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Are we designing female audiences?
The case of BEME.com a women's commercial online portal

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In February 2000 IPC Media (IPC) – a UK magazine publishing house – launched its first commercial women's portal, BEME.com, to provide an alternative for its female magazine readership and respond to an economic boom in online industries. The site offered information and advice to female users but, in August 2001, after a period of only eighteen months, it closed having failed to generate commercial revenue. Could the way in which its target audience were 'designed' be part of what went wrong?

Within the design discipline it is accepted that practitioners operate at a juncture where the creation of new solutions meets the need to maintain the existing status quo. However, whilst designers' knowledge changes through the design process, they do not necessarily acquire more power to affect design processes or their outcomes. Therefore, understanding what it takes to create a design outcome crucially requires acknowledging the environment within which design practitioners work. Whilst specific limitations vary based on the particular design problem and context, the influence of societal, cultural and/or political structures need to be considered. Design scholars argue that the designer's role is to mediate between the process of production and consumption of outcomes. However, within a women's online portal context, designers do not achieve what Julier (2000) calls 'de-alienating of the commodity' (p. 49). Rather, design practitioners perpetuate gender values by constructing consumer profiles based on gendered assumptions. To discuss these concerns, a case study of BEME.com is presented and contemporary design, Internet and feminist theory provide illuminative lenses through which to explore these issues.

Feminist critique of design practice has drawn attention to problems women have as design practitioners and design consumers (Clegg and Mayfield, 1999; Farrelly, 1995; Sadowska, 2002). It is often argued that design processes can offer a path to 'betterment' through ongoing questioning, evaluation and reflection on design outcomes. Notwithstanding that Internet technology and design offer new means of communicating with

women, a feminist critique highlights that particularly within a commercial context there is unwillingness on the part of design practice to problematise its participation in the processes that embody gendered meanings. Instead, gender is often part of practitioners' creative toolkit when designing for female audiences. Therefore, this paper maps out ways in which, whilst creating BEME.com online designers 'design' their female audience through a reliance on gender. This paper draws on doctoral research which explored the capacity of design practice to offer alternative ways to target female online users. The research is rooted in postmodernist feminist thought, a commitment to grounded theory and a case study format. A snowballing process guided the research and semi-structured interviews and documentary and discourse analysis were used. The data includes IPC press releases, interviews with the BEME.com design team and with other online/publishing industry professionals to substantiate the themes raised in this paper, the purpose of which is to argue that today's design practitioners need to recognise the significance of questioning women's participation in and consumption of, design practice. Several theoretical and substantive strands frame this argument. These include: postmodernist theories of gender and identity; issues of gender in relation to design practice; questions raised by Internet technology for design practice; and the relationship between gender, design and ICT. The following section provides a brief discussion of each.

Background

With regard to gender and identity, many debates around women's magazines focus on the capacity of these artefacts to affect their readers' identity construction. Judith Butler's analysis of the process by which an individual assumes a subject position provides a useful lens through which to unpack the consequences of women's magazine consumption by female readers. Contrary to an essentialist perspective, Butler argues for a processual understanding of identity constructed in language and discourse. Accounting for such a process she traces the genealogy of the conditions of emergence of a subject position wherein the subject assumes that sex and gender are effects rather than causes of institutions, discourses, and practices. Salih (2002) comments, 'Butler has collapsed the sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender' (p. 62). This suggests that all bodies are gendered from the moment of and due to their social existence and there is no existence outside of the social. Butler's critique renders an understanding of identity that is less about what someone is, but rather about what someone does; a sequence of acts or a 'doing' rather than 'being'. Furthermore, Butler presents gender identities as neither 'straight, straightforward [n]or singular' but rather 'unstable' and 'resignifiable' allowing for subversive 'working against the grain' practice (Salih 2002:71). In relation to mass media, one might argue that a spread of non-traditional representations could destabilise traditional representations of gender hence allowing for subversive reading. However, a 'strength' of the women's magazine industry is its ability to present to female readers, a well packaged and easy to consume version of gender identity in the form of femininity.

That design practice is implicated in the communication and construction of gender identities is argued by Attfield (1989) who writes that design is involved in shaping '… the environment and makes assumptions about women's place in terms of buildings, public spaces and transport. It also provides the imagery women use to form their identity through fashion, advertising and the media generally' (p. 203). Nonetheless, she

cautions that '[t]he role of design in forming our ideas about gender power relations often remains invisible, while at the same time it makes them concrete in the everyday world of material goods' (p. 203). Furthermore, design '… segregates sexes through artefacts by endowing these with unnecessary gender definitions' (Attfield, 1989:203). She argues that a feminist framework ' … offers design … a range of historical/ critical methods which challenge the mainstream about how it defines design as a practice, about the parameters of what type of designed objects it should examine, about what values are given priority in assessing it, and even who it calls designers' (p. 200). It is clear however that whilst such literature argues persuasively for the significance of gender structures in relation to design practice, questioning this relationship is rarely at the forefront of design practitioners' concerns. Whiteley (1993) states, '…when you buy a product you are consuming a total mix of the product and its meaning' (p. 138). A historically grounded approach to women in terms of design is reflected in the outcomes of that practice, where gender stereotyping results in sexist portrayal of women and disregard for them as end-users.

Whilst design for print media such as magazines is undeniably complex, the Internet provides additional design challenges and opportunities. It is apparent however that its opportunities – for cross-disciplinary collaboration and non-linear and interactive design – have not necessarily translated into novel outcomes vis-a-vis gender. Sano (1996) argues, '[d]esigning [a] large-scale web site essentially requires a collaborative team involved in a design activity, working closely together on a continual basis, yet dependant on different skillsets' (p. 8). In addition, whereas in the case of magazines designers attempt to guarantee a linear content progression, in the case of the Internet due to its hypertext format and interactivity, the experience could go in many directions. Such a reading indicates that the user can move from one idea to another in a multi-linear, non-sequential manner (Gauntlett, 2000). Thus, the need arises to formulate new understandings of this medium in design terms. As Julier (2000) points out, '… the designer takes on a larger and more challenging role in the editorial arrangement of the content' (p. 170). As the Internet industry gathered momentum, it gave rise to flexible design organisations that were composed of more than just designers. According to Sano (1996) such organisations would consist of programmers, visual designers, interface designers, editors and writers as well as marketers. Thriving on cross-disciplinary collaboration, Julier (2000) observes that, '… designers in this domain provided a mixture of technological know-how and narrative creativity … [They] became] both cultural and technological intermediaries' (p. 173). However Hammerich and Harrison (1996) criticise that '… almost everyone who works in Web development makes judgements based on their own experience as users' (p. 11). Furthermore, due to lack of 'historical record' of high and low quality sites, these authors highlight an absence of quality standards: '[o]nly a few know about researchers who analyze Web sites for usability with regard to readability, visuals, and navigation, and even fewer are aware of the work being done by semioticians who have started to explore how different modes of communication interact and make meaning when combined in a document' (Hammerich and Harrison, 2002:11). Although there is growing recognition of the need to problematise how meanings are constructed and embedded within websites, gender adds another, often trivialised, dimension to this discussion.

Early studies of women's Internet use focused primarily on raising awareness of a disparity in the numbers of male and female users online (Harcourt, 1999). However, as Martinson and Schwartz (2002) point out, '[w]hile

current numerical parity on the internet is one measure of progress, issues of gender equality are more complex than simple counts of who is logging on to the internet' (p. 31). Recently, scholars including Rommes (2002) and Spilker (2000) have investigated various ways in which the Internet could become more inclusive of female users and initiatives such as *Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society* (2000-3) have sought to address the complexity of women's participation in the Internet (Faulkner et al., 2004). Oudshoorn, Rommes and Stienstra's (2004) research on gender and design cultures in ICT suggests that there is often a mismatch between the intended target group and eventual users. If the mismatch is acknowledged it is often too late for it to be addressed through design since the technology is already stabilised and there is no room for additional alterations (Oudshoorn et al., 2004). Frequently the target audiences are either defined as 'everybody', 'all women' or 'all men'. Such definitions - as Oudshoorn et al maintain, - cannot be seen as isolated events but rather in the larger context, particularly if these contexts play a major role in defining the user. As Oudshoorn et al argue, as many technologies have a history with strong masculine connotations this has an effect on how the users are defined. They therefore advocate the need for special considerations to avoid gender-bias being built in when creating user profiles, whilst also noting that gender-bias has roots in design itself. This is a problem they refer to as the use of 'I-methodology'. This means that '[i]nstead of assessing the interests and competencies of users by formal procedures, designers … generally took their own preferences and skills as major guidelines in the design' (p. 53). As the project teams in these cases consisted predominantly of men, the design '… largely adopted a masculine design style, [where] the interests and competencies inscribed in the design were predominantly masculine' (Oudshoorn et al., 2004:53). Therefore, it is not just important to study the identities of the users and their relationship to the Internet, but it is also crucial to investigate the identities of the designers and their impact on design outcomes. Oudshoorn et al. (2004) conclude that generalist profiling of online users to fit the design process does not begin to address the complexity of the people who engage with that design. Although they acknowledge that their research did not account for the fact that users themselves may appropriate and shape the technology in various ways, Oudshoorn et al's research illuminates the gap between design strategies and the definition of the user: '[d]ue to lack of differentiation and the use of the I-methodology, … [online sites] were designed not for everybody but primarily for men' (p. 54). This particular study raises very important issues regarding how design processes embed particular gender values into design outcomes. It also indicates that the introduction of new forms of communication do not necessarily provide design practitioners with totally new paradigms to work within, nor guarantee fresh thinking. The BEME.com case study, as presented below, builds on the points raised by Oudshoorn et al's (2004) research, in order to demonstrate how a commercial context further compounds these problems.

BEME.COM Portal: Embodiment Of All That Is Feminine

The data presented in this section stems from a series of IPC press releases regarding the BEME.com portal launch and maintenance. This data is substantiated by a collection of interviews conducted with the BEME.com design team undertaken between December 2001 and April 2002. Analysis of the data revealed a variety of ways in which the design team relied on gender to help them create this portal. This was visible in (a) women-focused intentions, supported by (b) visual intentions and grounded in (c) corporate intentions. Although 'women-focused' and 'visual' intentions were directly linked to the design and purpose of

BEME.com as an online portal, the 'corporate' intentions demonstrate, at the organisational level, the way in which the BEME.com audience was defined.

a) Women-focused Intentions

There is no denying that BEME.com is meant to attract female users. In the case of BEME.com this targeting took the form of women-focused intentions which functioned on a number of levels. They informed the corporate and usability aspects as well as the driving idea of the portal. The BEME.com design team believed that the key to generating and fulfilling women-focused intentions was through recognising the diversity of the female audience. The marketing consultant observed:

'The idea was to offer a site, which caters for all facets of women's lives. It recognised that women were not just mothers, lovers or had careers but were all of these things at one time. Therefore the structure of the site with channels ranging from shops to entertainment and news was designed to cater for all their needs' (I-PT1:19-23).

The brand was also based on a commitment to diversity through the notion of 'AND' and 'OR'. On the other hand, following in the tradition of women's paper magazines, the site was meant to offer advice to its female users. The female senior producer said that the '[portal offered] advice and help [providing facilities] to be able to ... ask question and get answers' (I-PT5:174-177). Unfortunately, 'women-focused' in the case of BEME.com often meant gendered. The design manager/designer remarked, '... it has to … do with content as well. At the end of the day the user is going to the web site for content, content is King … but I think idea of having a women's site is a great one, every traditional media suggests there is a market because Cosmopolitan has been going for years, look at Vogue' (I-PT3:350-356). Hence, women-focused intentions were often informed by the proven success and approach of women's magazines.

In a more progressive vein, the female senior producer associated women-focused intentions with the notion of a female Internet community. A departure from the gender norms of women's magazine publishing, this reflected a dominant conceptualisation of the Internet as evidenced by cyberculture studies (Silver 2000). As the female senior producer described:

'... if you want to focus on a particular group ... something that's going to interest a certain amount of people and they'll go there because they want to talk to each other and they almost create their own community in their own site and ... then you add content and build around information about your users as they sort of come on board' (I-PT5:348-349).

The female senior producer was the only member of the team who questioned female online users' association with stereotypical assumptions. The ideas she put forward as relevant to women's sites indicated a pursuit of anti-stereotypical interpretations. For her, women-focused intentions meant recognising the value of the target audience as intelligent, multifaceted individuals. When referring to BEME.com experience she commented:

'… what … [female users] want to be using it for was more, we thought, tools and communication. So rather then using it as an offline … paper magazine … ie just to read articles or what ever … It would be the whole kind of email to a friend, the chat, the forums, all of those things' (I-PT5:164-168).

She conceived of women-focused intentions as a strategy '… to get women talking about BEME and talking to each other … It was to communicate … to keep them there and to keep them in the community aspects' (I-PT5:346-349). Her view of women-focused intentions, contrary to other members of the team, was not based on an exploitative commercial imperative. Her observations and reflections indicated that the site had much more potential as a women's online communicative space then as a shopping experience.

b) Visual Intentions

The visual intentions expanded on the women-focused intentions and informed the interface design of the portal. However, interviews with the BEME.com design team revealed the ways in which gender informed these visual intentions. In their descriptions of the portal design, the interviewees frequently referred to stereotypical graphic norms to justify their choices. For example, the male brand designer observed, '... [the letters used for the logo] really work and they don't look hard and they don't look sort of aggressive ... it just really works because it's bold and it's confident' (I-PT4:198-200). In his explanation he relied on his design experience confirming that female users respond positively to soft, non-aggressive outcomes. As a feminist critique of design practice reveals (Oudshoorn, Rommes et al., 2004) these assumptions run deep in the design discipline's conceptualisation of women as an audience.

c) Corporate Intentions

The IPC press releases describing potential female users of BEME.com are revealing of the gendered corporate intentions. These descriptions were based on what is termed by feminist scholars as stereotypical gendered notions of what constitutes a traditional magazine reader (Winship, 1987; 2002; Ferguson, 1983; Beetham, 1996). For example, one press release reads '… BEME.COM is able to connect women everywhere, appealing to those in different stages of their lives and reflecting their diversity in age, lifestyle, socio-economic and ethnic groups' (D-CP4:13-16). Another reads '[i]nfluence, affluence, big spending, lovers, mothers, peer group leaders, avid readers. We're talking women!' (D-CP3:3-4) and '[i]ts about having the power to communicate, entertain, and advise. It's about freedom. Women don't want to be dictated to, and neither do our brands' (D-CP3:14-16). The press releases addressed female users with confidence gleaned from years of experience publishing for women. Here, IPC assumed that such confidence would evoke trust in female users and attract them to BEME.com. However, these juxtapositions of belief in an alternative on the one hand with the safety of a long-tradition on the other, sent a mixed and irreconcilable message and served to undermine the sincerity of BEME.com's mission. Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron (1991) propose that such conflicts are commonplace within women's paper magazines, used to generate a fragmented representation of femininity. As this analysis suggests, it is a practice prevalent within online women's publishing. A further example comes from the female editorial/creative director in her press release observation about the TV series Ally McBeal sponsorship of BEME.com: 'Ally McBeal is a perfect fit for BEME which is all about appealing to the universal modern woman. And Ally is just that – pathetic and

clever, funny and serious, gorgeous and beastly, silly and thoughtful, glamorous and insecure' (D-CP1c:18-24). On the other hand, in her interview she insisted that BEME.com's design was based on non-stereotypical representations of female users. However, reading these messages as simply conflicting does not reveal the depth of their significance. A feminist analysis prompts criticism of the notion of 'and' or 'both', insofar as women are not only allowed but are expected to be both: pathetic and clever, assertive and submissive, women, mothers, wives and lovers; in other words, whatever patriarchy demands. Therefore, an attempt to absorb a feminist critique of gender often results in its subversion or dilution (Winship, 2002:37).

'Designing' An Audience

Several scholars have argued that within publishing, male audiences are targeted on the basis of their interests or needs, whereas female audiences are approached with gender as axiomatic (McCracken, 1993; Skeggs, 1997). To explore this bias, interviews with online/publishing industry professionals were conducted. These were professionals engaged in supporting women's uses of the Internet as well as businesses that fostered Internet ventures. These participants described a variety of issues regarding gender and its influence on the understanding of a potential audience. Discussing Internet spaces specifically designed for female users, the female director of DigitalEve argued that businesses still misunderstand women as a target audience: '… the women's sites are not targeted towards selling to women, because they don't believe women have buying power. Whereas I think the statistics were that more than 50% of women are the decision makers on buying big things from the Internet. But marketing people still don't see that, they still don't know how to market to women' (I-IP1:143-148). Thus, the production of such online spaces is based less on verifiable up to date statistics but more on the basis of 'what's been done before, works'. Hence, gender assumptions are both perpetuated and invoked to fill in the gaps. Such practice only creates greater misunderstanding, generating outcomes that either become demeaning to female audiences and/ or do not generate revenue due to lack of interest. As the female CEO at eZoka Group observed, '[t]he idea that somehow you are going to ply a little bit of money into a web site and they are going to capture all of those women doesn't happen. Women are not cheaply acquired as customers' (I-IP2:139-142). Furthermore, as the female director of DigitalEve critiqued, '… all the women's web sites I've seen are very demeaning to women because all they talk about is shopping and make-up, there is nothing intellectual … and there is no attempt to even introduce anything even vaguely … anything else' (I-IP1:148-152). The portals that are commercially driven often reduce female users into 'fluff bunnies' without deep concerns. She further observed, '… there are so many magazine sites up there. After a while it is all the same, people don't want to read about make-up and shopping all the time. They want to read about role models' (I-IP1:159-161). Therefore, just as in the women's traditional paper magazines, gender defines the way in which commercial enterprises target their audiences by avoiding genuine distinctiveness that could lead to commercial advantage. In an environment like the Internet offering multi-lane access to information from the most trivial to the highly intellectual, promotion of gendered content does not seem to be the best strategy with which to retain users. However, the gender factor not only manifests itself at content and production levels of women's online portals. It is also evident in discriminatory practices of the organisation. The female CEO at eZoka Group observed, '… women just get less funding in the whole venture capital' (I-IP2:106). Although, she did not make explicit that the lack of investment is due to gender discrimination, this is documented within feminist literature (Borsook, 1996). However, she pointed out that

under such circumstances it becomes almost impossible to generate a successful enterprise: '… when you are talking about an undercapitalised business fighting against a niche and trying to change peoples behaviour you are really trying to push water up hill' (I-IP2:109-112).

The gender factor is at times implicit, well hidden within years of publishing traditions. In the case of the Internet, the gender factor trivialises the medium's ability to generate possibilities that can help female users to question and resist a patriarchal status quo. However, it is within the designers' power and in their interest to search for new ways of communicating and, as producers, to question the framework and usefulness of outcomes and products. Wakeford (2000) reminds us that it is important not to forget the politics of identity involved in designing. She questions the effect this might have on the production of the Internet and how could this be studied. In addition, the literature strongly suggests that in order to address the complex relationship between gender and design it is not enough to just 'add women and stir' (Harding, 1986 in Oudshoorn et al., 2004). Rather as Oudshoorn et al. (2004) postulate, there is a need for '… a transformation of the dominant cultural image of technology, a drastic change of the technology push orientated routines and practices of current design communities, and a renegotiation of gender identities in relation to technology' (p. 54). On the other hand, McRobbie (1999) and Gough-Yates (2003) have both suggested that new readings of women's magazines within cultural studies point towards alternative approaches to women's representation on the part of the industry. In particular McRobbie (1999) observes a change within women's magazines in the way female readers are targeted that could be interpreted as acknowledging a feminist agenda. Such an approach is also evident within women's online portals released on the UK market. The case of BEME.com demonstrates how the feminist agenda of women's empowerment might be interpreted by the design process to fit within a commercial context. The most visible action is the heavily broadcast re-defined profile of the female user. However, this apparent acknowledgement of diversity, individuality and strong sense of choice in a supposedly 'new millennium' female user does not go far enough to release her from a gendered classification. To appeal to this 'new and informed' user, the women's commercial publishing industry re-focuses its visual communication language, finding 'new' ways to communicate old norms. Therefore, designers are expected to create online portals that through their association with 'empowerment ideologies', attract users to consume traditionally defined products. However, these 'new' practices are still based on a gendered understanding of online female audiences shared by design practitioners and the women's magazine publishing industry. Nonetheless, Ballaster, Beetham et al. (1991) argue that it is within the women's magazine publishing industry's nature to play with various contradictions or to generate tension with representation of forced opposites (p. 172-173). The resulting combination of empowerment and established stereotypes results in a visual language that is complex and often contradictory.

Future Directions

Further cross-disciplinary research into the relationship between design, gender and the Internet is needed to address disparity between the gendered production of online design outcomes and what female users perceive as useful. Building on this research, of particular interest would be an investigation into ways in which design practitioners construct what Tham (2004) calls 'professional uniforms' – forms of identity that allow practitioners to disengage their own personal values and beliefs from those they express as professionals (in

Sadowska and Tham, 2004). Research into the process whereby design practitioners who, on personal level, support a feminist agenda continue working within industries that trade heavily on gendered notions could reveal whether such conflicts are partially responsible for design practitioners' apparent reluctance to reflect on and question gender values embedded within their practice.

Conclusion

In her discussion of feminist scholarship and women's magazines, McRobbie (1997) raises the issues of design and content. She argued that there does not seem to be anyone who has studied '… the people who put these pages together…[and] it would also be necessary to ask the writers and designers what it is they think they are doing. What is their relationship to feminism? How aware are they of its influence?' (p. 206). This paper attempts to respond to these concerns by highlighting design practitioners' tendency to 'design' the audience in their production of commercial online portals targeting female users.

The BEME.com case study reveals how design practitioners do not consider gender as a problem, but rather within the commercial world of business and profit making, it is seen as a commercially reliable guide to understanding users. In the pressured daily routine of design practice, reliance on such 'safe solutions' may seem like a sensible approach but this does not necessarily equate to responsible design practice. Whilst there are voices within the design discipline that call for reassessment of such an approach, the commercial world positions design expertise in a very particular instrumental way, limiting its ability to lead on change. In spite of the late 1990s witnessing changes in design approach and targeting of female readers of women's magazines, none of these break with the gendered modus operandi in terms of design. This means that no matter how many or how much individual designers might support alternative approaches to the targeting of female users and believe that the Internet is a vehicle to promote such change, the overall relationship between the client and the designer remains conservative and practitioners are more often cast in a role of 'acting out' pre-determined content and intentions. Furthermore, as Oudshoorn et al. (2004) suggest, the reliance on 'I-methodology' inhibits design practitioners' understanding of their target audience. BEME.com is a classic example of that process; from a visually interesting yet meaningless site for 'all women', a mid-point re-design renders it a portal addressing a supposedly homogenous group of simply 'young, preferably white middle-class women'. Through exploration of the case study, it is apparent that design practitioners do not question the gender assumptions they are asked to interpret. Furthermore, in the case of BEME.com, the design outcome is further prejudiced by the predominance of men on the design team. Even when the two members of the team in creative decision-making positions (the editorial/creative director and the senior producer) are female, their working context does not encourage active questioning of gender assumptions (See Rommes (2002) for further discussion). Rather, the male designers are in positions of power to integrate their personal assumptions. At no point is this perspective questioned by any member of the team, since it complies with traditional values propagated by the women's magazines publishing industry. By translating these ideological stances into everyday products, they validate and reiterate these gendered structures.

In addition to the need for designers to question their implicit knowledge, the ever growing focus on online interactivity emphasises the role users play in co-designing Internet sites. Attention to this and creating design

outcomes which focus on particular needs of female users in combination with innovative e-commerce strategies promise greater success than current solutions. Furthermore, today's designers cannot ignore the growing influence of ICT as a tool of cultural production, an arena in which female audiences have already demonstrated active participation. Finally, understanding the design process as an exclusive interaction between 'ideal' user, designer and client is far too simplistic and does not acknowledge other factors that can make or break a design outcome. If acknowledged early on within the design process, awareness of social, cultural and political factors can lead to more informed design outcomes based on strategies of inclusion. In light of this, design practice for the Internet can be conceived as having an open invitation to individually and collectively reflect on and effect, design outcomes that are not simply based on gendered understandings of everyday life.

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