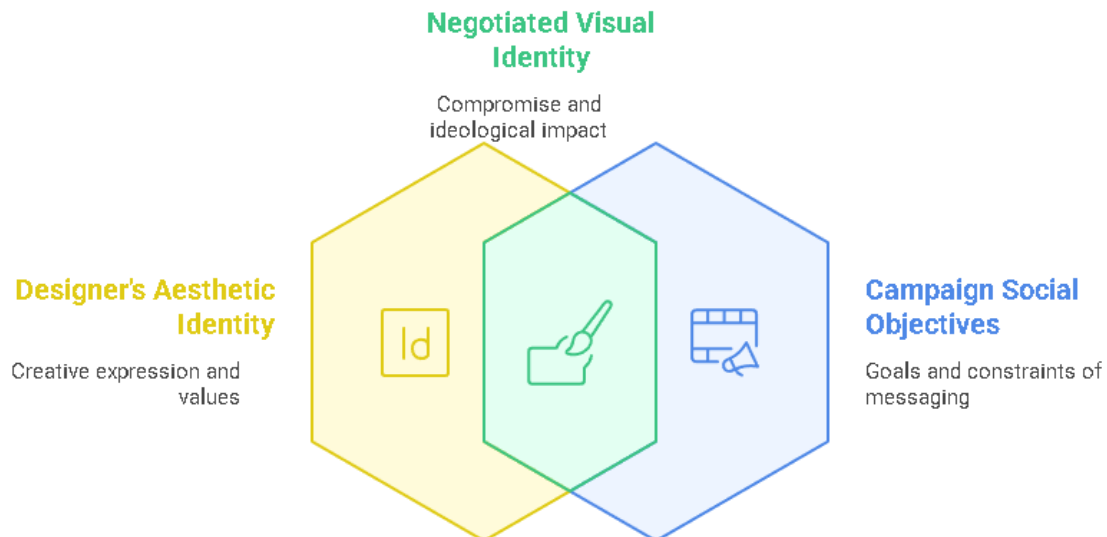
Negotiating Aesthetic Identity within Social Messaging

Participants expressed a recurring internal conflict between their personal visual style and the rigid demands of social messaging. While designers valued authenticity and creative freedom, the social objectives of campaigns often imposed constraints on their aesthetic choices.

“There were moments I felt like I was betraying my own style. I wanted to design something bold and expressive, but the campaign brief required it to be clean, minimal, and neutral. It felt like I had to mute myself.” (P3)

This negotiation was not merely technical, but emotional. Designers often felt a sense of self-erasure when compromising their aesthetic identity to accommodate campaign narratives—particularly in campaigns addressing sensitive social issues like mental health or gender equality. They became aware that their aesthetic decisions were not just visual but deeply ideological, shaping how the public perceived and responded to the message.

Where Personal Style Meets Campaign Needs



Emotional Resonance and the Burden of Responsibility

Designers described intense emotional engagement throughout the design process, especially when working on campaigns with urgent or vulnerable social themes. This emotional investment often transformed into a heavy sense of responsibility to represent marginalized voices appropriately and effectively.

“When I was working on the anti-bullying campaign, I cried after designing the first draft. Not because I was proud—but because I was afraid. Afraid it would be misinterpreted, afraid it wouldn’t do justice to the people who shared their stories.” (P5)

The emotional burden was further amplified by the immediacy of social media. Designers were hyper-aware that their work would be judged not only aesthetically, but ethically. This created a dual-pressure environment: to maintain creative quality and to ensure that the visual message aligned sensitively with the campaign’s core values.

Aesthetic Decision-Making in Platform-Specific Contexts

Participants noted that platform constraints (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) significantly influenced their aesthetic decisions. The need for instant visual impact and algorithmic visibility altered how they constructed and evaluated the success of their designs.

“I had to redesign the entire layout because it didn’t ‘fit’ the Instagram square grid. The message felt diluted. The platform dictated not just the form, but the meaning.” (P2)

This theme illustrates a broader shift in design thinking among young designers, where aesthetic choices are increasingly informed by media affordances and platform norms. The integration of aesthetic logic with algorithmic visibility demands a form of “platform literacy,” which reshapes how designers perceive the function of aesthetics in social campaigns.

Across the three themes, the findings highlight a complex interplay between personal creativity, ethical responsibility, and digital platform constraints in shaping the aesthetic experiences of young designers. The essence of the phenomenon lies in the continuous negotiation of meaning—between self-expression and social impact, between emotion and strategy, and between visual identity and public perception. Rather than being passive executors of campaign briefs, these designers emerge as reflexive agents navigating the aesthetic, social, and technological terrains of digital advocacy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that young designers experience the act of designing social campaigns not merely as a technical task, but as a deeply personal and ethically charged process. Central

to their experience is the tension between preserving aesthetic identity and meeting the social, emotional, and platform-driven demands of advocacy-based design—highlighting the intricate negotiation of meaning, emotion, and creative agency.

These insights provide a meaningful response to the central research question: How do young designers subjectively experience aesthetic decision-making when designing digital social campaigns? The study contributes to a richer understanding of how aesthetic choices are not neutral or purely stylistic, but entangled with personal values, emotional labor, and ethical awareness. Rather than functioning solely as executors of briefs, young designers position themselves as reflexive agents—balancing self-expression with social responsibility. This phenomenological lens reveals how designers live through ambiguity and constraint, yet continue to search for authenticity and impact within their visual narratives.

In relation to existing literature, the findings align with Brown's (2020) and Iskandar's (2022) work on the emotional and psychological dimensions of design. However, this study extends their conclusions by emphasizing the interpretative and reflective processes that occur during aesthetic negotiation—especially under the influence of digital platform constraints. It also complements Tanaka's (2023) argument on the ethical complexity of visual storytelling, adding depth by foregrounding the lived experience of designers who must navigate these dilemmas in real time. Unlike prior studies that focus on design outcomes or audience reception, this research centers on the designer's perspective, offering a nuanced account of how visual ethics, digital logic, and emotional engagement intersect in the creation of social advocacy content.

The findings carry significant implications for both design education and professional practice. From a social and cultural standpoint, they suggest that young designers working within digital advocacy are not only technical practitioners but also ethical agents who continually navigate personal and public meanings. Their aesthetic decisions are informed by emotional labor, platform literacy, and a heightened awareness of social impact. Practically, these insights highlight the importance of creating design environments—whether in studios or academic settings—that acknowledge the emotional and ethical dimensions of design work, fostering reflective practices that support designers' well-being and creative autonomy. For institutions or organizations commissioning social campaigns, understanding the lived experiences of designers can lead to more collaborative and empathetic briefing processes, potentially resulting in more authentic and impactful visual messages.

Despite the richness of the findings, this study has several limitations. First, the small sample size—typical in phenomenological research—limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations. All participants shared relatively similar cultural and educational backgrounds, which may have influenced the thematic consistency across interviews. Moreover, the research focused specifically on digital campaigns disseminated via visual platforms, excluding other forms of advocacy design such as installations or editorial work. The emotional depth of the narratives, while a strength, also introduces interpretive subjectivity that must be acknowledged as part of the phenomenological process.

Future research could expand this study by including a more diverse sample of designers across varying cultural contexts and design domains. Comparative studies between novice and experienced designers could also shed light on how aesthetic agency develops over time in response to social and technological pressures. Additionally, integrating participatory or longitudinal methods may offer richer insights into the evolving nature of meaning-making in socially engaged design practices. By deepening our understanding of designers' lived experiences, future work can continue to bridge the gap between creative subjectivity and social responsibility in visual communication.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived aesthetic experiences of young designers engaged in creating digital social campaigns, focusing on how they negotiate personal creativity, ethical responsibility, and platform constraints. The findings revealed that aesthetic decisions in this context are deeply shaped by internal conflicts, emotional labor, and the designers' desire for authentic visual storytelling. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study uncovered the subjective processes that

underpin visual design for advocacy, addressing gaps in previous research that focused primarily on design outcomes.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged, including the small, culturally homogenous sample which may limit the generalizability of findings, and the cross-sectional design that captures experiences at a single point in time rather than their evolution. These insights contribute to a richer understanding of designers as reflexive agents who shape meaning through visual practice in socially charged digital environments. The study encourages further exploration of designer experiences across broader cultural and professional settings. Future research could adopt cross-cultural comparative methodologies to examine how sociocultural contexts influence aesthetic meaning-making, or implement longitudinal designs to track changes in designers' creative processes over time. Additionally, participatory action research involving co-design with practitioners may deepen understanding of ethical decision-making in rapidly evolving digital platforms.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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