

# Design and Women's Expectations of WWW Experience

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## INTRODUCTION

Development of the World Wide Web (WWW) prompted a flurry of research investigating women's participation in the creation, production, and use of online technologies. Initial studies focused on trends in female users' participation rather than investigating the role of design in these processes (Pattanaik, 1999). Web design practice was rarely a focus. This article presents findings from my PhD research, which applies feminist and design theory to critique Web design. Focusing on a commercial UK based women's portal, BEME.com, I examine the value of Web design practice to female users and their expectations of online interaction. I describe the type of experience BEME.com intended for its female users, as outlined by the design team during interviews. Interviews with the production team were conducted two years after the design was completed, making them reflective in nature. Alongside interviews with the intended target audience, the aim is to highlight disparities between design intentions and female users' expectations.

## BACKGROUND

Encouraging the discipline to review its position on gender and design, Buckley (1989) argued that design is implicated in maintaining patriarchal power relations. She warns that "female stereotypes [materialised in design practice] delineate certain modes of behaviour as being appropriate for women." (p. 252) Similarly, Whiteley, (1993) says "market-led design" represents ... women in a sexist way, and ... disregards women as end-users" (p. 137). Buckley (1989) observes that "[t]hese stereotypes have had enormous impact on the physical spaces "... which women occupy their occupations, and their relationship with design" (p. 252). On the other

hand, Forty (1986) maintains that design practice offers a paradox where design practitioners are in charge of what they do and yet they are also willing or unwitting agents of ideology. Julier (2000) observes design practice role in defining consumption, making it active and passive, meaningful and meaningless all at the same time. He highlights design practice involvement in "... refining and controlling ... patterns of meaning which pass from production to consumption" (p. 64).

Matlow (1999) advocates that new technologies are symptomatic of a paradigm shift from "modernist graphic design towards [a] fragmented postmodern approach." (in Warwick, 1999, p. 15); a shift illustrated by "... movement away from rigid structures and principles to the transparent and ephemeral which exists for the most part within virtual dimensions." (Warwick, 1999, p. 15) Matlow (1999) believes that this shift in relation to gender "... can illuminate professional and individual [design] practice" (in Warwick, 1999, p. 15). Thus, I argue, the relationship between gender and design within the context of the WWW is at a crossroads. On one hand, research has highlighted the conservative gendered approach to design for the WWW (Martinson, Schwartz, & Vaughan, 2002). On the other hand, the opportunity is ripe to investigate alternative ways to tackle gender (Spilker & Sørensen, 2000). There is a particular need to "... [assess] the deliberate, accidental, and alternative technological decisions and design-processes which, when implemented, form the interface between the network and its users" seeking "... to offer more complex, more problematized findings" (Silver, 2000, p. 24-25). Such an approach allows this study to go beyond mere description of the WWW and investigate the relationship between gender and design practice within an online context.

The BEME.com case study provides the opportunity to examine a portal developed directly from

the women's magazine publishing tradition. A product of publishing company IPC Media (UK), which specialises in what are referred to as traditional women's magazines (including Marie Claire and Woman's Own). Its development in 1999 responds to an online industries boom at the end of the 1990s. The life-span of BEME.com—with its launch in 2000 and its closure only a year later—partially reflects the fortunes of Internet businesses more generally which, following initial commercialisation is threatened by economic collapse in 2001. The way in which the site design responds to these circumstances is revealing of the relationship between design processes, gender ideologies, and the commercial context.

The original design of BEME.com is slick, uncluttered, and thematically structured with a vertical layout, distinguishing it from other women's portals. The content and editorially driven BEME.com "brand" is given priority over an e-commerce led strategy. However, at the beginning of 2001, limited commercial success triggers a redesign strengthening its connection to paper magazines and to other women's portals. When this redesign does not generate sufficient advertising revenue and the site closed in August 2001. Its demise is attributed to its relatively late emergence in the dot-com boom as well as to the question of whether an editorially driven niche portal is the best way to attract female users. That notwithstanding, BEME.com is a site where ideologies, history and tradition materialise in the design process and artefact. Disparities between the intentions of the design team for the site and expectations of female users alert us to the issues affecting design attempting to reconcile a critical agenda with both gender structures and commercial imperatives.

## INTENTIONS OF DESIGN TEAM

The intentions of the site, as expressed by the design team, fall into four main categories: corporate, visual, emotional, and women-focused intentions.

### Corporate Intentions

Corporate Intentions relate to the public side of BEME.com—the aim to construct a unique brand.

The male brand designer recalled that the best way to respond to today's online female user was to recognise her multifaceted identity. Hence, the intended "BE ME" experience was driven by the notion of "AND" or "BOTH" rather than an approach where readers subscribe to "ONE" ideal like the "Cosmo girl" or the "ELLE woman."

Nonetheless, corporate intentions were based on interpretations of what was already available for female users and what was on offer was based on interpretations of existing gender structures and stereotypes (Beetham, 1996). However, BEME.com did not put forward a straightforward interpretation of gender but offered a contradictory mixture of approaches. For example, the female editorial/creative director describes female users as both "...pathetic and clever, funny and serious, gorgeous and beastly, silly and thoughtful, glamorous and insecure" (D-CP1, l. 18-24). In her interview, she insisted that BEME.com's design was based on non-stereotypical representations of female users. While one could argue that her mention of "pathetic *and* clever, funny *and* serious ..." is anti-stereotypical. A radical feminist analysis also criticises 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 resulted in its dilution (Winship, 2002, p. 37). My research suggests that BEME.com's corporate intentions perpetuated the contradictory values (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer, & Hebron, 1991) that have for 200 years secured commercial profit for the women's magazine publishing industry.

## Visual Intentions

For BEME.com to sustain interest, the site needed to bring together interesting and relevant content, which meant a complex multi-level portal design. The male brand designer believed that this complexity required it to be intuitive and simple, with enjoyable layouts made relevant to female users by focusing on their daily lives (examples of which are unfortunately unavailable due to the site's closure). The visual language aimed to offer new, snappy, and easily accessible experiences with expandable con-

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