

Is Graphic Design Being Taken Seriously as a Profession?

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Abstract

As compared to other professionals such as architects, doctors, engineers, and accountants, graphic designers have relatively lower professional status. Some people argue that this is in large part due to the fact that graphic designers have lighter responsibilities, i.e., they deal only with ‘the making of things and beautiful things’ instead of ‘life and death’ or ‘safety’ issues of their clients. However, many design scholars perceive graphic design as a strategic tool that can bring massive values to global organizations, markets, societies, and economies. In light of this ‘perception gap’, graphic designers must reconsider how they can strengthen or elevate their professional status among the public. Through conducting a comprehensive literature review, this paper aims to investigate and discuss the possible factors that have failed graphic designers to be recognized as professionals. It concludes that the conventional definition of the term ‘graphic design’ can no longer reflect the current state of the profession and that governing bodies must work towards developing an professional accreditation for graphic designers.

Key words: Graphic designers, professional status, standards of practice, accreditation, design thinking, and communication design.

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Introduction

Graphic design has been considered as a profession since 19th century (Hollis, 1994; Meggs & Purvis, 2012). The Industry Revolution in England had drawn a distinctive line between fine art and commercial art (Drucker & McVarish, 2009), giving birth to graphic design as a modern design profession (Davis, 2015b; McCoy, 1997). As time goes by, graphic design profession is becoming more widespread and popular in the global arena (Debbie, 2011). The rapid advancement of digital technology and the explosion of global consumer market have generated numerous opportunities for contemporary professionals in graphic design to perform their skills and expertise (Heller & Fernandes, 2004). From the design of a single business card to a whole series of brand identity system, or from a company’s website to the print and digital advertisements of an integrated advertising campaign, graphic design can take place at any scale and any time (Cezzar, 2017). The long-recognized responsibilities of graphic designers are to manipulate visual and textual content (Bestley & Noble, 2016) to “persuade, inform, identify, motivate, enhance, organize, brand, rouse, locate, engage, and carry or convey many levels of meaning” to a specific group of audience (Landa, 2014, p. 4).

However, several studies (e.g., Adu, 2015; Cheung, 2012; Debbie, 2011; McCoy, 1997; Short, 2011) had highlighted that as compared to other professionals such as architects, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and accountants who may need to deal with ‘life and death’ or ‘safety’ issues of their clients, the professional status of graphic designers is relatively lower. This is in large part due to the fact that graphic designers are perceived by public as ‘decorators’, ‘stylists’, ‘artisans’ or ‘craftsmen’ who deal

primarily with making things look beautiful (Muratovski, 2010), and therefore, they have lighter responsibilities (Cheung, 2012). Such typical perception, as noted by Short (2011), has hindered the progress of acceptance of graphic design as a true profession. On the contrary, many design scholars and international design bodies view design as a strategic tool that can bring enormous values towards businesses (Conley, 2004, 2007; Stevens, 2010), markets (Heller & Fink, 1996), societies (Berman, 2009; Bierut, 2015; Harland, 2011; Heller & Vienne, 2003; McCoy, 2003; Rahman, 2013; Whiteley, 1993), and economies (Heskett, 2009) around the world. Design can be used meaningfully to produce various forms of effective solutions, including intangible such as strategy and experiences (American Institute of Graphic Design (AIGA), 2015b; International Council of Communication Design (ICOGRADA), 2011; Muratovski, 2016).

In responding to this 'perception gap', there is a significant need for graphic designers to reconsider how they can strengthen or elevate their professional status among the public. Through conducting a comprehensive literature review, this paper aims to investigate and discuss the possible factors that have failed graphic designers to be recognized as professionals. Specifically, it traces the origin of the term 'graphic design', discusses graphic design as a profession, and investigates the possible factors that have failed graphic designers to be recognized as professionals. Recommendations on how to strengthen the status of graphic design as a profession are provided in the conclusion.

Literature Review

2.1 Graphic Design: Origin, Definition, and Analysis of Term

The word 'graphic' is originally termed 'graphikos', a Greek word that can be referred to any form of mark making or drawing. Design historians such as Aynsley (2001), therefore, traced the roots of graphic design back to the earliest known forms of visual communication. Similarly, Meggs and Purvis (2012) also traced the origins of graphic design back to Lascaux cave paintings, dating from c.15,000 to 10,000 BC, and more specifically to The Book of Kells, c.794 to 806 CE, an illuminated manuscript Gospel book in Latin. By examining its origins, it should come as no surprise, then, graphic design is perceived today as a very broad design profession called visual communication, and as a discipline that has gained increasing popularity in design education around the world (Debbie, 2011).

The term 'graphic' can also be described as the pictorial arts associated with the printing and reproduction of text and images to represent sound or convey meaning: "of, relating to, or involving such reproductive methods as those of engraving, etching, lithography, photography, serigraphy, and woodcut" (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Therefore, graphic design is always associated with those activities that involve the reproduction of visual text and images by means of various tools and technologies. Hollis (1994) tried to relate the development of graphic design from print technologies to the revolution of computer graphics in the 21st century. Both Hollis (1994) and Aynsley (2001) mentioned that the term 'graphic design' was first coined by William Addison Dwiggins, an American book and type designer in 1922. This term, however, achieved widespread usage only after World War II (Debbie, 2011).

Graphic design is defined differently in modern context and there is no one agreed-upon definition. Soar (2002) defined graphic design as "a ubiquitous, yet largely invisible, practice that nevertheless contributes substantially to the make-up of our visual culture" (p. vi). In his study, Soar (2002) found that there are increasingly conflicting ideas about how to identify and demarcate the definitional boundaries of 'graphic design'. There are constant debates in changing the name of graphic design, for example, to 'communication design' or even to 'experience design' as proposed by Grefé (2000), and to 'information design' as preferred by Bonsiepe (1994). Soar (2002) claimed that such demarcation can potentially affect designers' self-perceptions in terms of "how they think of themselves, and what constitutes legitimate design practice" (p. 23). Consequently, some have attempted to combat this by just calling themselves 'designers' (Saldanha, 2003). However, this term is considered imprecise because it can also be used by practitioners from other design fields. Therefore, design scholars such as Frascara (2004) and Nini (1997) argued that it would be more accurate for graphic design to use the term 'visual communication design'. McCoy (1990) stated that graphic design field is an 'identity crisis' due to the multiple titles of how it is named. Despite this, however, the term 'graphic design' is still by far the most widely used, especially in developing countries such as Malaysia.

In the year 2007, the International Council of Communication Design (ICOGRADA, now known as International Council of Design, ico-D) undertook a major policy review. One of the key agendas of this review was to establish a consensus on what graphic design really is. They ratified the following definition to create a common international understanding of the nature of graphic design (ICOGRADA, 2007):

Graphic design is an interdisciplinary, problem-solving activity, which combines visual sensitivity with skill and knowledge in areas of communications, technology and business. Graphic design practitioners specialize in the structuring and organizing of visual information to aid communication and orientation.

Following this definition, the Graphic Design Association of Malaysia (wREGA, 2012) expanded the scope of activities and influences of graphic designers by describing them as the “architects of change on various levels” (p. 14). According to wREGA (2012), graphic design practitioners have the ability to “contribute to, dictate and influence global cultures; intellectual capital; human values; personal preferences; material needs; economic activity; regional development; and... our living environment” (p. 14). However, it is worth noting that new technological innovations, ways of operating business, and many other factors are constantly shaping the understanding of graphic design and the scope of graphic designers’ work regardless of how much of consensus these definitions may bring about (Debbie, 2011).

2.2 The Concept of ‘Profession’ and ‘Professional’

Profession can be defined as “any type of work which needs special training or a particular skill, often one which is respected because it involves a high level of education” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017). A professional is a person who is committed in a full-time job and expected to have lifelong career (Schein, 1972). A professional has a specialized body of knowledge after a long period of training (Crueess, Johnston, & Crueess, 2010), and therefore, is accountable to serve and make decision for clients in a manner that is objective and transparent (Cheung, 2012). However, as argued by (Eraut, 1994, p. 1),

The professions are a group of occupations the boundary of which is ill-defined. While most powerful professions of laws and medicine are commonly perceived as the ‘ideal type’, few other even approach their degree of influence. Public-sector professions with significantly less power, such as teachers, nurses, were described by Etzioni (1969) as ‘semi-professionals’; but this simply added one further ill-defined category.

2.3 Graphic Design As A Profession

In relation to the professional development of graphic design field, Davis (2015b) commented that due to the roots of graphic design, graphic designers are trained primarily to master technical production skills in order to create visually appealing works for effective communication. However, practitioners are urged to develop new aspects or criteria to reflect the more recent status of graphic design as a profession due to the development of the information age and the growth of the knowledge economy (Davis, 2015b). However, McCoy (1997) stated that graphic designers have failed to be recognized as professionals. She argued that graphic designers have been perceived as ‘visual artists’, which is similar to ‘fine artists’ who deal primarily with the production of beautifully crafted objects. To many, graphic design is viewed as a ‘decorating activity’ rather than a ‘professional service’ (McCoy, 1997). Short (2011) also highlighted that graphic design has yet moved from being considered as a ‘trade’ to a ‘true profession’. He commented that when graphic design is perceived as a trade, it relies merely on the application of techniques and styles to fulfill commercial clients’ needs. Swubdells, Atkinson, and Sibely (2001) criticized the professional standards of designers, “...compared to the standardized and institutional rigors of, for example, architecture or medicine, a hierarchy from architecture, through design, down to art, may be interpreted as a structure of ‘major’ to ‘minor’ professions” (p.130).

2.4 No One Takes Graphic Design Profession Seriously. Why?

Several factors may have led to the insufficient appreciation and respect for graphic design as a profession. First, a number of scholars (e.g., McCoy, 1997) highlighted that graphic design education has failed to train the students towards being professionals. For example, Cheung's (2016) study suggested that the focus of design education in Hong Kong is still on the technical and stylistic aspects of design, and consequently, it creates a 'mismatch' between what graphic designers learn at the university and what they are expected to perform in design practice. According to Cheung (2016), novice graphic designers in Hong Kong are taught inadequately on some of the professional knowledge that has been seemed explicitly important in the practice such as business, marketing, user behavior, and consumer psychology. In discussing the creativity and design education in Singapore and Malaysia, Lim (2015) mentioned that most design schools in these two countries have failed to nurture their students to see design from a more strategic and broader perspective. Design thinking and entrepreneurial mindsets have not been emphasized in the curricula. As a result, most students are incapable to solve complex problems and identify business opportunities to drive economic growth after they graduate. Instead, they are 'only capable' to sit in front of the computer and click the mouse to perform assigned design tasks (Lim, 2015). Accordingly, Heller (2005) noted that contemporary design market are filled with many graphic design graduates, however, very few of them are considered as young professionals who are truly competent. In this sense, the role of design schools in developing the necessary knowledge and skills of future design professionals is questioned (Debbie, 2011).

Second, no professional training is offered by relevant authorities for graphic designers to further qualify themselves as 'professionals' after they graduate from university (Adu, 2015; Short, 2011). In other words, graphic designers do not need to meet any professional standards for the right to practice in the industry (Higgins, 2008). On the one hand, this means that the entry requirements to the profession is very low. On the other hand, graphic designers themselves will have to take the initiative to search for further training to reach professionally accepted standards (Cheung, 2012). On the contrary, some professions, such as architectural design, accountancy, and engineering, have formal training or examination dictated by professional bodies to govern the quality their practitioners. In Malaysia, for example, one can apply to become a professional architect only after sitting for the professional examinations conducted by the Architectural Examination Council of Malaysia and fulfilling additional prescribed criteria (Lembaga Arkitek Malaysia (Board of Architects Malaysia), 2017). Therefore, the numbers of genuine and qualified professional architects remain small. Unlike architects, graphic designer is not a 'legally protected' profession, so anyone may call themselves as graphic designer (Van der Waarder, 2009), including freelance designers working from their homes or practitioners employed by other establishments which require the service of a graphic designer 'in-house' or printing companies, which may not register themselves in associations, inventory sites or directories. In this context, graphic designers are everywhere. As graphic designers are not recognized as professionals like architects, lawyers or accountants, they are usually perceived as earning low salary and having lower status (Debbie, 2011).

Third, thanks to the advancement of digital technology, design software is easily obtained and learnt in modern day. The availability of do-it-yourself templates on free online platform makes good design accessible to all (Morley, 2016). Anyone can claim to be a 'graphic designer' as long as they know how to use design software and manipulate the templates. Consequently, design industry is filled by an increasing number of 'self-taught' and 'informally trained' graphic designers who never receive any formal design education (Chiang, Idris, & Chuen, 2018). These informally trained graphic designers have huge impacts on the design industry. For example, Okyere's (2017) study suggested that 82% of the graphic design workforce in Ghana is informally trained. This group of graphic designers are very popular in Ghanaian design industry because they can perform effectively to meet clients' demands. More importantly, they provide affordable prices to the clients. Further, his results also highlighted that the clients in Ghana prefer to hire informally trained graphic designers because university graduates usually take longer time to adapt themselves to the industry requirements (Okyere, 2017). In other words, individuals without receiving formal education in graphic design can now work as graphic designers of which McWade (2013) described that "whether you are ready or not, this modern world has made everyone a designer". Cross (2001) also claimed that everyone has the ability to design. Undoubtedly, this phenomenon has diminished the professional role of graphic designers among the public.

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, many argue that graphic designers have lighter responsibilities as compared to other professionals. The long-recognized responsibilities of graphic designers are to

manipulate visual elements such as typography, colours, and images in both print and digital media to communicate ideas (Ambrose & Harris, 2011; Bestley & Noble, 2016; Cezzar, 2017; Frascara, 2004) and translating ideas into visual solutions (Givechi, Groulx, & Woollard, 2006). This is unlike some other professionals who have to deal with 'life and death' or 'safety' issues of their clients (Cheung, 2012).

Discussion

However, there is a large body of literature indicates that designers are no longer pure decorators, artisans, or stylists (Muratovski, 2010), but instead, with the knowledge and skill sets in design, they can handle various roles and duties at different positions in the corporate environment (Bohemia, 2002; Dziobczenski & Person, 2017; Dziobczenski, Person, & Meriläinen, 2018; Kang, Chung, & Nam, 2015). They can work as either functional specialists in the processes of new product development or strategic process leaders in organizations (Ravasi & Lojaco, 2005). Some studies also imply that organizations work with internal and external designers in varied ways (Jevnaker & Bruce, 1998) and that the persons who the designers work with can determine their perceived contribution (Valencia, Person, & Snelders, 2013).

Several studies (e.g., AIGA, 2015a; Cheung, 2016) investigated the professional scope of work and knowledge of graphic designers. For example, in order to redefine the plural domains of graphic design, Harland (2011) proposed a contemporary way of looking at the field by emphasising on the design processes rather than the outcomes. As pointed out by Harland (2011), "the traditional domains of typography, illustration, photography, and print, while contributing significantly to graphic design, are inadequate terms for describing what graphic design is, and what graphic designers do" (p. 22). Having studied how graphic design has evolved to integrate other design areas and how it is used more broadly in many other non-design disciplines, Harland (2011) consequently described graphic design as a "unified thinking and doing activity that involves idea generation, image creation, word interpretation, and media realization" (p. 22) for various essential dimensions: communication, commerce, industry, culture, and society. Harland (2011) argued that graphic design should not be viewed only as "a craft for commerce", but instead, it should be used as "a tool for social, cultural, and economic development" (Harland, 2011, p. 24).

Cheung (2016) investigated the professional knowledge in graphic design practice by using mixed method approach to collect data from graduate graphic designers, design firm employers, and design academics in Hong Kong. Respondents involved in the study shared a similar view that "A professional designer is knowledgeable and performs well in both internal and external environment" (p. 34). In other words, not only that the professional graphic designers need to have knowledge of the design process in the business environment, they also need to be able to engage effectively with experts from different disciplines.

On the other hand, various efforts have been made to promote the status of graphic design as a profession. Many professional bodies for design are established around the world with the intention to "advance design as a professional craft, strategic advantage, and vital cultural force" (AIGA, 2017). Among the famous associations are: American Institutes of Graphic Arts (AIGA) (www.aiga.org), International Council of Design (ico-D) (www.ico-d.org), Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA) (www.agda.com.au), Graphic Artists Guild (www.graphicartistsguild.org), Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (DGC) (www.gdc.net), Malaysian Graphic Design Association (wREGA) (www.wrega.org), etc. These bodies have diverse visions, but generally, they hope to advocate a greater understanding of the value of design and designers in various sectors; heighten professional development through enriching learning opportunities at all levels; inspire designers and the public by sharing sensational work and engaging in thoughtful discussion on important issues; organize events to serve a wide range of special interest groups; and make powerful resources accessible to all.

In order to strengthen designers' integrity, these international bodies have developed their respective standards for professional practice or so-called the Professional Code of Conduct (CoPC) for their members to follow. These standards cover several key aspects. They are: responsibilities to the association, responsibilities to clients, responsibilities to other designers, responsibilities to the public or community, and responsibilities to society and the environment (AIGA, 2010; Australian Graphic Design Association (AGDA), 1996; wREGA, 2013; ico-D, 2011; Society of Graphic Designers of

Canada (GDC), 2012). While much efforts have been made, however, several critical issues remain unresolved: What is the required competency level of a graphic designer to be called as a professional? How to measure effectively if a designer has successfully achieved the desired competency level as a professional? How to do that holistically? In other words, further investigation is needed to develop a set of competency standards for effective graphic design professionals and a valid tool for competency assessment.

Conclusion & Recommendations

It is not surprising that graphic design profession is not highly regarded or getting the respect it should deserve. Anyone with knowledge of design software claims to be graphic designers, including freelancers who work at home, desktop publishing artists who work in printing companies, and so forth. However, anyone can cook but that does not make him or her a chef. Likewise, there must be some specialties differentiate professionally-trained graphic designers from those who are informally-trained. Unfortunately, there are still many who are ‘unwilling’ to treat graphic designers the way they would give to their lawyers, accountants or architects.

Is it true that most clients just want graphic designers to create some styles only rather than an effective design solution? Graphic designers are not make-up artists. They are problem solvers. Thinking must come before style and good design is about solving problems but not about making problems look pretty. Therefore, graphic designers must acquire a holistic knowledge of professional practice when dealing with clients. The Code of Professional Conduct (CoPC) encourages good standard and fair balance of the needs of graphic designers. It is an ethical standard, which covers designers’ responsibilities to clients, to fellow designers, the public, and to society and environment (wREGA, 2013). Graphic designers must also need to master a wide range of competencies in order to be able to conceptualize and develop design strategy for implementation of an idea (Adu, 2015; AIGA, 2015a). While professional knowledge and competencies are necessary, having the passion to enjoy what they do and having enthusiasm to design will ensure the success of the profession (Dziobczenski & Person, 2017).

The governing bodies must strive their best to establish a design accreditation (Debbie, 2011), starting with assessment of the competency levels of the graduates to ensure the quality of all new entrants to the profession (Chiang, Idris, & Chuen, 2018). For professional designers, accreditation criteria can be based on academic background, working experience, and passing the Accreditation Examination just like other professions. It is believed that by doing so, the professional standards will be strengthened, and the status of graphic designers elevated. In addition, as highlighted by Zackary Harris Ong, the president of ico-D (wREGA, 2012), to make design more well-recognized, graphic design practitioners must not reject the idea of collaborating with the government. There is a critical need for the practitioners to work together to invent new policies and blueprint for holistic development of design profession.

The concept of ‘design thinking’, a strategy or process used by designers to create innovative solutions are now widely adopted and used to solve social, environmental, cultural, and business issues around the world (Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Clark & Smith, 2010; IDEO, 2015; Muratovski, 2016). Empathy, optimism, and integrative thinking are central to the ‘design thinker’s personality profile’ (Brown, 2008). Empathy enables designers to investigate the issues from different perspectives. Integrative thinking refers to that designers are able to see all of the salient and potential solutions to a design situation, often improving on or providing unforeseen alternatives. Integrative thinking is tied to optimism, which assumes that no matter how challenging a design problem, there is the potential for a positive outcome (Brown, 2008). Increasingly, design professionals are also found collaborating with experts from other disciplines to solve complex issues rather than merely focusing on traditional technical production (Davis, 2015a). In such a context, it is anticipated that design will continue to play significant and critical role in the future, contributing meaningfully to the growth and success of various aspects of human life. The assumed responsibilities of designers are not as ‘light’ as what people perceive generally.

Since it is no longer enough for graphic designers just to make problems look pretty, the term ‘graphic design’ must also be reconsidered because it can hardly represent what contemporary graphic designers are doing. Out of so many names that proposed by design scholars, such as ‘visual communication design’ (Frascara, 2004; Nini, 1997), ‘experience design’ (Grefé, 2000), and

‘information design’ (Bonsiepe, 1994), ‘communication design’ (ICOGRADA, 2007), perhaps, is the most appropriate term to be used to reflect the current state of the profession. This is because, according to ICOGRADA (2011), communication design can be described as “an intellectual, creative strategic, managerial, and technical activity” that “essentially involves the production of visual solutions to communication problems” (p. 8). Will it be a better choice for graphic designers to call themselves as communication designers instead in the future?

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