The Contribution of Communication Design to Encourage Gender Equality

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ABSTRACT

Gender divide is currently at the heart of the international debate, "Achieve gender equality" is the fifth goal of the *ONU Agenda 2030*. From a communication design perspective, the issue concerns women's representation in the media and the repercussions it has in reinforcing stereotypes. Mediascape in Italy still plays a crucial part in conveying stereotyped models that influence personal and collective identity, in this context communication designers have to intervene to develop new tools to change the ways of consuming and distributing images. This paper is focused on the ongoing research and experimentation activities conducted by the research group DCXCG - *Communication Design for Gender Studies*. Its main goal is to offer a critical view of the forms of representation of gender and to support new communication models in the educational context. The aim is to show where and how communication design can intervene on the streotype vicious circle. This could be a contribution in generating positive actions and a step towards gender equality.

Key Words: Gender Equality - Communication Design – Visual Criticism

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper faces the issue of the representation of woman from a communication design perspective, by examinating the roles and contributions that the Communication Design has in the educational field, specifically in training future designers. A particular attention should be paid to the disciplinary contribution of communication design and the opportunities for relations and integrations between the domain of visual cultures and that of social sciences represented by gender studies. Gender divide has deep roots, it assumes different shapes depending on places, cultures and societies and it is closely related to the cultural and social dimension of Communication Design, how images are produced, distributed, and how people consume them creating models and behaviours. Theoretical contributions are represented mainly by essays from sociology and philosophy: Goffmann (1979), de Beauvoir (1949), Arendt (1989) and from the theory of representation, visual culture and semiotics: Berger (1972), Mitchell (2008), Volli (2002), Zingale (2012), Eco (2011) and from design theory: Schön (1983), Kolb (1984).

The *ONU Agenda 2030* points out the central position of the gender issues in the international debate, and puts gender equality in the first places of the sustainability goals to reach by 2030: "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls [...], end all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere". The picture of 2018 painted by the "*Global Gender Gap Report*" still shows an alarming situation, in which Italy occupies the 70th place on 149 countries. In this context advertising and marketing, and in a broader sense the communication project, are at the center of a responsibility system (Calasanti T, Tech V., 2007) as reflections of a culture but also agents which contribute to create it. This was reiterated in the *European Parliament Resolution* (3rd September 2008, 2008/2038(INI)), about the impact advertising and marketing have on the equality between men and women. As Camussi and Monacelli reaffirm in "*Questioni sul corpo in psicologia sociale*", mass media play a crucial role in building and perpetuating the culture of sexual objectification: they propose female and male images that will consequently be borrowed from most of the social actors. From a communication design perspective the issue mainly concerns the representation of women in the media and the contribution of the images themselves in confirming and strengthening gender stereotypes. Communication design is actually the area of the project that "gives form" to the content, it acts on the content itself and its mode of representation to develop objects, visual and communicative systems which enable the passage of contents by "putting them in the picture" and thereby make them available.

2. GENDER STEREOTYPES AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Media images are always vehicle for explicit or implicit messages and they very often communicate by models and stereotypes to be immediately recognizable and understandable to the social groups to which they are adressed. The term stereotype indicates the generalization of a simplified image of the reality due to limits of knowledge. "The stereotype is configured as commonplace and it can have both positive or negative features" (Capecchi, 2018). Barthes wrote about the definition of commonplace: "what counts is the evidence of the (already a thousand times) heard; it follows that a very coded form, like a proverb, may seem original to me, if I don't know it yet. The "cliché" and the "stereotype", [...] insisting on the mobile character of the production, denote the repetition of the form rather than that of the content".

In this context the role of media is not to create stereotypes, but to confirm and strengthen them. As stated in the "*Anticorpi Comunicativi*" preface, advertising communication is not the place that creates stereotypes, but the place that amplifies the existing ones, strengthening them in an instrumental way with images and riding on the sensibilities of the cultural climate in which they are placed. In "*Questioni sul corpo in psicologia sociale*" Camussi and Monacelli reiterate how media models contribute to activate gender stereotypes that, in turn, are responsible for defining schemes of self, going so far as to condition both cognitive resources and emotional reactions in the face of sexist statements. Social reality and media representation are part of a vicious circle in which the media are at the same time a faithful and deforming mirror of reality (Baule, 2012), they draw on already consolidated models and return them stronger and amplified. The dynamic of the stereotype is therefore not unidirectional but circular. When an individual adopts stereotypical beliefs towards a target category and these beliefs are confirmed by the behaviour of one member of the group, these "retroactive evidences feed and make even more secure the initial beliefs of those who possess such stereotypes" (Capecchi, 2018). According to the *Stereotype Threat Theory* formulated by Aronson & Steele in 1997, "the existence of such a stereotype means that anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes". Starting from these premises we wanted to outline the media process implemented by stereotypes (*figure 1*). The aim was to fix the crucial steps with the help of a notational system, to facilitate the deconstruction of the phenomenon and thereby to understand the role of communication design within the overall process. The ultimate purpose was to recognize the most appropriate spaces where acting to reorient the flow.
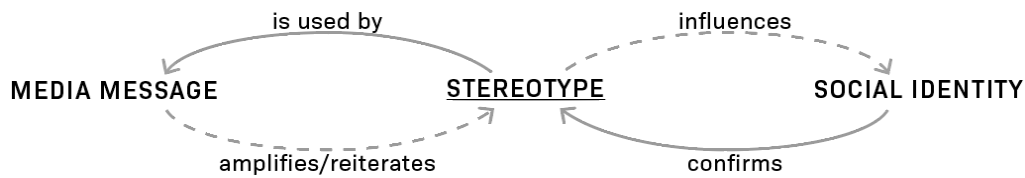
[Figure 1] *Representation of the vicious circle of gender stereotypes*

Stereotype is placed at the center of the scheme, social identity and the media message at the poles, highlighting the mechanism of self-feeding (or positive feedback) which results in the reiteration and amplification of the stereotype. Stereotype itself acts in turn on social identity by directing it and influencing the construction of individual and collective biographies.

From a sustainability perspective communication design can take part of the process on two levels.

2.1. Through the design of the media message

The first level concerns choices and design methods put in place to arrive at the definition of the communicative artworks. The choices of the communication designer (whether they are aware or not) inevitably fall on the perception that the receivers have of reality. Hence the need to train responsible and conscious designers, capable of understanding and restoring the complexity of reality in order to cheat (Zingale, 2012) gender stereotypes; and the need for critical reflections on the use of expressive registers, rhetorical models, tools that the theory of directing construction and staging make available to designers.

2.2. Education for critical reading of media messages

The second level takes into account the role that design can play in raising awareness of gender issues and in educating to a critical reading of the media landscape in which we are immersed. Through its design activities, it is the communication designer who is able and responsible for producing artworks that support awareness, awareness raising and user training. The visual alphabetisation of the receiver is essential in order to be aware of what he/she is watching and to be able to exercise a critical reading of the media message. Taking up the idea of "antibody", the designer can act on the design thought and on the culture of the subject who uses the media message, to help make him/her "immune" to gender stereotypes. In this direction, visual cultures can give their contribution in terms of criticism, awareness and information, as well as responses to the need to rethink the formats and rules of visual communication.

These two spheres are necessarily related to each other and, in the scientific field, research, design and teaching merge. The research work and experimental activities of DCxCG - *Communication Design for Gender Cultures*, a research group born at Politecnico di Milano, within the Department of Design- find place in this framework. The group carries out a process of systematization of research about the representation of women in the media and a work of experimentation on activities that can stimulate the social responsibility of Communication Design also in the educational field. The aim the group claims is "to point out several aspects of the research: the assumption of different methods and methodologies; the value of experimental activities as an integrative part of basic research; the need of building tools for reflection and media education beyond stereotypes and reconstituted visual models".

3. EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNICATION DESIGN

In 2015 the first course of "*Communication Design and Gender Cultures*" was introduced, adresseed to students of the master's degree from the Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano. It is a transversal course, open to students from the areas of communication, product, interiors, fashion, pssd. The aim is to raise the awareness of future designers on gender issues from the communication design perspective, using a multimodal educational approach (blended learning); for instance activities aimed at strengthening the critical capabilities of students and equipping them with tools that encourage deconstructive processes and responsible design processes. In order to achieve this objective, we worked to create an experiential dimension of learning that integrates theory and practice in line with Kolb's *Learning Theory*, with the final output of a communication project (or the detailed definition of the concept) aimed at sensitising/awareness-raising on a specific aspect related to gender stereotypes and female representation in the media.

From a comparison with the *Pyramid of Active Learning* (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) the course is structured in different modules associated to different purposes and methods, which represent 4 pillars for educational activities.

3.1. Lectures (to remember, understand)

The lectures are aimed at providing the theoretical basis for a critical reading of media images and the tools for deconstructing gender stereotypes. Through the presentation of and discussion about both negative case studies of gender communication and virtuous cases, the student understands the context and develops those "antibodies" useful, as a designer but also a consumer of communication, to take a conscious and critical point of view. The frontal lessons, resuming the *Pyramid of Active Learning*, are mainly placed on the first two steps: "remember - recognizing and recalling facts" and "understand - understanding what the facts mean".

3.2. Side activities (to apply, analyze, evaluate)

In order to activate the students to equip-themselves with tools for observation and critical reading of the context in which we live, side activities to be conducted independently have been experimented. One of the activities was the development of a personal diary about gender issues aimed at the careful and critical observation of the daily context and in particular of the media landscape in which we are constantly immersed, paying attention to both the explicit and the implicit. The outputs of side activities converge in moments of debate and confrontation, which allow to bring to light useful inputs and to open new areas of observation and reflection. The diary tool was aimed at stimulating self-reflection and careful observation of the context in which we live.

3.3. Field observation (to apply, analyze)

The phenomenological observation and analysis of the reference background is aimed at investigating more circumscribed and specific aspects concerning modalities and forms of representation of women in the media. It is a structured research activity, aimed at collecting and sampling data using different exploratory methods, going deeper in terms of the amount of collected data. The purpose is to place media images at the centre of a re-examination and deconstruct the stereotypes isolating recurrences and analogies. The concrete application of tools and methods for deconstruction and analysis of gender stereotypes lays the foundations for responsible design choices able to trick the commonplace, interrupting the vicious circle.

3.4. Design output (to evaluate, create)

The final phase of the course involves the design of a communicative artefact through which to reassemble recurrences and evidence emerged from the research, in order to produce a communicative action in shape of critical synthesis. By exploiting the potential of the <u>artefact</u> dimension it is also possible to promote processes of sensitization and awareness. These are therefore actions that can both operate on design thinking, if addressed to designers, and – albeit to varying degrees - talk to the target of communication increasing its visual culture. To better document the training programme described, some examples that may constitute case studies are given below. These are three projects that deal with gender stereotypes in different ways. In the first two cases (4.1 and 4.2) the subject of the analysis is the nature of the media images observed by assuming two different thematic centers (some media products for girls and communicative products from the publishing sector in the field of technology) while in the third case (4.3) behaviourally stereotypical acted by men and women in the use of technology are examined.

4. DEVELOPING ANTIBODIES THROUGH THE PROJECT: THREE CASE STUDIES

4.1. *"The phenomenon of tweening – coss-mediality in Violetta, Barbie and Winx"*

The work examines the phenomenon of *tweening* focusing on the representation of female figures in three case studies: Violetta, Barbie and Winx. The term *tweening* refers to the phenomenon of early adolescence, in terms of communication it concerns all those products, TV programs, advertisments, adressed to kids aged 6 to 10 years but that report the features (attitudes, poses, references) of products for teenagers. The project path was articulated according to the following model:
- the collection of visual material (images and videos) relating to the case studies, which led to an archive of images from different media;
- the deconstruction of stereotypes, obtained through an operation of sampling and isolation of visual recurrences, which allowed to implement the tools and capabilities of critical interpretation of the media message;
- the operation of critical re-reading and reassembly was obtained by designing a kinetic artwork (a video) based on the editing of the scenes and images collected, which has the dual function of summarizing the research and raising awareness of the theme. The video editing uses hyperbola as a rhetorical figure, exasperating the concept of reiteration of media images in a reinforcing dimension, in order to denounce the nature of the phenomenon. What has been obtained is therefore a communication tool useful to make evident visual features and reusable in different contexts with awareness-raising objectives.

4.2. *"Thech(wo)men – denounce to the exploitation of the female image perpetrated by technological masculineism"*

This case concerns the representation of the female figure in the major magazines about technology. The first phases of the research were dedicated to the collection, sampling and observation of data, in this case a qualitative and quantitative analysis was carried out on the female figures found in the examined magazines. After a process of isolation of the salient features and visual recurrences, it emerged that the female figures collected were depicted according to expressive codes typical of the pornosoft universe, a parallel, that would make explicit the overlaps, was therefore created. The female figures represented on the covers collected from the technological field in fact shown some typical traits of the pornography sphere: plastic poses, shots, forms, mise en place, etc. The reassembly operation was based, in this case, on a flipping scheme, a "counter-narration" was developed through an overturning strategy. Materials have been reassembled to trigger a reflection on the theme of the woman objectification, assumed to be "ornament" or "object-display" when it comes to technology. In concrete terms, the final output consists of a web page of denounciation in which the protagonist is the mechanism of overturning. Through a scroll bar it is possible to slide some female figures, taken both from Playboy and from the magazines under study, on covers characterized only by the title (Playboy, T3, Jack...). The representations of women thus become interchangeable and scrolling through the different titles no longer allow the viewer to understand where they come from, making quite evident the spread of pronosoft as a transversal modality.

4.3. *"Hack the Stereotype – a format to talk about gender gap in STEMS"*

The third case study differs from the previous ones because it shifts the attention from the woman representation in the media to the acted behaviors in approaching the STEM subjects, specifically coding. Drawing from methods characteristic of the field of anthropology, the project has been developed according to the following scheme:
- participatory observation activities,
- deconstruction and analysis of the participants attitudes,
- isolation of recurrent behaviours representative of gender differences,
- reassembly of the results through the design of a communication artefact.

The participatory observation was conducted with a group of students of communication design who were asked to carry out an elementary programming activity according to given indications. After a brief explanation of some coding notions, the nine participants were divided into three groups heterogeneous by sex, and they were asked on the basis of what they were explained earlier to program a simple web page. The activity was shooted in order to analyze similarities and behavioural differences between men and women. In this case, the attitudes of males and females and the roles they assumed within the teamwork were isolated and sampled. What emerged in terms of content confirms the tendency to consider coding as a predominantly male matter "by nature". The individual attitudes were reassembled in a video in order to make them evident. This video has a dual function: to raise awareness among young people and to visualize the research.

The three cases were identified as representative of different research methods and kind of design outputs recurring during the course and aimed at practical experimentation and implementation of useful tools for conscious design. The aim is to train designers who are able to make responsible choices not only in the academic territory but also and especially in the workplace, where the communicative actions planned have a greater resonance and a real impact on the group of individuals who receive the message.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Through the exposition of the activity developed in the didactic field, the paper intends to underline the roles communication design plays against the vicious circle of gender stereotypes, focusing on the importance of training responsible designers. In a still alarming picture from the point of view of the representation of women in the media, the meaning we give to the concept of sustainable design concerns the quality of the impact that communication design has on social identity, specifically in terms of gender equality. The cases depicted show how it is possible to move towards a culturally and socially sustainable design model, and highlight the need to foster opportunities for discussion and confrontation in order to strengthen methods and experiment with new tools that communication design can provide to contribute to the achievement of gender equality. The paper was therefore intended to prove that In this context communication design is at the centre of a responsibility system. The aim is to strengthen its contribution to generate positive actions, lifelong learning and active encouragement towards a design that is culturally and socially "sustainable". The activity presented can be considered a first step to develop educational activities aimed at building a solid and conscious visual culture. The DCXCG research group works in this direction, experimenting with didactic models that can stimulate the social responsibility and improve the "antibodies" of the designer, based on a multidisciplinary dimension which includes the domain of humanities and social sciences.

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