

Chapter 22

Commerce and Gender Generating Interactive Spaces for Female Online Users

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ABSTRACT

Internet technology presented the women's magazine industry with new prospects for publishing and user interaction. The case of BEME.com, the UK online commercial portal targeting female users, exemplifies the tendency for a commercial context to trade in and on gender stereotypes instead of pursuing opportunities for novel conceptions of interaction with users. Contemporary design practices together with a feminist framework are drawn on to explore these issues. It is argued that although design managers and producers might have been aware of the Internet potential to foster new forms of interactive spaces for female users, these advances did not fit within the existing business models of commercial portals. The notions of "becoming" and "user interaction" are suggested as alternative approaches to the development of female oriented Internet portals.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the women's magazine publishing industry has traded in and on gender. Its goals and successes are measured by commercial standards where gender stereotypes define its inherent nature, communicate meanings, and users' perception of what is being sold. Although it is not the only example, the business success of this interplay between commerce and gender owes a great deal to

the highly sophisticated visual language developed through years of design practices and enhanced by the adoption of computer-based publishing. In the past decade, magazine publishers have expanded into the realm of the World Wide Web exploring novel opportunities for online user interaction.

It is argued that interaction has been a key component of the women's magazine publishing industry. Whether in terms of inviting contributions from female readership, engaging readers in competitions, responding to readers' questions and issues in advice columns, these tools of social

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interaction have informed notions of communities of readers and readership based on brand loyalty. However, the extent to which this interaction and brand-driven commercial model has also relied on, but moreover perpetuated, gender stereotypes has been the subject of considerable debate (Attfield, 1989; Gauntlett, 2002; McRobbie, 1999).

This chapter investigates Internet spaces defined as commercial portals targeting female users and their role in developing online social interactions. In particular, the intention is to illuminate the impact of a commercial context on the generation of novel interactive spaces for female Internet users. Against the backdrop of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 growth, the case of BEME.com provides an opportunity to examine an online space developed directly out of the women's magazine publishing tradition in the United Kingdom. A product of IPC Media, one of the leading U.K. consumer magazine publishers which specialises in what are referred to as traditional women's magazines (including *Marie Claire* and *Woman's Own*), the portal's development in 1999 and launch in February 2000 was a direct response to an electronic commerce boom of that time. Initially, it was somewhat unusual in that developing BEME.com content and editorially driven brand was given priority over an e-commerce profit-driven strategy. However, at the beginning of 2001, limited commercial success triggered a redesign, strengthening its connection to a traditional woman's magazine industry approach. When these hasty measures failed to generate sufficient advertising revenue, BEME.com was closed in August 2001.

The chapter highlights how a traditional commercial print publishing concept has maintained a stronghold on the idea of interaction in an online environment. Whilst Web 2.0 technology has presented new possibilities for interaction, this new technology - even in latest commercial portals targeting female users - is not widely applied, and designers of commercial online spaces intended to attract female users do not seem capable or willing to break with gendered visual norms.

Contemporary design and Internet practices and a feminist framework provide illuminative lenses with which to explore these issues. The data used in support of this argument derives from the author's doctoral research asserting the potential of online portal design to offer alternative ways of communicating to female users in order to resist and combat the gendered status quo.

BACKGROUND

Beetham (1996) argues that women's magazines are situated at the crossroads of the following agendas: "money, public discourse and individual desire" (p. 2). As the Internet entered the women's publishing industry, it did so against a broader background which questioned the potential of this technology to facilitate social interactions amongst its female readership. On the one hand, Spender (1995) claimed that Internet technology was close to the core values of femininity and Braidotti (1996) contended that it "enables a transgression of the dichotomous categories of male and female, constructing transgender or even genderless human identities and relations" (as cited in van Zoonen, 2002, p. 6). On the other hand, Wakeford (1997) argued for recognition of the opportunities of becoming connected but believed that stereotypes tend to overshadow the creative and political uses to which female users have adapted the Internet. Pohl (1997) concluded that whether or not women find specific places or ways to behave or interact on the Internet, these would always be gendered: "Gender-specific behaviour can be found on two levels. The first is the actual behaviour of the Internet users, and the second focuses on the stereotypes and images people have" (Pohl, 1997, p. 193). Indeed, evident within commercial women's portals are conceptualisations of social interaction defined as female consumption opportunities underpinned by gender stereotypes. Weale (2000) observed that this is "one of the key differences in the

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