FRANCESCA CASNATI

COMMUNICATION DESIGNERS FOR FAIRNESS

A FEMINIST MODEL TO ACTIVATE GENDER DE-BIASING PATHS

ESSAY BY
VALERIA BUCCHETTI

DESIGN DELLA COMUNICAZIONE | SAGGI OPEN ACCESS | 08

Design della comunicazione

La collana Design della comunicazione nasce per far emergere la densità del tessuto disciplinare che caratterizza questa area del progetto e per dare visibilità alle riflessioni che la alimentano e che ne definiscono i settori, le specificità, le connessioni. Nel grande sviluppo della cultura mediatica la presenza del Design della comunicazione è sempre più trasversale e in continua espansione. La comunicazione richiede un sapere progettuale là dove la cultura si fa editoria, dove i sistemi di trasporto si informatizzano, dove il prodotto industriale e i servizi entrano in relazione con l'utente. Il Design della comunicazione è in azione nella grande distribuzione dove il consumatore incontra la merce, nella musica, nello sport, nello spettacolo, nell'immagine delle grandi manifestazioni come nella loro diffusione massmediale. La collana è un punto di convergenza in cui registrare riflessioni, studi, temi emergenti; è espressione delle diverse anime che compongono il mondo della comunicazione progettata e delle differenti componenti disciplinari a esso riconducibili. Oggetto di studio è la dimensione artefattuale, in tutti i versanti del progetto di comunicazione: grafica editoriale, editoria televisiva, audiovisiva e multimediale, immagine coordinata d'impresa, packaging e comunicazione del prodotto, progettazione dei caratteri tipografici, web design, information design, progettazione dell'audiovisivo e dei prodotti interattivi, dei servizi e dei sistemi di comunicazione complessa, quali social network e piattaforme collaborative.
Accanto alla dimensione applicativa, l'attenzione editoriale è rivolta anche alla riflessione teorico-critica, con particolare riguardo alle discipline semiotiche, sociologiche e massmediologiche che costituiscono un nucleo portante delle competenze del designer della comunicazione.
La collana si articola in due sezioni. I SAGGI accolgono contributi teorici dai diversi campi disciplinari intorno all'area di progetto, come un'esplorazione sui fondamenti della disciplina. Gli SNODI ospitano interventi di raccordo disciplinare con il Design della comunicazione.

Francesca Casnati
Communication designers for fairness
A feminist model to activate gender de-biasing paths

Essay by Valeria Bucchetti

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Contents

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Communication Design and Gender Cultures
Disciplinary identity and interconnections

1. Time and context

There are subjects that embody the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time, and *gender-sensitive* communication, in this sense, does not merely reflect a cultural trend of our era but corresponds to a need: the necessity to bridge a gap that has arisen, particularly between the representation of women in the media sphere and the reality that concerns them, in the many aspects that define their identity. We operate within a framework densely populated by *iconic acts* that, through their messages, hinder the path toward a more equal society.[1] These acts, all too often, fall into the lower part of the gender-based violence iceberg – those subtle and invisible manifestations that contribute to sustaining a 'system of images' rooted in a sexist culture. A culture that has grown out of a model of hypertrophic communication, one that has spread an amplified and misrepresented fixed portrayal of women, obsessively repeating it. This portrayal has been locked into a dominant *cliché*, incapable of reflecting the complexity and multifaceted roles of women in society.

More broadly, it is essential to emphasize that the communicative context, which we continuously expand with every text-icon we produce, is marked by hypervisibility. This hypervisibility appears to have firmly rooted itself in what Fulvio Carmagnola described as the *era of the all-visible*, where «the power of visibility is besieged by its own visibility»[2] (author's translation). Density and pervasiveness, amplified by the internet's ability to redistribute and expand the 'space' of visibility, give rise to phenom-

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1. See what has been reiterated and brought to the attention of the Member States of the European Union: Resolution of the European Parliament of September 3, 2008, on the impact of marketing and advertising on gender equality (2008/2038(INI)); Resolution of the European Parliament of April 17, 2018, on gender equality in the media sector in the European Union (2017/2210(INI)).
2. See F. Carmagnola, *Visibilità*, 1989, p. 9.

ena that overwhelm us: *communicative overload*, *information overload*,[3] and even *image overload*. These factors, taken together, inevitably lead to an overall intensification of communicative performance, underpinning an idea of competition as a necessary condition to escape invisibility. This increasingly frantic race to emerge from the undifferentiated flow places us within what Giovanni Anceschi described as the *multisensory clamor of civilization*[4] and what Luigi Zoja, with an even harsher perspective, referred to as *psychic rape*.[5]

We are all confronted with images that perpetuate discriminatory messages based on gender, depicting women as sexual objects through faces and bodies that conform to predetermined aesthetic standards rooted in male and heteronormative ideals. These representations are enhanced by overt forms of manipulation, such as framing, perspectives, and the posing of subjects, as well as the emphasis on anatomical details and photo editing, which promote an idea of formal perfection bordering on myth.[6] But not only that, there is another category of images, those rooted in an androcentric perspective where men are seen as the "human standard" and women as the "other". These images reinforce and sustain male dominance in society, perpetuating gender inequality by concealing the masculinity of the male gender behind a so-called *neutral standard*.[7] These are images that embody a principle of *separation*, where the male and female are divided according to opposing principles. This division is tied to a *hierarchical framework* that positions the masculine as the *norm* encompassing the world, while the feminine is defined instead as a *deviation from that norm*.[8] This is a widely studied phenomenon that goes by the name of *male as norm* (MAN), *universal masculinity* or *man as default*,[9] and

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3. *Information Overload* – or informational overload – began to be discussed in 1996, when Reuters commissioned a study titled 'Dying for Information?' during which interviewees described the effects of information overload, which resulted in compromised work performance. By extension, we can refer to an overload generated by images, leading to a metaphorical blurring of our vision. For this interpretation, see: V. Bucchetti, 2021.

4. See G. Anceschi, 1999, p. 14.

5. See L. Zoja, 2018, p. 120.

6. Cfr. M. Niola, 2012.

7. Cfr.: S.L. Bem, 1993; A.H. Bailey; M. La France and J.F. Dovidio, 2019. See also V. Bucchetti, 2021.

8. See V. Bucchetti, 2022.

9. Cfr. H. Kotthoff and R. Wodak, 1997.

which quite often, as Alma Sabatini[10] stated, is an expression of a 'false neutrality' of the masculine when passing off as universal what is only man's. In other words, we are facing forms of representation in which the feminine is implicated as *alterity* and whose effects spill over into every sphere of our social and cultural dimension, in the form of *exclusionary matrices*[11] that contribute to fuelling inequality and gender inequalities, which nullify the existence of identities themselves or harness them, stiffen them, confine them, thus giving rise to crystallised and stereotypical sets (Bucchetti 2022).

2. Communication Design and social responsibility

At the core of the discourse, therefore, we cannot fail to consider the role played by communication design and its responsibilities. Through the design of artefacts, cultural contents are defined, a relationship with images is developed involving the direct implication of the media in the reflexive process of the self and in the construction of social reality. By providing images, fragments of images, iconic elements, the media are influential in the understanding of the individual's role in society and in the determination of an aesthetic and ethical universe, implicitly transferring profound questions: "What do I like about myself and others? What are the rights and duties as a male or as a female? On the basis of what do I feel intelligent, or skilled, or beautiful?". As Jean-Marie Floch would say, what is being recalled is the level of the relations between the values *reproduced* by the image and the values *produced* by the image, which, by acting subtly, generate forms of devaluation, humiliation, invisibility and contempt for women, through unfair and degrading stereotypical images, anchored in limiting models, incapable not only of restoring the complexity of the contemporaneity they wish to refer to, but also of merely alluding to it. These images, which should be part of a remote past, seem on the opposite side to continually regenerate their own clichés: *Women-bottles* by assonance of curves, women's bodies used as a unit of measurement

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10. This refers to the 1987 text, written for the *Commissione Nazionale per la parità e le pari opportunità tra uomo e donna*.

11. See V. Bucchetti, 2022.

to describe the tactile qualities of materials, whether plastic surfaces or foodstuffs, female hands whose touch, as Erving Goffman observed, charges any object with sensuality; women as object-holders holding the most disparate goods, charging them with desirability, women portrayed with orgasmic expressions always ready to express pleasure. But also passive women, depicted in the background intent on observing in admiration the amazing tasks performed by a leading man, women engaged in secondary or domestic roles, relegated to expressing feelings of care or compassion.

Dealing with these issues means considering the several manifestations of immaterial domination which, as is well known, are among the most powerful and which act on the market of symbols in the absence of physical constraint, just as is the case, in an invasive and widespread form, for the media order. Forms of immaterial domination that belong to the sphere of symbolic violence, which permeate the socio-cultural dimension and which presuppose, as Bourdieu asserted (author's translation), «a social relationship in which the "dominator" exercises on the "dominated" forms of indirect violence, acted through the imposition of a certain vision of the world, social roles, cognitive categories and mental structures».[12] Expressions of domination that pass through the *male gaze*,[13] a gaze exercised by men in which women see themselves through their eyes, internalise male expectations, seeking to please them and to adhere to the image that the male has of them.

In this process, which acts by reiteration and concatenation, the function that discourse and language play within the media – and visual language in particular – is a pivotal function, exercised through the re-proposition of models that act as amplifiers of social conventions and affect the acquisition of behaviour and practices.

Mirzoeff in his text *How to See the World* reminds us that we represent what we see and know on screens that accompany us everywhere, and it is precisely the relationship between what we see, the images we feed on,

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12. See P. Bourdieu, *Il dominio maschile*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1998.

13. The *male gaze* is the erotic desire through which, in the history of art and media, the representation of women has been filtered, reducing them to an 'object of vision.' See also S. de Beauvoir (1949), A. Heller (2017).

according to a form of *iconophagy*,[14] that needs to be investigated. When we refer to stereotypes we are talking, as is well known, about a phenomenon that is self-feeding, that self-produces positive feedback and that results in the repetition and amplification of the stereotype itself.[15] And it is therefore fundamental to produce a reversal, to succeed in 'changing the sign' so that this trend between the two poles – construction and mirroring – is transformed and a virtuous circularity is established.[16]

Also for these reasons, the communication designer must necessarily go beyond merely recognizing their own skills and penetrate into the very core of consciousness in order to guide future behaviors. They cannot, therefore, make the mistake of acting within the space of the *commonplace* (Barthes 1979), of staying in the orbit of the stereotype that presents itself as immediately available, but which is nothing more than a fixed and unchanging impression, an expression of an ideologically oriented connotation that hardly fits the reality it claims to represent.[17] Just consider the implications this issue has in contemporary design, for example, when using *stock images* provided by image banks[18] – whose selection criteria are based on the success achieved by an image – or even more evidently, when design processes generate images through generative machine learning systems. That is, when the model is only familiar with the images and concepts within the dataset it has 'learned' from, starting with a prompt (caption) (Benjamin 2019; Broussard 2018, 2023; D'Amico 2020; D'Ignazio & Klein 2023), the significance of studies on stereotypes and *unconscious biases*, as well as the definition of the datasets themselves and their impact on the entire process, becomes clear.

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14. This is how it is defined by N. Baitello Jr. in his text *A era da iconofagia. Reflexões sobre imagem, comunicação, mídia e cultura* (2014).

15. Reference is made to the vicious circle of stereotyping argued by V. Bucchetti and F. Casnati in their essay "Icons: Normativity and Gender Inequalities" (2019).

16. Cfr. P. Montani (2010).

17. Cfr. S. Zingale (2012).

18. Cfr. M. Rossi (2022).

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3. Visual Cultures and Gender Cultures, building a research field

The transformative role of the communication designer, expressed and conveyed through the artifacts and systems they create, is to guide the choices and behaviors of the recipients, altering their perception of the reality in which they operate. This contributes to the formation of viewpoints and opinions, participating in awareness-raising processes concerning problems and emergencies. And, thanks to their directorial and mediating role, the designer has the opportunity to influence social reality. Through the design of artifacts, cultural content is defined, and a relationship with images is developed that directly involves the media in the reflective process of the self and in the construction of social reality (Resnick 2019). Therefore, we are dealing with the ability to produce and manage content and its translation. Processes that, as is well known, require both theoretical and systemic skills from an intermedial and crossmedial perspective. But also a set of knowledge concerning the solidity of managing the processes of producing 'meaning effects' and the strength of the cultural and ethical spectrum[19] (Baule and Caratti 2018; Bucchetti 2021).

If we were to examine the reasons that lead designers to so easily accept and replicate clichés, we would have to consider multiple closely related factors. Among the most obvious, on one hand, there is the issue of education, which is not always able to provide sufficient methods of discernment and cultural knowledge. On the other hand, there are emotional factors where the sharing of a common place or idea creates solidarity, commonality, and a sense of belonging to a group (Priulla 2013), often determined by the prevailing cultural context. Changing this status quo, invalidating a cliché, means having solid information and argumentative skills, but also being willing to risk the support of the group (to which one belongs or addresses). Alongside these reasons, there is also a form of cognitive immunity to anything that might jeopardize a set of opinions that, having become ingrained over time, form the foundation of our daily actions and thoughts.

It is within this framework, where the social value of communication takes on a priority role and where the communication designer must

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19. Regardless of whether the iconic utterance or communicative artefact was realised in analogue or digital form or obtained through the most advanced forms of AI.

be seen as a subject who acts for and within the community, that the research path, traced from the intersection between *communication design and gender cultures*,[20] should be situated. A path that develops by bringing into play the contributions that *Visual Cultures* can make in terms of critical knowledge and methodological approach, placing them alongside those historically developed by the *Social Sciences* and *Gender Studies*, thus giving rise to an area of study that takes shape from these disciplinary axes.

The work undertaken, which has evolved progressively, has been strengthened over the years by intersecting *research* experiences with *teaching* experiences, both aimed at developing tools to reinforce self-reflective processes and to establish a design approach centered on awareness. This orientation, in fact, reaffirms a perspective of responsibility that should be a prerequisite for communication in general, but becomes an indispensable characteristic when it involves gender issues (Bucchetti 2024), with the goal of not only overcoming but also counteracting the generation of discriminatory iconic texts and their transmission.

The field outlined is an experimental area that has developed thanks to the convergence of disciplinary interests, which allowed for the formation of a research group within the broader *communication design* group.[21] Pioneering in nature, the focus of the research has been on the relationships and responsibilities that designed communication forms have when they carry discriminatory content, hindering the path toward overcoming deeply rooted patriarchal structures.

Working in this field required, on one hand, the creation of disciplinary tools, and on the other, the *construction of networks* capable of promoting an interdisciplinary perspective essential for addressing multidimensional issues. A key role is played by the Interuniversity Research Center on Gender Cultures,[22] which was founded in 2013 and in which we participated.

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20. This term is therefore used to designate a specific field with its own centre of gravity in Communication Design, but with a continuous interdisciplinary relationship.

21. This refers to the research work in the scientific field and didactic experimentation developed by the *dcxcg* research group (http://www.dcxcg.org/) within the Department of Design and the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano, aimed at the development of critical reflections, the definition of analytical tools and the advancement of knowledge regarding the relationship between the disciplines of Communication Design and Gender Cultures.

22. The *Centro di Ricerca Interuniversitario Culture di Genere* (Interuniversity Research Centre on

This center allowed for the explicit contribution of communication design to this building of interconnections, while simultaneously fostering its disciplinary growth.

Over time, experiences have followed in which research and teaching have mutually supported each other – among these, in 2010, the seminar and workshop *Types and Stereotypes* and the conference *Communicative Antibodies*[23] – the first opportunities to develop a framework in transformed subthemes; later, in more in-depth paths, followed by numerous other activities. In the development of this field, the research-teaching relationship has marked important experimental steps, such as the introduction of a new course specifically dedicated to it – *Communication Design and Gender Cultures*[24] – the first national course to be included in a master's curriculum. There was also the activation of extracurricular training activities in which communication design becomes both a means and an end: a means because it serves as a tool for designing artifacts that communicate gender issues among peers, and thus produce advocacy actions;[25] an end for the maieutic component of the design process itself, capable of triggering a path of awareness and reflection on the topic. This was evident in the campaign designed on the topic of *digital catcalling*, which originated within the university and was aimed at its own members (Bucchetti, Ferraresi, and Magaraggia 2019), or in the *We Say Stop* project (Bucchetti and

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Gender Cultures) was set up in 2013 with the aim of giving a permanent impulse to studies, research and positive actions related to the topic of gender cultures and thus contributing to the growth and dissemination of respect for women's dignity and skills, bringing together six Milanese universities (https://www.culturedigenere.it/#homepage).

23. The workshop *Types and Stereotypes* was activated within the Degree Course in Communication Design – Politecnico di Milano –, in November 2010 (lecturer Elena Caratti, scientific supervision Valeria Bucchetti); the conference 'Communicative Antibodies. Stereotypes of gender: the contribution of communication design' in which the role of communication design within a process of social criticism was addressed, was held on 18 November 2011 at the Politecnico di Milano.

24. The course *Communication Design and Gender Cultures* was activated for the first time by the School of Design (Politecnico di Milano) in the academic year 2014-2015 (regular lecturer Valeria Bucchetti), is aimed at master's degree courses and is part of the didactic offer of the *Ambassador Inclusivity Design programme*.

25. An example is the Bracco Foundation's *Mind the Stem Gap* project for which the dcxcg research group of the Department of Design developed the framework of project activities to produce communicative actions between peers (students towards students) in order to counter the spread of stereotypes.

Casnati, 2024), designed to combat violence against women.[26] Reaching the formalization of a *manifesto for gender-sensitive communication*,[27] which includes a statement of intent and principles, available for endorsement and support. In this case, it is a document that clarifies a stance fueled by the desire to create change and act upon it, starting from the disciplinary axis of communication design.

The path outlined is one shaped by studies and theoretical reflections, design actions, and experiments that have found natural spaces for growth in doctoral research, such as that of Francesca Casnati.[28] Through her work, she has firmly taken up the baton to further develop what has been built over the years, focusing on the tools that the theory of directorial construction and staging offer to communication designers. These tools are essential when designers are called to act from a perspective of cultural innovation and *critical design* (Baule 2015: 26)

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26. The project *We say stop. Graphics to counter violence against women* has been joined by the Politecnico di Milano, which promoted it, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Politecnico di Bari, University of Campania 'Luigi Vanvitelli', University of Camerino (http://www.wesaystop.it).

27. The *Manifesto for a gender-sensitive communication from the perspective of communication design*, online from october november 2022, was created within the dcxcg research group. Scientific coordination V. Bucchetti; editorial staff: V. Bucchetti, F. Casnati, M. Rossi; it is promoted by the Interuniversity Research Centre Gender Cultures. https://www.comunicazionegendersensitive.polimi.it.

28. Reference is made to Francesca Casnati's doctoral thesis (2024) *A system of de-biasing practices for future gender-sensitive designers. Navigational tools for a step-by-step revolution*, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano (Supervisor: Prof. Valeria Bucchetti, 36th Cycle) giving substance to the preliminary work addressed by Marta Isabella Reina (2018) in her research *Communication design for gender cultures. Models and tools to explore gender issues in design education*, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano (Supervisor: Prof.ssa Valeria Bucchetti, 30th Cycle).

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packaging
spot tv
children's products
toys
tech/stem mag
tv series
stock archives
artificial intelligence
sport newspapers
sexualisation
objectifying
caring
housekeeping...
family representation
active/passive behaviour
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STEM gap
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male-gaze
in-visibility
violence
beauty standards
numeric imbalance
gender roles

Detail of "The Atlas of Topics". The visualization maps the themes and sub-themes explored by the dcxcg group activity over the years.

Introduction

A radical shift in perspective will not come unless and until a large number of designers (and design institutions) become convinced that equitable design outcomes are a goal that is important enough to warrant retooling.
(Costanza-Chock 2020: 54)

This volume addresses the intersection between Communication Design and Gender and Feminist Studies, proposing and discussing the result of a research[1] conducted as part of a Ph.D. pathway: *a feminist model to activate gender de-biasing paths*, and trying to respond – one among all the possible responses – to the need of spreading and nurturing a form of *fairness culture* in design. The volume is, first and foremost, to be understood as the outcome of a research journey that builds upon an established layer of theoretical and pragmatic knowledge, considering the inherently dynamic nature of the disciplines involved, whose parameters and positions are under continual negotiation. This outcome can be imagined as a new layer that adds to the important work pioneered 15 years ago by the *dcxcg*[2] research group at the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano, with the aims of advancing the discourse by delving deeper into the nuances of gender bias among young designers and within design education and recalibrating the research focus in light of the continuous and rapid evolution of this field. In this logic of progression and ongoing repositioning, this book is intended as the conclusion of a step of research that is hoped to serve, in turn, as a driving force – a starting point from which new questions and new research spaces may emerge.

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1. This refers to the doctoral research "A system of de-biasing practices for future gender-sensitive designers", A.A. 2023-2024, PhD programme in Design, 36th Cycle. Supervisor Prof. Valeria Bucchetti, Coordinator Prof. Lucia Rampino.
2. See: http://www.dcxcg.org/.

A controversial and constantly evolving field

The area delimited by Feminist Studies and the domain of visual representation has been studied over time and is an ever-growing and evolving field – on different layers and scales – that needs constant revision and reinterpretation, taking into account the developments of feminist movements and theories, and grasping and deepening their common areas in order to develop tools and strategies that keep pace with this change. In recent years in particular, there has been a proliferation of movements that place feminist thought within a broader system of social, political, and climatic urgencies, adopting a perspective that identifies the *humanist heritage* and the *capitalist model* as the main cause of social inequalities today thus also fitting laterally into the current discourse on *decolonisation* (Braidotti 2022; Delap 2020; Demaria 2019; Laboria Cuboniks 2018; Zylinska 2019). The reflection on the decolonization and *depatriarchalization* of design is nowadays central to most of feminist debates on the design discipline, but it fits within a much more complex general framework, which historically sees Visual Culture and Feminist Theories intertwining and influencing each other.

Moving within this framework from the disciplinary perspective of communication design, however, we cannot ignore another important aspect involving the media in influencing the common perception of gender issues. The visibility of topics related to gender and the values and ideals championed by feminist movements has grown exponentially in recent years, both online and beyond. Social media platforms abound with pages where one can witness the proliferation of content (and *anti-content*) addressing issues such as violence and discrimination, messages of empowerment, and expressions of identity claims. The idea of "communicative overload" mentioned by Valeria Bucchetti in relation to representations of the feminine also extends to this scenario. While this kind of quantitative proliferation may seem positive at first glance – because "at least we are talking about it" – it leaves insufficient ground for a qualitative evolution of content, and risks nullifying any form of reflection. Everything is obfuscated and flattened, resulting in a *semantic emptying of content* (Maldonado 1959). Sloganeering phrases, decontextualised quotations, *cliché-images* using the rhetoric of «if you really want, you can!», echo

the principles of a neo-liberal feminism (Demaria 2019) that denies the complexity of variables and power relations on which the agentivity of subjects depends. All too often, these messages are almost self-defeating, risking the reiteration of patriarchal and sexist logics.

In addition to the trivialization of feminist discourse, there is, on the opposite front, politically driven propaganda against the so-called 'gender theory' (Butler 2024). This backlash poses a serious setback to hard-won rights, slowing progress toward equality and significantly distorting collective perceptions of gender-related issues.

In this complex framework, which is inevitably intertwined with the sphere of policy, designers and researchers in design who deal with the discipline from a feminist perspective therefore enter a doubly fluid and constantly changing field. *How do we intend to affirm our position? How can we prepare ourselves, and how can we equip future designers, to navigate this complexity without falling in the same hegemonic languages?*

A need to nurture a fairness culture in communication design

The part of research discussed in this volume builds on the premise that every designer, whether aware of it or not, serves as a conduit for gender biases, which are inevitably reflected in their design outputs, perpetuating and reinforcing the dominant perspective which, according to feminist theories, aligns with that of the *white, Western, heterosexual male*, thus excluding the *Other* – anyone who does not correspond to the *norm*. Taking as a given the inherently political dimension of images and the close connection between systems of representation and the production of meanings and identities, the communication designer has the power to *give voice* rather than *exclude*. This epistemic and symbolic exclusion «is no abstraction: it translates into ruthless violence for the real-life people who happen to coincide with categories of negative difference» (Braidotti 2022: 19).

We as communication designers therefore bear a responsibility that cannot be ignored. It becomes more and more urgent to equip ourselves with the tools and strategies to critically understand the present, foreseeing and preventing the effects of our biased design practices. Tools and strategies that can convey a gender-sensitive approach to communication design, but also triggering an *avant-garde* and activist approach leading to

a *step-by-step revolution* towards the dis-mantling of cognitive schemes and mental habitus embodied in the designers and consequently in our design practice, contributing to the definition of new agendas for design.

As anticipated, the core of the volume is represented by the research and reflections that led to the definition of a *model of tools and practices to activate gender de-biasing paths*. The book's structure follows a progression that begins with a critical re-examination of theoretical knowledge, reaffirming key foundational elements essential for defining both a perspective and a positioning. It then unfolds through the presentation of an observational study and subsequent experimental applications in educational contexts, with the aim to contribute to a broader reflection on the definition and necessity of effective models to foster a culture of fairness in communication design.

The first chapters primarily aim at better framing the disciplinary perspective, bringing back into focus key elements at the intersection of Communication Design and Gender Studies. These elements represent a body of knowledge that can now be considered acquired and consolidated, symbolically forming the foundation upon which the research work is built. A critical reinterpretation of the connections and overlaps between Feminist Theories and Visual Culture follows, defining a perspective and a position. The first part concludes with a chapter that explores and deconstructs the concept of *gender bias*, linking it to communication design practice and highlighting its mechanisms and contradictions.

The central chapters of the volume explore and explode recursive models aimed at increasing designers' awareness. It builds on a systematic observation and analysis of actions carried out since 2010 within the *dcxcg* research group, with the goal of identifying and mapping key topics, strategies, tools, and methods used to integrate gender issues into the education of communication, visual, and graphic designers. This essential mapping work delves into research and experimentation on tools, methods, and strategies designed to foster a gender-sensitive approach among future designers, shifting towards applied research. That work has led to the definition and development of a feminist model to activate gender de-biasing paths, discussed in the third part of the book.

The value of the research presented within the volume lies therefore in its dual contribution: it offers a practical set of tools for integrating gender-sensitive practices into design curricula and provides a systematic and consolidated knowledge base that enriches both theoretical and pragmatic understandings of gender bias in communication design. The developed model is intended as a contribution, a step forward to implement long-term activities aimed at a change of attitude and behavior of designers in approaching the communication project.

«An intersectional critique of the ways that current design practices systematically reproduce the matrix of domination ultimately requires [...] a retooling of the methods».

(Costanza-Chock 2020: 54)

1.
The role of communication design within a social persistent urgency

The field represented by the intersection of gender issues with the domain of visual representation and media has historically been approached and extensively explored from various disciplinary perspectives (De Lauretiis, Jones, Mulvey, Wilson). For this reason, I believe essential to establish some key points and premises that help contextualize the research at the core of this volume in order to provide a concise framework, metaphorically representing a layer of knowledge that can now be regarded as well-established and upon which this research is built.

At the same time, however, this field is highly politicized, constantly evolving and reshaping its boundaries in response to shifts in the socio-political sphere. This dynamic continuously calls for a careful consideration of the current context in which we, as designers, position ourselves and operate. Today, this context is globally marked by the resurgence of patriarchal elements once thought to be overcome; political discourse that reopens debates, questioning rights previously considered consolidated and shared; hate speech aimed at exclusion based on gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, ... We live in a contradictory and ambivalent present, in which misogyny and sexism draw new life from the claims of populist and sovereignist governments fueled by media. A world which still sees the *white, western, healthy and affluent man* as the *measure of all things*[1], all that is *other* than *man* is different from, in a negative sense, and inferior to (Braidotti 2021).

After all, anti-feminist and misogynist rhetoric has dominated the political debates in last years. Forms of misogyny and machismo that were

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1. «That image was represented visually by Leonardo in the famous sketch of the Vitruvian body as the perfectly proportioned, healthy, male and white model, which became the golden mean for classical aesthetics and architecture» (Braidotti, 2013).

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previously part of informal contexts, precisely because of these episodes repeated on multiple occasions, have gradually been re-legitimised even at institutional level in recent decades.

Positioning as a feminist designer in a backward-looking androcentric world.
Within this framework, as designers and as designer-researchers, our role as social agents and potential agents of change is undeniable from the feminist perspective. We design in a socio-cultural and political context of which we ourselves are permeated. A context that in turn we participate in shaping through the images and media messages we design and that contribute to the definition of collective imaginaries (Baule & Bucchetti 2012).
Starting from this belief, it therefore becomes imperative to equip ourselves with tools that enable us to critically read the environment in which we are immersed and to be aware of the possible impact that our actions can have on the socio-political context. Ignoring ethical concerns can result in the misuse of design to propagate misinformation, exploit vulnerabilities, perpetuate harmful stereotypes that result in the exclusion and denial of alterities.
As designer-researchers, it is essential to train ourselves to step back occasionally, broadening our perspective to include in our understanding the overall and evolving framework within which we operate, in order to critically read it and position or reposition ourselves within it.

1.1 The socio-political responsibility of communication designers

While on the one hand we are witnessing a violent resurgence of misogyny and sexism (as well as racism, anti-Semitism, homobitransphobia...) legitimised by governments, at the same time there is a debate of protest and demand for rights that seems to be getting more and more heated. In 2017 the term 'feminism', a historically controversial term, was listed by Merriam Webster dictionary as the most consulted word of the year. This situation also saw the activation of movements such as "Ni una menos"[2] which quickly spread first to other South American countries, and then to Europe and the United States, where it also helped give impetus to the #MeToo harassment movement. The movement began to represent not just a women's uprising or a political showdown, but a broader feminist cultural movement, which placed itself at the centre of the global public debate, targeting the basis of gender and social inequalities, and taking feminicide as the extreme act in a chain of violence that has among its links phenomena such as exploitation, misogyny and the imposition in social relations of a hierarchical and sexist models. The Ni Una Menos movement also reaches Italy, with Nonunadimeno[3], today actively engaged in defending women who are victims of physical, psychological and symbolic violence, highlighting interpretative models that point to the intersectionality of the levels of power and oppression implicated in male-female relations, and also committing itself to defending and enhancing the fluid spaces that overflow from conventional gender categories. These are just a few examples, the most far-reaching ones, to highlight how in both the private and the political spheres the relevance of gender issues emerges overbearingly, conditioning destinies and life paths.

Counter-actions(?) from the field of communication design
From a visual communication standpoint, feminisms and visuality are inherently and closely interconnected with each other. Communication design and graphics have indeed been and continue to be important means

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2. See https://niunamenos.org.ar/.
3. See https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/.

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through which to translate the thoughts, protests, and acts of denunci-ation inherent in various feminist waves, conveying forms of activism. The domain of representation constitutes a field for experimenting with models and languages of rupture departing from dominant patterns, generating new visuals capable of provoking or triggering reflections by proposing themselves as tools for resignifying the female position and multiplying perspectives (Demaria 2019).

The other side of the coin, given the widespread diffusion of these move-ments and the increased visibility that feminist issues are gaining, sees the media and social media sector as one of the main actors involved, but often mainly for marketing purposes.
The fact is that some of the themes and topics of feminisms have been appropriated by pop culture and become mainstream, partly thanks to certain companies, Dove first in 2016 with the "Real Beauty" campaign[4], which paved the way for a strand of communication campaigns focus-ing on some of the feminist themes, but often also resulting in what is called *pinkwashing* and *purplewashing*. While these campaigns, added to the social activity involving influencers as well as brands, contribute to a positive change, highlighting the urgency of the issue and bringing some of the feminist issues to the attention of a wide audience, at the same time we are witnessing the reduction of feminist thought to mere slo-ganeering, with a consequent *semantic emptying* (Caputo, Carlomagno, Casnati, Vacca 2022). So we reassure ourselves that our conscience is clear simply by wearing a t-shirt with the words "feminist" or "sister-hood is powerful" (of a brand that probably in parallel perpetrates sexist corporate policies). What and how much responsibility do we have as communication designers?

The mediasphere is increasingly flooded with messages from social pag-es and influencers, who not only reduce the feminist issue to slogans, but who, by urging girls and women to "be themselves", to "not be influ-

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4. The "Dove Campaign for Real Beauty." Launched in 2004, the campaign marked a turning point, paving the way for more gender-aware communication (although predominantly focused on body image communication). On the other hand, however, it contributed to spread a distorted and partial vision of feminists. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wpM499XhMJQ&ab_channel=AdAge.

enced by the judgement of others", to be "businesswomen", ecc., empower women and end in identifing female emancipation exclusively with achieving success and wealth.

Cristina Demaria in *Teorie di genere. Femminismi e semiotica* discusses the rise of neoliberal feminism pointing out how

this is an ideal female subject, who is encouraged to conceive of herself as an individual enterprise, whose main goal [...] is to put herself to good use with resilience, perseverance, lightness and, above all, constant good humour. All of this individual's activities, but also his or her own desires and drives, must be appropriately bent and moulded until they become an investment in self-improvement as an enterprise. A Self, as Angela McRobbie (2015, 2009) also states in discussing contemporary mutations of the ideal of female perfection, which is presented as a neoliberal spreadsheet. (Demaria 2019: 372-389; author's translation)

If we look today at some of the posts, images and editorial content on the web it is not difficult to see how women are, more and more often, called upon to *self-regulate*, *self-rule*, *self-discipline*. They are urged to transform their selves in order to truly be themselves, continually showing and claiming how their actions are always *free choices*[5]. There would be nothing wrong with this if we did not speak, as Demaria points out, of constructions and representations of the female subject within narratives that, while rightly extolling her agentivity, forget how this agentivity is not solely the result of a propensity or a temperamental trait, but depends strictly on our daily relationship with the world and with each other and the underlying power relations.

Lastly, I feel it is necessary to make a reference to a recent event that directly involves the system of production and circulation of communication artefacts, what since June 2023 in Italy has been called the "#MeToo of the communication sector", along the lines of the US movement of

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5.   See for exemple the Freeda's Instagram page https://www.instagram.com/freeda/. The group has a large following in Italy and positions itself as «the voice of the new generations of women, of men, and of humans who don't recognize themselves in traditional gender categories - of fearless thinkers and doers who speak their mind with authenticity and want to turn the world into a better place». Cristina de Maria takes the group as an example of sloganistic and simplistic feminism.

the same name. The discussion and sharing of testimonies arose from an interview by Massimo Guastini[6], former president of the ADCI (Art Directors Club Italiano), with a former employee of the Milanese agency "We are social", an interview that kicked off a series of stories that are unveiling sexist and misogynist work environments. A toxic and unsustainable climate that seems to characterise a good part of the communication sector. The interview uncovered a Pandora's box, revealing a system that is misogynistic at its roots – one that operates on yet another level but inevitably, if it is true that as designers we tend to translate part of our worldview into our design output, also finds reflection in the quality of the images that are produced and spread.

An intersectional critique of the ways that current design practices systematically reproduce the matrix of domination ultimately requires not only more diverse design teams, community accountability, and control, but also a retooling of the methods that shape so many design domains under the current universalist paradigm. That shift, however, will not come unless and until a large number of designers (and design institutions) become convinced that equitable design outcomes are a goal that is important enough to warrant retooling. (Costanza-Chock 2020: 54-55)

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6. See https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2023/09/21/molestie-e-pubblicita-basta-minimizzare-serve-un-cambio-di-passo-degli-uomini/.

1.2 Media and gender stereotypes: some fixed points

To better frame the research presented in this volume it is fundamental to start by underlying its continuity with the work of the *dcxcg* – Communication Design for Gender Cultures – research group of the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano, with which I have had the opportunity to closely work since 2016. The group, founded in 2010, is located in the area of intersection between Communication Design and Gender Studies and was formed with the aim of offering a critical point of view regarding the forms of representation of gender, but also with the intention of supporting and developing, through research and experimental teaching, the proposal of «new communication models and opportunities/actions aimed at increasing sensitivity and awareness regarding gender issues in everyday life». According to this perspective design owns in fact the appropriate tools to promote innovative and open visions of the relationships between people and visual languages. Moreover, in design culture, it is increasingly evident that the production of artefacts and services is not limited to the satisfaction of a need, nor does it concern only the exercise of aesthetics or functionality.

Media, communication and gender stereotypes
Bucchetti in "Cattive immagini" (2021) reaffirms that there is a full awareness of the fact that visual culture reflects the perspective of society and thus also the masculinist aspects that distinguish it, but also the conviction that a society can be critically observed from the quality of its communication and the *quality* of its visual messages. By *quality* is meant in this case a balanced combination of graphic quality and sustainability (understood as *socio-cultural sustainability*) of the images, where priority is given to the effect produced rather than the intentions of the designers. It is well-known nowadays that the visual messages conveyed by the media often fit into the submerged part of the *iceberg of gender-based violence*[7]

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7. The *GBV iceberg* is a metaphorical representation used to highlight the complexity of the different forms of gender-based violence. At the top of the representation, we find the most extreme expression of gender-based violence: femicide, followed by all those explicit and more easily recognizable forms (e.g., sexual abuse, physical violence, etc.). The submerged part represents all those "hidden" forms of violence, such as language, certain forms of manipulation, economic violence, and so on.

through manifestations that are considered subtle and invisible, which include sexist advertising and more generally, sexist languages (Baule & Bucchetti 2012; Bucchetti & Casnati 2019; Mulvey 1975, 1981; Nadotti 2015; Walter 2010). These are manifestations that we have to deal with every day, and that we often perceive as *normal*. I will not go into the mechanisms of stereotyping here, which will be discussed later in the specific context of the research, but what I would like to emphasise, despite the fact that for decades the topic has been the focus of national and international attention and debate, is that the *communicative landscape* (Baule 2012: 60) that influences the everyday dimension is permeated by gender stereotypes, which contribute to the definition of the Self (Camussi & Monacelli 2010), conditioning people's behaviors, cognitive patterns, and perception of themselves and others within a social community (Bucchetti & Casnati 2022).

Numerous investigations have been conducted with the aim of focusing on those manifestations that contribute to inequalities. Manifestations that together paint a contradictory picture of the forms of representation (or 'non-representation') of women. This is referred to as the "hyper-in-visibility paradox" (Bucchetti & Casnati 2022: 8), a biased system of production and reproduction of stereotyped images. It is within this framework that the issue of the relationship between the universe of images and gender inequalities comes into play, with the entire media system responsible for the production and dissemination of degrading forms of representation of women. Images capable of shaping our perception of reality by hindering the growth of an equal society. We know how much the communicative landscape is permeated by representations of women filtered through the *male gaze*[8], among which predominantly homologated female images, united by the centrality of the corporeal dimension, find space. The flattening of aesthetic canons, but also of women's roles, makes it difficult to find a deviation from the norm.

Hyper-in-visibility paradoxically also implies *invisibility*: the absence of female images, which are capable of restoring the multiplicity and com-

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8.   Originating from film theory and criticism in the 1970s, 'gaze' refers to how we look at visual representations. These include advertisements, television programmes and cinema. A key idea of feminist film theory, the concept of the gaze was introduced by scholar and filmmaker Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*.

plexity of reality, translates into a form of 'denial of visibility', a direct consequence of a way of thinking rooted for millennia that, as Criado-Perez (2020) states, in a certain sense, is a way of not thinking. A double *inertia of thought*: men are taken for granted, and women are not even talked about. The stories we tell ourselves about our past, present and future are oriented, marked, but also disfigured by a "presence-absence" that has the shape of the female body (Criado-Perez 2020). The term *invisibility* thus refers to this void: the absence of other female images – that are actually representative of half of the population – subtends entrenched and culturally normalised mechanisms of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1998). This is an invisible and perpetrated form of violence, which ends up legitimising something particular and historically conditioned, too often believing that the media give us a universal point of view, while they merely translate an androcentric worldview, thus referring only to a category.

Within this framework, the education of future designers assumes a vital and responsible role that cannot and must not be ignored, in what we hope will be a step-by-step revolution towards the construction of a sustainable and virtuous communication environment. The university is therefore called upon to act on different levels that intertwine and overlap, between research, education and project design, contaminating each other and other disciplines. The design education system is in part still based on knowledge and methods that stem from market requirements, the design tools provided by the market-driven educational system are useful to approach the problems of the existing world, but they are not critical tools to question reality, society and one's own individuality to imagine a different world. Horst Rittel's suggestion to «Do not only teach general rules but also rules for the changing of rules!» (Rittel 1971) has been lost (Califano 2022: 77). So while on the one hand

what is taught can reproduce power dynamics that are not totally inclusive and equal; dynamics and approaches that have demonstrated their limits on the environmental, social and economic levels. (Califano 2022: 79)

on the other hand, the educational system, as the place where future designers are formed, has the role and the duty to work to provide students with the tools they need to design consciously, assessing the impact of their design outputs.

It is therefore necessary to work so that the design dimension can also undertake research paths that highlight the need for recognition of the Other, in different social and cultural contexts.

What tools and actions, both mental and practical, can we develop to establish and cultivate relationships with Alterity in the contemporary world?

1.3 At the core of a cross-disciplinary intersection

The area delimited by Gender and Feminist Studies and Communication Design and Visual Culture has been studied over time and is an ever-growing and evolving field that needs constant revision and reinterpretation, taking into account the developments of feminist movements and theories, and grasping and deepening their common areas.

Within the past 40 years, feminist studies/women's studies/gender studies/studies in gender and sexuality have effectively grown into a globally practiced academic discipline while simultaneously resisting the notion of disciplinarity and strongly advocating multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity. (Pulkkinen 2015: 3)

What this quotation helps emphasizing is the inherently transversal and transdisciplinary nature of feminist studies and gender studies. These are disciplines based on the dimension of transdisciplinarity, Pulkkinen provocatively speaks of it as a discipline that seems «to maintain an identity based on non-identity, and its transdisciplinarity seems to be of its own explicit and stable kind». Unlike other recent fields, it is not a combination of established disciplines but works across a wide range of disciplinary boundaries. In multidisciplinary encounters and conversations between academics who 'come' from different disciplines, gender studies are often the 'transdisciplinary' ones. In other words, the characteristic

of being contrary to disciplinary identity (being multi/inter or transdisciplinary) is transformed into a marker of a particular disciplinary identity. This has significant implications for defining the field in which it is situated: the disciplinary perspective remains that of communication design but with significant influences from other disciplines that are, directly or indirectly, related to the gender perspective and the domain of visual representation. This includes media studies, whose contribution is fundamental above all for having introduced the concept of media literacy and critical media literacy; visual cultures with representational and translational theories and the domain represented by gender and feminist studies, which have been the subject of a critical reinterpretation, mainly concerning the new feminist movements within the domain of visual culture.
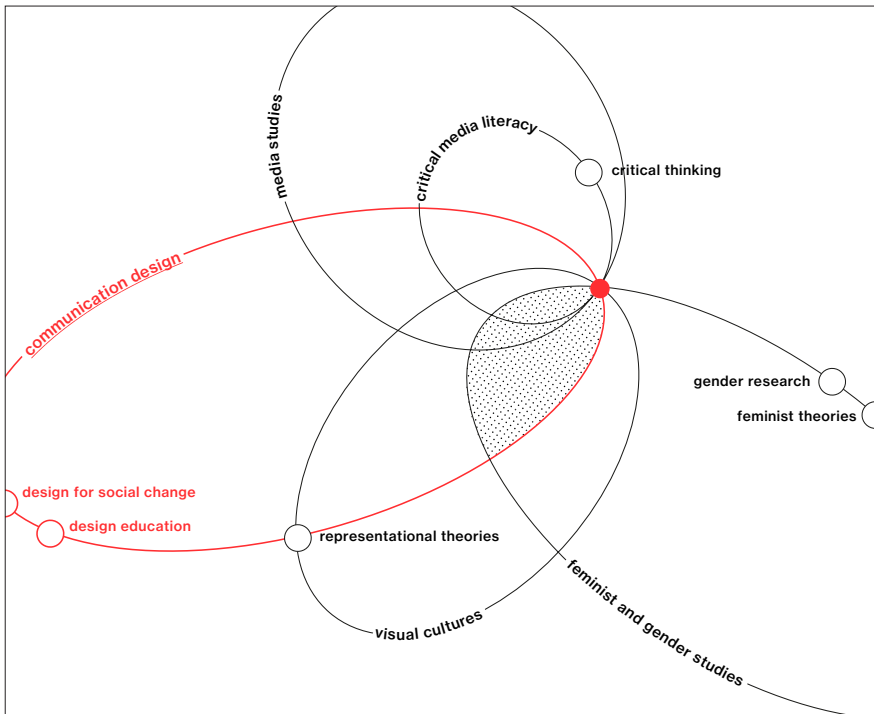
A field at a disciplinary intersection. The visualization represents the disciplines and sub-disciplines that have influenced the research.

'Media literacy' and the contribution of critical media studies

It is within this framework that the concept of *media literacy* takes on fundamental importance, along with other elements that emerge from the overlap of certain areas of media studies, defined by Friesem[9] a discipline that provides a distinct framework for critically examining and producing media.

It is fundamental to specify that media studies have a double controversial nature as they are historically used for both "good" and "bad" purposes, depending on the positionality of the researcher/designer.

What interested to me is that part of Media studies delves into various aspects of power dynamics within media production and distribution. This involves analyzing the hierarchical relationships and decision-making processes within media organizations, as well as exploring the unequal distribution of resources, influence, and control in shaping media content, in line with the feminist thought. The discipline examines the representation of different social, cultural, and demographic groups within media texts, investigating how they are portrayed, stereotyped, or marginalized. By scrutinizing these representations, media studies seeks to understand how they can reinforce or challenge social norms and ideologies. In addition, media studies explores the intricate ways in which media influence public opinion, attitudes, and behaviors, as anticipated, this can be a double-edged sword if those engaging in media studies have negative intentions for society or mere marketing purposes.

Another significant area of exploration in media studies, from the communication design perspective, concerns how media texts and narratives contribute to the formation and negotiation of individual and collective identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality. The discipline provides frameworks and methodologies for the critical analysis of media texts, seeking to uncover the underlying messages, ideologies, and discourses embedded within them. This analytical approach helps to unveil the hidden meanings, subtexts, and social implications of media texts, enabling a deeper understanding of their intended and unintended effects on audiences. In continuity with media studies, communication design – contaminated by disciplines such as sociology of the

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9. Friesem, Yonty (2016), *Developing Digital Empathy*. 10.4018/978-1-4666-9667-9.ch007.

media and semiotics) – works to define methods and tools for the critical analysis of media images based on the concept of critical thinking, to be understood both as a critical approach to media fruition and as a critical approach to content creation and sense-making processes.

Media literacy – It is in the field of media studies that the concept of media literacy has been developed, another key concept from which the research work stems. Media literacy encompasses a set of communication competencies that involve the reception, analysis, evaluation, and transmission of information, including both verbal (written) and iconic (non-written) messages, through the application of critical thinking (Puchner et al., 2015; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015; Thoman & Jolls, 2004). The purpose of media literacy is to educate citizens to critically use the media, as the use of our rights to information, expression, and opinion directly depend on our development of these capabilities (Mateus, 2020) taking it for granted that the media landscape itself constitutes a place of continuous and often unconscious formation. As Moez Chakchouk, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information, stated, also linked to the issue of gender discrimination, media skills

are essential to face the contemporary challenges of misinformation, hate speech and violent extremism. They are equally important for building inclusive societies and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. (UNESCO 2019: 5)

As Stix and Jolls reminds us, the core principles of media literacy were first formulated in the 80s by leading experts as Barry Duncan and John Puengente after Marshall McLuhan in the 1940s through the 1960s had created a foundation upon which many of our current ideas about media literacy are built. The Canadians put forward eight "fundamental concepts" that describe how global media symbolic systems operate:

(1) all media messages are constructed (Authorship); (2) media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own set of rules (Techniques/Format); (3) different people experience the same media message differently (Audience); (4) media have embedded values and points of view (Framing/Content); (5) most media messages are organized for profit and/or power (Purpose).

These principles, reinterpreted from the perspective of communication design, put two fundamental questions back at the centre. The first concerns the scale of priorities, at the top of which is placed the effect of meaning that a communicative artefact produces and consequently its impact on the social group it addresses, as the third principle of "Justice Design" formalised by Costanza-Chock in 2021 says: «we prioritize design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer». The second point concerns, as dealt with in the previous paragraphs, the role of responsibility of communication designers and the importance of a media literacy addressed not only to users but also, and more thoroughly, to those who deal or will deal with communication professionally.

On the other hand, designers are also at the same time those who generate media artefacts and those who use them. It is a matter of making transversal observations to investigate how gender representation occurs in media artefacts, again in line with the approach of gender studies and feminist studies.

Critical thinking – The concept of critical thinking, a key concept for media studies, returns in this perspective as also the Masterman's model inserts it among the "Eighteen principle of media literacy education"[10], stating that critical analytical ability must be a key competency. The de-

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10. «Masterman identified principles for classroom teaching and learning that can be considered current today. His 18 Basic Principles for media awareness education, written in 1989, read like a manifesto for 21st Century education (Masterman 1989). Highlights of these principles include: Content, in Media Education, is a means to an end. That end is the development of transferable analytical tools rather than alternative content; ideally, evaluation in Media Education means student self-evaluation, both formative and summative; indeed, Media Education attempts to change the relationship between teacher and student by offering both objects for reflection and dialogue; Media Education is essentially active and participatory, fostering the development of more open and democratic pedagogies. It encourages students to take more responsibility for and control over their own learning, to engage in joint planning of the syllabus, and to take longer-term perspectives on their own learning; Media Education involves collaborative learning. It is group focused. It assumes that individual learning is enhanced not through competition but through access to the insights and resources of the whole group; Media Education is a holistic process. Ideally it means forging relationships with parents, media professionals and teacher-colleagues; Media Education is committed to the principle of continuous change. It must develop in tandem with a continuously changing reality; Underlying Media Education is a distinctive epistemology. Existing knowledge is not simply transmitted by teachers or 'discovered' by students. It is not an end but a beginning. It is the subject of critical investigations and dialogue out of which new knowledge is actively created by students and teachers» (Jolls & Willson 2014).

velopment of critical thinking skills is indispensable because «will enable students to critically evaluate the traditional messages on gender transmitted by media tools and produce egalitarian messages of their own. A well-developed critical thinking skill enables young people to recognize behaviors that promote gender inequality and safeguards them from the effects of negative messages (Pinkleton, Austin, Chen, & Cohen 2012)» (Friesem 2016). Within the process undertaken by users, according to literature, it is essential to incorporate critical reflection. This critical reflection becomes especially important when considering the risk structures and cultural implications associated with modern technologies, as well as when addressing inquiries about potential consequences.

The discourse on critical thinking also leads almost physiologically to the concept of cognitive and social biases – and therefore gender biases too – as from literature emerges that

increasingly, too, critical thinking courses and texts include an explicit emphasis on the psychology of cognitive and social biases [...]. While they vary greatly in the length and detail of their treatments, a common feature of these texts is that they present names, taxonomies and definitions of some key biases, perhaps with some examples or explanations of the underlying empirical work included. Given their role in critical thinking didactics, it is safe to assume that these treatments are intended to foster practical reasoning skills of mitigating or forestalling the effects of biases – to enable students to identify biases in reasoning, and to minimize biases in their own thinking. (Kenyon & Beulac 2014)

«Creating a feminist design practice involves examining one's own bias and privilege, seeking to represent varied ways of being, and making space for underrepresented voices».

(Lupton 2021: 11)

2.
A feminist approach to design research

Let's start by defining feminism as a practice. Sara Ahmed, in her book Living a Feminist Life, explains that becoming a feminist involves recognizing inequality, sharing power, acknowledging privileges, and exposing bias. [...] Feminism is a practice, – a way of thinking and acting. Design is a practice, too. Creating a feminist design practice involves examining one's own bias and privilege, seeking to represent varied ways of being, and making space for underrepresented voices. (Lupton 2021: 11)

The quote by Ellen Lupton helps in underlying the close connection between feminisms and design but also highlights how feminism, defined here in a hyper-simplified way as «a way of thinking and acting», constitutes a way of living and seeing the world. Inevitaby, it also permeates the way research and design are conducted, influencing and integrating the perspective on and from the discipline itself. The philosophical perspective implemented and the consequent adopted approach to design research stems from recent feminist movements, which move away from neoliberal positions by criticising the capitalist and Eurocentric/androcentric model – «will we continue to pursue equal opportunity domination while the planet burns? Or will we reimagine gender justice in an anti-capitalist form, one that leads beyond the present crisis to a new society?» (Aruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 2019: 4) – placing the feminist issues in a broader framework and emphasising how they are connected to and interdependent on other current issues within a complex network. The path of the research that led to identifying a specific disciplinary positioning and a characteristic worldview stems from a critical re-reading of the literature aimed at investigating the connections, commonalities, and contributions of gender studies and feminist studies to visual cultures. This allowed, on the one hand, the investigation and definition of

a philosophical approach to research in design, and on the other hand, to delve deeply into the field of communication design, focusing on the unequivocal link between feminist studies and the area concerning the domain of representation and visual culture. As Demaria states in *Teorie di genere. Femminismi e semiotica*:

Feminist theory not only investigates how meanings have been fixed and sedimented but also explores how the entire set of semantic and pragmatic rules governing the nodes and junctions of symbiosis can be redefined. The proposition is that the transformation of meanings and discourses that constitute our cultural system may depend on differences that not only exist but are deliberately created or actively asserted. Rather than substantiating the idea of a closed and impermeable way of life, feminist theory attempts to reconstruct the parameters of a set of differences that can significantly alter the values, norms, and interpretations of our common culture. (Demaria 2019: 30; author's translation)

2.1 The researcher's perspective, a critical reading of feminist theories

Feminist movements, as known, have over the years grown and branched out into different currents. Interest in this case is mainly directed at movements and theories coming from the Fourth Wave – or at least in part, since the very complex and multifaceted nature of feminist movements – and from what Rosi Braidotti theorised about what she defines "post-human feminism", thus also fitting laterally into the broader discourse on decolonisation and, specifically, depatriarchisation.

Intersectionality and the refusal to reduce feminism to homologation
A number of concepts have been borrowed from feminist movements and feminist studies that I consider to be fundamental and which help to give indications regarding the research approach, which inevitably takes on a political dimension as well.
The Fourth Wave is the latest iteration in chronological order of the western feminist movements that brings to the core the concept of *intersectionality* introduced and theorized by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in

1989.[1] Intersectionality is a concept that illuminates the complex interplay between various systems of inequality, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and class, among others. These systems of discrimination *intersect*, giving rise to unique dynamics and effects that shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. In *Women, Race & Class* Angela Davis had already highlighted the connection between gender discrimination and racial discrimination, discussing the link between the fight for Women's Liberation and the struggle for Black Liberation. The critical insight of intersectionality therefore lies in recognizing that all forms of inequality are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. After Crenshaw's theory, other expressions were coined, as Costanza-Chock recalls in *Design Justice*:

closely linked to intersectionality, but less widely used today, the *matrix of domination* is a term developed by Black feminist scholar, sociologist, and past president of the American Sociological Association Patricia Hill Collins to refer to race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression. It is a conceptual model that helps us think about how power, oppression, resistance, privilege, penalties, benefits, and harms are systematically distributed. When she introduces the term in her 1990 book "Black Feminist Thought", Collins emphasizes race, class, and gender as the three systems that historically have been most important in structuring most Black women's lives. (2020: 20)

Intersectionality can also be a tool that allows us to imagine how any resistance to such norms can be based on a *re-signification* of the processes through which identities are normatively marked, starting from the way in which each individual negotiates the social relations of power in which he or she finds himself or herself entangled (Demaria 2016).
In the research work carried out, even if the term intersectionality is not always made explicit, the subjects spoken of are anyway understood as the result of a process in which multiple *power differentials* intervene, in

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1.   The term "intersectionality" was initially introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar, in her 1989 essay titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics". In this piece, Crenshaw elucidates how the prevailing antidiscrimination legislation, specifically Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, consistently fell short in safeguarding the rights of Black women employees.

line with Rosi Braidotti who, although not explicitly adopting an intersectional approach, thinks of the subject as the result of a construction that excludes "boundary markers or constitutive others" from its field. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc. become interconnected and intersecting dimensions of a *structural alterity* or *difference as negativity* that play an important role in defining the norm and the normative view of the subject. The reason why it was decided not to make the concept of intersectionality explicit is in line with what Cristina Demaria states:

some of its [intersectionality] intricacies and entanglements remain to be clarified, including the very status of the norms and power differentials that individuals are exposed to, or possibly negotiate, along with the nature of the mechanisms that generate them. In other words, is intersectionality a tool that helps us identify given positions, to which we can only adhere? Or are the norms the result of discursive constructions that become normative constraints, which, however, as just stated, can be re-signified within a theoretical and political struggle? Which epistemology, which way of conceiving the subject lies upstream, or rather downstream, of these reflections? (2016: 74; author's translation)

As Donna Haraway first and Sasha Constance-Chock later remind us referring to design practice, the risk we run and from which we need to distance ourselves through continuous self-criticism is that of romanticising and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while «claiming to see from their position».
It is almost impossible to assume a perspective that is not influenced by, or that totally deviates from, the male/androcentric and western-centric gaze, what we can do as researchers is to learn to recognise at least partially the biases to which we are subjected, elaborating strategies so that these have as little effect as possible on our work.

The refusal of homologation and the valorisation of alterities – if de Beauvoir never questioned the validity or power of the human model built into the feminist emancipatory and socialist politics but wanted to open it up to the excluded (Braidotti 2021; Delap 2020; Kristeva 2018), one of the peculiarities of the latest feminisms (excluding neoliberal movements) is the refusal to reduce the feminist issues to homologation or integration

into the «Eurocentric masculine standard of sameness», offering more situated and hence more accurate analyses of the power relations upheld by the humanist paradigm (Delap 2020).

According to Demaria (2019), Spivak highlights the significance that feminism, particularly *postcolonial* feminism, has always placed on envisioning an alternative way of seeing/knowing, and therefore power (epistemology), as forms of action and imagination understood as political practices within a specific context, where certain actors operate and potential agency is constituted. *Who speaks, and from which location? In what historical time? In relation to which subject and object positions? What kind of subaltern do we refer to, and in relation to which potential testimonies and/or alliances?* This position is partially taken up also by the authors of "Feminism for the 99%: a manifesto" who state that

many people know that capitalist societies are by definition class societies, which licence a small minority to accumulate private profits by exploiting the much larger group who must work for wages. What is last widely understood is that capitalist societies are also by definition wellsprings of gender oppression. Far from being accidental, success is hardwired into their very structure. (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser 2019: 20)[2]

In utopian terms, it is the system as a whole – in our case the design system – that needs to be overturned and reorganized. This perspective laterally fits into the broader discourse on decolonisation and, specifically, depatriarchisation – where patriarchy is understood as a «deep-rooted 'habit of mind' that allowed men's domination of women, as well as the domination of racial minorities by whites, the young by the old, and women by other women, to seem normal» (Delap 2020: 68).

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2.   About 'ending capitalism' Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser authors of "Feminist for a 99%: a manifesto" write: «The organisers of the Huelga Feminista insist on ending capitalism: this system that generates the boss, produces national borders, and manufacturers the drones that guard them. […] the contrast could not be starker. but what makes the choice pressing for us now is the absence of any viable middle way. We owe the dearth of alternatives to neoliberalism: that exceptionally predatory, financialised form of capitalism that has had sway across the globe for the last 40 years. having poisoned the atmosphere, mocked every pretense of democratic rule, stretched our social capacities to their breaking point, and worsened living conditions generally for the vast majority, this iteration of capitalism has raised the stakes for every social struggle, transforming sober efforts to win modest reforms into pitched battles for survival».

Post-human feminism and the 'decolonizing' issue

Rosi Braidotti, in her book published in 2022, formalizes the concept of post-human feminism, introducing within an additional key to the concepts of 'post-human' and 'decolonization', showing how everything is closely connected within a complex system and demonstrating the need to converge different viewpoints and movements that have similar and coherent aims at their base. In a context that sees the crisis of androcentrism (and more generally of anthropocentrism) and the questioning of masculine roots founded in what Braidotti calls "Eurocentric humanism".

Controlled by white, European, heterosexual, property-owning, male, legal citizens, mainstream humanistic culture upholds dominant memory and selects who gets to write official history. It functions as a centralized data databank that edits out and de-selects the existence, activities, practices as well as the alternative or subjugated memories of the multiple sexualized and racialized minorities. (Braidotti 2022: 19)

It is humanism itself that needs to be deconstructed and critically reread: if the human (male) body has always been the measure of all things[3] – from Vitruvian man to Le Corbusier's Modulor, to robotics – it is now but «an obsolete piece of machinery by comparison with the speed and liveliness of the new technologies». «Posthuman Feminism is an intergenerational and transversal exercise in constructing a discursive community that cares for the state of the world and wants to intervene productively in it» (Ibid.), which reinterpreted through the lens of communication design focuses on the responsibility that those involved in design research and design education have in fostering a community of designers who care for the state of the world and wants to intervene productively in it, incentivising designers not only to design responsibly but to adopt a proactive activist attitude.

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3.   Criado-Perez in "Invisible women" (2019) reminds: «This "reference man", that is meant to represent humanity, is a Caucasian man, between 25-30 years of age who weighs roughly 70 kg and is 170 cm in height».

De-colonizing, de-patriarchiesing

From the adopted perspective, which implicitly integrates the concept of intersectionality, power relations between subjects are placed at the center as the foundational elements of structural alterity – an alterity that identifies *diversity* (anything different from the white, Western, heterosexual, affluent man) with *negativity*.

When one group rules another, the relationship between the two is political. When such an arrangement is carried out over a long period of time it develops an ideology (feudalism, racism, etc.). All historical civilizations are patriarchies: their ideology is male supremacy. (Millet 1968: 1)

From any point of view one wishes to deal with the issue of alterity, dealing in depth with its presence in our systems of thought and action entails moving away from anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism and abandoning all claims to cultural primacy. Alterity breaks down hierarchical pyramids and world navels, to weave networks of relations and exchange. The thought of alterity that affects design culture – and every other activity of intersubjective life – concerns the awareness of our being in relationship; or rather, of being in the relationship, because «outside the relationship there is no salvation» (Zingale 2022: 17; author's translation).

In the "Decolonising Design Editorial Statement"[4] published in 2016 the editors highlight the need to acquire 'sharper lenses' to bear on non-western ways of thinking and being and on the way that class, gender, race, etc. issues are designed today.[5] The editors also state that they

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4. See: https://web.archive.org/web/20220127161317/https://www.decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/, consulted on 6 February 2025.

5. In this same direction, it is interesting what Lucy Delap, historian of feminist movements writes about He-Yin's thinking. In particular she «took an ambitious approach to theorizing the structural inequalities that characterized women's experiences. She offered a re-reading of a Confucian Mandarin term, nannü, to mean a sexed system of social organization. It might be translated as 'sex-gender' or 'patriarchy', though nannü is challenging to translate because, unlike 'patriarchy' it also captures a variety of broad oppositions – past and present, China and the World. Formed of nan (man) and nü (woman), it can be seen as 'the foundation of all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction" […] Nannü offered a way of linking distinctions of gender to the organization of bodies, labour, and power through cultural and economic life. It enabled He-Yin to imagine a world where 'the nouns nanxing [male nature] and nüxing [female nature] will no longer be necessary'. For her, this implied the end of capitalism underpinnings of ideas of modernizations». (Delap 2020: 81)

understand the highlighting of these issues through practices and acts of design, and the (re)design of institutions, design practices and design studies (efforts that always occur under conditions of contested political interests) to be a pivotal challenge in the process of decolonisation. (Ansari et al. 2016)

The relevance of this statement also stems from the explicit intention to move beyond academic discourse and engage in critically questioning «ideas and practices that circulate through the work of professional designers embedded in the various sectors of production that stimulate and sustain the modern/colonial world economy». The goal become therefore ontological rather than additive change.[6] While the theoretical idea of the need for radical change is agreeable, the risk is that these reflections may remain mere rhetorical exercises. Progress should be made in small steps to achieve a long-term, radical subversion of the system.

Patriarchy is a deep-rooted "habit of mind" to which we are all subject, albeit with varying levels of awareness, making it nearly impossible to adopt a perspective completely free from its influence.

Joanna Zyilinska, for example, has attempted this with her speculative experiments, exploring a shift in perspective in image production through relinquishing control over technology, as seen in the *Feminist with a drone experimentation*.[7] The objective is to challenge the image construction

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6. The goal stated in the "Decolonising Design Editorial Statement" says: «Our goal is ontological rather than additive change. It is not sufficient for design institutions to simply include a greater diversity of actors or perspectives. This only goes to serve a delaying and offsetting demands for radical systemic change. While we support and defend measures to include marginalized subjects and our/their concerns in spaces from which we/they have been excluded or remain precarious, we also believe there is little point to diversifying institutions, practices, and processes that ultimately sustain colonial imperatives. Our aim is not to direct our efforts to prop up existing power structures, or to sustaining them through ameliorative measures. Rather, our aim should be nothing less than to seek the radical transfiguration of these structures through the critical eye of the programmatic imagination that dares to identify the possibilities and conditions that will give us alternatives to the now».

7. Joanna Zyilinska's *Feminist with a drone* speculative experimentation was presented at the 11th European Feminist Research Conference (June 2022). The experimentation opens up a reflection on the use of technology to investigate new views of the world. Zyilinska's work stands in a transversal mode between theory and practice, man and machine, representation and reality, opening up different ways of thinking and seeing. The work lies between critical media-practice and feminist theories, focusing on dominant representational models and the use of technology. Embracing the eco-eco-punk feminist movement - ecological and economic - the case study contrasts media-thinking and media-making that underlies human-centric, androcentric, Europe-centric and colonialist rules and viewpoints, seeking a way out of the media-polluted world through the use of technology, pursuing

rules resulting from a male gaze on the world. This is clearly an exercise that remains within its speculative function, aiming to prompt reflections on ways and strategies to move away from the androcentric, colonialist, and capitalist view in image production – images that contribute to shaping our worldview. However, from the perspective of communication design, it raises another important question concerning the parameters we use to interpret and evaluate the graphic quality of communicative artifacts. On the level of visual translation and the production and interpretation of images, however, a dedicated space is needed; in the next paragraphs, communication design is brought back into focus, highlighting the links and contributions of feminist theories to the field of visual cultures and representational theories.

the idea of alienation from the 'white man savior'. Before going into the merits of the case study, it is useful to open a parenthesis on the issue of representation. According to Luciana Parisi, "the model of representation reduces all differences – biological, physical, social, economic, technical – to the universal order of linguistic signification constituted by binary oppositions where one term negates the existence of the other" (2004: 284). The translation models underlying the creation of images are based on mental schemas and habitus inherited from an androcentric worldview. This confuses the humanocentric viewpoint – here in the feminist sense – with the universal. If images reflect the way we see the world and at the same time influence it, defining what is "normal" and what is not, a radical change of perspective is needed, one that is less heroic and does not flatten the world or elevate man as the creator and destroyer of the world, seeking an alternative planetary vision. Zylinska's work focuses on the concept of nonhuman photography (Zylinska 2020), referring to photographs that are not of or taken by humans, in order to combat our partial view of the world. In the case of *A feminist with a drone*, the researcher focuses on the loss of control over technology, opening a reflection on the role of technology left to act 'autonomously', according to a chaotic approach. From a procedural point of view, the experimentation is very simple: it involves losing a drone and later collecting images that are taken 'autonomously'. In this way, the human has no control over the translation processes and is unable to bring its own biased point of view back into the image. Zylinska's goal is the negation of the "belle image", disrupting dominant representational models and experimenting with a form of post-anthropocene visuality, once that does not sanitize the world, obtaining a more purist planet-scape. This practical experimentation has led to the establishment of archives of "loser images," alternative visions that form a counter-visuality that also questions all those disciplines such as geography, history, architecture, ... of humanistic heritage, which incorporate a colonialist vision (Casnati, Ianniello, Romani 2022).

2.2 Feminist Studies and Visual Culture, dialogues and convergences

There is an unequivocal link between feminist studies and the area concerning the domain of representation and visual cultures. As Mulvey's and Berger's texts suggest, feminist and visual culture have a reciprocally weighted relashionship, they are two intersecting and overlapping worlds as «feminism has long acknowledged that visuality is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western culture. Feminism and visual culture deeply inform one another» (Jones 2003: 3). Meiling Cheng in "The unbearable lightness of sight" poses the analogy of «a pond of suspended visions» to explain how feminism and visual culture intersect. The author imagines an ondulating pond in which viscous colors are introduced offering a «certain vibrancy to the visions, coating them with an additional texture and seemingly making the phantasmatic floating sights more focused, hence more 'materialized'». The visions are both reshaped and disguised by the colors and the colors also generate their own floating images. Feminism acts as a weighty collection of colors, seeking to address the myopia of androcentric culture.
Feminists see visual culture as a system heavily entangled with androcentric values, commodifying images while leaving them void of deeper significance. In essence, the convergence of feminism and visual culture in this analogy portrays a dynamic interplay between the quest for meaningful representation and the ever-changing, multi-faceted world of images, resulting in a captivating and complex exploration of identity, power, and meaning.

As the field of visual cultures owes a significant debt to the contributions of feminisms, the next paragraphs aims to explore the contribution that feminisms have had and have in the field of visual cultures, bringing to light those junctures that have shaped and oriented the research.
First of whole in the realm of visual culture studies, the integration of feminist perspectives has been instrumental in shaping a profound political impetus (Jones 2003). Feminist studies conveyed to visual culture studies their focus on the political dimension and the situated and constructed character of all visual representations – including those that present themselves as the most objective, natural and transparent – and

their critique of any abstract and supra-historical conception of the spectator gaze (Pinotti & Somaini 2016: 24).

On the same wave feminisms had a central role in the development of critical models of reading visual imagery in visual culture and the visually oriented arms of media, new media and cultural studies, and in spreading the critical approach according to which language – mainly understood as visual language in this case – is denied the possibility of expressing unambiguous, absolute (and neutral) meanings and affirms, instead, the need to analyze any text or narrative by revealing internal conflicts and dissonances (cfr. Decataldo & Ruspini 2014).

The idea that it is almost impossible to produce texts[8] that are neutral and universal is reiterated by Danah Abdulla, who refers directly to the field of design and the necessity of a shift in perspective: «for far too long, designers have remained married to the concept that what we do is neutral, universal». She further rebukes the idea of 'design neutrality' and insists that all design choices are intrinsically political. This effectively means that we do not practice any design without a positionality, without ethic, without politic (cfr. Levick-parkin 2020).

Text, language, alterity
The matter of language and linguistic expression takes on a pivotal role in conveying cultural categories of the community in which it is developed and serves as a medium for constructing concepts and power relationships (cfr. Robustelli 2000). Viewed through a feminist lens, language gives rise to critical inquiries that delve into the very essence of the binary dichotomy: *normality=masculine=positivity* vs *alterity=non-masculine=negativity*.

Indeed, as emphasized by Demaria, it is through language that gender identity is constructed. Language, in this broader sense as a symbolic system and not solely verbal discourse, plays a central role in this process: «language is the cause of the subject. The symbolic order, which is also the social and cultural order, structures the subjectivity, conscious

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8. «An image is a configuration or convergence of what Foucault (1970, 1992) called 'the seeable and the sayable'. [...] Every image is really a text/image or a 'sentence image' as Rancière would put it» (Mulvey, 2003: 44).

and unconscious, of each individual» (Demaria 2019: 52; author's transla-tion). Language inscribes and symbolises sexual difference within its own structure, in a form that is already hierarchised and oriented (cfr. Violi 1986; 1987) and at the same time, in a vicious circle, sexual difference participates in the symbolic structuring of language, starting with the lin-guistic category of the grammar gender, normally analysed as an arbitrary and unmotivated linguistic datum, and therefore independent of any form of value attribution. According to this perspective, if one argues that language is gendered, gender comes to be thought of not only as a gram-matical category regulating mechanical facts of concordance, but also as a semantic category manifesting body-related symbolism. The symbolic order, which is also a social and cultural order, structures each individu-al's conscious and unconscious subjectivity. It expresses the thought and conditions it, contributing to the determination of reality: without specif-ic words, certain realities cannot be affirmed, and consequently, they are not recognized as such (cfr. Robustelli 2000). This consideration by Ro-bustelli contributes to highlight a critical issue: the definition of female presence in society passes through language. If the rule of male-as-norm, a remnant of a culture based on androcentrism, prevails in iconic and ver-bal language, this results in the denial of Alterity (Bucchetti 2021: 76-77s), where alterity means different from white, heterosexual and healthy man.

In the same direction the thought of Derrida becomes crucial as it indicates how the definition of female identity is based on an exclusion that is first and foremost carried out in and through language. The opposition between masculine and feminine is sustained by establishing a hierarchical value system: the feminine is subordinate to the masculine into which it con-verges, and the marked term functions as an "accident". What is defined as a practice of *différance* is thus primarily understood as an operation of dis-placement of binary oppositions, as a process that detects the interdepend-ence of dichotomous terms (feminine vs. masculine) and their meaning, which is thus relativised and historicised (Demaria 2019: 60). As also Peggy Phelan writes in "Broken symmetries. Memory, sight, love":[9]

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9.   Pelan, P. (2003), "Broken symmetries. Memory, sight, love", in A. Jones (edited by), *The feminist and visual culture reader*, chapter 15. Routledge.

As Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction have demonstrated, the epistemological, psychic, and political binaries of Western metaphysics create distinctions and evaluations across two terms. One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning. Within the psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imagistically, while he who is marked with value is left unmarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks. [...] within the realm of the signifier and the image, women are seen always as Other; thus, the woman cannot be seen. [...] visibility is a trap ("in this matter of the visible, everything is a trap": Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts: 93); it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. (Phelan 2003: 109)

Translation in feminist criticism and the link to communication design
Closely related to the discourse about language and inseparable from the discipline of communication design, if we consider the designer as a translator (Baule & Caratti 2016), is consequently the issue concerning the concept of *translation*. For feminist theories, translation in fact indicates, in the first place, the peculiarity of the interpretive act to be exercised on those texts through which the dominant (western and patriarchal) culture and the dominated cultures have formed and continue to mutually shape themselves. Demaria speaks of this in reference to verbal (written) language, but these are concepts and considerations that can be transposed and reinterpreted from the perspective of visual communication (Baule & Caratti 2016).

To discuss translation is to underscore the hermeneutic process required for the comparison and potential rebalancing between dominated and dominant cultures, where the difference primarily concerns the discursive and value-based universe underlying individual national languages. [...] Translation thus becomes a means of approaching texts and translating them in a way that encapsulates novel strategies of cultural representation, evolving into political forms of interpreting texts and cultures. (Demaria 2019: 189-190; author's translation)

Consequently, *no translation can be innocent*. If translating implies in the first instance an interpretative act, interpretation is always an encounter with alterity.

The implications of this viewpoint lie on two levels that represent two sides of the same coin. On the hand of those who dominate (or those who have assumed and internalised their gaze) the risk is running of repeatedly conveying, and thus consolidating, a single point of view, which is precisely that of the dominant. On the other hand, however, the act of translation can become an instrument of cultural intervention, part of an effort that takes place at the level of concepts, syntax or terminology, aimed at subverting dominant languages (Simon 1996: 9).

From this theoretical point of view, the act of translating thus implies its own nature as a cultural and social practice that can express social agency, becoming an original creation underlying an ethical and political project besides a linguistic and critical one. Translators introduce their voice into the text and settle there by implementing specific textual and linguistic strategies. Strategies through which interpretive acts are performed, transforming the effect of their representations (Baule & Caratti 2016). This factor becomes even more pivotal when approaching the realm of communication design. It compels us to contemplate the translation strategies we can employ to alter the effect of representations of the feminine and masculine, breaking away from the prevailing model rooted in androcentrism and binary constructs.

The "political unconscious" of visual representation

In feminist studies, alongside cultural studies and postcolonial studies, there has been a significant contribution to infusing visual culture studies with a distinct focus on the political dimension and the inherently situated and constructed nature of every visual representation. This includes even those that claim to be objective and natural, thereby dispelling the notion of the existence of neutral representations. Furthermore, these fields have also critiqued any abstract and overarching understanding of the spectator's gaze that transcends historical and cultural contexts. The *gaze* of the designer cannot be neutral, just as the gaze of the spectator itself cannot be neutral.

Feminist studies drew attention to the always sexually oriented nature of the gaze towards images and the way patriarchal ideology encodes its hierarchies and power relations in forms of popular visual representation, which deceptively assume a normality and neutrality status.

Studying and analysing the images produced in a given context therefore means emphasising the cultural dimension of the images themselves and of viewing. The cultural role of images thus becomes a dynamic and conflicting terrain, and the status of the spectator is neither unambiguous nor supra-historical, but rather historically, culturally and politically determined (cfr. Pinotti & Somaini 2016). On the other hand, if identities themselves are temporary and unstable outcomes of relationships between multiple and diverse differences, as asserted by Demaria, the concern shifts from merely adequacy or distortion of representations to a politics of representations and placement. This involves delving into the ways in which identities are produced and assumed through discursive and textual practices.

Representations are like "pools" of meanings through which our experience in general, and specifically that of "what we are", as well as what we can be and become, gains significance: the production of meanings and identities located within and by systems of representation are so closely interconnected (Demaria 2019: 78).

This has significant implications for methods and methodologies of image analysis, establishing the groundwork for a way of interpretation and decoding that considers not only the socio-cultural context in which the image is situated, but also the multitude of perspectives and potential in-

terpretations from both dominant and subordinate groups. Additionally, it takes into account the potential consequences that a representation might have on individuals within a given context.

The research perspective of feminist studies and visual culture studies invites us, when facing each image and each spectator position, to ask a series of clearly political questions: who do we see and who do we not see? Who holds privilege within the visibility regime? What aspects of historical past are currently visually represented, and which are not? What fantasies, belonging to whom, are nurtured by which images? (Sturken & Cartwright 2017), implying that what/who is unseen turns out not to exist and thus linking back to the concept of alterity as a mistake, as a deviation from the norm. But it is also necessary to ask who is the spectator and who is the object of the depiction, Laura Mulvey in "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" provides an exhaustive summary writing: «in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female» (Mulvey 2003: 47), woman as image and man as the bearer of the look.

This issue leads at the last point worth considering, that concerns the scale of priorities and summarizes in a sense my way of approaching communication design and research. The third principle of *Design Justice*[10]

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10. «The Design Justice Network was born at the AMC in the summer of 2015, when a group of thirty designers, artists, technologists, and community organizers took part in the workshop "Generating Shared Principles for Design Justice". This workshop was planned by Una Lee, Jenny Lee, and Melissa Moore, and presented by Una Lee and Wesley Taylor. It was inspired by the Allied Media Projects (AMP) network principles, the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition (DDJC) digital justice principles, and the pedagogy of Detroit Future Youth. The goal of the workshop was to move beyond the frames of social impact design or design for good, to challenge designers to think about how good intentions are not necessarily enough to ensure that design processes and practices become tools for liberation, and to develop principles that might help design practitioners avoid the (often unwitting) reproduction of existing inequalities.undefined» (see: https://designjustice.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/ap8rgw5e/release/1). The author also states design justice isn't centered on intentionality, but rather on the course of action and eventual results. It raises the question of whether the attributes of a designed object or system disproportionately limit opportunities for already marginalized groups, while simultaneously augmenting the prospects of dominant factions, irrespective of the designers' initial intentions. Design justice both draws from and diverges in significant ways from related paradigms like value-sensitive design, universal design, and inclusive design. A fundamental imperative for practitioners of design justice is to ensure non-maleficence. Translating this principle into practice within an educational context can be intricate and demanding. Instances might arise where educators are compelled to reject student concepts due to their potential to jeopardize individuals within vulnerable communities.

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formalised by Costanza-Chock in 2021 states: «we prioritize design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer». A stance that in the case of communication design shifts the attention to the forms of encoding and decoding of the images (Hall 1986; Pinotti & Somaini 2016). Emphasis is therefore placed on agency, intention, causation, outcome and transformation (Haraway 1985).

It's not the access to reality, but rather the production of the effect of a sense of reality, the referential illusion created by a semiotic strategy, that needs to be explored. Peggy Phelan in *The feminist and visual culture reader* writes:

I am concerned with marking the limit of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other. I take as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see, is in very way related to what one can say. [...] representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The "excess" meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. Precisely because of representation's supplementational excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change. (Pelan 2003: 106)

The research stems from this perspective, focusing on the design educational dimension and considering the fact that, if procedural knowledge is an unavoidable element of design learning, as Levick-Parkin reminds us, it is also the place where designers unconsciously acts gender biases which will affect their representations of the real. If, according to the feminist perspective, feminist epistemology concerns with the dis-mantling of existing ontological warrants, by shifting the concept to the field of communication design, it emerges the need to work towards the dis-mantling of cognitive schemes and mental habitus embodied in the designers and consequently in their design practice, contributing to the definition of new agendas for design. This theoretical framework has two main implications, in summary:

[A] in terms of the methodology adopted in "looking at" and decoding representations, an aspect that «demands our critical examination as we confront the dominance of masculinity that has covertly manipulated visual portrayals to uphold its power» (Cheng 2003: 30);

[B] in terms of strategies not only to contrast the visual androcentrism but to generate new and multiple ways of representation. This opens up an expansive creative realm where it is possible to experiment – Returning to Cheng's metaphor mentioned at the beginning of the chapter – with «rebellious shades, those that give rise to our unique stories, enabling them to emanate from the fluid visions in the pond» and produce political change.

Braidotti reminds us that «[...] asking people to both endure the present and dream up possible futures is asking a lot» (Braidotti 2022: 237), however imagination can be a driving force, a power that can only be ignited and sustained collectively and in which communication design can play a key-role in translating processes from imagination to visual representations and communication artifacts. The collective imaginings of posthuman feminism are projected transpositions that construct possible futures and, in so doing, make for a more bearable present (ibid.).
The objective is to de-patriarchalize and decolonize the imaginary from which designers stem, thereby restoring to the individual the ability to imagine, achieved by stimulating it through cultural means; this constitutes a political action (Riitano 2019 : 34).

2.3 Intersecting gender dimension, communication design and design education

If the perspective outlined in the previous paragraphs can be seen as a set of lenses – custom-shaped filters through which one approaches and interprets the discipline – then the focus here is on the intersection of gender dimension, communication design, and the education of future designers and professionals.

This discussion primarily refers to the university context while acknowledging that professional designers and communication experts also require ongoing training. This necessity is evident in the Italian media landscape, where the quality of communication – understood as a balance of graphic quality, message effectiveness, and socio-cultural sustainability – is frequently challenged. Addressing this issue requires long-term strategies and countermeasures rather than short-term solutions like censorship, which act as mere palliatives[11] (European Parliament, Policy Department C, 2013, *Women and Girls as Subjects of Media's Attention and Advertisement Campaigns: The Situation in Europe, Best Practices and Legislations*). Based on this urgency, the research initially was articulated in two macro-areas aimed at exploring how gender cultures are shaped within design universities (A) and how this understanding can contribute to the development of strategies aimed at counteracting gender biases in communication design education (B). Within the two macro-areas, research questions were defined in order to delimit and orientate the field of research, specifically defining the objectives.

(A) *Gender cultures within design universities*
The first set of research questions were aimed at defining and outlining a state of the art. The area intersecting gender studies, communication design and more generally speaking the mediatic field has a strong

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11. In Italy, for example, at institutional level, the IAP (Istituto di Autodisciplina Pubblicitaria) «for over 50 years has set the parameters for 'honest, truthful and correct' commercial communication to protect consumers and fair competition between companies. It does so with a code of self-discipline to which the main operators in the sector adhere». However, this implies an a priori awareness on the part of those involved in communication, which is not always present. Moreover, the IAP works mainly through censorship (a posteriori), thus constituting a valid short-term solution, but lacks a long-term strategy that aims at a change of perspective, addressing the root of the problem.

cross-disciplines feature, involving e.g. disciplines as media studies. A first preliminary and exploratory question therefore addressed the issue of which disciplines cover the re-search topic under study and, at an academic and university level, which are the most concerned disciplines with issues relating gender studies and communication design, or rather gender and visual communication.

This preliminary question was also aimed at highlighting how design universities – more specifically communication design, graphic design, visual design – are positioned with respect to the issue of gender imbalance in relation to visual representation and if and how they are active in this direction. Since the research topic cannot be dissociated from a political dimension, a parallel and continuous monitoring was also undertaken in relation to the policy framework – international policies and appeals that relate media and gender cultures: what do they detect and what do they ask to the communication designers community? – within which the research moves and to statistical data on gender inequalities.[12]

How (communication) design education is moving to integrate the gender perspective within the design curricula – As it was decided to prioritize the training and educational aspect, it became essential to refine the focus after initial questions arose. This refinement involved narrowing down the field and formulating a research question to gather qualitative data on the integration of gender perspectives within design education curricula:

What approach do university research centres that deal openly and exclusively with gender and design take? What strategies do they implement?

Which actions, strategies, tools and methods are implemented within the education (communication) design field? Is it possible to systematise a number of case studies to implement further actions?

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12. The monitoring of documents such as reports and dossiers at national and international level (e.g. The Gobal Gender Gap Report), as well as data and statistical surveys on the many issues concerning gender inequalities is a fundamental component when researching in this field, as it allows to have an overview of the general framework within which one stands with a specific point of view.

(B) How to contribute to the development of de-biasing strategies
The research was in a second step oriented to the need to activate debiasing processes (Morewedge et al. 2015; Beaulac & Kenyon 2014; 2018) based on self-reflection (Doucet & Mauthner 2007), which put at the core the design practice itself in a gender-sensitive perspective. The research questions that emerged can therefore be summarised as follows:

How, and through which processes and approaches, to train future communication designers in practicing critical thinking and self-reflection on design practice itself, from a gender-sensitive perspective?

How and through which tools and methods to elaborate and build a flexible system of practices useful to activate de-biasing processes among design students, in order to spread a gender-sensitive and activist approach? A system of activities and content that can be combined in workshops that address the following requirements: (i) to constitute inputs for the development of critical thinking; (ii) to function as activators/catalysts of debiasing processes; (iii) to implement the skills to predict the fallout that a project may have, in terms of perceived meaning, on the socio-cultural context; (iv) to counteract the phenomenon of the inertia of though; (v) and, finally, to be able to adapt to different situations, students' backgrounds and constraints/needs dictated by universities.

Feminist research and the need of a hybrid methodology
Within the past 40 years feminist and women's studies, as well as studies in gender and sexuality, have effectively grown into a globally practised academic discipline. These have simultaneously resisted the notion of disciplinarity and strongly advocated multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity (Pulkkinen 2015).
Gender studies constitute a discipline based on the dimension of transdisciplinarity. Pulkkinen provocatively speaks of it as a discipline that seems «to maintain an identity based on non-identity, and its transdisciplinarity seems to be of its own explicit and stable kind» (ibid.). Unlike other recent fields, it is not a combination of established disciplines but works across a wide range of disciplinary boundaries. In multidisciplinary encounters and conversations between academics who come from differ-

ent disciplines, gender studies are often the 'transdisciplinary' ones. In other words, the characteristic of being contrary to disciplinary identity (being multi/inter or transdisciplinary) is transformed into a marker of a particular disciplinary identity.

Feminist research is research which is carried out by women who identify as feminists, and which has a particular purpose for knowing (a "why"), particular kinds of questions, topics and issues to be known about (a "what"), and an identifiable method of knowing (a "how"), which distinctly draw on women's experience of living in a world in which women are subordinate to men. (Wadsworth 2001)

This peculiarity, added to the strong cross-disciplinarity of design, had important implications in identifying and defining a methodology from which to articulate the research. As anticipated the methodology employed for this PhD research blends techniques and approaches from both design research and feminist research, I consider it worth highlighting some essential points borrowed from feminist research, which complement and implement the methodology adopted:

(I) The belief that the gender perspective must refer to both women and men (and to the many nuances between the two poles).

gender is a variable of comparison, since it considers women and men in a two-way relationship: this underlines the basic need to detect and interpret differences (or convergences) between male and female life courses and projects. (Decataldo & Ruspini 2018: 26)

(II) All the subjects are understood as the 'result' of a process in which multiple power differentials intervene, in line with Rosi Braidotti who, although not explicitly adopting an intersectional approach, thinks of the subject as the result of a construction that excludes "boundary markers or constitutive others" from its field. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity etc. are interconnected and intersecting dimensions of a structural alterity that play an important role in defining the norm and the normative view of the subject.

(III) The deconstructionist conviction that language cannot express un-ambiguous and absolute meanings and the consequent need to analyse any text (and images) by bringing out its internal conflicts and disso-nances.

(IV) The refusal to reduce the feminist to homologation or integration into the Eurocentric masculine standard of sameness, therefore looking for more situated and hence more accurate analyses of the power rela-tions upheld by the humanist paradigm (cfr. Delap 2020). This also leads in terms of terminology to particular caution when using terms such as inclusion and synonyms, favouring, for example, the concept of gender justice.[13]

(V) Critique and self-critique as fundamental elements, as Scott remarked:

Feminists have not only wielded critique (against patriarchy, the nation-state, capitalism, socialism, republicanism, science, canons of literature, all the ma-jor disciplines) in the name of ending discrimination against women; they have also interrogated the premises of their own beliefs, the foundation of their own movement. This impulse of self-critique has been present from the inception of feminism as a social-political movement. (Scott 2008: 7)

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13. According to the Global Fund for Women "gender justice" best signifies an intersectional ap-proach that «centers the diverse needs, experiences, and leadership of people most impacted by discrimination and oppression. This approach helps achieve both equity (equal distribution of re-sources, access, and opportunities) and equality (equal outcomes for all)». See: https://www.global-fundforwomen.org/what-we-do/gender-justice/.

« [...] even if we use tools that are defined as neutral and universal, we always put our own culture and prejudices into our design projects [...] even if we don't realise it».

(D'Urzo et Al. 2022: 78)

3.
Gender bias within design practice: the need of a structural revolution

Stereotypes, as well as attitudes, goals and identity also appear to exist at an implicit level, and operate 'without the encumbrances of awareness, intention and control'. [...] the implicit associations of the mind can be thought of as a tangled but highly organized network of connections. [...] The strength of each of these connections depends on your past experiences (and also, interestingly, the current context): how often those two objects, say, or that person and that feeling, or that object and a certain behaviour have gone together in the past. (Fine 2011: 82)

Rudolf Arnheim in *Visual Thinking* argues that our mind, as it measures itself against the world, performs two functions: gathering information and processing it. To gather information, the mind must perceive it. We therefore speak of «perception as cognition» in the sense that the cognitive operations called 'thought' are essential ingredients of perception itself (cfr. Arnheim 1969). He refers to all those operations such as active exploration, selection, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, behaviour, correction, comparison, problem-solving, as well as combination, distinction, insertion within a context. All operations that the mind uses to process cognitive material at every level. By cognitive, he means all mental operations in the sense of receiving and processing information: sensory perception, memory, thinking and learning. The influence of historical memory on perception is very strong and is full of images constructed over time (stereotypes). Mitchell writes:

Images should not be reduced to symptoms of the scopic drive but serve as models and constitutive schematisms for the visual process itself, since the very structure of visual cognition and recognition belongs fundamentally to social practices. (Mitchell 2010: 116)

In what relationship then are bias and design? Or rather gender bias and communication design? Starting from these initial considerations and progressing to discussing the concept of bias and gender bias, it is essential to provide some definitions. This involves delving into the interpretation adopted for the term within this specific research context, as well as exploring the connection between the concept of gender bias and communication design.

3.1 Introducing "bias" from the communication design perspective

First and foremost it is important to remark that the term *bias* has its origins within other domains, primarily the field of psychology, even if it was then borrowed and reused by other disciplinary areas. The sphere in which the debate on biases is currently most intense is undoubtedly the realm of technology, especially concerning the affordances of technological products, as well as all aspects related to biases perpetuated by artificial intelligence[1] (Benjamin 2019; Broussard 2018; 2023; D'Ignazio & Klein 2023)

Bias are extensively documented by numerous studies, including *implicit association tests* (Greenwald, Mcghee & Schwartz 1998), field experiments (Batson et al., 2002), as well as *psychological and social theories* (such as Henri Tajfel's *Human Groups and Social Categories* 1981; and Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* 1922). Going from the general to the particular, it is possible to start by giving a first concise definition from the IPS-Inter Press Service (2010), that in the *Gender and Development Glossary. A Tool for Journalists and Writers*[2] writes about bias: «inclination or attitude towards or against something, someone or a particular group of persons;

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1. The 'bias' represents an exceptionally relevant topic today, and ongoing studies are further confirming how biases primarily find their way into AI through designers and programmers (humans) who translate their anthropocentric and androcentric worldview into it. As also D'Amico highlights: «[...] from the literature discussing the issue of artificial intelligence and gender discrimination, there's an awareness that algorithms built on masculine models relying on feminine stereotypes might lead to negative outcomes. These aspects need to be understood, then highlighted, and finally changed to the best extent possible». (D'Amico, 2020; author's translation)

2. See: https://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/gender-devtglossary_ips_2010_en.pdf (accessed 27 February 2025).

prejudice», and then specifying under "gender bias": «prejudiced actions or thoughts based on gender-based perceptions that women are not equal to men», definition also provided in the Eige (European Institute for Gender Equality) online glossary with an addition: «not equal to men in rights and dignity».

To find more elaborate definitions, it is necessary to explore the field of psychology, where the term originated: according to the APA Dictionary of Psychology the

implicit bias, also known as implicit prejudice or implicit attitude, is a negative attitude, of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group. Implicit bias is thought to be shaped by experience and based on learned associations between particular qualities and social categories, including race and/or gender. Individuals' perceptions and behaviors can be influenced by the implicit biases they hold, even if they are unaware they hold such biases. Implicit bias is an aspect of implicit social cognition: the phenomenon that perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes can operate prior to conscious intention or endorsement.[3]

The APA adds a key attribute to the term bias: *implicit* – or *unconscious* – better describing the associations we hold, outside our conscious awareness and control. Unconscious bias affects everyone – both designers as sender and the addressee – and is triggered by our brain automatically making quick judgments and assessments. They are influenced by background, personal experiences, societal stereotypes and cultural context. It is not just about gender, ethnicity or other visible diversity characteristics – height, body weight, names, and many other things can also trigger unconscious bias. Unconscious bias can have a significant influence on our attitudes and behaviours, especially towards other people.

Among the definitions of bias found in literature, there is a particular aspect I would like to emphasize, which pertains to the inherent nature of biases. Gender biases are described as *social classification errors* – and it could be added, *structural* (albeit *acquired*) classification errors or *systemic errors* – that result in treating (and representing, speaking from the disciplinary perspective of communication design) individu-

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3. See: https://dictionary.apa.org/bias (last consulted on 12th May 2025).

als unfairly and differently based on their gender identity. In the Italian language, terms that closely correspond to 'bias' are *pregiudizio*[4] (prejudice) or *preconcetto*[5] (preconception). The definitions of the two terms, although not exhaustive – both tend to leave out a much broader meaning: «bias, in fact, besides commonly indicating a generalised prejudice, indicates a systematic error» (Huyskes, 2020) –, are useful because they help to refocus on some common peculiarities of the term bias that are fundamental to research.

Comparing the definitions of the two terms, what clearly emerges is the character of undue generalization and rigidity or inflexibility, characteristics that are also common to the 'stereotype'. According the definition that Zingale gives in "Immobili visioni. Domande intorno alla persistenza dello stereotipo", the stereotype would in fact require:

(I) an arbitrary generalisation, because a particular feature is elevated to a general value; (II) a social sharing, because it is assumed by one social group against another group; (III) a semantic rigidness, because when it imprints itself on human consciousness, it is hard to change it. (2012a: 101; author's translation)

The link between the 'bias' and the 'stereotype' is strong (sometimes they are mistakenly used as synonyms), almost consequential in a vicious circle: in some ways it is as if they give strength and nourishment to each other. Stereotypes persist and strengthen due to strong biases that selectively ignore information conflicting with existing beliefs or attitudes. These biases affect for example the attributions we assign to a person's actions. When someone's behaviour aligns with a stereotype, we associate it with the characteristic that stereotype represents in their group, thus reinforcing the stereotype itself. On the other hand, if an individual

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4. *Pregiudìzio*: «an unfavourable or hostile attitude, in particular when it displays not only superficial and undue generalisation, but also features of inflexibility, i.e. when it implies a refusal to question its validity and a resistance to verifying its relevance and consistency)» (Treccani, 2023. Author's translation).

5. *Preconcetto*: «conceived before; it is said above all of ideas or judgements formulated irrationally, on the basis of prejudices, ideological convictions, instinctive feelings, often on the basis of taken sides and without personal experience: opinions p.; dislike, aversion, hostility p.; a preconceived stance. 2. s. m. Conviction, idea, opinion lacking rational justification or unsupported by direct knowledge and experience» (Treccani, 2023. Author's translation).

behaves counter to a group stereotype, we tend to link that behaviour to external factors, thereby upholding the stereotype's accuracy.

This paragraph provides some definitions of bias, highlighting its peculiarities and its relation to stereotype. However, it is essential to focus on another key term that is closely related to the concept of bias, a widely used term that has become established in sociology since Bourdieu's studies. This is the concept of *habitus*, which Pierre Bourdieu (1998) defined as a «system of perceptual patterns of thought and action acquired in a durable manner», but also, paraphrasing the author, a relationship of knowledge or cognitive construction, since it contributes to constituting the field as a signifying world, equipped with meaning and value, in which it is worth investing one's energies. In summary, the habitus constitutes a set of norms and expectations unconsciously acquired by individuals through experience and socialization as embodied dispositions, «internalized as second nature» (Bourdieu), predisposing us to act improvisationally in certain ways within the constraints of particular social fields – and this is the main aspect in common with bias. Demaria writes about the habitus:

the habitus is the object of its user (as such an object of consciousness and investigation). But it is also a subject, which holds "the fate" of the individual to whom it is destined. It goes beyond singular consciousness, because it has a wider extension and agency. Thanks to this agency, habits maintain a function of mediation, coordination and constitution with respect to the cognitive activity of the subjects. Habits therefore "mediate between the infinite possible or the non-existent impermeable and reality, thus reducing it, making it relevant. Thanks to the habitus, the subject tends to act in a certain, predictable way and to recognise and coordinate the experiences he or she has." (Lorusso 2015: 275). It also tends to recognise itself, I would add, and to adapt to gender patterns consisting of acting out habits, but also structuring agents. (2019: 312; author's translation)

The dichotomy of which Demaria speaks is a fundamental point: the habitus as *object* but also *subject*, since in some way it determines the individual and his/her way of relating to the Other (also through design practice), taking up the concept of Alterity. Demaria then refers to Pierce and his observation concerning one's intellectual life, which lies in a variable

number of promises that are not questioned, such as perceiving oneself, having experience and behaving as a man or a woman. At the centre are the boundaries between what is taken for granted and what is doubted: is this my identity? Are these my possibilities? In this direction it is crucial, says Pierce, to adopt critical 'common-sensism' as a rule. That is, a critical look at the dynamics and beliefs of common sense.

The change of habit to which we optimistically tend requires therefore a transformation of the general law, of what is thought to be *normativity by nature*, of the rules that, governing a certain disposition to action, define not only expectations of what can be given, but the very conditions of possibility of reality and its predictability. This, in the context of visual representation translates as the need to revise and subvert norms and codes of representation/visual languages that derive from an androcentric heritage perpetuating a vision – biased and based on gender hierarchies – that is distorted and harmful. In order to achieve a real change, however, a radical change in the way of thinking and doing design practice is necessary.[6]

Why bias and communication design(ers)
As exemplified by Chemaly, gender biases often stem from a fundamental misconception that girls and women are deviations from a male-centric norm, leading to the neglect of their unique needs and the perpetuation of exclusionary practices:

the underlying design assumption behind many of these errors is that girls and women are not "normal" human beings in their own right. Rather, they are perceived as defective, sick, more needy, or "wrong sized," versions of men and boys. When it comes to health care, male-centeredness isn't just annoying – it results in very real needs being ignored, erased or being classified as "extra" or unnecessary. To give another, more tangible example, one advanced artificial heart was designed to fit 86% of men's chest cavities, but only 20% of women's … the device's French manufacturer Carmat explained that the company had

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6.   In this volume, whenever the term *bias* is used, it is to be understood as *gender bias*, or rather the «unintentional and automatic mental associacions based on gender, stemming from traditions, norms, values, culture and/or experience» (International Labour Organization, 2017).

no plans to develop a more female-friendly model as it "would entail significant investment and resources over multiple years. (Chemaly 2016)

To understand the effects that bias has on the discipline of Communication design, it is useful to start by considering design in a broader sense. In particular, what Sasha Costanza-Chock wrote in "Design Justice" about the concept of *affordance*[7] can be helpful. The author cites as an example Norman's concept of affordance[8] and his book *The Design for Everyday Things*, argueing that although the volume is now outdated (1988 first publication) it still represents a widely recognised design resource, offering valuable insights and impactful examples, still widely used in the educational field. The perspective adopted by Norman however excludes almost entirely those who are other than white men who fits into what is labelled as the standard, lacking significant considerations for dimensions like race, class, gender, disability, and inequality. Costanza-Chock writes:

He [Norman] uses the term women only once, in a passage that describes the Amphitheatre Louis Laird in the Paris Sorbonne, where "the mural on the ceiling shows lots of naked women floating about a man who is valiantly trying to read a book." Gay, lesbian, transgender: none of these terms appear. Disability is barely discussed, in a brief section titled "Designing for Special People". In this three-page passage, Norman describes the problems designers face in designing for left-handed people and urges the reader to "consider the special problems of the aged and infirm, the handicapped, the blind or near-blind, the deaf or hard of hearing, the very short or very tall, or the foreign". (Costanza-Chock 2020)

The author of *Design Justice* then focuses on the concept of dysaffordance, the other side of the coin – an affordance for some is a dysaffordance for others she says –, the term is usually used for an object that requires some

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7.   According to the Interaction Design Foundation, affordances are «an object's properties that show the possible actions users can take with it, thereby suggesting how they may interact with that object. For instance, a button can look as if it needs to be turned or pushed».

8.   Norman's concept of affordance pertains to the inherent properties of an object, particularly those essential traits dictating its potential uses. Examples include chairs facilitating sitting, doorknobs enabling turning, mice permitting cursor movement and clicking on screens, and touchscreens allowing tapping and swiping.

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users to misidentify themselves to access its functions and which can be applied to all those design outputs that, intentionally or unintentionally, are "exclusive" in the sense that they disincentivise and exclude a section of the population from using them. They states:

for example, as a nonbinary person, I experience a dysaffordance any time I interact with a system, such as air-travel ticketing, that forces me to select either Male or Female to proceed. While a graduate student, Joy Buolamwini experienced the dysaffordances of facial detection technology, which failed to detect her dark-skinned face until she donned a white mask. (Costanza-Chock 2020: 39)

In these cases, designers' biases translated into design output have in turn translated into forms of social discrimination based on gender and ethnicity. It is the matrix of domination that partly shapes both how we perceive and encounter various affordances, as well as dysaffordances, both from the user perspective and the designer's. Criado-Perez (2019) in *Invisible Women. Exposing data bias in a world designed for men* provides some concrete examples such as studies that demonstrated that the most common smartphones do not fit the average women's hands or pockets, they are designed and sized for the average male hand size. This implies that the average woman is unable to use a phone one handed, reducing the functionality of the device. Another example is given by the car safety issue: as crash test dummies represents the average white male, a woman is 71% more likely to be injured and 17% more likely to die, due to the differences in size and physique. Of course anyone else who is deviating from the standard is more in danger.
Moving from the particular example to a higher level, Proosdij (2020) approaching the issue of bias and design identifies three categories: standards, behaviour and associations, through which there is a risk of conveying bias and which should be three points of attention (albeit still at a generic level) when designing.

Standards: this category focuses on standards that are not representative. For example Criado-Perez talks about the "reference man" – Caucasian, between 25-30 years of age, who weights around 70kg and 170cm tall – that is meant to represent humanity when designing 'for all'. In the de-

sign process, standards are often used to improve efficiency of the design process and improve the safety and useability of the final design but can result in a very exclusive output;

Behaviour: the behaviour of the target group and the behaviour expected from the target group. Expectations and prejudices about a group of people can lead to a biased design outputs. However, this is a contentious issue that intersects the target audience's expectations with the expectations the designer holds about the target audience;

Associations: This category focuses on the designer's reasoning. These biases influence the designer's perspective on a project

Papanek in *Design for the real world* makes a similar list of elements that he calls "innovators" «that keep us from solving tasks in new and innovative ways. These are: «emotional blocks; associational blocks; cultural blocks; professional blocks; intellectual blocks; environmental blocks». Rereading this work today, within the context of this research field, it is plausible to establish a connection between what the author labels as "blocks" or "innovators" and biases. If we interpret "blocks" as pre-existing notions that designers have internalized to the extent of considering them natural or normal, a link to biases can indeed be traced. Let's take for example the "cultural block" that, the author writes, «as the name implies, they are imposed upon an individual by his cultural surrounding. And in each society a number of taboos endanger independent thinking» (Papanek [1984] 2019: 158-163). Essentially, this discusses biases that are imposed by our cultural context of belonging and social norms, acting as constraints that impede independent thinking. From the perspective of feminist studies, these biases contribute to perpetuating the dichotomy of *normality=man=correct vs alterity=different from man=wrong*.

Another type of block that is relevant to mention is what Papanek refers to as "professional blocks", as it brings up the issue concerning the realm of education and professional training. «[...] professional blocks: sometimes, specific professional training may establish truly crippling blocks» (ibid.).

If those involved in educating and training designers are unable to recognize and manage their own biases, it becomes easier for these biases to be conveyed to students, effectively contaminating them and further reinforcing biases and stereotypes in turn. This process creates a vicious cycle that functions as positive (in the sense of amplification, although it would be more appropriate to say "negative") feedback in an infinite loop (cfr. Bucchetti & Casnati 2019). It could be asserted with increased specificity that within the framework of neoliberal multicultural capitalism, the reproduction of the matrix of domination (encompassing white supremacist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism) tends to occur inadvertently among designers.

What happens if we shift the focus on the communication design discipline? – It has been said that no one is immune to biases, they are part of us and we can at best learn to recognise them and devise strategies to circumvent or make them manifest themselves in mild forms. It follows that communication designers themselves are carriers of biases and, as producers of meaning and 'translators' (cfr. Baule & Caratti 2016), inevitably convey – no translation is innocent – at least part of their own worldview within the communication artefact in the form, for example, of stereotypes. Again, some concrete examples may be useful to get to the point.

An effective example is given by a number of case studies found in the field of pictogrammatic languages[9] and their use as forms of pictographic representations which have a prescriptive and directing function, guiding people to "do the right thing", "in the right way", and which, themselves, are developed based on normative design principles (Bucchetti & Casnati 2019). The study (ibid.; Di Turi 2022) took into consideration public and non-public wayfinding systems that make use of pictogrammatic figures with the value of 'person'.
Here a few of the considerations that emerged, which help to frame the issue around gender bias. The study showed that human figures are de-

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9.   This refers to a study conducted by Bucchetti and Casnati, bibliographical reference: Bucchetti V., Casnati F. (2021), "Universal Visual Languages in a Male-oriented Society", in Di Lucchio, L., Imbesi, L., Giambattista, A., Malakuczi, V. (edited by), *Design Culture(s). Cumulus Conference Proceedings* Roma 2021, Volume #2.

clined and characterised in the feminine in very few cases within the pictogram systems examined, specifically when referring to the roles of caring and nurturing children. Two concrete examples will be useful to better explain.

Baby changing room – the pictogram indicating the room with the changing table for babies' nappies depicts the pictogram of a woman (characterised and recognisable by her skirt) in the act of changing a baby's nappy. Within a signage system that is intended to be universal and neutral, the decision to depict only a few pictograms in the feminine form suggests that while the majority of cases default to the male or universal masculine, or male-as-default there are specific (limited) contexts where communication is directed exclusively towards a female audience, designating it as alterity or a deviation from the norm. What are the implications of having depicted that specific pictogram in the feminine form? Firstly, it involves the exclusion of the masculine from that particular context or role, leading to the exclusive association of that role with the feminine sphere. To draw upon the concept of "dysaffordance," in this reversed case, I am asserting that the space is dedicated to women, which inadvertently discourages men from accessing it (if I don't represent or mention it, it doesn't exist or if it does, it's wrong).

[1] Baby changing room pictogram; [2] Child seat pictogram.

Pictogram to indicate the child seat within shopping carts – this pictogram is positioned on the shopping trolley of a major supermarket chain and represents a female fgure in the act of pushing a trolley with a child seated inside it. The supermarket in question is Esselunga, whose wayfinding system uses a visual language very similar to that of public signage in which the neutral masculine is prevalent. The 'need' of the issuer or designer to make the icon female therefore emerges precisely from the relationship between a child (again) and the act of shopping. A relationship that "necessarily" includes a female figure: the task of caring for house and children falls to women. The mother/carer icon recurs in other cases of co-presence in pictograms representing children. In both cases, the designers have conveyed their gender biases into the project, translating them into visual stereotypes that in turn exclude men from that specific role (baby care), thus confirming and perpetuating a gender role.

The examples have a representative value, but biases within the field of communication design can manifest at various levels and stages of the design process, starting from the first stages – think for instance of the use of personas, if the designer transfers biases since the first steps of design these will be perpetuated and will inevitably contaminate the design output. Among the areas and forms in which biases can manifest are:

A. the drafting of project briefs, shaping the expectations for the project and influencing the design direction;

B. prejudices towards the target audience, which inevitably will be translated into stereotypes; for exemple Huff and Cooper (1987) discovered that designers creating educational software for children defaulted to assuming the user was male, unless the users were explicitly identified as girls. Additional research reveals that even designers hailing from marginalized backgrounds frequently exhibit similar normative assumptions regarding users who aren't explicitly specified;

C. in the consolidation of gender stereotypes through the design choices made (language, visual codes, rhetorical register, ...) here one could cite countless examples ranging from chromatic polarisation to the objectification of the female body.

It is important to highlight at this point that biased design frequently emerges not from malicious intent but rather from a deficiency in knowledge, viewpoint, and comprehension. This deficiency is exacerbated by the substantial data gap within human history, research, and representation, particularly regarding women (Criado-Perez 2019).

Designers constantly make choices about which users to privilege and which will have to do more work. The majority of designers might not perceive themselves as exhibiting sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, ableism, or colonialism. Some might align with capitalism, but only a few would see themselves as part of the privileged ruling class. Numerous designers experience internal conflicts with capitalism and even label themselves as socialists (Costanza-Chock 2020). Nevertheless, the focus is not on intent; rather, it is on the process, outcomes, and the resultant impact. Furthermore, designers often instinctively lean towards envisioning users whose experiences mirror their own. Consequently, users are commonly presumed to belong to the dominant and therefore *unmarked* category. For instance, in our context, this refers to individuals who are (cis) male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, literate, college-educated, not young children or elderly, possessing broadband internet access, and owning a smartphone, among other attributes.

If design is the discipline of making choices, it is time to accept that every choice is biased. The issue of objectivity is increasingly difficult to sustain in design. (D'Urzo et Al. 2022: 79)

3.2 Biased designers, biased design practice, stereotyped design outputs

When we produce a sign (we converse, choose a dress, draw on a sheet of paper, design a pictogram) we are constructors of semiosis: we arrange signs in such a way that they become objects of interpretation for others. (Bonfantini, Bramati & Zingale 2007: 21; author's translation)

The "inertia of thought" and the "numbness" as engines of a vicious circle
Patrizia Violi states that language (in this case understood as visual language) inscribes and symbolises the difference within its own structure, in an already hierarchised and oriented form (Violi 1986: 40). At the root of the actual production of meaning, therefore, the difference between male and female is inscribed according to the dual positionality of subject and object, the form of dualism, opposition, reduction, and thus symbolised in language in such a way that for woman the possibility of identifying herself with the position of the subject is already closed, identification is only possible if she denies the specificity of her gender and becomes a human being, who is said to be, precisely, a man (Violi 1986: 155). Visual languages therefore have a weight in shaping the perception of reality and the reality itself, defining, as anticipated in the previous chapters, what is the norm and what is alterity. It is well established that the semiosphere (Lotman et Al. 1973; Volli 1991) in which we are enveloped is marked by an evident communicative overload caused by the reiteration of images. Maldonado (1970) defined this condition as epidermal communication, without any thickness or depth (authors' translation) common and hypersimplified images and representations of reality that influence the collective thought (Decataldo and Ruspini 2014: 17). These representations become part of the collective imagination acting on the definition of individual and social biographies (Ghisleni 2004), orienting thoughts, opinions, desires, ways of relating to others and self-determination within a social group.
It can be argued that the pervasive nature of images thus leads to a condition comparable to habituation: we are so accustomed to the models of reality repeatedly proposed by the media, that those impossible models end up being perceived as reality, normality, the correct reference point to

aspire to (Baule & Bucchetti 2012; Bucchetti 2021; Casnati 2022). Barthes in 1980 wrote with foresight: «I had induced from the truth of the image the reality of its origin; I had confused truth and reality in one emotion».

About the concept of habituation, Pinotti in "Alla soglia dell'immagine" uses the expression media narcosis as the «obnubilation of image consciousness, the dulling of proprioception» (Pinotti 2021: 15; author's translation), the numbness to which McLuhan already referred.
It is therefore the narcotic power of the image that establishes that auroral and crepuscular dimension of consciousness whereby the indistinction of image and reality is made possible (Pinotti 2021: 16). And it is precisely the failure to distinguish image from reality that is at the heart of the problem: the image is grasped by the observer as if it were reality itself and not a mediation of it. The observer relates to it as a presence relates to another presence and not a mere iconic representation.[10] Every image implicitly produces in our culture a reality effect that profoundly influences its fruition. In "Invisible Women" (2019), Criado-Perez mentions the inertia of thought, «in a way, a way of not thinking», a concept that can easily be traced back to the common way in which we too often design images and artefacts: we are so familiar to the models and representational languages that surround us that we end up taking them for granted, considering them the most correct and the most effective, forgetting that they are rooted in a retrograde and androcentric model.

Even if we [designers] have the best possible intentions, even if we use tools that are defined as neutral and universal, we always put our own culture and prejudices into our design projects and take a personal position, even if we don't realise it. (D'Urzo et Al. 2022: 78)

The whole system of production and reproduction of images is therefore a compromised system of reproduction of stereotyped models in which the communication designer plays a key role of social responsibility (cfr.

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10. Consider the impact of images generated by artificial intelligence and the proliferation of fake news. This is a topic that has not been touched upon in this volume but which represents an urgent need to be addressed today and could be an area for future research.

Baule & Bucchetti 2012). This system can be represented through the symbol of infinity (∞), that well highlights the paradox at the basis of stereotyping mechanisms: the stereotype is exploited and amplified by the media system, influencing social identity, that in turn confirms it, in a vicious circle in which the designers act as a catalyst, being themself subject to cultural biases and mental schemes of which they are not always aware and which they translate into the project (Bucchetti & Casnati 2019). For the purposes of the research, the concept of bias was also integrated into the diagram showing the loop of stereotyping mechanisms, highlighting their close connection and points of contact with the aim of relating the two concepts.

Simplification vs. semantic banalisation: when the design processes and tools risk to impoverish design thought.

The framework discussed above opens a reflection based on the dichotomy regarding the ever increasing hyper-complexity of reality (Morin 2017) that characterizes society as a whole and the need, on behalf of the media, to simplify information in order to be effective. The concepts of
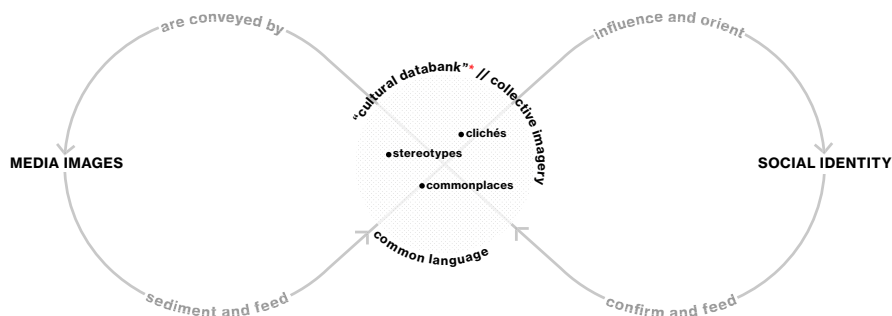
A paradoxical loop. At the centre is what Braidotti describes as a 'centralised data bank', which eliminates and excludes the existence, activities, practices and alternative or subordinate memories of anyone who is considered other, other man white, western, straight etc. A database that determines not only individual and collective biographies but also the perception of Self and the world, defining a collective and shared imaginary from which communication designers inevitably draw when it comes to producing images. Images that once in circulation will feed and consolidate that same imaginary from which they were generated in an infinite loop in which designers are both senders and addressees. The schematisation is a reworking of the image 'the endless loop of the stereotype', in Bucchetti V., Casnati F. (2021).

multiplicity and complexity are therefore opposed to the need for simplification. If on the one hand there is the complexity of reality and the consequent urgency of a communication design that is representative of this multiplicity, in order to be inclusive and sustainable from a socio-cultural point of view; on the other hand, the need for simplification inevitably results in the enactment of semiosis processes that lead to the formation and consolidation of stereotypes and *clichés*. The result is a semantic banalisation and emptying of content that, according to what Maldonado articulated in "Communication and Semiotics" as early as 1959, concerns precisely the tendency of some universes of discourse to excessively reduce the repertoire of signs, leading to the consequent generation of visual and verbal emblems (Caputo et Al. 2022).

The higher the degree of emblematization of a symbol is, that is: the higher the degree of its semantic banalization is, the lower its communicative incisiveness. The more intrusive is its institutional meaning, the less is its functional meaning. (Maldonado 1959)

The increasing simplification of the message then, up to hypersimplification, coincides with the elevation of the degree of semantic banalization, which brings with it both the impoverishment of content, and a distortion of the meaning produced, since, being the stereotype ideological connotation, «whatever "object" it means, it means it by contaminating it with other meanings» (Zingale 2012a: 101; author's translation). Here the paradox of the serial image (Baule 2012) comes once again into play, generating a short-circuit of meaning. The stereotype is technically necessary to communication, but at the same time it impoverishes its content and distorts its meanings.

The paradox of worthless images being powerful has a number of consequences. Firstly, as Smargiassi (2012) argues, the overproduction of images means that we are overwhelmed by an iconogenic surplus. This surplus is incongruent with the image's ability to create differences and oppositions because it is not content oriented as Volli (2008) argues. this surplus transforms the audience into a tabula rasa, sensitive and receptive to media communication, but largely unaware of content beyond the moments of transmission and reception. (Caratti & Roxburgh 2018: 456)

This vicious circle primarily causes the impoverishment of thought, ending in the denial of complexity and the inability to critically read not only media messages but reality as a whole, leading to what Papanek referred to as conformity in thought: concept that, in turn, allows to draw a direct link with design practice and the tools of design practice.
What happens when it is the design tools themselves that facilitate the use of representative clichés and sterotypes, leading to semantic banalisation?

In "Design for the Real World" the author refers to the fact that one of the worst mistakes is to confuse «conformity in action with conformity in thought», the risk is that by adopting methods and tools that simplify and speed up design processes, this has repercussions on design thought itself, translating into semantic banalisation (1959), the semantic impoverishment that leads to a flattening and depleting of communication and that, in the long term becomes part of the vicious circle (Bucchetti & Casnati 2019): on the one hand it leads to no longer being
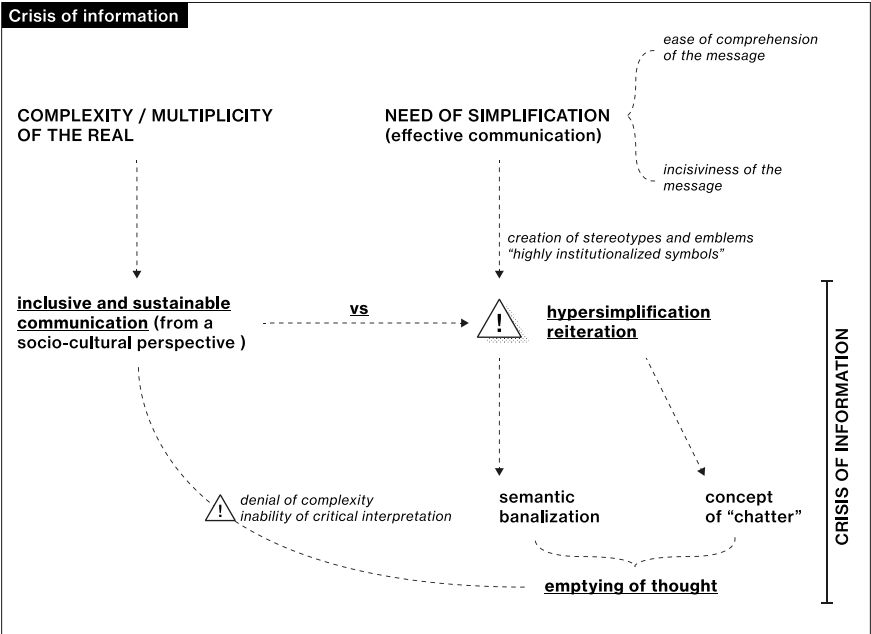
The schematization constitutes a critical re-reading of the Maldonado's "crisis of information" (Caputo et Al. 2022).

able to critically access the present, and on the other, it leads designers to always reproduce and feed the same kind of empty and stereotyped communication, generating a stagnant situation (Caputo et Al. 2022), a negative feedback effect which is, from the gender perspective, still strongly biased and linked to an androcentric and patriarchal worldview. One instance of design tools that generate controversy in this sense is the concept of User Personas that have become so prevalent that the web offer tools (also free tools) for design teams to 'effortlessly' create, manage, and share them (Costanza-Chock 2020: 81). These are concise, fabricated profiles of product users, typically featuring a name, an image, and a brief description that find extensive application in guiding various design processes, such as UX and UI design, graphic design, product development, architecture, service design, and more.

But is it possible to generate short profiles of hypothetical users without falling into the stereotype trap? Or is it simply a fictitious extension of the concept of "standard", which only gives the illusion of actually deviating from the "reference man" Criado-Perez discusses? How much are prejudices and expectations of the target's behaviours eiterated through this practice?

This, like so many other tools that simplify the design process (think for instance to the ready-to-use contents available online within the stock archives), run the risk of also harnessing design thought and homologating its outputs as well. As Abdulla remarked in a recent lecture: «(…) If we take off design thinking tools, can the designer just think?» (Abdulla 2021). What is provocatively emphasised in this sentence is that design tools are often prepared to serve market needs. As D'Urzo et Al. state in "Burning Thoughts about a Critical and Positive Design Pedagogy"

mostly, complexity is addressed without giving the instruments to devise systemic changes that involve the problematic foundations of the existing system. Thus, the design tools provided by the market-driven educational system are useful to approach the problems of the existing world, but they are not critical tools to question reality, society and one's own individuality to imagine a different world. Horst Rittel's suggestion to "Do not only teach general rules but also rules for the changing of rules!" (Rittel, 1971) has been lost". (2022: 77)

Escobar in "Designs for the Pluriverse" (2018) conceives design as an «ethical praxis of world-making», addressing how design practices often end up in reproducing the totalizing epistemology erasing the worldviews of the dominated subjects. The author calls for an approach to design that is focused one the creation of a world "where many worlds fit".

3.3 From the identification of a gap to the draft of a *de-biasing system*

One of the preliminary questions addressed by this research was whether design universities – and, more broadly, those involved in training communication designers – integrate gender and visuality into their curricula, and if so, how. This section aims to explore this question to map the disciplinary positioning of these topics.

The central inquiry, therefore, was how design as a field engages with gender fairness, examining which academic disciplines encompass this research area and identifying, within academia, the disciplines most actively involved in gender and visual communication. Who are the key actors addressing these issues? Is the design discipline itself actively engaged? In terms of method, the study was implemented in two directions: on the one hand, academic papers and articles dealing with the topic under investigation were collected and mapped (who conducts research and from which perspective); on the other hand, the focused was on the actions implemented by and within university contexts, mapping the most active disciplinary fields in promoting courses, initiatives, workshops aimed at critical media literacy from a gender perspective and/or disseminating a gender-sensitive approach to visual communication design.

The observation led to the elaboration of maps that provide information concerning the disciplines most active in research and education on the topics of gender and visual communication, opening up a reflection on the lack of actions undertaken in the field of design.

Mapping the literature – This preliminary phase of the research was conducted collecting and mapping useful information on the basis of the two research questions. The resulting mapping representation serves as a tool for visualizing the key disciplines and conceptual domains associ-

ated with the designated field of inquiry. The first evidence is that communication design occupies a relatively peripheral position within this landscape. A discernible shift is observed towards the sphere of media studies, particularly emphasizing the concept of media literacy, as already anticipated and deepen in the section about the positioning map. From the adopted perspective, media literacy signifies an educational paradigm structured to facilitate the cultivation of a comprehensive comprehension of media's societal role, along with the cultivation of requisite competencies for the discerning analysis of media messages.

Regarding the educational domain, the exploration highlighted a substantial basin of resources predominantly centered on the spheres of *media literacy* and the *pedagogy* surrounding the critical analysis of visual content. These resources are mainly focused on case studies, projects, methods and tools to spread critical thinking skills among children and adolescents. The primary objective in these cases is to equip the younger generations with the intellectual tools required for discerning, evaluating, and contextualizing the deluge of visual information encountered in today's media-rich environment. In addition to this, a discernible emphasis is also placed on fostering media literacy among various actors deeply embedded within the system of image production and consumption. This reflects the growing recognition that media literacy is an indispensable skill for all participants in contemporary society. While the literacy about educational activities primarily orbits around the realm of media studies, a pronounced asymmetry emerges when looking at the domain of design and design education, a lacuna that raises questions regarding the state of design education and the potential avenues for its implementation in a gender-sensitive way. Within the domain of design disciplines, those exhibiting a heightened degree of activity and engagement appear in fact to be subfields linked to technology, artificial intelligence and game design. This involvement may, in part, be attributed also to the catalytic impact of the *Gamergate* controversy in 2014, which served as a watershed moment, fueling the debate within this domain. Reversing the perspective for a while, another aspect that emerged concerns the presence of literature from the disciplines of gender studies and feminist studies that deal with the media representation (or nonrepresentation) of women from a multidisciplinary perspective.

A second observation was aimed at investigating the activities and actions provided by universities (Europe and the United States) in order to grasp how and who is incorporating these topics into their programmes. *The aim was to answer to the following research questions: which are the academic disciplines more active in the education of communication professionals in a feminist/gender-sensitive perspective? Which are the most common activities/approaches?*[11]

This made it possible to draw a picture of what is being done and in which areas. From the map, it is possible to visualise which disciplinary fields are most involved. The preponderant role of media studies once again emerges, but also the prominence of social sciences (with branches such as sociology of the media) and the arts&humanities, an area in which Mulvey's contribution has certainly paved the way for studies and reflections.

The need to work from a long-term perspective

From this framework, attention was focused on those counter actions that can have long-term effects, since actions that are defined as short-term – such as censorship – act downstream of the problem and represent mere palliatives (European Parliament, Policy Department C, 2013, *Women and Girls as Subjects of Media's Attention and Advertisement Campaigns: The Situation in Europe, Best Practices and Legislations*). Among the long-term actions two main directions were identified both in the field of media literacy – which concern, on the one hand, the training of those who consume images (non-designers) and, on the other, those who deal with visual communication. Media studies, communication studies, journalism are the sectors mainly involved, both in the educational and professional field. The literature review highlighted the scarcity of structured and widespread activities in the specific educational field of communication design (visual design and graphic design). As previously discussed, furthermore, the educational activities (workshops, courses,

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11. The observation process conducted is similar to the previous one: (a) definition of the macro-area: Education + Gender Cultures + Media + University actions; (b) data collection: university courses, training activities, faculties that, with different weights and roles are facing issues related to gender and design or gender and media representations, or gender and visual culture; (c) data visualization and mapping. In the final step a visualization and exploration software for graphs and networks (Gephi) was used, in order to find hubs and connections.

laboratories) offered by universities are not mandatory; they involve students who are interested in gender issues, hence it is assumed they are already sensitive to the theme, excluding a large part of subjects. Therefore, there is a need to find a formula that can be proposed at different levels of education, engaging also students who are less familiar with the topic but not immune to gender bias. Moreover, although media literacy and the development of tools for the critical reading of media messages are fundamental aspects, the research highlighted the need to activate debiasing processes (Morewedge et Al. 2015; Beaulac & Kenyon 2014; 2018) based on self-reflection (Doucet & Mauthner 2007), which put at the core the design practice itself in a gender-sensitive perspective.
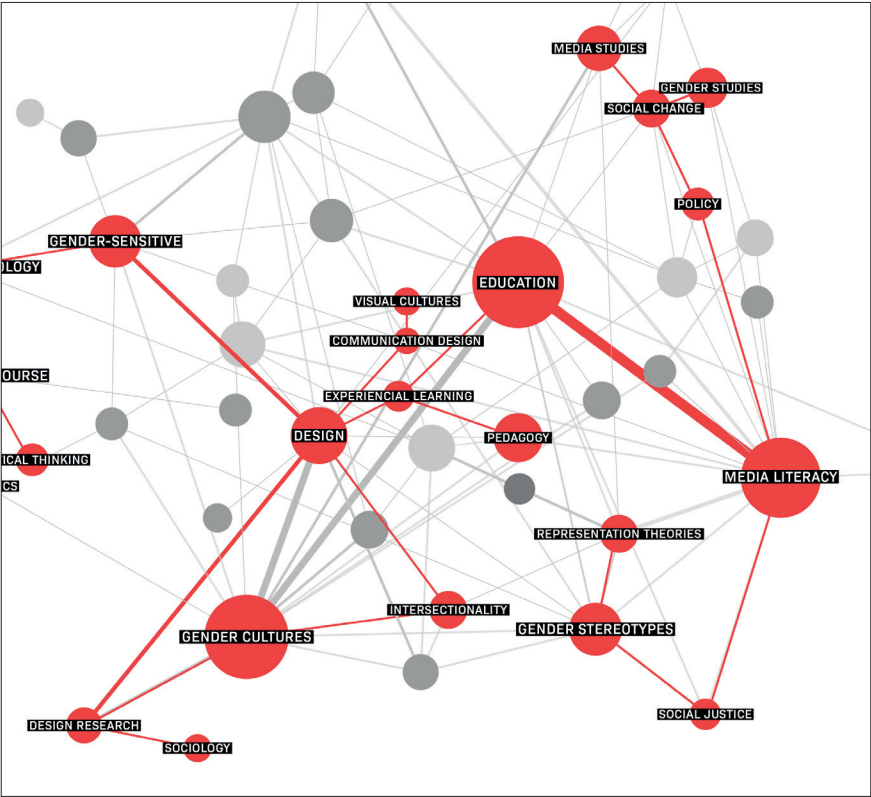
The visualization shows the most active disciplinary areas in term of actions and activities that relate the gender dimension and media representations, according to the results of the first observations and data collection.

This initial observation made it possible to identify the disciplines that, at university level, are most concerned with issues relating gender studies and communication design, or rather gender and visual communication. The observation was useful in highlighting an important gap that sees design universities, and specifically graphic design and communication design, still largely inactive, especially in the teaching field, with respect to the issue of interest.

This gap, as well as the lack of interest of design universities in the topic, is also documented by a research carried out in Germany by Ina Von Rumohr, designer and researcher of the iGDN – international Gender Design Network. The survey "Attitude or skill. How do German design academics think about gender and diversity education?" involved teachers from 17 German universities in order to understand whether and in what way there is a propensity or at least an interest in deepening and introducing gender-related topics in design courses. The research highlighted some evidences, including the propensity of some of the interviewed academics to consider the terms gender and feminism as 'taboo words', negatively perceived and often leading to a 'biting reflex'. Some of the interviewees also emphasised the lack of awarness among colleagues, pointing instead to the fact that, for exemple, there is an increased student demand for curricula with a focus on gender.

If feminist critique closely links androcentrism and the capitalist model, design, a discipline that was "formed on the capitalist model and consumerism", fits perfectly into this framework and design education accordingly. The androcentric perspective becomes therefore a structural and systemic problem, which concerns design as a whole system that, according to Costanza-Chock, requires then «a retooling of the methods that shape so many design domains». Many researchers and academics are currently arguing that design and the design education system need structural reform, to be 'decolonised'. This is a concept that, albeit at different times and with different terminology, Maldonado had already anticipated, emphasising that

in the near future we will have to revise our position, not only our position, however, but our methods too: that is, we must develop our specific working methods adjusting them to the specific types of problems that we shall have to solve.

Papanek[12] also anticipates part of the discourse, referring to the alleged moral neutrality of the designer:

the ideas of pure design and the moral neutrality of the designer always come up when designers achieve official statues or become salaried or subsidized. It seems like an attempt to affirm the identity of the designer and to protect him against officials interference by managerial groups [...]. Just what would happen if all social and moral obligations were to be removed, the advertising design manufacturing market research profiteering complex were really to be given free rein? [...] how do they change, or distort, the face of the world?. (Papanek [1971] 2019)

Although the cited authors did not refer to gender nor to colonization/de-colinization, the two reflections reread today put the non-neutral character of design back at the centre, advancing an initial critique of capitalism and thus referring back to the discourses which today are inevitably related to the decolonisation of design. This leads to a connection to the more recent book *Designs for the Pluriverse*, in which the anthropologist Arturo Escobar sees design as an ethical praxis of world-making. He encourages to contemplate how contemporary design practices frequently perpetuate the the totalizing epistemology of modernity, consequently erasing indigenous perspectives (and more in general the perspectives of the Other), knowledge systems, and modes of existence. Escobar advocates for a design approach centered on the creation of a world «where many worlds fit», thus focusing on diversity and multiplicity instead of integration and uniformity. Ruha Benjamin as well, in *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (2019) delves into the intersection between design and systemic racism – but once again the discourse can be extended to every social discriminations – advocating for a deliberate commitment to antiracist principles in the realm of innovation. She in particular urges a cautious reevaluation of the universalist and solution-oriented perspectives regarding design as a remedy for structural

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12. Thee position of Papanek remains, from the feminist perspective, controvertial in relation to gender. See *Depatriarchise design *!Lab!*: Whose "Real World?" Papanek and the Politics of Display* by Anja Neidhardt and Maya Ober (2019), https://depatriarchisedesign.com/2019/03/17/depatriarchise-design-lab-whose-real-world-papanek-and-the-politics-of-display/.

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inequality. From an ontological and epistemological perspective, it therefore means embracing and fostering critical and pragmatic paradigms, such as e.g. post-human feminism and decolonization, that try to diverge from the positivistic and the constructivist worldviews that contributed to produce the dichotomies between genders, Global South and Global North, nature and human, and so on, responsible for the current social, environmental and values crisis.

In this direction, the integration of these new perspectives within the educational sphere becomes urgent and fundamental to trigger change starting with and from future generations of designers in a long-term approach. The palliative solutions put in place today, such as censorship after the publication of a sexist project, are not enough, we need a radical change in the way we think about and approach design. It is not only a matter of reviewing our position but also the methods and tools that are provided to design students (Califano 2022) and that sometimes risk trapping design within rigid schemes and processes that leave no space for experimentation with alternative and non-conformist representative models. What is therefore desirable is a change in the current and dominant paradigm, based on the concept of androcentrism and anthropocentrism, and, thus, strongly man-centered, towards non-centric visions, which see an outline or a perimeter (one world), within which multiple and plural worlds, perspectives, experiences, and points of view coexist» (Casnati, Romani, Ianniello 2022).

it is therefore appropriate to expand the didactic areas of design education, but not only: it is also necessary to work on a more personal, cultural, social and individual side other than the technical one, with the aim to gain critical consciousness of what one is designing and to be conscious of the complexity the design artefact will be inserted in. (D'Urzo et Al. 2022: 77)

There are many questions that arise from these reflections, which too often risk remaining at a too abstract level, without proposing truly concrete solutions. How to implement a structural change from the inside if we ourselves are biased designers and researchers produced by the same model we criticise? Where to start? With which strategies? Personally, I

believe that a radical change, even if planned to perfection (that is uto-pia), is not possible overnight. However, any single action that is directed, even if in a small way, towards this kind of change, constitutes a building block, a step forward.

Where frontal attack fails, contamination prevails.[13]

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13. Baricco, A. (2021) *Quel che stavamo cercando. 33 frammenti*, Milano, Feltrinelli; author's translation.

«Women's studies is driven by political concerns that inevitably lead to a critique of the way knowledge is produced».

(Rooney 2008: 146)

4.
Mapping recursive models to increase designers' awareness

The focus on gender-sensitivity within the context of design education holds significant relevance as it seeks to cultivate heightened awareness regarding gender-related aspects throughout the design process. This, in turn, ensures that future designers comprehend the importance of considering gender in their endeavors. To address this need, the research followed two complementary directions, aimed at identifying models and approach strategies used to bring gender issues into the training of communication and graphic designers. The research therefore involved an analytical observation of projects and communicative actions mainly developed by design students within the context of university classes and workshops. Projects and actions aimed at implementing tools for critical image analysis; to recognize and deconstruct gender stereotypes; to develop and experiment with communicative strategies to counter gender discrimination; to experiment towards new alternative representative models.
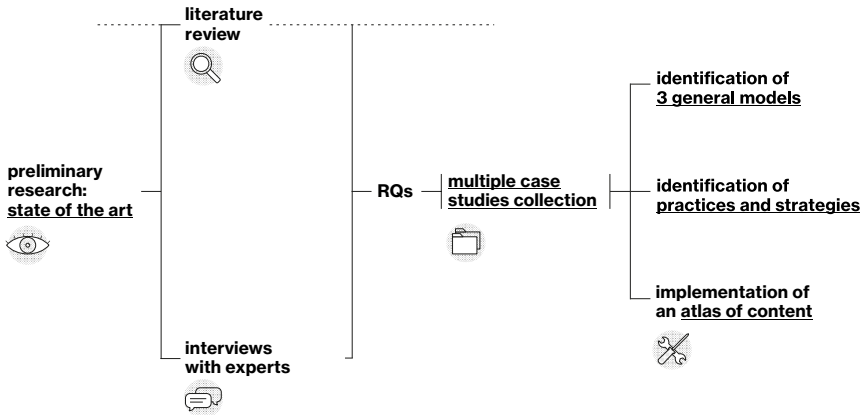
Schematic representation of the research process.

If this kind of investigation allowed the delineation of recurring models and patterns of action – from which strategies, methods, and translational steps emerged to address different objectives and purposes – it was necessary to concurrently implement the research in a complementary direction, focusing, from a wider perspective, on the different kind of approaches implemented by researchers and academics working from a feminist perspective on gender issues. This second part of the investigation – which included interviews with members of the research groups under study – was aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the theoretical thinking behind the activity that dictates different approaches and leads the various groups under study to develop and apply different strategies.

4.1. Two approaches to disseminate gender-sensitivity within design curricula

A part of the literature review, combined with interviews conducted with experts and researchers in the field of design (mainly graphic design) and feminist studies, led to the identification of two main attitudes and points of view in dealing with gender issues in design curricula. As far as the interviews are concerned, the focus was set on two foreign research groups: the first is the IGDN[1], which since 2013 has built an international network working on these issues at a research and teaching level, constituting a point of reference and catalyst for projects at a European level. The second reality, more recent, constitutes instead an example on a different scale which, as we will see in the following paragraphs, adopts a broader point of view and is closer to the issues of eco-feminism and

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1. The international Gender Design Network was conceived by Dr. Uta Brandes (Professor of Gender & Design and of Design Research at the Köln International School of Design) and Simone Douglas (Director MFA Fine Arts, Associate Professor of Photography, School of Art, Media and Technology, Parsons The New School for Design, New York). The website says: «Our goal is to empower female and non-binary perspectives in design, on the designer's as well as on the user's side. That's why we are focusing on gender within the design process especially: how to develop gender sensitive methods and how to implement them into the design process. We are bringing together in a single influential and powerful network all those who have an interest in this issue». See https://genderdesign.org/network/why-igdn/.

post-human feminism. This is the research group "Gender and Design Network".[2] In addition, it was useful to interview an expert figure[3] in design philosophy and ontology, who carries out specific work on didactics. This made it possible to have information on different scales, in terms of size and expertise developed in the sector, allowing for an in-depth discussion of strategies and approaches that can be adopted to disseminate gender education among future designers starting from the educational field. The two groups, and the knowledge about the dcxcg group,[4] specifically helped in delineating two different approaches, which could be described as 'direct' and 'indirect' and refer to different currents of thought. Direct approach – consists of the inclusion of specific courses concerning the gender dimension, workshop activities, seminars, modules, etc. in designers' university curricula, emphasising how fundamental it is to begin, with a prospect of a step-by-step revolution, to introduce even compulsory courses that enable students to acquire the tools to design with a critical sense and a sense of responsibility. Although we are still a long way from introducing specific mandatory courses on the dimension of gender or social inequalities in a broader sense. It assumes that direct and explicit actions are needed to trigger real change. Indirect approach – less 'invasive' is instead the strategy adopted by the Gender and Design group, which is experimenting with a way of taking a feminist approach to design education without making it explicit. With these considerations in mind, the question the group is asking is about the situations, modalities and measurability of these 'integrated' interventions. It assumes that it is not necessary to initiate ad hoc courses and activities (because this would risk imposing a point of view) but instead it is useful to 'wear' the lens of

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2. The group, lead by professor Levick-Parkin, is set at the Sheffield Hallam Unievrsity (UK). Their website says: «this body of work investigates how design research informed by feminist theory and philosophy can facilitate future design ontologies conceived beyond normative patriarchal and capitalist value constructs». See https://www.shu.ac.uk/art-design-media-research-centre/archive/gender-and-design.

3. Prof. Julia-Constance Dissel, Professor for Practical Philosophy and Cultural Philosophy, University of applied Sciences Darmstadt.

4. One of the limitations of the research, discussed in more detail in the concluding chapter, concerns the geographical limit within which the strategies were investigated. The non-European context in fact presents very heterogeneous situations of gender inequality, which could be contexts of interest in which to immerse oneself in the future in order to make the research more complete, departing from the European and privileged point of view.

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gender, and more generally of intersectionality, for instance during project review and evaluation.

In both cases, the biggest problem concerns the fact that gender issues are still too often seen as a 'point of view', an 'opinion', or as an already outdated chapter. In conversation with Julia Constance-Diessel, Professor in philosophy of design, the need emerged to work towards the hybridation of the two approaches, considering feminism as a practice, a way of thinking and acting, which by nature flows into design practice and design education, yet putting back at the centre the need for any action, even small-scale, aimed at generating not only awareness in new and future generations of designers but also, and above all, at disseminating a critical and gender-sensitive approach to communicative design.

How can people learn to design in an 'ethical' and 'responsible' way if they are not made to reflect critically on the political implications of their projects, their beliefs and prejudices? (Califano 2022: 80)

Direct approach, when gender issues become subjects
The enhancement of designers' education is integral to fostering a comprehensive understanding of the gender dimension within the professional landscape. This enhancement entails a strategic integration of targeted courses, workshop activities, seminars, modules, and other educational components into the university curricula for designers. The emphasis lies in recognizing the pivotal nature of initiating a progressive transformation – one that underscores the importance of incorporating not only optional but also mandatory courses. These courses play a crucial role in equipping students with the necessary tools to approach design with a discerning and responsible mindset.
It is imperative to acknowledge that while strides have been made, we are still in the early stages of incorporating specific, mandatory courses that address the intricate nuances of gender and broader social inequalities. The current educational landscape underscores the need for a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive and socially conscious *design ethos*.
The proposed educational framework advocates for a deliberate and con-

certed effort to instill a sense of critical awareness and responsibility in design students. This, in turn, demands a departure from the conventional approach and a reevaluation of educational priorities. The call for mandatory courses in gender studies or broader social justice issues is rooted in the belief that explicit and direct actions are essential catalysts for driving tangible and sustainable change within the field of design education.

In essence, the evolution towards curricula that prioritize gender and social dimensions is a gradual yet transformative process. By embedding a sense of responsibility and critical thinking within the educational journey of designers, we pave the way for a future where the design profession actively contributes to dismantling societal inequalities.

Indirect approach, the implicit adoption of a feminist attitude

Women's studies is driven by political concerns that inevitably lead to a critique of the way knowledge is produced. ...The feminist students who choose to major in women's studies construct their choice as a political one. (Rooney 2008: 146)

In contrast to a more direct and overt approach, the Gender and Design group has strategically embraced an indirect methodology, characterized by its less 'invasive' nature. This group is at the forefront of experimentation, navigating the realms of design education through a feminist lens without explicitly delineating it as such. Rather than explicitly proposing a feminist framework, the group's overarching strategy revolves around a nuanced exploration of the integrative potential of feminist principles within the existing educational framework. Through this approach, the group seeks to foster an environment conducive to critical reflection and dialogue, encouraging students and educators alike to interrogate conventional norms and power structures inherent in design practice. By actively probing the intricacies of situations, modalities, and the measurability of these 'integrated' interventions, the Gender and Design group aims to catalyze meaningful transformations within design education, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future in the field. The

group is actively probing the intricacies of situations, modalities, and the measurability of these 'integrated' interventions.

Drawing inspiration from the wisdom of Ellen Rooney, who, in 1988, highlighted the inherently political nature of women's studies, the Gender and Design group aligns itself with a similar ethos. Rooney observed that feminist students engaging in women's studies viewed their choice as a political statement, driven by a critical examination of knowledge production. Fast forward 35 years, this sentiment remains pertinent. Gender studies, as envisioned by the group, resists becoming a mere exploration of gender or sexuality in isolation. It transcends the conventional study of differences between women and men or the static definition of gender. Instead, it adopts a *dynamic* and *intersectional* approach, acknowledging the complexities of identity formation and social structures.
This perspective resists offering a comprehensive account of what is, eschewing the conventional approach of mastering and organizing accumulated knowledge on gender and sexuality. Rather, it emphasizes the fluidity and plurality of gender experiences, inviting continuous inquiry and dialogue. By challenging essentialist notions and embracing a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender, the group aims to dismantle hegemonic power structures and promote social justice within academia and beyond.

Within this paradigm, the group advocates for a fundamental shift in perspective – urging the adoption of a gendered and intersectional lens, particularly during project reviews and evaluations.
Instead of mandating specific courses and activities, the emphasis lies in 'wearing' the lens of gender throughout the entire design process. This approach aims to avoid the risk to impose a singular point of view while fostering a holistic integration of feminist principles into the educational framework. By encouraging designers to consider the multifaceted aspects of gender and intersectionality at every stage of their work, this approach highlights the transformative power of subtle and gentle interventions in the educational landscape. It champions a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within the realm of design, emphasizing the importance of sensitivity and awareness in addressing complex social

issues. Through this lens, design education can evolve to become more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of society.

The two approaches, the "direct" and the "indirect," despite their obvious differences, share a common concern rooted in the perception of gender studies and feminist theories as political and ideological issues. Consequently, they struggle to find their place within design curricula, except through niche actions and activities that only reach a small portion of the student community, often those already sensitive and partially informed on the topic.

4.2 Outlining a main general model

A fundamental part of the research focused on projects and communicative actions developed by students within the framework of university courses and workshops that focused precisely on gender issues, in order to identify strategies, tools and methods and systemize them. For this purpose the basin of projects and cases provided by the archive of the dcxcg group constituted a first important source to draw on, enabling in-depth and focused analysis of the entire processes and objectives of any single case,[5] as well as the design outputs produced by the students. The archive contains projects and information collected and stored over the course of 10 years of the group's activity (since 2012). From the point of view of design education, the group is involved in the activation and implementation of activities and courses for the training of conscious designers, providing them with the necessary tools to correctly decode the media landscape (media literacy) that surrounds them and to estimate the impact of their own way of practicing design, in order to stimulate critical thinking and the experimentation with other representational models that can counteract gender stereotypes (Bucchetti & Casnati 2024). The case studies collected and analysed are therefore in their ma-

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5.   Despite the fact that the archive is very extensive and allowed for an in-depth analysis, this represents one of the limitations of the investigation conducted, namely the specificity of the context of the case studies, which can be seen as a limitation, giving back a particular and situated point of view. However, the critical analysis and comparison with the literature made it possible to take a view that was as detached and critical as possible.

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jority outputs of the work that the group conducts with communication design students, which includes:

Design outputs developed by design students for the course "Communication Design and Gender Cultures"[6] – These are project outputs of different typologies developed over the course of a semester in response to a brief provided by the professor. The entire path is therefore known: from the request to the output.

Design outputs developed by communication design students during thematic workshops, usually lasting one week. In these cases the initial brief is very specific and binding, the outputs are consequently more homogeneous.

Master's degree thesis – These are research projects developed as part of Master's degree thesis in Communication Design, this implies that the focus is more oriented to the research phases rather than to the design output, responding to the purpose of increasing knowledge. The collected cases include e.g. research on representation and gender stereotypes in the media and design aimed at reconstructing a state of the art concerning the pollution of the media landscape, observing and monitoring some critical areas and returning a series of evidences that can be turned around in a positive key to design counter-actions. Thesis are generally developed within a time frame of six months to one year.

Design outputs developed within broader research projects that constitute actions and counter-actions to raise awareness – By 'actions and counter-actions for awareness-raising' it is meant projects carried out by the dcxcg group independently or in cooperation with partners such as organisa-

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6.   The course "Communication Design and Gender Cultures" was activated and introduced in 2015 – the first of its kind in Italy –, aimed at Master's degree students at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano. It is a transversal course – communication design, product, fashion, interior and product service system design – that addresses gender issues from the perspective of communication design through a critical approach, with the aim of raising the awareness of future designers using a multimodal approach – blended learning (Bucchetti and Casnati, 2019). The course is structured between lectures, thematic contributions and project activities that mix theory and practice, in order to integrate a gender-sensitive perspective in everyday life and the shared construction of new hypotheses of intervention in the social context.

tions and institutions or other university departments from a multidisciplinary perspective. This type of project in many cases also involves actions aimed at raising design students' awareness of gender issues within design practice.

The multiple case studies collection has the advantage of allowing the Identification of patterns – in this case patterns of approaching gender issues within communication design education and patterns in designing actions and counter-actions within the educational context –, with the aim to reach analytic generalization (Robson & McCartan 2016). In order to make the analysis and the critical interpretation of cases rigorous and systematic, specific analysis sheets have been designed. These sheets provide the opportunity, on one hand, to systematically focus on the single steps of the process followed by students in each case study, from the initial research phase to the design output, with the aim of delineating patterns in order to define action models and their variables. On the other hand, they also offer the possibility of a more discursive section, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of the points of interest of each case study, with the support of images.

The dossier: an organized appendix
The analysis sheets were then collected and organized within a dossier, which serves as an appendix – an organized archive that provides a critical and systematic reading of the case studies in order to highlight their key aspects, as well as giving evidence of the models and sub-models outlined from the analysis.
At a second stage the dossier/archive was supplemented with external case studies, more oriented and focused on design tools to support training and awareness-raising actions and formats that can be used independently, with a particular focus on suitable tools and supports.

From the case studies analysis it was therefore possible to identify the strategies, tools, and methods that can be quite close to what it is meant for 'de-biasing' purposes and reassembled in order to define new experimental activities that meet the above-mentioned requirements. On the

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other hand, it was also possible to define an atlas of contents, a mapping of themes and topics that can be useful in the formulation of activities and workshops on specific issues, thus coping with the vastness and complexity of the macro-theme of gender issues. The atlas of contents constitutes a kind of index of the basin of contents and knowledge that can be put at the service of de-biasing activities, but also highlights some gaps that can become the subject of further investigations and research.
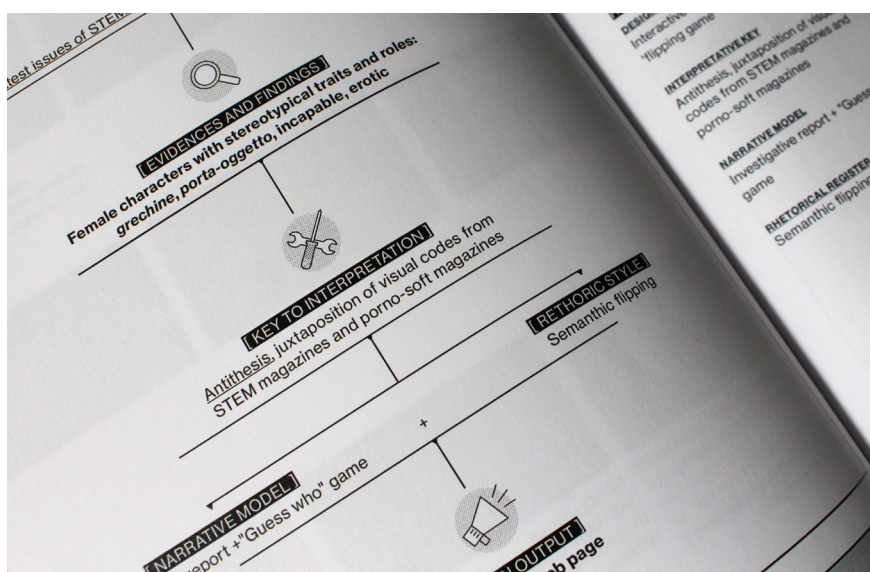
A detail of the dossier collecting the case studies and their analysis.

The identification of a recursive main model

The multiple case studies analysis has first allowed, through an operation of analytical generalization of what emerged, to outline a general model to which all the case studies respond, by systematizing the identified recursiveness. The identified model is articulated through an initial common and general research part (see the visualization in the next page), which then branches out into three 'sub-models' identified on the basis of objectives, aims, targets and type of output. At the centre are always the images and forms of representation, which assume a fundamental role both in the joint research phase and in the subsequent phases in which the outlined model is outlined.

The outlined model is thus divided into steps consisting of an initial phase of approaching the topic and preliminary research, aimed at defining an area of interest; an in-depth research, which in most of the analysed cases coincides with a targeted observation of a specific media context through the collection and analysis of visual and/or audio-visual material, leading to the identification of highlights and critical issues. From the identification of highlights and critical issues, the model branches off in three possible directions that respond to different goals and objectives, and imply the development of communicative artefacts of a distinct nature.

[1] *Observation/preliminary research* – this first phase aims to bring students closer to the subject in order to acquire the basic knowledge necessary to delineate a specific area of research within which they can delve in depth. It can be more or less driven or supplemented by the teacher and involves complementary or alternative methods ranging from observation of the everyday context (e.g. the activity of drafting a diary keeping track of every form of gender inequality and sexism in the media that crosses one's routine); literature review; documentary research (e.g. reports and data on inequality status, …). This first phase results in an output that aims to collect information in a specific form; it can be for example a research dossier, a poster, a diary.

[2] *Delimitation of the research area* – the preliminary observation, in addition to aiming at getting closer to the topic, allows for an initial explo-

1
OBSERVATION/PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

METHODS

daily context observation   literature review   documentary research
(field observation)

2
DELIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH AREA

3
IN-DEPTH RESEARCH

APPROACHES

punctual approach   cross approach
crossing between a media area and   selection of a representative model
a representative model [01]   and observation across different media areas [02]

METHOD
taxonomic collection of audio-visual data

[01] e.g. stereotypes in STEM fields and technology-themed periodicals; gender roles in professional fields and commercial TV spots...;
[02] e.g. theme: ageism and representation of the non-young woman, area: all communicative artefacts that characterise everyday life
in a given time frame.

A recursive model to increase designers' awareness. Schematisation of the recursive main model outlined as a result of the multiple case studies analysis .

ration of gender-related themes within the communication design realm, with the purpose of subsequently defining the field more precisely. It enables students to independently identify their own area of interest to delve into during the subsequent steps. In general, it has been observed that the narrower and more defined the area is, the greater the likelihood that the subsequent observation will be precise and rigorous, leading to original highlights and reducing the risk of drawing conclusions based on students' preconceptions and common *clichés*.

[3] *In-depth research* (*observation*) – once a specific area of investigation is defined, the dimension of representation is placed at the centre, initiating a research activity aimed at collecting and sampling data through different exploratory methods. The objective is to place media images at the centre of a re-examination and to deconstruct the stereotype with the aim of developing critical thinking and the ability to critically read images and recognize stereotypes. In this step two approaches were identified, which imply different methods of observation: the first was termed *punctual approach*, as it examines a specific stereotype or representative model to observe it within a specific mediatic area, with the aim of deconstructing it and investigating it in depth; the second one was termed *cross approach*, as it implies again the selection of a stereotype or a representative model in order to observe its forms and manifestations across different media areas (e.g. one of the analysed cases focuses on the representative models of the non-young woman in everyday media, by carrying out a field observation and collecting all the images and video fragments in which the non-young woman is represented, intercepted in a given time frame). In both cases, the collected audio-visual materials are organized through a taxonomic collection, an essential step in order to isolate representative recursiveness and deconstruct the images. The outputs can be taxonomic tables, dossiers collecting analysis sheets (in cases where the analysis is more articulated), and infographics. In general, these are tools useful for the students themselves, showing the research by systematically visually translate its findings.

[4] *Identification of highlights and critical issues* – the in-depth observation leads to the identification of highlights and critical issues, which lay

the foundations for subsequent steps, constituting the communicative content to be translated into artefacts. Once the highlights have been identified, which will represent the core content from which to develop the subsequent steps, the case studies branch out into three clusters.

The three identified clusters, although responding to a common pattern in the early stages of research, are structured in response to significantly different objectives, processes and methods. This implied, methodologically speaking, the definition of *ad hoc* analysis criteria for each cluster of case studies, which, however, responded to the same ratio.

The next paragraphs discuss in detail the three emerged models (or sub-models), highlighting their peculiarities and showing exemples of analyzed cases.

4.3 Denouncing, increasing knowledge, fostering actions and reactions

Unmasking the stereotype[7]
The first cluster of cases comprehends those activities that, following the research and identification of the highlights phase, aim at a visual and synthetic translation of the findings, able to return and make immediately evident what emerged from the in-depth observation – considering that the focus of observation is in most cases an area of the media landscape. This results in a *process of visual (or audio-visual) synthesis* that translates into the design of a communicative action, based on the reassembly of the visual evidences emerged in the previous phase, on their disclosure or verification, in order to convey one's own critical perspective on the issue and reveal the emerged criticalities.

The output of this action consists of a *visual or audio-visual synthesis* – in most cases constructed precisely from the images and materials collected during the observation – with a dissemination purpose, addressed to one's community of affiliation (e.g. other students).

In terms of learning, students are thus encouraged to take an additional step beyond observation, focusing on their own *interpretive key*

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7.   [A] Outputs to unmask the stereotype. Analysing, deconstructing, denouncing.
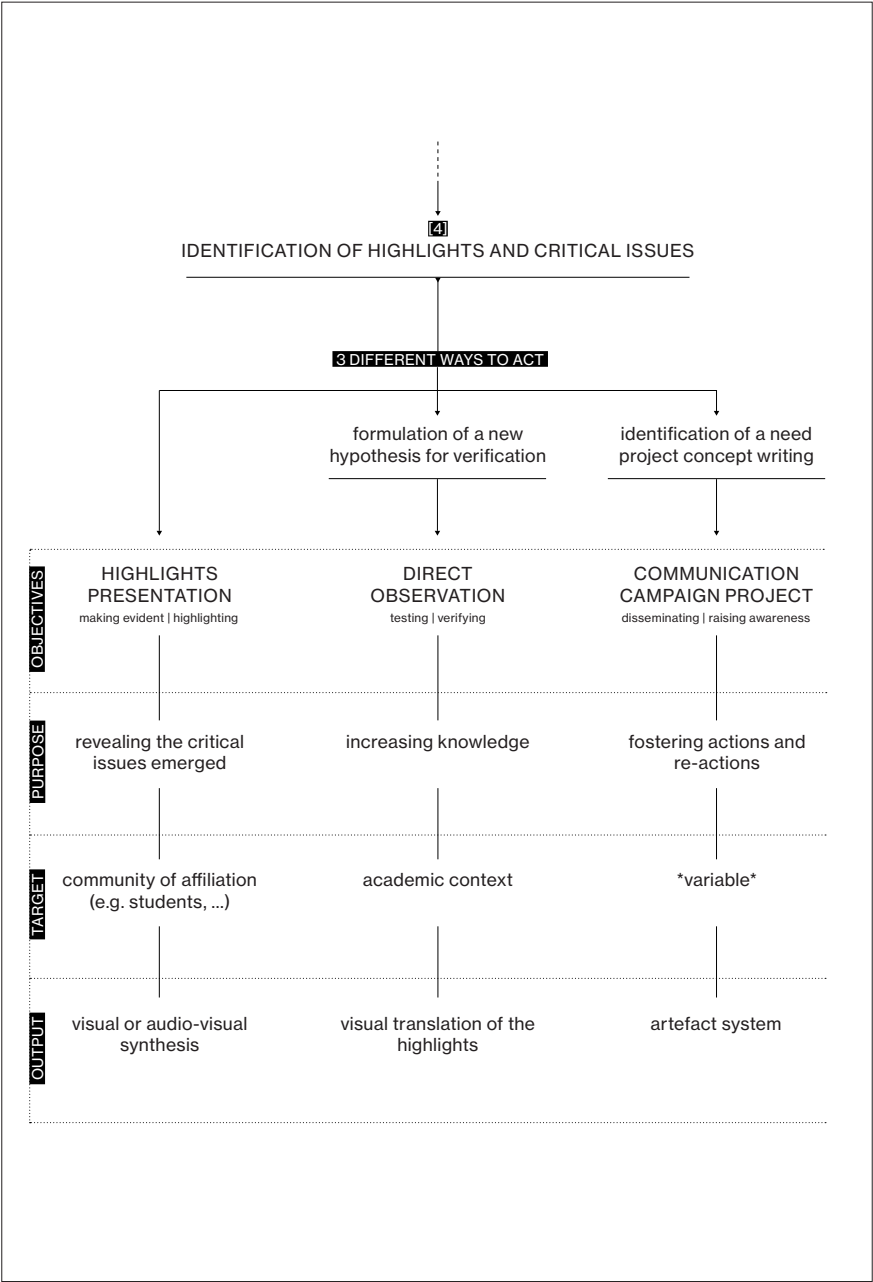
A recursive model to increase designers' awareness (**part 2**). The schematisation highlights the branching of the model into three paths that differ in their objectives and goals.

and experimenting with effective and suitable communication strategies to convey and disseminate their research clearly and effectively. The scheme in the next page illustrates the model common to the cases which fit in this specific cluster: starting from the definition of the area of interest, a taxonomic collection of visual and audio-visual material is conducted (in-depth observation), generally aimed at identifying recursiveness and representative clichés and deconstructing the stereotype. From this observation the core content – evidences and findings – will be defined and then reorganized and translated into an artifact.

The point of interest here focuses on the interpretation of the findings and the subsequent translational steps implemented to arrive at the design output. In this framework the process implies first of all a critical reading of the research findings, aimed at defining an interpretative key. The interpretative key (rif. Biblio) is fundamental as it provides the student's original point of view on the identified problem, defining the key to its interpretation. In this way, students are encouraged to develop their own critical reading of the issue. Once the interpretative key is defined, the path proceeds through the identification of a narrative model to be adhered to and a rhetorical style in order to give strength to the content and to the effect intended to be provoked through the artefact – these steps are in most cases implicit within the design process. The design outputs in this cluster, therefore, go beyond simply presenting the research findings in a detached manner, they provide an original reinterpretation aimed at not only highlighting but also denouncing the problem, training a twofold interpretative skill (Zingale 2012b: 12): understanding the nature of the problem and the ways and forms to make it evident. The most frequent outputs, identified as effective models for synthetic restitution, are based on the kinetic montage of images or audio-visual fragments that, through heterogeneous rhetorical patterns, provide an effective and immediate interpretation of the problem. To better understand what has been discussed so far, the example of case study analysis displayed in the next pages may help.

Unmasking the stereotype

[1]
definition of the research area

[2]
taxonomic collection of visual and
audio-visual materials and sources

[3]
**identification of
evidences and findings**

[4]
choosing a key to interpretation

narrative model   +   rethoric style

[5]
design output

"Unmasking the stereotype" process schematization. In the following pages: an exemple of case study.

MAIN PROCESS

[DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH AREA]
Visual languages on the packaging of STEM children's toys

[PACKAGING - VISUAL AND VERBAL ELEMENTS]
Packaging images of 'scientific' and 'educational' toys

[EVIDENCES AND FINDINGS]
Stereotyping of the visual composition that characterises STEM toy packaging

[KEY TO INTERPRETATION]
Immedesimation,
contextualisation in the daily context

[NARRATIVE MODEL]   **[RETHORIC STYLE]**
Storytelling   +   Climax

[DESIGN OUTPUT]
Video

Context // Corso di Design della Comunicazione e Culture di genere,
Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano. A.A. 2014/2015

Designers // Sara di Nardo, Massimiliano Felicetti, Su Xizi

[134]

[1.6] UNMASKING THE STEREOTYPE

Non solo bambole

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION

RESEARCH AREA
Models of representation
on the packaging of STEM toys.

OBJECT OF OBSERVATION
Packaging of 179 toys collected
from major online sales sites,
categorised as 'scientific' and
'educational'.

DOCUMENTATION COLLECTED
Visual compositions.

HIGHLIGHTS EMERGED
Prevalence of visual codes and
languages related to masculine
canons.

The aim of the research was to investigate whether, and through which models, the packaging of STEM-themed educational children's games convey gender differences. Images of the packaging of 179 games, identified via the main online sales sites, were selected and collected. The packaging was subsequently filed and analysed by means of a visual composition deconstruction operation. The elements analysed concern visual elements (colours, shapes, fonts, images, illustrations etc.) and content elements (language, tone, semantic area involved etc.). What emerged, in short, is the widespread tendency to characterise STEM game boxes with stereotyped visual codes and language, referable to the 'male sphere', implicitly excluding girls from their target audience.

HIGHLIGHTING EVIDENCES // DESIGN OUTPUT

DESIGN OUTPUT
Animation
Duration: 1'35'',
dimension: 1920 x 1080 HD.

INTERPRETATIVE KEY
Immedesimation, contextualisation
in the daily context.

NARRATIVE MODEL
Storytelling.

RHETORICAL REGISTER
Climax.

The output consists of an animatic, a short animated film that integrates the narration of a common, everyday situation – the confusion of a parent who finds himself with his daughter in a supermarket toy department and has to make choices – with the presentation of the data collected during the research phase. The objective is to use a situation in which identification is easy, to bring to light the paradox of gender roles and to launch a reflection on the type of stereotypes to which, from an early age, boys and girls are subjected.

The video, entitled "Not only dolls", draws attention to the hesitation of the parent, whose gaze alternately bounces between "male" and "female" toys. The situation is resolved for the best when it is the child herself who chooses, showing enthusiasm, a scientific/educational game belonging, in terms of positioning and visual language, to the "male" games, overcoming the social conventions dictated by adults.

The setting, the aisle of a shopping centre, is representative of the picture that emerged during the research. Chromes, illustrations, subjects, textual messages are visual translations of the data collected and analysed. Some zooms on the words addressed respectively to the children – observe, build, analyse... – and girls – care, iron, make-up... – highlight the most recurrent patterns and codes.

[135]
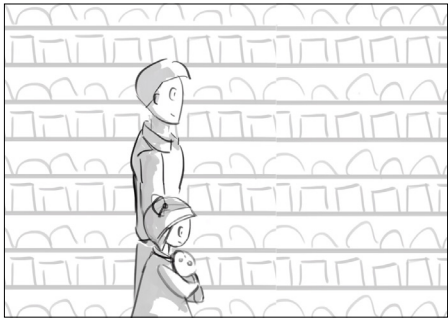
1. Context introduction
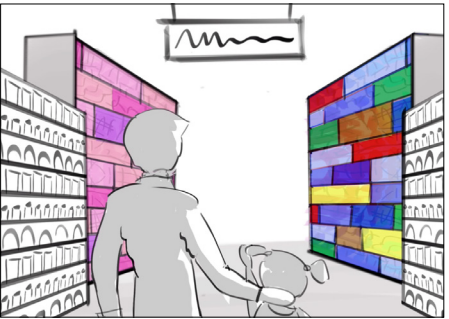
2. Theme introduction
The colour palette chosen solely for the products emphasises the polarisation that emerged from the research.

3.The parent is in an uncomfortable situation because of the polarization of toys
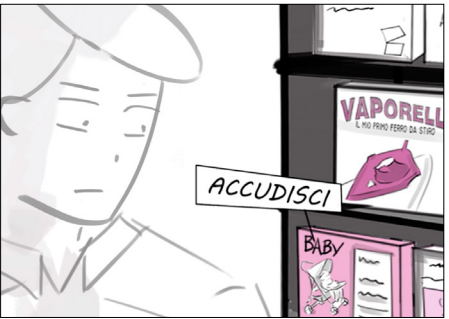
4. Data research presentation
The middle part of the narrative becomes an expedient to show what emerged from the research phase.

5.

6.
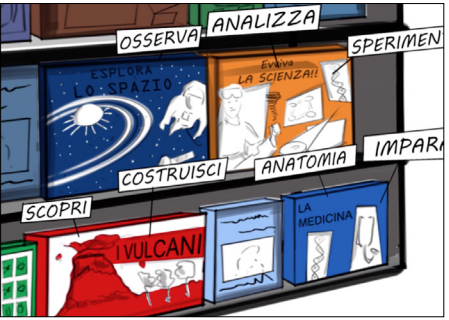
[136]

7. *Quadro di contrasto* and climax
They alternate, at an increasingly fast rhythm: 'female' games, 'male' games and close-ups of the increasingly uncomfortable character expression.

8.

9.
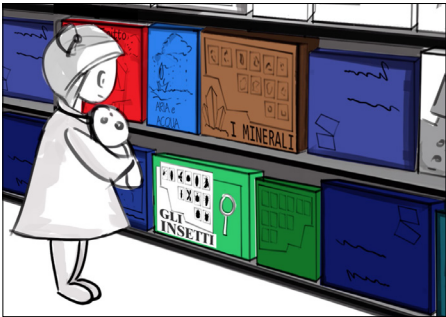
10. Resolution
The moment of discomfort is resolved when the child independently chooses the game she is interested in, despite the fact that it is not on the shelf of 'girl' toys

10.

11. Final claim and statement
"Dress her mind. Not only dolls".

Increasing knowledge through direct observations

The second cluster of case studies involves the first in-depth analytical observation setting the conditions for a new research question to be answered through a form of *direct observation* (or *empirical observation*).

The identification of the highlights of the in-depth observation phase thus leads to the definition of a new research question, a new hypothesis to be verified, which implies the design and activation of a form of direct observation of the phenomenon under study (e.g. whether the community of communication design students contributes to the perpetuation of bias). In these cases, the documentation of direct observation assumes a fundamental role and lays the foundations, in terms of content, for the realization of a design output, which once again consists of a concise and effective restitution of the observation activity and its findings, enabling the students to provide their own key of interpretation of the investigated phenomenon.

The overall objective of the case studies included in this cluster is to *increase knowledge through empirical observation*. The direct observation – which can take place through techniques ranging from participant observation to guerrilla research – indirectly allows students to engage in a broader critical reflection on design practice itself.

The analysis in this case focused precisely on the peculiarities of individual direct observation activities, in order to bring out their recurrences and variable elements.

The direct observation activities as anticipated generally focus on the behaviours acted out by groups of designers and/or students, or on the observation of perceptions, in order to grasp, for example, whether, in what forms and at what passages, the designers are affected by gender bias or employ stereotypes. The activities of direct observation, in the various identified typologies, are united by the need to define a scenario/context, which may be real or simulated, and by a leading event/artefact, which becomes an expedient and strategy to obtain, more or less explicitly, an answer to the research question. In this process, the work of documentation is fundamental since it allows, a posteriori, to analyse in depth e.g. acted behaviour, oral verbal discourse, way of relating etc.

Direct observations to increase knowledge

1
definition of the research area

2
desk research / taxonomic
collection / literature review

3
identification of
evidences and findings

new RQ

4
direct observation activity

strategy   +   setting/context   +   main event/artifact

documentation

5
output
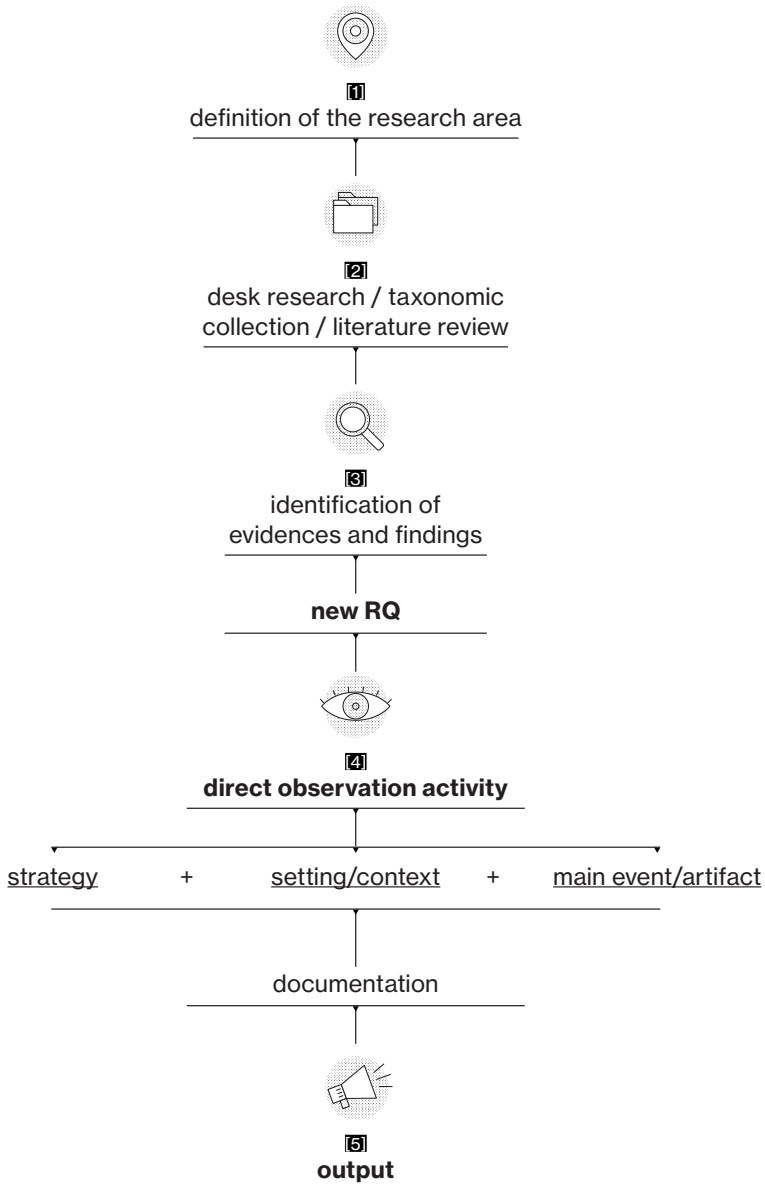
"Direct observation" process schematization. In the following pages: two exemples of case studies.

In the case study "Hack the Stereotype",[8] for example, the student aimed to investigate whether and how her collegues – communication design students – are influenced by gender bias when approaching STEM disciplines.[9] This was done by engaging a sample of students in a workshop activity focused on learning the basics of coding. In this case, the designed main event was precisely the coding workshop, to which some students were invited without being informed of the real objective: documenting the activity to identify potential gender biases by analyzing discourse, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with others.

Another approach was developed in the case study "I solit ignot*",[10] where the objective was to verify whether and how design students are influenced by unconscious gender biases related to male and female roles that might be conveyed in design projects. The team designed a sort of social experiment based on the well-known game Guess Who?. They created a set of cards, each featuring a decontextualized photograph of a person. Participants, working in pairs, were asked to place the depicted individuals in the correct profession (see images in the following pages) to document not only the choices they made but also the discussions and reasoning behind their decisions.

In both cases taken as examples, communication design tools were employed to support the planning and directorial coordination of the activities, which required careful choices regarding the setting, the instructions given to participants, the final reveal of the actual objective, and the documentation strategies (in this case, audio-visual recordings). In the "Hack the Stereotype" workshop, for instance, documentation could not be too intrusive but still needed to allow for the collection and analysis of all necessary information.

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8. Project by Benedetta Verrotti di Pianella, course "Design della Comunicazione e Culture di genere", Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano. A.A. 2017/2018. Professor V. Bucchetti, Tutor F. Casnati.

9. See https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/new-report-addresses-the-gender-gap-in-stem-education-across-educational-levels.

10. Project by Martina Galofaro and Michela Rossi , course "Design della Comunicazione e Culture di genere", Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano. A.A. 2019/2020. Professor V. Bucchetti, Tutor F. Casnati.

In most of the analyzed cases, audio-visual documentation of the activities made it possible to identify critical issues and later re-edit video highlights to synthesize key moments. These highlights emphasized behaviors, language use, reactions, and other elements that reveal underlying gender biases.

The added value of this type of activity lies therefore in the possibility of observing biases enacted by peers, thereby fostering self-reflection and enhancing the ability to critically examine one's own actions. This process enables individuals to recognize their own biases and work towards overcoming them.

The uniqueness of these actions lies in their potential to serve as true awareness-raising artifacts in a peer-to-peer perspective, triggering virtuous cycles of awareness at three main levels:

(a) The group of students directly involved in designing the observation activity, by focusing on a sample of peers, activates a form of critical analysis of their own community and, consequently, of themselves, equipping themselves with self-analysis tools.

(b) The observed student sample is encouraged to reflect on these issues based on their own behaviors.

(c) The final project output – such as the edited video highlighting key findings – becomes a communicative artifact that raises awareness within the broader student community and beyond.

MAIN PROCESS
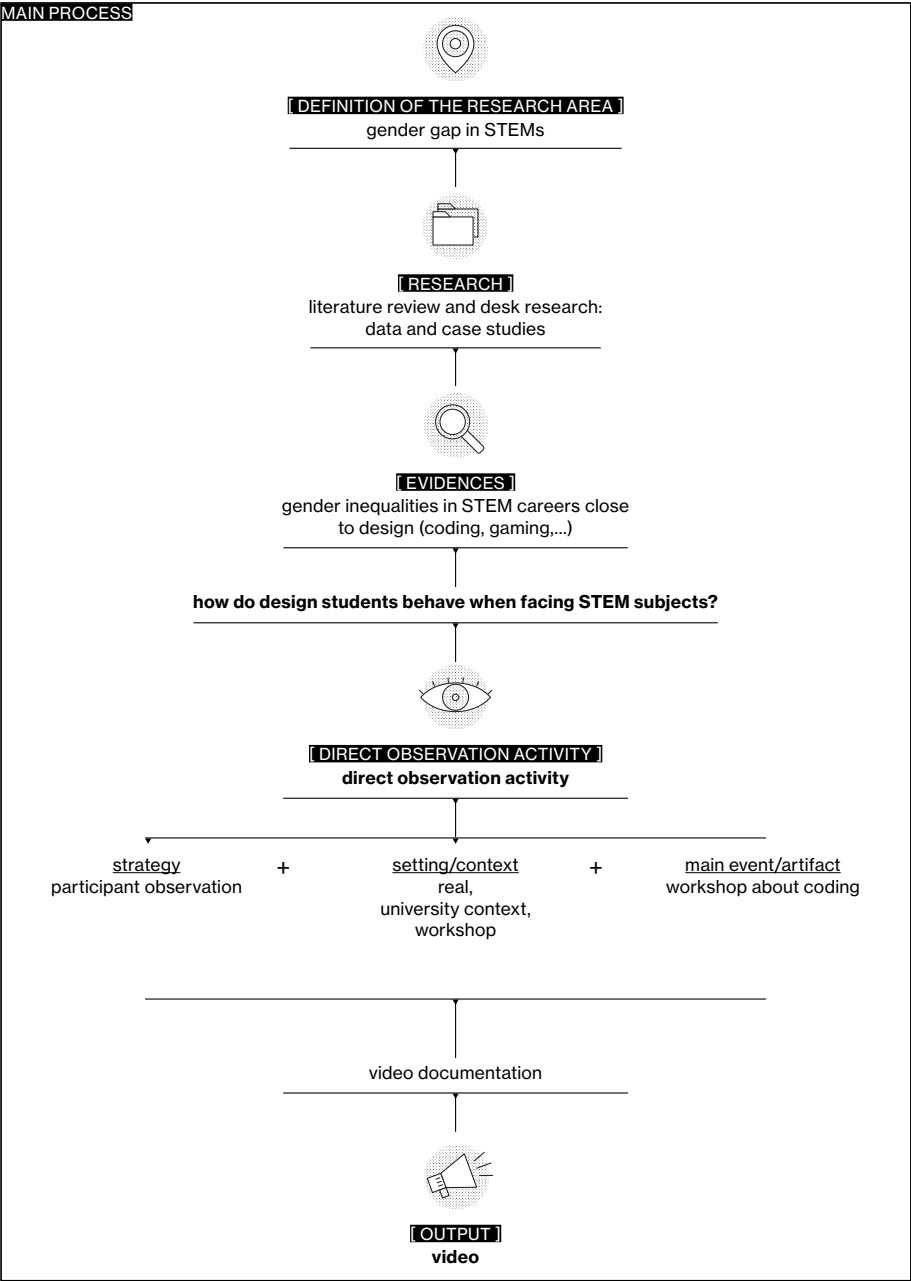
[DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH AREA]
gender gap in STEMs

[RESEARCH]
literature review and desk research:
data and case studies

[EVIDENCES]
gender inequalities in STEM careers close
to design (coding, gaming,...)

how do design students behave when facing STEM subjects?

[DIRECT OBSERVATION ACTIVITY]
direct observation activity

strategy   +   setting/context   +   main event/artifact
participant observation   real,   workshop about coding
                                       university context,
                                       workshop

video documentation

[OUTPUT]
video

Context // Corso di Design della Comunicazione e Culture di genere,   **Designer** // Benedetta Verrotti di Pianella
Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano. A.A. 2017/2018

[238]

[2.2] DIRECT OBSERVATION

Hack the stereotype

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION

RESEARCH AREA
Gender gap in STEMs.

OBJECT OF OBSERVATION
Gender gap in STEMs.

DOCUMENTATION COLLECTED
Data about gender gap
and case studies.

HIGHLIGHTS EMERGED
Gender inequalities in STEM
careers close to design (coding,
gaming,...).

The debate on the gender gap has focused in particular on the occupational field of STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics). According to Almalaurea data, female students enrolled in degrees in the scientific discipline group account for 34.8%, but the percentage plummets for the specific degree in technological and computer sciences: 15.2%. As far as freelance work is concerned, just over 19% of ICT sector employees have a female manager, compared to 45.2% in other sectors, and only 19% of ICT sector entrepreneurs are women, compared to 54% in other sectors (data from European Commission research Women active in the ICT sector, 2013).
What discourages the pursuit of these careers is neither lack of interest nor lack of ability, but numerous other factors, especially socio-cultural ones. The idea that STEM is more suited to men is very much ingrained both in girls, who are therefore discouraged from pursuing these avenues, and in boys, who tend to create discouraging sexist dynamics in these environments, such as isolation of the few girls present, little consideration of their opinion, and little support.

FIELD RESTRICTION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION
Is the design students behaviour in approaching STEM tasks influenced by gender bias? Does gender bias hold female designers back from pursuing STEM subjects?

HIGHLIGHTING EVIDENCES // DESIGN OUTPUT

OBJECTIVES
Verify whether and how Design
students act gender bias while
facing STEM subjects.

OBSERVATION STRATEGY
Participatory observation.

SETTING/CONTEXT
Real, university context,
workshop.

MAIN EVENT
Workshop about coding.

PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS
Students from the School of
Design at the Polimi, who did not
attend courses on gender and
design.

PARTICIPANTS N.
A group of 6 people:
3 male and 3 female students.

MODES OF INTERACTION
Teamwork.

TOOLS
Instructions and coding tasks
to accomplish.

RESEARCHER'S ROLE
Coding teacher and observer.

PROCESS
[1] Organization of the workshop.

[2] Preliminary questions about participants' experience in coding.

[3] Workshop: participants were introduced to coding and given some excersices both individual and collective. At the end of the ws the real aim was unveiled and each participant was invited to share thoughts.

[4] Analysis of the video documentation.

[5] Highlights and video editing. The video summarizes the findings and presents a positive case study.

[239]

DOCUMENTATION

COLLECTED DATA
Audiovisual documentation of activities.

ANALYZED ELEMENTS
Verbal speeches, oral interactions among participants, behavioral reactions, gestures and expressions.

EVIDENCES
Teamwork dynamics: boys assume the role of leaders despite equal skills; Girls tend to adopt a disillusioned attitude and intervene less, despite succeeding in their tasks as much as boys. Boys, on the contrary, show more self-confidence even when they are in difficulty.

OUTPUT
A video composed of significant excerpts from the activity, with a particular focus on the debate among the participants.

NOTES

Issues that emerged from the observation:

1. Boys tend to work more calmly in groups than girls who, even if they do not want to, play a secondary role in group dynamics.

2. In individual work, girls are much more active and ask many more questions than in group work.

3. Boys put themselves in control even when they do not know the answer or are not the best at it.

4. Girls are much more easily discouraged and do not try again. They ask their desk-mates for help or stop trying more than they try on their own to understand the problem.

5. Girls believe that knowing the basics of coding is unimportant for their future career, while boys, despite not liking programming, say they find it useful for their path.

6. The stereotype of the coder as a nerdy, slightly strange, game-loving boy is very much present.
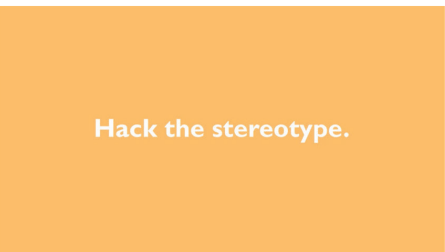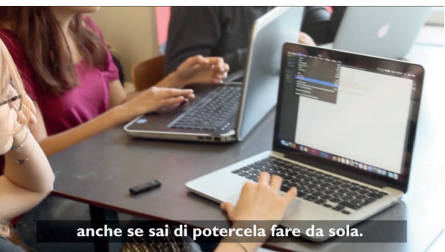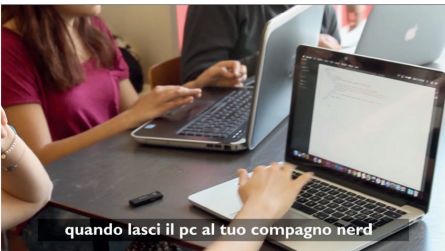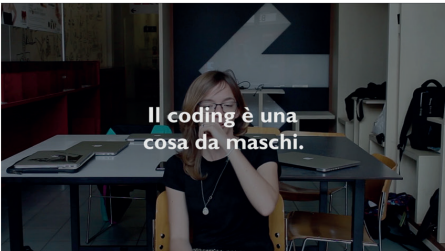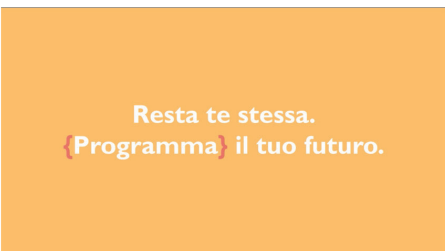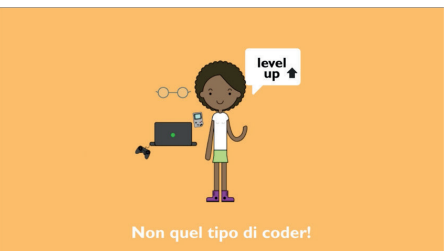
[240]

OUTPUT: VIDEO

MAIN PROCESS

[DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH AREA]
gender roles in family context + tv spots

[RESEARCH]
taxonomic collection of family representations
from italian tv commercials

[EVIDENCES]
fixity of roles, patriarchal viewpoint,
women-housewife, man-businessman

do design students perpetrate the same stereotypes?

[DIRECT OBSERVATION ACTIVITY]
I solit* ignot*

strategy   +   setting/context   +   main event/artifact
participant observation   real,   social experiment based
neutral (ph. set)   on game model "guess
who"

video documentation

[OUTPUT]
video
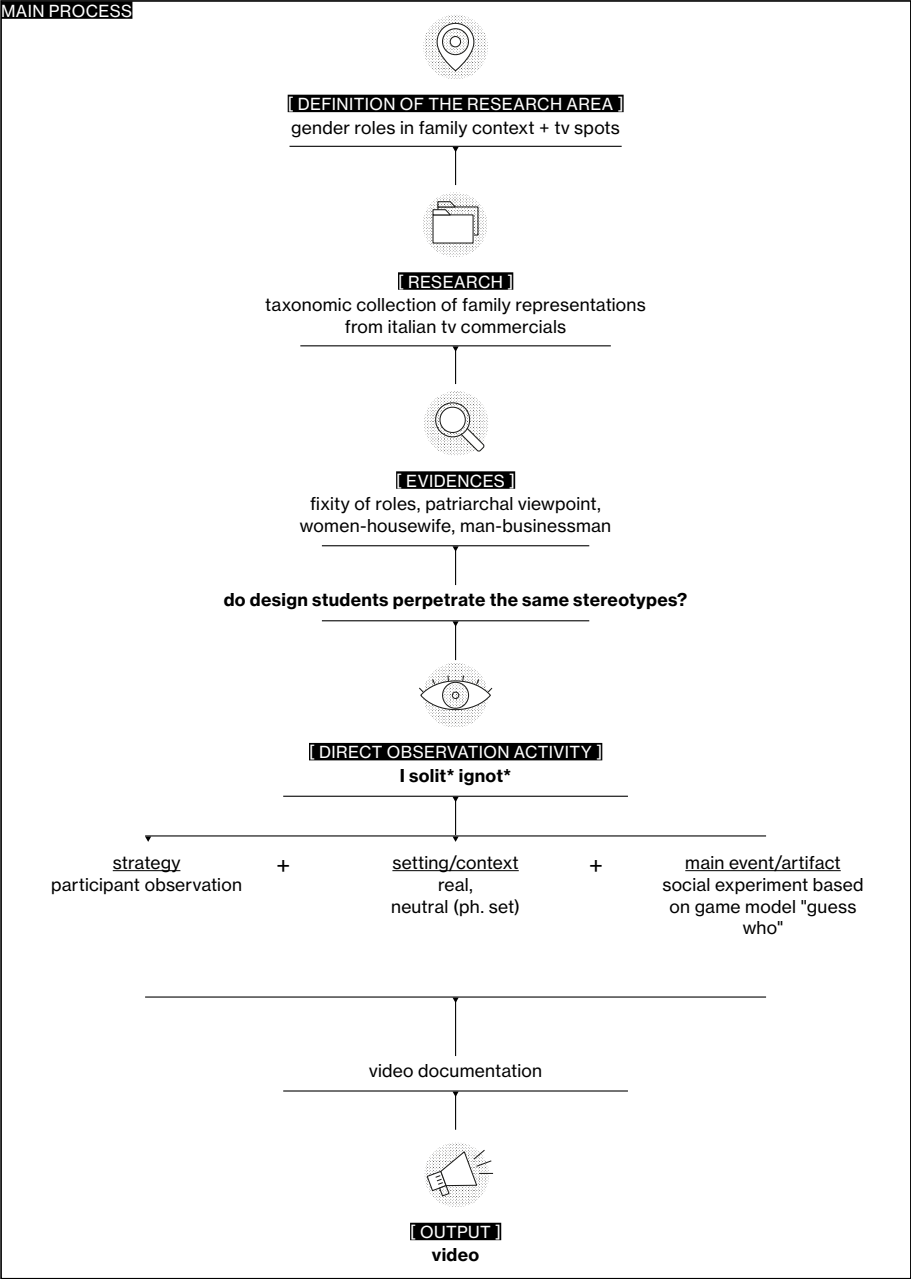
Context // Corso di Design della Comunicazione e Culture di genere,   **Designer** // Martina Galofaro, Michela Rossi
Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano. A.A. 2018/2019

[242]

[2.3] DIRECT OBSERVATION

I solit* ignot*

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION

RESEARCH AREA
Representation of family roles in advertising commercials.

OBJECT OF OBSERVATION
Advertising commercials aired in Italy between 2011 and 2019, depicting families.

DOCUMENTATION COLLECTED
Audio-visual excerpts.

HIGHLIGHTS EMERGED
Rigidity/recurrence/uniqueness of the role of the woman as a mother and homemaker.

The students' area of interest was the portrayal of families in advertisements, aiming to examine whether and through what forms of representation stereotypical models linked to a patriarchal view of the family are perpetuated. What emerges from the observation conducted between 2011 and 2019 is a picture that remains rooted in the model of the family derived from Western socio-cultural tradition.
The man is predominantly depicted as the head of the family, the career-oriented individual who leaves domestic and childcare responsibilities to the woman. When not portrayed as a homemaker, the woman must juggle professional work, domestic chores, and childcare. She takes care of cooking, laundry, and handling the small everyday family issues, while the man, within the domestic walls, assumes the role of the lovable but inept eternal child.

NEW RQ
Do the design students perpetrate the same stereotypes when assigning roles to people?

HIGHLIGHTING EVIDENCES // DESIGN OUTPUT

OBJECTIVES
Verify whether and how Design students are oriented by unconscious gender bias related to female and male roles when designing.

OBSERVATION STRATEGY
Participatory observation through playful activity.

SETTING/CONTEXT
Real, neutral, ph. set.

MAIN EVENT
Social experiment based on game model "guess who".

PARTICIPANT REQUIREMENTS
Students from the School of Design at the Polimi, who did not attend courses on gender and design.

PARTICIPANTS N.
Six students playing in pairs.

MODES OF INTERACTION
Playing, model: collaborative, "guess who".

TOOLS
Cards with portraits and jobs to be associated with each other.

RESEARCHER'S ROLE
Leader of the social experiment and observer.

PROCESS
[1] Pairs are made to sit at a table where cards with photographic portraits of men and women and a pack of cards with some professions on them are placed.

[2] Players are asked to match faces and professions. The collaborative game allows them to observe and record conversations and reasons for choices.

[3] In closing, the researcher reveals the correct combinations, which are far from models based on gender stereotypes.

[4] In the last part, space is left for the players to comment on their associations and the correct combinations.

[243]

DOCUMENTATION

COLLECTED DATA
Audiovisual documentation
of activities.

ANALYZED ELEMENTS
Verbal speeches, associatons
between portraits and jobs.

EVIDENCES
Participants were still found
to be oriented by unconscious
gender bias leading to the
protraction of stereotyped roles.

OUTPUT
A video composed of significant
excerpts from the activity.

NOTES

The cards used for the activity (see image below) represent real people
and their profession. The difficulty in designing the cards was in finding
terms that work that are not declined in masculine or feminine form.

The participants were not aware of the real purpose of the activity,
although it was obvious that the social experiment was about stereotypes.

On the following page are the screenshots of the video that gives
evidence of what emerged during the activity.

[244]

OUTPUT: VIDEO
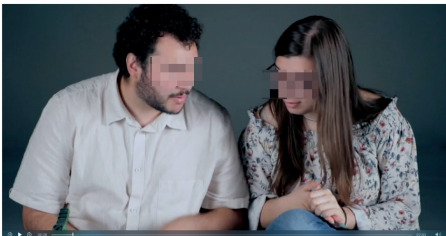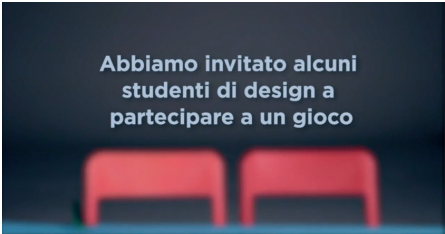
Fostering actions and re-actions

The third identified cluster includes case studies consisting of communicative actions, communication campaigns in most cases (but magazines, applications, board games, …) aimed at promoting actions and reactions with respect to the topic investigated in the previous research phase. The in-depth observation leads to the identification of critical issues, gaps, or needs from which a project brief is formulated. This brief involves the implementation of a communication action aimed at promoting change through strategies such as raising awareness, informing, disseminating, or advocating for a specific cause or issue. This action focuses on the social responsibility role of the communication designer, calling on him/her to implement his/her knowledge and disciplinary skills to foster change and trigger virtuous processes. From a learning perspective, students are called upon to focus on the most effective communicative strategies and languages to achieve their communicative goals.

In terms of process, the cases belonging to this cluster differ most notably from the two previous ones starting from the initial phases. After a preliminary research, students are indeed asked to identify a gap or a communicative need to address through the design of a system of artifacts. This leads to the definition of specific communicative objectives, such as raising awareness, informing, denouncing, promoting good actions, and so on. Subsequently, a design research is initiated, focusing on the most suitable and effective visual languages and communicative strategies to achieve the communicative goal. The process followed by the students is therefore aimed at designing a system of artefacts (e.g. a communication campaign) designed to mainly provoke actions or reactions. In terms of education, students are therefore encouraged to research and experiment with languages, communication strategies, narrative models, learning to manage the project with a social matrix and stimulating a double level of reflection. While they acquire more expertise in terms of design, they also develop a greater awareness and sensitivity to gender issues and to the tools that communication design can deploy to stimulate social innovation processes.

foster actions and reactions

1
definition of a gap/need

2
identification of a gap and brief
formulation

communicative objectives

3
design research
(e.g. case studies)

4
definition of a concept

strategy   +   narrative model   +   rethoric style

5
output
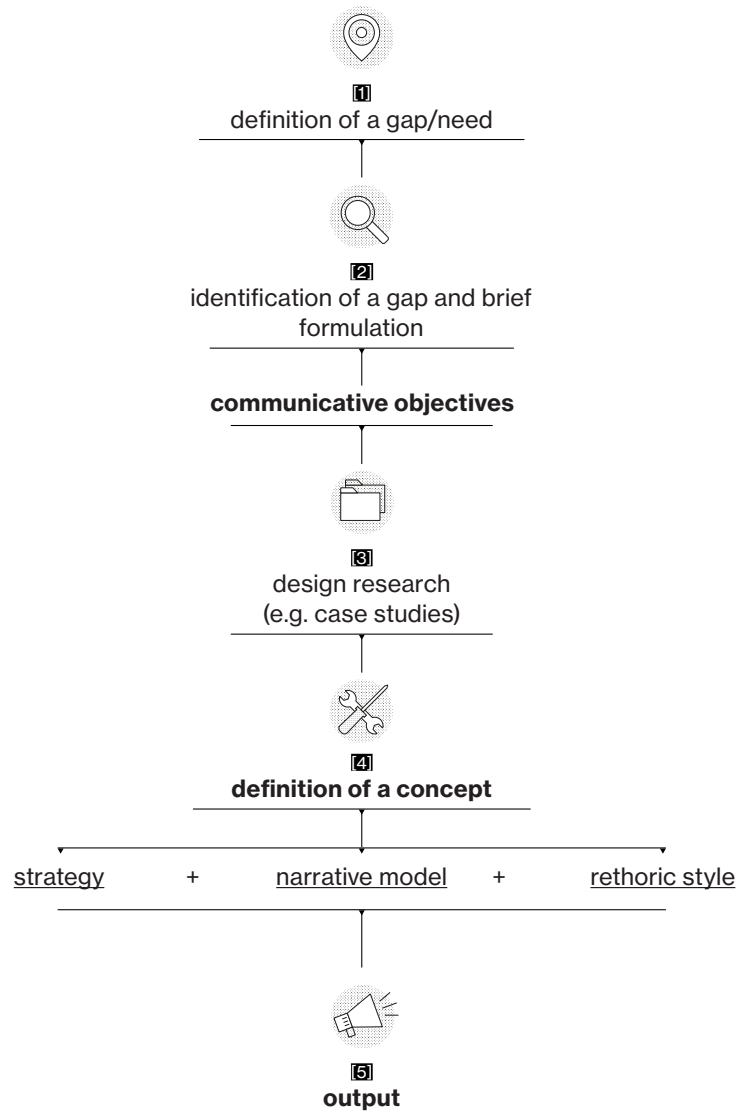
"Fostering actions and reactions" process schematization. In the following pages: an exemple of case study.

MAIN PROCESS

[GAP/NEED]

The need of raise awareness about gender-based violence in universities

[BRIEF]

Design an awareness-raising campaign starting from a given
report containing the findings of a cycle of focus groups*

[IDENTIFICATION OF A SPECIFIC TOPIC]

**Digital catcalling acted among students within the
university context**

[DEFINITION OF A CONCEPT]

Emulation/simulation of a sexist situation in order to give
evidence to the imbalances and injustices

[STRATEGY]   +   [NARRATIVE MODEL]   +   [RETHORIC STYLE]

Creating a plausible scenario   Whatsapp chat   Narrative plot

[DESIGN OUTPUT]

Posters campaing

Context // Workshop 'Heavy words', Scuola del Design, Politecnico di
Milano. A.A. 2018/2019.

Designers // Aurora Altea, Rossella Bosnia, Alberto De Biasi,
Xie MengJun

[266]

[3.1] FOSTER ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

A campaign against digital catcalling

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION AND BRIEF

AREA/TOPIC
Gender violence acted within the university context, with a specific focus on digital catcalling.

MAIN SOURCES
Given report with the findings of a cycle of focus groups.

BRIEF
Designing an awareness-raising campaign against gender-based violence in universitites.

The project come at the end of a research path developed in a multidisciplinary context, the starting point was a research conducted in Milan universities about gender-based violence through focus groups.
The recurrence of the stories – reported by the students – was particularly relevant, stories from which emerged for exemple messages received from unknown boys which turned into sexual advances, and then into insults, following their reactions aimed at putting an end to these messages. The young designers tackled the design by evaluating the different possibilities of structuring, modulating, and constructing the message (languages, communication strategies, rhetorical keys); at the same time, the design activity constituted an opportunity to lead the students to reflect on male verbal violence addressed to the female gender, as well as a formative moment useful to collectively analyse and discuss the theme.

DESIGN OUTPUT

CONCEPT
counteracting violence by stimulating empathisation.

STRATEGY
Creating a plausible scenario.

NARRATIVE MODEL
Whatsapp chat.

RHETORIC STYLE
Open-ended narrative plot.

OUTPUT
Posters.

The project focused on the phenomenon of digital catcalling in student chats (verbal violence acted out in informal virtual contexts).
The reference to the context is made immediate by the graphic reproduction of a chat room that becomes the visual hook immediately referable to the familiar's domain. The chat simulates a plausible situation, a discussion between university classmates, leaving it open for the person composing the last message to choose whether to fall into the sexist cliché trap or circumvent it. A small text at the foot urges users to counter digital catcalling and provides its definition.
In the background of the chat there is a photographic image of a Milanese Athenaeum, which varies depending on where it is affixed. The images were graphically manipulated so that the University would be clearly recognizable without interfering and disturbing the message. Thus, the foreground conveys the content of the chat, reformulated from the testimonies, and the background refers to the university context in order to contextualize the action.

This results in a system of posters declined into six subjects, one for each university, and digital kinetic versions, in which the artifact, adapting its format, is composed through an animation to respond to the forms of communication that characterize the language of social.

The chat simulates a plausible situation, a discussion between university classmates, leaving it open for the person composing the last message to choose whether to fall into the sexist cliché trap or circumvent it. A small text at the foot urges users to counter digital catcalling and provides its definition.

The campaign was launche on the occasion of 25th November 2019 in the 6 univerities involved and online through a animated posters.

[269]
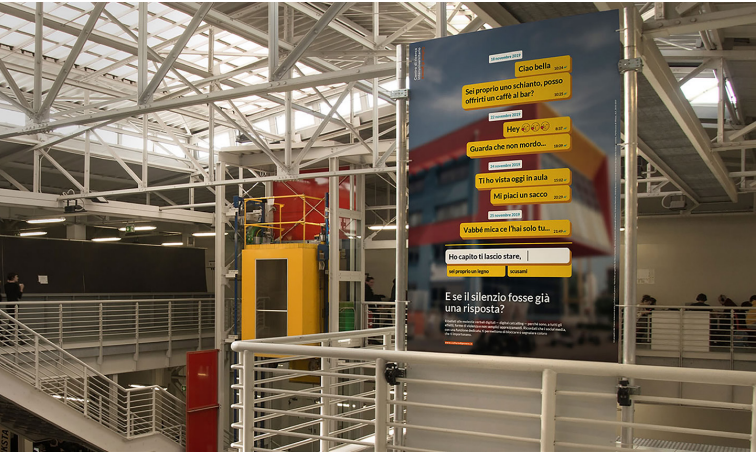
4.4 The atlas of topics

A different perspective on case studies helped in revealing fundamental insights into the themes and sub-themes addressed. By isolating the cases from the dcxcg group's archive, they were reorganized to create an 'index of the topics' for which information and content had been archived and made accessible. Following the analysis of these case studies, the themes and sub-themes explored in each project were extracted with the primary objective of organizing and translating them into a comprehensive map that served multiple purposes. First, it provided an overarching view and a state-of-the-art representation of the topics addressed, particularly those related to gender issues and media representation, thus offering a cross-section of existing knowledge, past investigations, and emerging critical issues. Second, it highlighted gaps that could become the focus of further research and inquiry. Finally, it functioned as an index of the body of content and knowledge that could be utilized for lectures and educational activities.

Based on these objectives, the data and information extracted from the case studies were reorganized and visually translated into a comprehensive representation called the Atlas of Content. This visualization responded to the need to systematize the knowledge acquired over the years through projects, observations, and activities conducted by the group, providing a simultaneous spatial overview. The resulting visualization highlighted the pervasive presence of gender stereotypes within the mediasphere, bringing together several studies focused on specific areas that had been subject to observation and investigation. These analyses aimed to identify the underlying mechanisms that contributed to the reinforcement and reiteration of gender-based stereotypes (Bucchetti & Casnati 2022). Once again, images played a crucial role: for each topic and area represented on the map, an extensive collection of observations and images was compiled, forming a repository of visual content – both static and kinetic – that served as evidence of critical issues while also constituting an archive of examples and references that could support further activities.

"The atlas of topics" representation.

How to read the atlas – The circular visualisation moves from the general to the particular starting from the core, which represents the heart of the matter defined by three key terms: *gender, patriarchy, androcentrism*. The next circumference level, proceeding from the centre to the periphery, contains two other key terms: *gender normativity* and *power relations*, which refer both to the domain of visual representation – norms and codes of representation/visual languages that derive from an androcentric heritage perpetuating a vision – and to that of the biased behaviour acted out by the designers when designing. From the successive circumference onwards, the visualisation is divided into two parts, two semi-circles cut by an axis that separates the topics concerning the *domain of representation* and that of *acted behaviour*.

The two semi-circles are for the first level mirrored, and are divided into two macro sectors containing topics directly relating to violence against women and symbolic violence – according to Bourdieu's definition, which

identifies it with all those forms of violence exercised through the imposition of a vision of the world, of social roles, of cognitive categories, of the mental structures through which the world is perceived and thought by dominant subjects towards dominated subjects. The symbolic violence section, which is logically more substantial, is in turn divided into three sub-sections: visual sexism, hierarchies, gender roles. Three sub-sections whose boundaries, in some cases, overlap and blur and are further subdivided internally, as can be seen in the image. This level follows different criteria and logic depending on the relevant sub-section, as these are further specifications that vary depending on the topic cluster.

The visualisation then proceeds outwards branching out into themes and sub-themes to arrive at the outermost ring on which the media areas on the one hand and the contexts of direct observations on the other are positioned, thus enabling the rendering of an overall framework. Consider, for instance, the sub-section hierarchies in symbolic violence, in the semi-circle related to the domain of visual representation. In this case, the sub-section is further divided into a part concerning representative models and a part, on the other hand, that concerns hierarchical relations that have been termed 'acted out', which in turn are articulated in language and acted-out behaviour – include, for example, observations made on the behaviour of the guests of a television programme, or observations on the written verbal language used within a specific media area. Observe for instance the topic of male-as-default, placed on the line between represented and acted hierarchies (language). Following the line into the represented section, we arrive at the area of pictogrammatic languages, which further branches into packaging, public wayfinding, instruction booklets. The map is thus to be read in this way: within the macro theme of gender hierarchies conveyed by visual languages, pictogrammatic languages were investigated in the three areas shown. Which means that a part of knowledge related to that specific topic is available as content for any other activities/lectures/for further research or investigation. And this is precisely the primary objective of the map, which constitutes an index of the basin of available contents and knowledge that can be put at the service of de-biasing activities, but also highlights some gaps that can become the subject of further investigation and research.

«I take as axiomatic the link between the image and the word, that what one can see, is in very way related to what one can say».

(Phelan 2003: 105)

5.
A modular system of de-biasing practices, experimentations towards a step-by-step revolution

The definition of a reference model within which to systematise the case studies offers an overall view of the strategies and actions implemented in order to spread a gender-sensitive approach to communication design. While the case studies analysed place the concept of gender stereotyping at the centre, mainly focusing on the critical analysis of forms of representation, the research intends to imply a perspective that takes into account the designer as a vehicle of gender bias.

If every designer inevitably reproduces, to a greater or lesser degree, the dominant worldview, the question that remains open then concerns the possibility of inventing new ways of representing – of imagining – the world, giving voice and space to other points of view. How can one really move away from the dominant point of view, and of the dominant, if the dominated has also internalised that particular view as 'normal'? Design as an act of prefiguration after all, Zingale tells us, is precisely «the faculty of making present in front of the mind the image of something that is not in front of the eyes» (Zingale 2012b: 21; author's translation), something apparently unimaginable. It is therefore necessary to explore ways to implement and reshape new activities that stimulate inventive thinking in design and planning, with the aim of imagining representational models that move beyond an anthropocentric, androcentric, and Western-centric perspective that shapes collective imagination. The challenge lies in generating images that genuinely offer an 'other' point of view – a perspective on the world that neither conforms to nor partially reflects the dominant one.

The new challenge that emerged from research can be summarised as follows: *is it possible to elaborate and build a flexible system of practices useful to activate de-biasing processes among design students, in order to spread a gen-*

der-sensitive and activist approach? A system of activities and content that can be combined in workshops that address the following requirements: (a) to constitute inputs for the development of critical thinking; (b) to function as activators/catalysts of debiasing processes; (c) to implement the skills to predict the fallout that a project may have, in terms of perceived meaning, on the socio-cultural context; (d) to counteract the phenomenon of the inertia of though; (e) and, finally, to be able to adapt to different situations, students' backgrounds and constraints/needs dictated by universities.

On one hand, the work developed by the dcxcg group continues to provide frameworks and methodologies for the critical analysis of media texts. This approach exposes the implicit messages, ideologies, and discourses embedded within media, unveiling their hidden meanings, subtexts, and socio-cultural implications. By fostering a deeper understanding of both intended and unintended effects on audiences, it prompts students to challenge the masculinist hegemony that has long shaped visual representation for its own perpetuation.
On the other hand, the focus shifts toward equipping students with tools for independent experimentation, encouraging them to explore new forms of representation. This process stimulates *inventive thinking* (Zingale 2012b), enabling the creation of representational models that break away from a distorted collective imagination.
The intersection of feminist perspectives and visual culture thus emerges as a dynamic space where the pursuit of meaningful representation engages with the fluid and ever-evolving realm of imagery. This convergence opens up new possibilities for interrogating identities and power relations, fostering a continuous reimagining of visual narratives.

Taking up Cheng's analogy, the author imagines «a pond of suspended visions», a pond with a rippled surface into which viscous colours are introduced, offering

a certain vibrancy to the visions, coating them with an additional texture and seemingly making the phantasmatic floating sights more focused, hence more 'materialised'. (Cheng 2003: 29-30)

The visions are thus reshaped and distorted by the colours, generating new suspended images, previously unimaginable, opening up a vast productive space for us to play with subversive colours, those that engender our own narratives, allowing them to radiate from undulating visions in the pond. And this is somewhat the purpose of this work. In order to contribute to the process of dismantling the dominant point of view, we need lenses that allow us to see from another perspective, to see what is already there but what we cannot see.

If inventing is anything but creating, and if inventing is indeed our everyday ability to find something, but in a higher cognitive and poetic tension, inventing is nothing but training in interpretation. It is the most acute moment of semiotics understood as interpretative activity, which interprets the world in order to know and transform it. (Zingale 2012b: 67; author's translation)

5.1 Modularity for adaptability, a flexible structure

Flexibility and *adaptability* are two of the key features defined for gender-debiasing practices. The reasons for this are on a twofold level.
On the theoretical level, it is the feminist perspective itself that dictates the need for flexibility and adaptability to different situations, considering where certain actors operate and potential agency is constituted. Who are we dealing with, what backgrounds do they come from? – issues that were directly addressed in the testing phase by working with groups of students coming from cultural contexts very different from the Italian reality and with other urgencies related to gender discrimination. *Do they have knowledge on the issue and what kind? Are they already interested/sensitive to gender issues?*
The mistake into which one risks falling when dealing with these issues is precisely that of «romanticising and/or appropriating» (Constanza-Chock 2020) the vision of the Other and generalizing it. Haraway reminds us instead of advocating policies and epistemologies tied to a place, a location, without falling into the trap of universalism. What we can do is to implement strategies and tools to make designer learn to recognise at least partially the biases and to critically approach the communication

project. The intention is not to impose a point of view or a fixed solution to the problem but to provide the necessary tools to activate processes of criticism and self-criticism with respect to one's own actions, learning how to read images and control the effect of meaning in order to convey fair messages that give voice and space to different forms of Alterity.

On a more practical level, the need for flexibility is given by needs corresponding to: students' level of knowledge of the subject; level of training in the field of design; the need to organise activities that are not necessarily optional (thus also involving people not sensitive to the subject); the possibility of fitting into course programmes without disrupting their structure.

Media literacy, critical thinking, counter-action
The main goals of the system can be summarized as follows: to provide methodologies and tools for the development of critical thinking applied to design practice, through the application of experimental activities/ exercises that focus on methods-tools-contents specifically tailored to the group of participants and their background knowledge. Starting from these fundamentals, the system is based on three complementary and unavoidable key axes, identified and formulated on the basis of the literature review and the highlights emerged from the case studies analysis:

Critical media literacy – In order to imagine new futures, it is necessary to equip oneself with the appropriate tools to critically interpret the present. From this point of view, a media literacy component remains fundamental, enabling us to learn to read the media landscape in which we are immersed and the images that surround us, to make a semiotic reading of them, to recognise their stereotypical and harmful aspects as well as their impact on individuals in a certain socio-cultural context. Learning how to read images and evaluate their impact and repercussions is a fundamental step to unpack unconscious bias and stereotypes in the media and acquire awareness and the antibodies (Baule & Bucchetti 2012) necessary not to fall back into the stereotype trap. It is a matter of providing the tools to 'awaken' designers from what Pinotti calls 'narcosi mediale', media narcosis, that is, the «obnubilation of im-

age consciousness, dulling of proprioception» (Pinotti 2021: 15; author's translation), the numbness already mentioned by McLuhan.

Self-reflection and critical thinking – If the critical media literacy component is useful in deconstructing and understanding designed images, developing critical thinking with respect to one's own design practice allows one to reflect on design processes and understand the steps that somehow facilitate the translation of bias into design outputs.

The aim is thus to tackle what Criado-Perez (2019) calls inertia of thought that does not allow us to break out of the endless loop of the stereotype (Bucchetti & Casnati 2019). In concrete terms, this involves working on unconscious bias behaved in design processes through self-exploration, in order to learn to recognise mental habitus and control the meaning production processes, reducing the gap between the communicative intention of the designer and the effect of meaning produced.

In the study of visual culture, these skills are connected to the ways of making and reading images that are only possible as a result of thirty years of feminist struggles around representation. According to Betterton they include, in no particular order:

an awareness of how gender shapes looking and the "gaze"; an understanding of terms like "gender" and "patriarchy"; a certain reflexivity in the representation of the self; a willingness to explore issues of identity and difference; an an interest in and engagement with body politics; an ability to read "against the grain" of a given text. (2006: 12)

Counter-action – starting from the idea that every communication designer has a strong social responsibility that he or she cannot shirk, the aim of these workshops is to stimulate and bring out the social activist side of the designer, as well as to encourage him or her to adopt an avant-garde attitude, imagining and anticipating new futures for communication design. The aim is to stimulate design students to react to inertia of thought by experimenting with 'alter' representational models by bringing an inventive component into play. In this passage, particular emphasis is placed on communicative strategies, translation and resemantisation processes.

[1]
MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES COLLECTION

[1.A]
IDENTIFICATION OF DEBIASING STRATEGIES, METHODS, TOOLS

[1.B]
DESIGNIN G A MAP OF CONTENTS

[2]
DEVELOPMENT OF A FLEXIBLE SYSTEM OF DE-BIASING PRACTICES

[3]
EXPERIMENTATIONS/TESTING
10 WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

6 WS
held at polimi,
scuola del design
with LM students.

1 WS
for the "Festival dello
sviluppo sostenibile
2022" held at Polimi
with students from
Universitá Diego Portales,
Santiago
del Cile.

2 WS
at Sheffield hallam
university (uk)
with MA students.

1 ONLINE WS
at Universidad Autonoma
Metropolitana (Mexico)
during the iGDN seminar.

[4.A]
DOCUMENTATION AND ANALYSIS
OF PROCESSES AND OUTPUTS

[4.B]
DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING OF 2 METHODS TO VALUE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WORKSHOPS (QUESTIONNAIRE; FOCUS GROUP)

[5]
IDENTIFICATION OF CRITICAL ASPECTS AND FINALIZING THE SYSTEM

A FLEXIBLE SYSTEM OF DE-BIASING PRACTICES FOR FUTURE GENDER-SENSITIVE DESIGNERS

Scheme of the path that lead to the definition of the system.

Modularity for adaptability

The system encompasses a set of gender de-biasing activities that are intended to be applied and practiced across various levels of design education. These activities are designed to activate processes that mitigate bias based on gender and foster a more gender-sensitive approach.

The modular system assembles a diverse array of tools, methods, topics, and areas of interest. These components have been carefully curated through the research path, with the primary aim of adapting and utilizing them in a flexible workshop format tailored to design students, contexts, places. The overarching goal is that these workshops, in their implementation, will lead to the development of exemplary practices and attitudes, thus contributing to an incremental transformation towards a more equitable and unbiased paradigm. The framework of these activities is structured to address a dual imperative. As articulated by Braidotti, it is a formidable challenge, if not an impossibility, to envision novel languages and approaches to design and communication without possessing the essential tools for critically assessing contemporary reality. Therefore, the overarching objective is to embark on a journey that commences with a discerning examination of the current societal landscape and subsequently advances towards the exploration of new languages and visual codes. This progression is underpinned by the vision of a future that is characterized by diversity and inclusivity, where multiple possibilities are imagined.

The foundational concepts underpinning the system – media literacy, critical thinking, and counter-action – underwent a strategic reorganization to give shape to the system's flow and structure. This restructuring resulted in the delineation of four distinct blocks of activities, each serving two overarching purposes: critically engaging with the present by decoding visual communicative messages, and envisioning new futures through the experimentation with alternative representational models that challenge prevailing norms, thereby stimulating the designer's activist inclination.

The resulting framework comprises four interconnected blocks which, while sequential, are not rigidly bound to one another. Within each phase,

a multitude of exercises and activities have been meticulously defined, creating a dynamic system where they can be interlinked or conducted independently. The operational mechanism of the system revolves around the integration of a modular approach. This modular design[1] facilitates the creation of comprehensive and adaptable workshop activities, as previously mentioned, tailored to suit diverse situations and contexts.

This versatility allows for a nuanced and flexible application of the system, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness in addressing a variety of learning environments and scenarios.

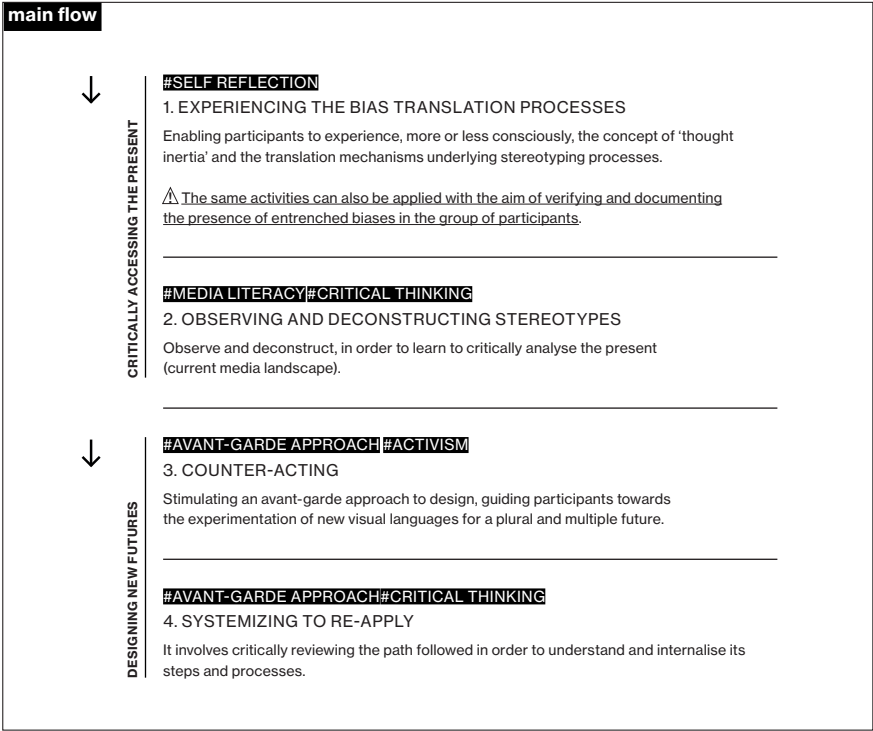*Flexible and modular elements, four blocks of activities*
The four activity blocks differ in their objectives and aims and, as mentioned above, are not inseparable from each other.[2] Each activity is planned to meet very specific objectives, according to the principle that

training is effective only when designed intentionally to achieve discrete, and often narrow, outcomes. Next they are taught how to overcome bias through a combination of strategies. These include calling out stereotyped views, gathering more individualized information about people, reflecting on counter stereotypical examples, adopting the perspectives of others, and increasing interactions with different kinds of people. Provide examples of how to change behavior. (Maureen & Andrade 2018)

Each activity attempts to integrate what has emerged from the critical reading of the case studies in terms of effective strategies, combining them with the literature on de-biasing strategies (usually developed in the professional or educational sphere), and placing it in the communication design context, thus also focusing heavily on design outputs and

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1. The entire system and individual activities were collected in a notebook to take action. A dossier that aims to illustrate the system and provide the coordinates of the individual activities: objectives, goals, process, variables, any supporting tools. The map of topics and content constitutes an index of the basin of available contents and knowledge that can be put at the service of de-biasing activities, but also highlights some gaps that can become the subject of further investigation and research.

2. However, deciding to structure an activity on a single block, or on pairs of blocks, requires special attention in the drafting of the briefs that will be delivered to the class and the need to support the class with information and content that will allow them to have a good knowledge base from which to start the activity.

main flow

CRITICALLY ACCESSING THE PRESENT

↓

#SELF REFLECTION
1. EXPERIENCING THE BIAS TRANSLATION PROCESSES

Enabling participants to experience, more or less consciously, the concept of 'thought inertia' and the translation mechanisms underlying stereotyping processes.

⚠ The same activities can also be applied with the aim of verifying and documenting the presence of entrenched biases in the group of participants.

#MEDIA LITERACY #CRITICAL THINKING
2. OBSERVING AND DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES

Observe and deconstruct, in order to learn to critically analyse the present (current media landscape).

DESIGNING NEW FUTURES

↓

#AVANT-GARDE APPROACH #ACTIVISM
3. COUNTER-ACTING

Stimulating an avant-garde approach to design, guiding participants towards the experimentation of new visual languages for a plural and multiple future.

#AVANT-GARDE APPROACH #CRITICAL THINKING
4. SYSTEMIZING TO RE-APPLY

It involves critically reviewing the path followed in order to understand and internalise its steps and processes.

The defined system consists of four phases that are consequential but not inseparable from each other. Within each phase, several exercises/activities have been defined that can be linked to each other or conducted independently.

their function. Each module is designed to reposition images at the core of the learning process, assigning them different roles and functions depending on the stage of engagement:

(a) the participants themselves have to produce or put together images, in order to critically re-read them and become aware of how easy it is to fall into the loop of biases and stereotypes;
(b) in the second block, which has to do with media literacy, images already produced and put into circulation become the object of study and critical reading by the participants, who are called upon to deconstruct them through various strategies, in order to bring out the discriminating representative models, which refer to an androcentric vision based on f/m binarism;

(c) In the third and fourth blocks, on the other hand, the participants are once again called upon to produce images and counter-images, in order to counter and denounce a particular criticism encountered, or to experiment with new representational models that attempt to deviate as far as possible from the dominant vision, thus forming building blocks for new imaginaries.

Imagination can be a driving force, a power that can only be ignited and sustained collectively and in which communication design can play a key-role in translating processes from imagination to visual representations and communication artifacts. The collective imaginings of posthuman feminism are projected transpositions that construct possible futures and, in so doing, make for a more bearable present (Braidotti, 2022: 237).

overview of the system

Critically accessing the present | | Designing new futures

1/ EXPERIENCING THE BIAS TRANSLATION PROCESSES	2/ OBSERVING AND DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES	3/ FIGHTING, COUNTER-ACTING	4/ SYSTEMIZING TO RE-APPLY
Enabling participants to experience the concept of 'inertia of thought' and the translation mechanisms underlying stereotyping processes.	Observe, analyse, deconstruct, in order to implement skills to critically read images and the current media landscape.	Stimulating an avant-garde and activist approach to design, guiding participants towards the experimentation of new visual languages for plural representations.	Critically reviewing the followed path in order to understand and internalize procecces and tools.
X self-reflection	X media literacy X critical thinking	X avant-garde approach X activism	X self-reflection X internalization
1A/ A MINUTE TO DESIGN IT 1B/ IMPOSSIBLE MOODBOARDS 1C/ DE-BIASING PICTIONARY	2A/ VISUAL TAXONOMY 2B/ 'L'ANALISI DELLA BEFANA' 2C/ EMULATION	3A/ GENERATING AMBIGUITY 3B/ VALORISATION OF ALTERITY 3C/ REASSEMBLING TO DENOUNCE 3D/ DE-BIASING PATHS	4A/ A COLLECTIVE ARCHIVE

The scheme renders the system as a whole, taking into account that it is a flexible and extendable model. Each exercise can be combined with any exercise belonging to the next step in order to compose a workshop activity tailored to the context and the participants (knowledge and educational background). in this direction, an atlas of topics was defined, from which it is possible to draw to build an ad hoc activity.

5.2 Experiencing the bias translation processes

[*De-biasing pictionary*]
The exercise is based on quick associations and is aimed at enabling participants to experience the paradox of the stereotype: if the image we create is to be immediate, it must use a shared language that can be immediately decoded by others. This necessarily leads to the use of clichés and stereotypical images that are often dense with commonplaces that discriminate against certain groups. Along the lines of some of the case studies analysed, rules were borrowed from a well-known board game designing a playful activity.

Through the Pictionary[3] board game model, participants are stimulated to reflect on the difficulty of finding codes for encoding and decoding images that are shared between sender and receiver without falling into the stereotype trap.

To enable students to experience first-hand the pervasiveness of unconscious gender stereotypes in relation to translation processes – from verbal written language to visual language – and interpretation, in order to encourage the practice of self-reflection. The aim is to unveil the 'infinite loop' mechanism that characterises the stereotype paradox, to encourage the recognition of gender stereotypes and the mental habitus that lead the designer to fall into the stereotype 'trap'. The playful approach, and the specific Pictionary model with its rules and constraints, stimulates participants to act in an 'instant' manner, eliminating the filters that might result from more careful reflection and planning.

The activity takes place according to the scheme of the Pictionary game. Participants take turns drawing a word from the deck and have to make their teammates guess it by drawing. The goal is to be able to visually translate the word and make them guess it without resorting to stereotypical representations. Each participant has 45 seconds for each word. The exercise can be conducted in two ways to obtain different results.

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3. The board game Pictionary is a word/sketch game played in teams. Players work in teams and try to get their teammates to guess the secret word by drawing a picture that represents the word. See https://www.hasbro.com/common/instruct/Pictionary_2000.PDF.

Recommendations – The game is started without stating the objectives. In this case, the participants will act unconsciously and the objectives will only be declared at the end. afterwards, a phase of critical re-reading of the drawings produced is initiated, with reflection oriented towards understanding the translation mechanisms implemented.

Before starting the exercise, a further rule is announced: stereotypical representations must be avoided. in this case, the exercise becomes more complicated and the players will begin to experience the difficulty, even impossibility, of finding codes for encoding and decoding images that are shared between sender and receiver without falling into the stereotype trap.

The corpus of words can change and must be composed by selecting the most suitable words on the basis of studies and research on gender stereotypes and taking into account different levels of stereotyping, from the most explicit and overt to the most implicit. In the tested activity, the focus was specifically on gender roles in different areas of everyday life.

[*Impossible moodboards*]
The activity is aimed at making participants experiencing the paradox of serial images and the pervasiveness of the stereotype, which ends up being confused with normality and the ordinary. We are so accustomed to using stereotypical images and representational models that all too often, especially if we are on a very tight schedule, we used of inertia of thought, slipping into the trap of cliché. Participants are challenged on the paradox of serial images and the visual codes we are used to adopt as normal. The final goal is to initiate and stimulate the practice of self-reflection and self-analysis of one's own design process, becoming aware of the influence that cognitive biases have on the translation processes acted by designers.

Step A – Delivery of a set of pre-selected images (e.g. images from stock archives, responding to pre-established queries). The images are selected in order to represent the dominant representational models.
Step B – Students are asked to select 5 or more images that meet the re-

quirements of fairness with respect to: roles, hierarchies, number of M/F subjects. The aim is to compose a moodboard responding to the key concepts of #fairness; #equity; #inclusivity...

Step C – The task emerges to be impossible, participants experience the 'fake freedom of choice' offered by the media landscape and the fallacy one can fall into by using design tools without critical thinking

Expected reactions – The most common reaction documented through the test activities see the participants realise the impossibility of the exercise, questioning it and autonomously initiating their own reflection. Another possible scenario could be that at the end of the exercise, the participants are asked to share their moodboards explaining the strategies adopted to respond to the brief and a discussion is triggered, accompanied by the semiotic reading of the selected images, in order to bring out all the paradoxes and stereotypical elements.

The theme addressed is one of the variables of the activity. During the testing activity, the model was applied with respect to the theme of stereotypical models of representation in stock archives.

[*A minute to design it*]

The purpose of this exercise is to immerse participants in the palpable inertia of thought, effectively experiencing firsthand the tendency to gravitate towards clichés when under constraints (time in this case). Designers are therefore invited to delve into the depths of their cognitive processes, unraveling the intricate webs of preconceived notions and design paradigms that often dictate their creative output.

Central to this exercise is the exploration of thought patterns that inadvertently perpetuate the recycling of familiar design models, often without critical examination of their actual impact on the intended message or aesthetic effect. By confronting participants with this phenomenon, the aim is to instigate a profound introspection into the underlying mechanisms of creative decision-making, shedding light on the subconscious biases and ingrained habits that shape our design choices. At its core, this exercise challenges participants to confront the notion of "normalcy" in visual communication, prompting them to question the very fabric of

conventions and visual codes that often go unquestioned. By disrupting the comfortable familiarity of established norms, we encourage individuals to embrace discomfort and uncertainty, paving the way for genuine innovation and fresh perspectives to emerge.

Ultimately, the overarching objective of this exercise is to catalyze a process of self-reflection and self-analysis within each participant, fostering a heightened awareness of the cognitive biases that subtly influence the translation of ideas into design outputs.

Step A – Delivery of a basic brief (e.g. drawing a pictogram with the meaning of 'person').

Step B – Participants have one minute (variable on the basis of the complexity of the brief) to sketch a design solution. The analogue technique is useful to stay within the time limit and stimulate spontaneous and instinctive responses.

Step C – The individually produced materials are first subjected to a self-analysis aimed at identifying any stereotypical elements unconsciously translated into the design solution.

Step D – After the self-analysis work, the materials are shared with the group of participants in order to engage in a discussion.

The activity has two main variable elements: the topic addressed. E.g. during the testing activity, the model was applied with respect to the theme of graphic androcentrism perpetrated by visual languages with universal significance, specifically pictogrammatic languages; the brief: for the activity to be successful, the brief should require a basic design action and be simple and straightforward. The brief will be calibrated and written on the basis of the selected topic.

5.3 Observing and deconstructing stereotypes

[*Visual taxonomy*]
The aim of the activity is to practise the semiotic reading of images in order to identify, isolate and reorganise images and image elements into stereotypical categories or groups of stereotypical elements. This leads to the development of skills in the recognition and identification of stereotypical forms of representation, useful for the designer-addressee to develop antibodies (Baule & Bucchetti 2012) against harmful images, and useful for the designer-sender to learn to critically analyse their own work, avoiding (or at least limiting) the further re-circulation of inequitable representational models. The taxonomy model, at the basis of which are precise nomenclature rules, forces the exact definition of criteria, principles, procedures and rules that govern it. This translates, from the point of view of communication design, into an important exercise of identifying and fine-tuning the criteria for organising the evidences that emerge from semiotic analysis, the same criteria in turn define the point of view, the perspective of the researchers/designers themself.
The assumption is, in fact, that there is no single 'correct' solution, but rather a variable number of solutions, and the choice of strategy may highlight some criticisms rather than others. In this way, students are also led to critically reflect on the relationship between the clustering strategies adopted and their own point of view. At the same time, taxonomy allows one to give scientific solidity to one's thesis (rather than disconfirm it).
The main aim of the exercise is to gain a critical attitude and learn to recognise the elements that make an image stereotypical or gender-oriented.

Step A – Delivery of a brief aimed at observing and analyzing a specific media context (or delivery of a pre-selected corpus of images).[4]
Step B – Semiotic analysis of images, first identification of all visual (or written textual) elements that contribute to the possible stereotyping of the analysed images.

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4. It is essential that the brief is sufficiently narrow (especially if it is an activity of limited duration), e.g. on a specific media area, so that participants can collect a sufficient number of images or audio-visual material to be able to make a meaningful analysis. It is also crucial to define criteria for the collection of visual material, so that participants do not collect material arbitrarily.

Step C – Sharing and discussion aimed at presenting findings for an initial clustering of the visual representations.

Step D – Definition of a thesis and a cluster reorganisation strategy. This also implies a political positioning on the part of the designers: what perspective is to be adopted, what points/criticisms are to be stressed.

Step E – Creation of visual taxonomies (taxonomic boards), i.e. the return in an organised form of the identified and clustered criticalities. The objective is to create boards that, through the juxtaposition of images or fragments of images with similarities, provide a picture of the identified modes of representation – whether negative or positive.

The activity can be declined taking into account several variables, including: *topic* – the starting point for observation is the selection of a media area as the object of observation. The choice of a very specific and limited media area for exemple allows less dispersion of energies and a deeper analysis of the images. Another constraint may be related to the visual language of the observed artefacts; *tools* – for an initial reading and clustering of the images. E.g. in the testing activities, *glossary cards* with terms pertaining to different types of discrimination that can pass through the images were used as a tool to stimulate a more accurate and in-depth analysis of the images. In other cases, adapted basic diagrams (e.g. Cartesian quadrants) were used (e.g. by asking participants to initially place images between the M and F quadrants, stereotypical and non-stereotypical).

[*Misguided emulation*]
The excercise has the aim of making participants experience first-hand, through designing, the dynamics that lead to the translation of bias and stereotypes within the design output, in order to identify strategies for breaking out the loop. The activity mainly consists of faithfully reproducing a given communicative artefact (e.g. a photographic shot for an advertisement) in order to encourage, in a bottom-up perspective, an in-depth analysis of all its compositional elements and deconstruct it in order to identify where and how to act in order to gradually move away from the stereotypical representation.

Step A – Analysing and selecting. Participants are given a corpus of images and asked to place them on a scale graded between non-biased and biased. If at first the exercise seems simple and participants quickly start to place images, as they proceed in the discussion and placement they become aware of how difficult it is to establish clear criteria and boundaries. This leads to broader reflection on the need to design images and artefacts that are representative of the multiplicity of subjects and points of view, moving away from the idea that one can define a single correct model of representation.
This stage on a practical level leads to the selection of a series of images useful for the next stage.

Step B – Participants are asked to select one or more images and, in a sort of role play, faithfully reproduce it. In the case of a photographic image or video fragment, participants will assume for exemple the respective roles of art director, director, model and so on. One of the team members is asked to write down everything that is said/does on the set in order to faithfully reproduce the shot, in order to analyse the process, the expressions used, the possible discomfort of the model.

Step C – Finding boundaries. As option to conclude the exercise, once the starting image/artefact has been reproduced, participants can be asked to try to gradually move away from the bias or stereotype, making micro-variations and experimenting with the boundary between stereotypical and non-stereotypical.
Through the in-depth analysis of the images aimed at the detailed emulation of those same images, the participants are led to observe and deconstruct poses, attitudes, expressions but also and above all the directorial rules behind the construction of an image, identifying those steps that lead, in a more or less conscious manner, to the construction of biased images. The work then carried out to experiment on the boundary between biased and non-biased, although it runs the risk of resulting in an impossible exercise, forces participants to reflect on those individual elements that together lead to representations that reflect the dominant's point of view.

[*The "befana" model*]

The logical-cognitive procedure is initially the opposite of that peculiar to visual taxonomy. Starting from one or more given images, the participants are asked to break them down in order to identify which elements lead us to attribute a given meaning to them (e.g. if the image represents a mother, we ask ourselves which figurative elements make that mother a mother, or, in one of the activities tested, in front of a pictogram perceived as a 'man', we ask ourselves which plastic-formal elements lead us to decode the pictogram, attributing to it the meaning of 'man'). The "analisi della befana", or fantastic analysis, is introduced by Gianni Rodari in his text "Grammatica della Fantasia", in which the author and pedagogist discusses ways and strategies through which to invite children and young people to break down passages, words and characters (with reference to children's literature). With the "analisi della befana", the author intends a method for breaking down fairy tale characters into prime factors, starting with a question: what makes this befana a befana? The broom, the sack, the broken shoes. The same concept can be transferred to the analysis of images and forms of representation from the desiger's perspective: e.g. what makes this image a sexist image? What makes this image a discriminatory image with respect to a certain social category? And so on.

This exercise, inspired to Rodari's method, therefore makes it possible to identify and isolate all the elements of the visual composition (stereotypical and non-stereotypical) that lead to its decoding and attribution of a shared meaning. The objective is to identify the elements that make an image discriminatory in some way and, conversely, to develop strategies to circumvent this kinf of representations. Ultimate aim of the exercise and thus the identification and elaboration of strategies to avoid slipping into stereotypical forms of representation.

Step A – Analyse and identify. Starting from one or more given images, isolate the elements that determine their meaning (the perceived effect of meaning).

Step B – List and clustering. Extrapolate the identified elements and construct lists of them by type.

Step C – Identifying strategies. Draw up a list of strategies with the aim of circumvent stereotypical representations.

This exercise as well can be modelled and built on variable elements. The main variable is the theme to be set as the basis of the activity and consequently the body of images that will be at the core of the exercise. In the testing phase for exemple the aim of the exercise was to identify the plastic-formal elements that make the pictogrammatic figure 'person' ambiguous, making the attribution of the labels 'male' or 'female' insecure. For this purpose, pictogrammatic figures from different wayfinding systems were handed out and the participants focused on them.

5.4 Counter-acting

[*Alter-narratives: generating ambiguity*]

Starting from the assumption that representative models derive from and continue to perpetuate an androcentric, western worldview (the viewpoint of the heterosexual, normalised, western white man), the purpose is to promote an avant-garde approach in future designers, stimulating them to experiment and generate visual images and compositions capable of renewing and experimenting with visual languages and codes, in polemic with the relationship between design and society. The ultimate aim is the activation of decolonisation processes through the diffusion of an avant-garde approach to design that encourages multiple and different perspectives.

On a practical level, the aim of the exercise is to reflect on the impossibility of generating neutral images and to experiment with the construction of figures and images depicting human figures that leave the interpretation open, which can therefore be attributed indiscriminately to both sexes and at the same time to no one in particular. Participants will acquire a better critical sense of their own design practice and will learn to design taking into account the multiplicity of reality, thus giving space to what we continue to perceive as other than ourselves.

Assumpions – starting from the assumption that it is impossible to design an image that is truly neutral for the viewer, as we all since all of us (in

Western society) are accustomed from birth to label and divide people into male and female categories, the first strategy tested focuses on the concept of ambiguity.

Objectives – analysing and understanding the visual codes that cause an image to be perceived as masculine or feminine. The aim is to generate an ambiguous image that allows multiple ways of perceiving it and interpreting it.

Brief – participants are therefore asked to mix and distort the visual codes of the M and F genres, according to the polarisation inherited from our culture, in order to elaborate images that make their interpretation more difficult and ambiguous. The objective is therefore to stimulate the participants to 'play' with the images, analysing and breaking them down in order to learn how to manage the processes of meaning generation. During the testing activity, the theme of visual languages with universal value and the question of the universal masculine or male-as-dafault were addressed.

[*Alter-narratives: experimenting with multiplicity*]
The premises are the same as in the previous exercise, but a different strategy has been implemented.

Assumpions – at the heart of the activity lies the challenge of breaking away from a single dominant representative model that is still androcentric and western-centric, and the need, on the other hand, to give space to what we consider otherness, thus accounting for the multiplicity and complexity that marks reality.

Objectives – starting from a reflection and an in-depth examination of what is considered otherness, the objective is to experiment and design images that account for the heterogeneity and complexity of reality, providing different and multiple models capable of counteracting the dominant visuality.

Brief – participants are therefore asked to work on multiple and different ways of representing the same concept, investigating the heterogeneity of solutions and providing the observer with the idea of complexity and diversity.

[*Counter-narratives: re-assembling to denounce*]
This sub-cluster of exercises starts from the assumption that design can be a powerful vehicle for pursuing forms of political activism, denouncing and highlighting the paradoxes related to gender discrimination in media and design.
Participants acquire a greater awareness of the social role of the designer and experiment with strategies, rhetorical keys and communicative languages that can be used in order to denounce and make their voice heard, stimulating the activist designer.

Assumpions – reiteration and pervasiveness of the same representational models lead to the fixity of stereotypes. The exercise starts with a preliminary activity aimed at collecting and analysing media images. It is therefore assumed that the participants have an archive of previously analysed and organised images. The exercise initially involves identifying and explaining the representative stereotype/cliché that is to be countered/denounced.

Objectives – the aim of the activity is to denounce through reiteration and reassembly of images/videos or elements extrapolated from images/videos.

Brief – Through the selection, reorganisation and reiteration of the images, or parts of the images, previously collected and analysed, the participants are asked to design a static (e.g. using the collage technique) or kinetic (e.g. Blob montage) work with the aim of highlighting and denouncing a stereotype, a representative cliche, a dominant model.
Participants are asked to: (a) formulate, through writing, their own statement: what they want to communicate; (b) identify an interpretative key and a communicative strategy; (c) design the denunciation work.

[*Counter-narratives: de-biasing paths*]
Based on the assumption that emulation can be a method to fully understand the elements of a visual composition and the processes implemented by the designer to arrive at that output, the exercise focuses on the progressive distancing, through micro-modifications, from the emulated image/video in order to experiment on the borderline between discriminatory and non-discriminatory forms of representation.

Objectives – the objective of the activity is precisely borderline experimentation in order to progressively identify which elements lead us to perceive an image (static or dynamic) as biased or stereotypical (in the negative sense of the term). The final purpose is to produce a work that consists of a sequence of images aimed at showing the progressive departure from the discriminatory representation, until arriving at a representation that is perceived by the working group as 'non-discriminatory'.

Brief – participants are asked to (a) emulate a pre-selected video image/fragment that is deemed to be discriminatory (see section on emulation); (b) make a series of (almost imperceptible) micro-modifications in order to achieve a representation that is deemed to be non-discriminatory.

5.5 Systemising to re-apply

[*Collective archive*]
This is the exercise that chronologically must be placed last, at the end of the workshop activity. The goal is to carry out a collective synthesis and confrontation exercise aimed at developing a critical understanding of the previews activities through the building a collective archive of the produced outputs. An archive of visual strategies or counter image that is an expedient for critically re-examining the process carried out and the outputs, in order to elaborate a key to interpretation. This final activity is structured as follows:

Step A – Output Sharing and discussion. Participants are asked to share the outputs produced by uploading them into a shared file that is project-

ed for the class to see. The shared document, which gives the overall view, will be the subject of discussion. Each participant/group of participants presents their output and a discussion will begin on the effectiveness and any criticisms of what was presented.

Step B – Collective writing, taking a position. The group is asked to formulate its own position statement and declaration of intent that can be placed at the opening of the archive. The aim is to put some key passages back into focus and guide the participants on a path of critical re-reading of what has been done through the writing of a collective position statement and a concise declaration of intent. Participants also work on organising archive content and writing titles and captions for their outputs.

The final objective is to build a counter-archive of denunciation images or virtuous images, as opposed to the polluted media landscape in which we are immersed. In this way, the participants are encouraged to take a pro-active attitude, leveraging the responsibilities and potential that we all have as designers.

«[...] it is also necessary to work on a more personal, cultural, social and individual side other than the technical one, with the aim to gain critical consciousness of what one is designing».

6.
Bringing the system to life through workshop activities

The mechanism underlying the system provides that the activities illustrated in the previews chapter can be recombined to form workshops. This chapter presents four workshop models[1] formulated from the recombination of activities with the aim of developing and testing the system through classroom activities with students.

The combination of the various modules of the system, and their association with a specific topic resulted therefore in four workshop models focuses on topics identified from the atlas of content.

Each section of this chapter goes into one of the workshops, highlighting the use of modules/activities and the specific goals. For each workshop, the process of defining the briefs related to the individual activities and designing any supporting tools is also illustrated.

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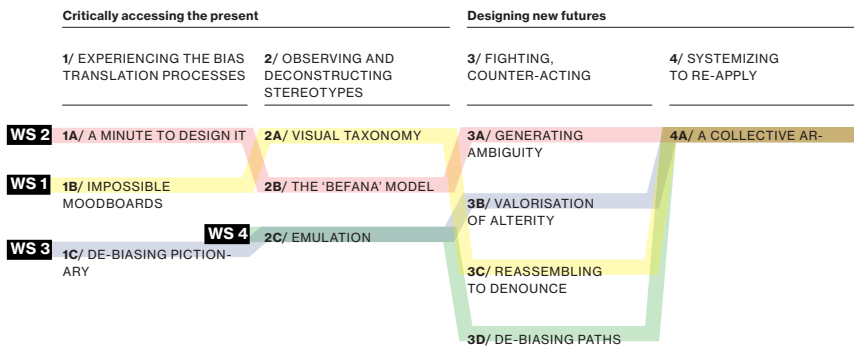
1.   Four was set as the number of workshops to test at least once each module or exercise of the system.

6.1 Serial de-stereotyper. Stock stereotypes and counter-images

The issue addressed by the first workshop model concerns the reiteration of stereotypical gender roles within stock image archives, opening a reflection on the "ready-to-use" design elements and the impact they can have on design output.[2]

Aim of the activity – The aim of the activity is to experience and understand the mechanisms underlying the stereotype paradox[3] and to stimulate the designer's social activist side so that they can independently activate good practices to tackle gender discrimination and self-defence measures against stereotypes. The designers are first made to fall into the stereotype trap through the "impossible moodboards" exercise, which leads them to experience the paradox of stereotyping in the construction of moodboards based on a set of stock images (the most visible and best-selling ones, which are, however, based on representative cliches). In subsequent exercises the designers will then acquire skills in the critical analysis of images and will finally be led to design counter-images of denunciation.

Topic – As anticipated the issue addressed during the workshop concerns the reiteration of stereotypical gender roles within stock image archives. Stock material archives (pictograms, illustrations, photographs) constitute reservoirs of pre-packaged design elements that simplify the design process and are daily reproduced and disseminated (by designers and non-designers) on a large scale. Choosing to use a specific image means contributing to the consolidation of that specific vision of the way, reiterating it and increasing its visibility within the archives themselves. In this case the topic constitutes an expedient to trigger reflection on multiple levels as well as to acquire skills in recognising and deconstructing the

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2. As anticipated, the workshop activities are based on issues resulting from previously conducted case studies and research/observations of the media landscape. In this case we are dealing with research work conducted by Michela Rossi as part of a master's thesis in communication design. This work led to the identification of stock image archives as reservoirs of stereotypical representations that feed themselves through the very mechanisms of the archives: visibility and number of image downloads are directly proportional.

3. See chapter 3.2, pp. 80-86.

stereotype. The processes of simplification that we as designers implement can lead to semantic emptying and the reproduction of meaningless cliche images. The use of cliched images is often due to the phenomenon of *inertia of thought* (Criado-Perez 2019).

Process

a. Intro – "the impossible game"
The preliminary action is aimed at launching a first reflection on the mechanisms of stereotyping, then deepened in a short frontal lecture by enabling participants to experience first-hand the stereotyping mechanism of popular stock archives. The path is the following:
[*a1*] each group is given a set of male and female images divided by jobs. The images are selected in order to amplify stereotypes by emphasising the mechanism of stock archives;
[*a2*] each pair/trio of students is given around 30 images collected from Shutterstock reflecting the dominant representative patterns of the image archives in relation to different professions and is asked to select 5 images that meet the requirements of fairness with respect to: roles, hierarchies, number of M/F subjects;
[*a3*] the task emerges to be impossible, participants experience the 'fake freedom of choice' offered by stock archives.

Two different scenarios are possible from this exercise. Worse case scenario: participants select the images according to the request, without understanding the trick. The moment when the purpose of the game is revealed, analysing the images and prompting the participants to reflect on less explicit forms of stereotyping is crucial here. Best case scenario: participants realise the impossibility of selecting 5 truly inclusive images and implement strategies to try to achieve a satisfactory result anyway.

b. Guided observation – "taxonomic collection"
The main task consists in identify and isolate visual clichés and recursiveness, deconstruct the stereotype in order to gain a critical attitude and learn to recognise the elements that make an image stereotypical. The process follows this path:

[b1] Selection of key term, each group is asked to select a key term relating to a profession that in the collective imagination is the preserve of one gender;

[b2] Observation and data collection. Participants start an observation activity on 3 given image banks. They are asked to collect and analyse the first 50 results that appear by typing in the key term;

[b3] analysis and highlights. Finally, each group is asked to give evidence to the findings through 3 or more taxonomic boards.

Observation and data collection is conducted on 3 stock content platforms, selected on the basis of popularity and number of downloads. Participants can choose which profession to focus on.

c. Counter-action – "reassembling to denounce"

The main task consists in designing a counter-image of protest based on an operation of deconstruction and reconstruction of the stereotype. The final aim is to develop awareness of the strategies that designers/activists can use to fight gender stereotypes. The action implies the following path:

[c1] selection of one of the emerging evidences. Each group member takes charge of one of the evidences emerged from the observation;

[c2] definition of an interpretative key and a communication strategy to counter and denounce the inequalities perpetrated by the identified representative model;

[c3] designing of a counter-image using the technique of collage. The constraint of the collage technique (it can be a variable element) help in optimizing the images collected during the observation and allow participants to focus more in implementing the translation processes and communicative strategies that are considered most suitable.

Some concrete examples of this type of output come from field testing and verification activities (see chapter 7). These examples help illustrate the strategy and interpretative approach employed, aimed at making discrimination visible and exposing it. The counter-image in this case[4] had to be realised by using the collage technique – limitation that
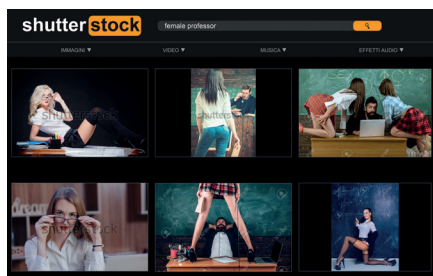
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4. This refers to the first workshop conducted in May 2022 with communication design students of the Master degree at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano.

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allows students to work with images already collected in the previous phase, enabling them to focus on translation strategies only –, implementing the translation processes and communicative strategies that are considered most suitable.

In the first exemple "Female professor" the image produced is a denunciation, through a form of *semantic-flipping*, of the sexualisation of female figures in contexts that do not require it, which is not the case with men. The images collected during the observation were provocatively inserted into the PornHub platform interface. The second exemple "Surgeon" intends to denounce, through *hyperbole*, the gender differences linked to the representation of the professional figure of the surgeon. It highlights the difference in age between the men and women represented. The former are adults or mature, grey-haired, embodying the values linked to experience; the latter, young and good-looking, embody the dominant aesthetic models (see images below). These are rough, almost conceptual images, created in a short time with the goal of focusing on rhetorical framing and communication strategy rather than on producing images of high aesthetic quality.

d. A counter stock archive
The class is asked to build a counter stock archive, formulating their own position statement and declaration of intent that can be placed at the opening of the counter-archive. The aim is to promote joint action that can have a positive impact on the whole community by denouncing the paradox of the actual situation and promoting change.

Two of the 'counter' images produced by students during one of the workshop activities.

Some pictures documenting the testing activity of the workshop model with some communication design students of the Master degree at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. Milan, May 2022.

6.2 Shape ambiguity. Universal visual languages and the 'male-as-default'

Participants work on the concept of neutrality and gender ambiguity in order to develop self-defence strategies and experiment more inclusive and universal visual languages. Given the impossibility of producing neutral images, the focus is on experimentations with visual codes that create *confusion* when decoding the image. Underlying this is a reflection that has developed over the years on pictogrammatic languages with universal value,[5] which end up passing off as universal what is in fact only men's. Which elements of pictographic representations generate ambiguity in the perception of gender? What is the borderline for a figure to be perceived as ambiguous or polivalent?

Aim of the activity – The aim of the activity is to investigate and dismantle the biases related to the concept of male-as-default and the representation of the neutral within universal visual messages. Participants work on the concept of neutrality and gender ambiguity in order to develop self-defence strategies and experiment more inclusive and universal visual languages. Objective is to provide the tools to "ask the right question at the right time" during the design process, learning to critically analyse the visual representations we produce to circumvent biases.

Topic – In pictographic languages, the concept of the male-as-default prevails. The masculine is given the value of neutral, normality, while the feminine takes on the value of other, deviation from the norm. The results of an observation lead in 20195 are at the starting point of the activity. The observation concerned the forms of schematic representation (pictographic languages) which permeate everyday life and have an informative and prescriptive function, characterized by a high degree of objectivty and addressed to the whole community – both men and women.

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5.   See Bucchetti V., Casnati F. (2021), *Universal Visual Languages in a Male-oriented Society*, in Di Lucchio, L., Imbesi, L., Giambattista, A., Malakuczi, V. (edited by), Design Culture(s). Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021, Volume #2; Rebecca di Turi's thesis: "Il dominio maschile nel linguaggio pittografico. Uno studio intorno alla sua percezione nel quotidiano", 2019, Politecnico di Milano. https://www.politesi.polimi.it/handle/10589/154000.

Which plastic-formal elements of pictographic representations generate ambiguity in the perception of gender? What is the borderline for a figure to be perceived as ambiguous or polivalent?

Process

a. Intro – "design it in a minute"
The goal is to make participants experiencing first-hand the inertia of thought that leads to the reiteration of clichés by Challenging them on the topic of the representation of the neutral and opening a debate on the biases acted out by designers. Participants are asked to draw a pictogram with the meaning of 'person'. The constraints are the time (1 minute) and the medium (white A5 and black felt-tip pens) and are intended to stimulate an instinctive and as spontaneous as possible response. The pictograms produced are then collectively compared, placing them between two poles: M and F, the centre of which is represented by the neutral.

b. Observation – the "befana" model
The exercise is aimed at gaining a critical attitude and learn to recognise the elements that make an image stereotypical or gender-oriented. Participants have to draw up a list of peculiarities that can form the basis from which to articulate the subsequent activity of practical experimentation. The activity implies to:
[b1] analyse and identify: observe and arrange given pictograms in the space between the two poles M and F;
[b2] clustering: isolate and group the pictograms on the basis of common elements and representation strategies, in order to identify the elements that make the representation of the human figure ambiguous or polarized;
[b3] isolating and organizing: draw up a list of "ambiguous strategies";
[b4] discussing: debate activity and brief introduction aimed at contextualising the activity and providing the theoretical basis.

c. Counter-narratives: generating ambiguity
Aim of the activity is to apply and systematise what was observed in the previous phase, experiment with alternative representation models. The goal is to design pictographic figures with the meaning of 'person'
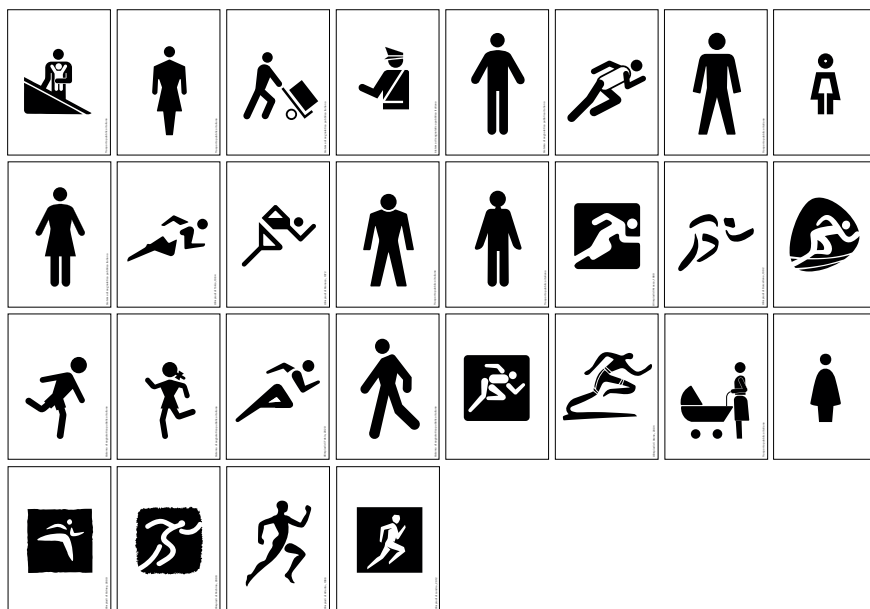
The corpus used during the test activity. It includes pictograms of static and frontal human figures or in the action of running/walking. Pictograms were selected from: Italian public signage system; Olympic identity systems.

that are 'ambiguous', therrefore that cannot be attributed to any specific gender or sex. The exercise implies three main consequential steps:
[c1] the identification of a strategy (among those defined and listed in the previous activity);
[c2] achieving ambiguity. Starting from a given pictogrammatic figure, participants are asked to act through small modifications in order to achieve gender ambiguity;
[c3] digitisation and finalisation of the pictograms produced.

Participants can be provided with some tips, e.g. what steps to obtain an ambiguous pictogrammatic figure? What is the dividing line between the perception of a male or female figure? Proceed by 'minimal' interventions on the figure.

d. Verification, perceptual test

The purpose is to practice a self-evaluation of the pictograms produced and verification of their effectiveness with respect to the gender ambiguity effect produced through a collective discussion. The outputs are shared and each participant presents their output highlighting the strategy used to achieve the ambiguity effect. Then a collective discussion follows and the arrangement of materials between the two poles M and F.

The practice of peer-to-peer comparison and evaluation in this case serves as an initial test to obtain different feedbacks with respect to the figures produced, comparing more or less successful strategies and initiating the debate of the next phase.

e. Collective archive

This phase is peculiar to all the developed workshops. The aim is to critically re-examine the process carried out and the outputs produced, in
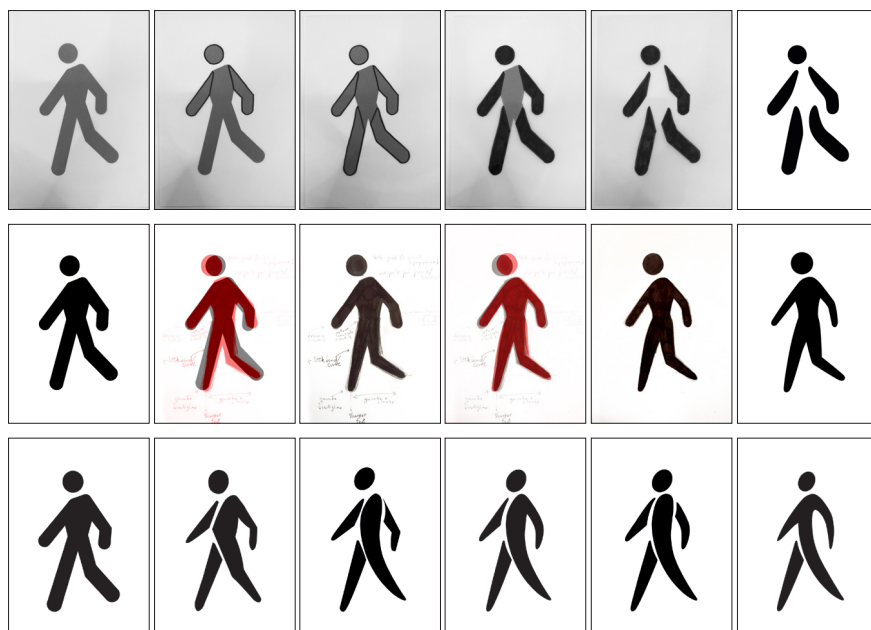
Some of the paths produced by participats during one of the testing activity. In the upper section, a subtractive approach was taken, completely removing the torso to address the issue. In the second, the student worked by shaping and reshaping the volumes to achieve ambiguity.

order to elaborate a key to interpretation by carrying out a collective synthesis and confrontation exercise aimed at building a collective archive of visual strategies to achieve the neutral. The exercise implies:

[e1] uploading images to a shared file, writing titles and captions for each image;

[e2] each participant presents their pictograms;

[e3] collective writing: the group is asked to formulate its own position statement and declaration of intent that can be placed at the opening of the archive.

A picture documenting one of the testing activities held at Politecnico di Milano.

6.3 Stereotypes boundaries. The borderline between stereotypical and non-stereotypical

Participants work on the boundary between the stereotypical and the non-stereotypical starting from an analysis and reflection on fem-vertising, in order to learn to recognise and circumvent stereotypical elements.[6]

Aim of the activity – The aim of the activity is to deconstruct the images coming from advertising and femvertising, comparing them and question their biased and stereotypical nature. This initial work of deconstruction and confrontation leads to a series of experiments that begin with the exercise of "misguided emulation" in order to investigate the fine line between stereotypical and non-stereotypical. By analysing the construction of the images, the directing rules, lighting, framing, poses, expressions and attitudes of the models and acting through small modifications of these same elements, the participants aim to produce gradual departures from the dominant forms of representation, arriving at the construction of representations that are as fair as possible.
The general aim is to activate processes of reflection and understanding of the mechanisms behind the construction of an image, learning the intrinsically political nature of each design choice and learning to critically read one's own work, working to generate images that deviate from the dominant representative models.

Topic – The reflection behind the activity starts from the communication model of fem-vertising which, although aiming to counter gender stereotypes, itself often slips into forms of gender representation that are stereotypical and anchored in an androcentric and western vision. Against this background, the question arises as to what is the borderline between stereotypical and non-stereotypical in the photographic image for advertising/fem-vertising.

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6. The theme of the workshop is supported by research work conducted on femvertising by Alessandra Andreello in 2021. The research focuses on the representations of the feminine and masculine in the sphere of femvertising, and has highlighted how a good part of these artefacts mask real practices of pinkwashing, contributing to consolidating a distorted and reductive idea of feminism and conveying those same stereotypes that it proposes to demolish.

Process

a. Observing – the "befana" model.
The aim of the exercise is to acquire the tools to deconstruct images by taking a critical gender view, learning to ask ourselves the right questions in order to identify the stereotype. Starting from a set of adv images participants are asked to identify the elements that make a given image stereotyped, negatively. The exercise implies two main actions:
[a1] Clustering and organizing: arranging the given images (adv and fem-vertising from the fashion field) along the two axes stereotypical/non-stereotypical and positive/negative;
[a2] Analysis and deconstruction of the images in order to identify and isolate the elements that make them stereotypical.
E.g. of analysis tips: when positioning and clustering images consider: expressions, attitudes, poses, framing, physical features, context/background... Why was that image placed in that quadrant? What are the elements that oriented its placement? Do unconscious biases emerge with respect to what is considered more or less stereotypical or more or less negative?

Documentation of step a. Observing – the "befana" model.

b. Deconstructing – emulating the stereotype

The exercise is aimed at learning to thoroughly analyse a (stereotypical) image and deconstruct its elements. Participants are asked to faithfully reproduce one of the images previously placed in the stereotype-negative quadrant. This implies that participants form groups of 3 and choose an area to work on: expressions, poses, attitudes, framing. They will have to select one of the images that they consider very stereotypical and negative and will have to faithfully reconstruct the shot in a photographic set. In the group the participants will be asked to play roles: actor, director, camera technician... This exercise aims to go even deeper than the construction of the image. The expedient of emulation, i.e. having to faithfully reproduce one or more shots among the selected ones, stimulates the participants to go into the details and partly relive the mechanisms behind the construction of the image itself, bringing out the directing rules, framing, lighting, but also the poses, attitudes and expressions of the model. The fact that a team member has to take on the role of an actor may imply a lower quality output compared to the use of professional actors or models, but it constitutes added value because it brings first-hand experience of the situation, also understanding the feelings that actors and models may have when given certain instructions.

c. Counter-acting – generating ambiguity

The aim of this action is to acquire the tools to deconstruct images by taking a critical gender view, learning to ask ourselves the right questions in order to fight the stereotype and generate fair images developing strategies that through micro-variations achieve a non-stereotypical image. The process follows this path:

[c1] starting from the original shot, students are asked to devise strategies that through micro-variations achieve a non-stereotypical image;

[c2] acting through imperceptible micro-variations, max. 5 shots for each identified strategy;

[c3] finalisation of an image de-stereotyping sequence.

Output: sequences of images investigating the boundary between stereotypical and non-stereotypical.

d. A collective counter-archive – the action implies the presentation of the outcomes, that will constitute a collective archive of counter-sequences showing strategies implemented to subtly and almost imperceptibly detach themselves from stereotypical representations or those based on power relations, hierarchies, gender roles.

6.4 Directors on set, a participant observation

This last workshop focuses on the filmmaking rules and construction of sexist commercials in order to highlight their paradox. The core activity of the workshop is the 'misguided emulation' combined with a participant observation lead by the participants themselves.

Aim of the activity – The aim of this fourth workshop is to understand the paradox linked to the universe of the representation of feminine and masculine based on gender roles and patterns derived from a strongly binary androcentric vision of the world. Through the direct experience of a typically sexist situation, participants are led to reflect and become aware of the consequences that their attitude as designers, as well as the quality of their output, can have on individuals and society.
The set of a tv commercial it is therefore recreated, according to the model of the "misguided emulation". The participants, through a sort of role play, have to faithfully reproduce a fragment of a tv commercial that uses visual clichés representing men and women.
Only the participant in the role of director is aware of the purpose of the exercise. The others must submit to his demands and instructions without having seen the video fragment to be played. One member of the group, also unaware of the objective, has to take charge of noting down and documenting all behaviours/speeches through which sexist patterns are more or less explicitly confirmed and reiterated. The key moment is the concluding exercise, which in this case consists of a debriefing and collection of feedback.

Topic – The topic is the representation of the feminine and the masculine in advertising, which more or less explicitly implies models, roles, poses

and attitudes ascribable to a sexist vision. Among the video fragments selected for the workshop, there are some that are more explicit (e.g. the sexualisation and objectification of women) and others that are more implicit (e.g. male and female attitudes and expressions), which tend to be considered "normal".

Process

a. Division of roles and selection of the audio-visual fragment
Whereas in the other workshops the group participated equally, here the roles within the group are defined in advance and will have different weights during the activity. The participants are only told in advance that they are to reproduce the set of a commercial and that each group must assign roles: stage manager, actors, camera technician and what has been defined as a kind of "participant observer". Once the roles within the group have been defined, the directors are taken aside and the objective of the activity is revealed to them: to reproduce an explicitly or explicitly sexist advertising scene. The directors must be able to instruct their team without showing the scene and without revealing the objective to them. Selected fragments are shown to them and each director must choose the one to reproduce.

b. Shooting, a misguided emulation
Once the roles have been established and the directors instructed, the group starts shooting. In this phase it is crucial that the directors focus on the peculiarities of shots, lighting, points of view and instruct the actors as specifically as possible. In the test phase (see chapter 9) two main attitudes were noted: some of the directors tried from the beginning to give instructions using gender-sensitive language, although after several attempts they were forced to integrate using sometimes even explicitly sexist descriptors, causing uncomfortable reactions in the team. Other directors, on the other hand, decided to play the part by identifying with a politically incorrect director, adopting sexist language from the outset. During the shooting one of the group members is in charge of observing and taking notes of: verbal verbal discourse (what instructions are given, what descriptors are used,...); attitudes and expressions (e.g. the

reactions of the group to the directors' instructions, the way the director interacts with the actors); behaviours enacted. The group member in charge of observing the scene plays the part of the designer/researcher, documenting and taking note of everything that happens. The observers are also unaware of the real purpose of the activity.

c. Debriefing and video editing

At the end of the filming, the directors can show the starting video and reveal the objective of the activity. The observer shares his or her notes with the other group members and a debate on the activity takes place. The groups are asked to formalise what emerged from the debriefing, trying to cluster the issues that emerged from reading the observer's notes.

d. Debate and "collective archive" activity

Each group is called upon to present what emerged from the debriefing, going into depth on all the issues that emerged and the feelings felt (e.g. during the test activity, the actors revealed the difficulty of reproducing an "unnatural" gesture or the discomfort of some directors in giving instructions). This exercise is fundamental for the participants' awareness of the effects their actions as directors and image-makers may have on the individuals around them.

In this workshop model, it is also necessary to emphasise the dual function that the outputs can assume. From the process point of view, the output constitutes an expedient to lead the participants to analyse the design dynamics underlying the construction of an androcentric view. At the same time, the outputs also constitute a provocative way of denouncing certain representative models, which acquires strength in the form of the comparison juxtaposed with the original video fragment. Again, the final exercise may be the construction of a collective archive aimed at denouncing, in an irreverent tone, a paradoxical and stagnant situation.

In this scenario, the outputs produced during the testing constituted a point of interest on a twofold level: on the one hand, by gathering feedback during a concluding debate, the students remarked how certain passages were fundamental for understanding certain dynamics that do not emerge from the fruition of the artefacts. In fact, it was emphasised how some of

the directors' requests were degrading and paradoxical, the unnaturalness of gestures, the embarrassment of putting oneself on the line not only as actors but also as a technical team. The images shown on this double page represent the keyframes of a spot (the advertising of a well'known brand of yoghurt in this case), which the group had to replicate and, on the side, the keyframes of the video produced by the students.

Among the feedback from the exercise, in the concluding discussion, considerations such as «communication was permeated by double meanings: by changing the object complement of the sentences, the meaning and communicative intent were exactly the same» and «often the artistic direction of the video veered towards recreating and staging a sexual act, the movements and expressions associated with it' emerged».

With respect to the other roles it emerged that «Because of respect for the hierarchies, no one ever objected or rejected the art director's requests. The actresses, although embarrassed and uncomfortable, lent themselves to being filmed in unethically balanced scenes. Moreover, after the first indications regarding the inherent sexuality of the scenes, the actresses adapted and played the part independently, accepting and reproducing the sexualising theme of the video». Although these comments are partly oriented by the general topic of the course and by a critical approach also due to the preliminary knowledge of the macro-theme of reference, the three groups (who worked on different video fragments) all experienced a strong discomfort both in having to replicate the scenes as actors and in having to give instructions (although the context was informal and the participants had all known each other for some time). Others remarked on the unnaturalness of the gestures imposed by the director, with comments such as «but I don't usually do that» (referring to the action of applying face lotion while caressing oneself and with a pre-orgasmic expression). The activity therefore also led us to identify with the roles to which, as designers, we are used to giving instructions (in this case the actors), an expedient that allows us to change perspective for a moment and understand the effects that our design choices can have on others.

The uniqueness of this activity also lies in the output produced, which, in contrast with the original video excerpt, takes on a parodic value. The self-produced video thus serves as both a tool for reflecting on and di-

rectly experiencing the impact of gender stereotypes during the design process and an artifact of critique and opposition, highlighting the paradoxical nature of this type of communication. The outputs also constitute therefore a provocative way of denouncing certain representative models, which acquires strength in the form of the comparison juxtaposed with the original video fragment.

Some pictures documenting the testing activity of the workshop model with some communication design students of the Master degree at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, *Communication design and Gender Culture* class. Milan, April 2023.

«[...] to develop tools for strength-ening self-reflective processes and for fostering a project -oriented posture centered on awareness».

(Bucchetti 2024: 35; author's translation)

7.
Insights from the 'on field' testing phase

The testing phase played a fundamental role in verifying the functionality of the workshops and, when necessary, implementing improvements. Ensuring that workshop activities achieve their intended goals, especially in the long term, remains however a crucial open challenge.

While the clarity and effectiveness of the briefs and requests made to participants can be well documented, assessing long-term effectiveness is significantly more complex. Unlike immediate outcomes, which can be directly observed and measured, long-term effects involve gradual and often subtle transformations that are difficult to track over time. This evaluation would require the involvement of experts from other disciplines, such as sociology or anthropology, in a possible further implementation phase, given their expertise in studying social change and cultural evolution.

In fact, it would be necessary to devise investigative strategies that could be initiated before the activities begin, ensuring that their impact is not only recorded but also analyzed over an extended period. These strategies should go beyond standard assessment methods, incorporating longitudinal studies, ethnographic research, and participatory approaches that engage workshop participants in reflective processes. The general aim of the workshops is to contribute to modifying deep-rooted cultural aspects, activating mechanisms that, by their very nature, must continue autonomously over time. Unlike tangible or quantifiable outcomes, these mechanisms relate to shifts in perception, mindset, and behavioral patterns, making their evaluation particularly challenging. Nevertheless, it is precisely these long-term transformations that are most valuable in fostering sustainable change within communication practices.

Over time, it is expected that these mechanisms will influence the way communication projects are approached, fostering a shift in perspective

and attitude among participants. This change, however, is difficult to measure with conventional evaluation tools. It requires a broader, interdisciplinary approach that takes into account the complexity of cultural transformation and the non-linear nature of human adaptation. The challenge, therefore, is not just in documenting these shifts but in designing methodologies that allow for their emergence to be recognized, analyzed, and understood within the broader socio-cultural framework.

This awareness has led to the development and experimentation of hybrid methods that draw from the social sciences and gender research, relying on qualitative survey techniques (Decataldo & Ruspini 2014; Creswell & Cresswell 2018). These methods, which include narrative inquiry, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis, provide a more nuanced understanding of the long-term impact of the workshops.
The experimentation phase concerning the documentation of long-term effectiveness serves as a conclusion to the work carried out. More than simply providing answers, it aims to highlight the complexity of the issue, acknowledging that design as a discipline does not possess the necessary knowledge or adequate tools to implement these aspects autonomously. Instead, meaningful collaboration with experts from other fields is essential to developing a more comprehensive and effective approach to evaluating the workshops' long-term influence.
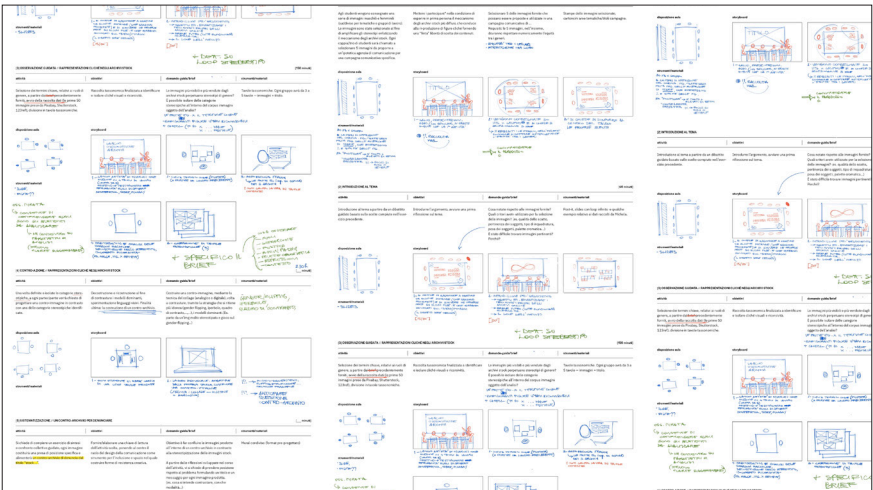
10 workshops

The testing phase resulted in the organization of 10 workshops conducted in different contexts, engaging students from diverse backgrounds. Six of these activities took place at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, involving students of the Master's degree in Communication Design. Of these six, three were held under the 'passion in action' formula,[1] involving students interested in the topic but who had never had the opportunity to explore it in depth, and three were held during the optional

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1. These are free-participation educational activities that the Politecnico offers its students, to foster the development of transversal, soft and social skills, and to encourage/facilitate a personalised enrichment of their personal, cultural and professional background. See https://www.ingindinf.polimi.it/it/didattica/lezioni-e-esami/passion-in-action.

course "Communication Design and Gender Cultures"[2] involving a class that had already had a cycle of previews lectures on communication design and gender stereotypes, thus a knowledge base that allowed to move further in the experimentation.

Additionally, four of the workshops were conducted with international student groups from universities abroad (see paragraph 7.2), providing valuable insights into how different cultural perspectives influence the interpretation and application of workshop content, further enriching the overall research process.

The modularity of the workshop system was tested through a series of multi-day sessions. This approach enabled the assessment of whether the workshops, when combined, could complement each other and function cohesively, offering a more integrated and thorough experience for the participants. Through this testing phase, valuable insights were gained into how different activities could work in tandem to reinforce the key objectives of the workshops, ensuring that the overall educational process was both flexible and effective in achieving long-term outcomes.

Example of tools used to plan the workshops and take notes during the activities.

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2. Optional course held at Politecnico di Milano, School of Design, Master Degree. Professor: Valeria Bucchetti, tutor: Francesca Casnati.

7.1 Improving the workshops through a first-level analysis

The analysis of workshop activities was carried out in multiple stages to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their effectiveness. The first level of analysis, which could be described as "immediate," focused on direct observation during the classroom sessions, specifically during the focus groups. The objective was to document participants' reactions, gauge their understanding of the content and requests, and examine group dynamics. This initial phase allowed for the identification of key issues, such as the suitability of the activities in relation to the students' background, and the effectiveness of the knowledge provided.

The difficulty encountered in this case lies in the dual role of researcher/workshop leader. The collection of materials took place mainly by note-taking and made it possible to identify some critical points with regard to the kind of knowledge provided and the suitability of the activities in relation to the students' background. In particular, it was possible to correct and integrate one of the activities (2C. Emulation), which took place for the first time in July 2022, implemented and tested again in April 2023 with the students of the "Communication Design and Gender Cultures" course, with positive results.

A second level implied the observation and analysis of outputs. Each activity provides more or less structured outputs whose effectiveness and coherence with the starting brief and the expectations of the researcher/workshop leader can be evaluated. In the case of the first module (Experience the bias translation processes), moreover, the outputs could also provide data about the presence or absence of bias in the group of participants. The relevance to the brief, the innovativeness of the visual languages used, the effectiveness of the communication strategy and the rhetorical key used (in cases of more articulated and defined design outputs) were evaluated. In this phase the confrontation with the case studies previously analysed was useful to identify the most effective outputs.

In this case, it is a question of obtaining information with respect to the progress of the workshop, mainly concerning the clarity of the exercises launched and the response of the students, the timing, the effectiveness

of the corpus of images underlying the activities, the quality of the outputs produced.

The use of questionnaires to assess the memorisation of concepts and processes
The form of observation mentioned above was then supplemented with questionnaires, which the participants were asked to fill in a few days after the workshop activities, in order to obtain more complete information also with regard to the understanding of the processes experienced and the memorisation of the topics dealt with.

The questionnaires are mainly divided into two parts: the first aims to stimulate participants to reconstruct the steps of the workshop and the objectives addressed, starting with an open question, asking them to describe the activity carried out during the workshop in points to narrower questions such as «three key words» or «summarise the activity in 5 points».

The second part focuses instead on memorising and understanding the theme addressed, and presents questions such as «Try to give a title to the topic addressed by the workshop», and then going into the merits of the specific workshop e.g. «what stereotypical category did you address», «what communicative strategy did you implement in the construction of the counter-image?» and so on, declining the questions with respect to the specificity of the workshop.

7.2 'Translation' exercises: the international experiences

Four of the testing activities were conducted with groups of foreign students from heterogeneous areas and cultures – India, Iran, Pakistan, Chile, UK, China. This allowed the comparison of other perspectives and visualities, and the subsequent verification/implementation specifically of one of the four workshop activities in contexts far from the 'comfort zone' given by the Politecnico di Milano. Two worshop activities were held at the Sheffield Hallam University,[3] in the UK, and involved first year MA graphic design students from different cultural backgrounds. Even in these cases, as in the first three workshops held at Polimi, most of the participants stated that they were intrigued by the topic but most of them had never tried to get deeper into it. It was a mixed group of British students and students from India, Pakistan and China; one workshop was held online on the occasion of the International Gender Design Network seminar "Gender Design" (3-6 October 2022), at the UAM Azcapotzalco University (Mexico City) with a mixed group of design students and members of the staff; the last one, but not chronologically, was held at the "Festival of Sustainability 2022" at Politecnico di Milano, with a group of design students (bachelor degree) from Universitá Diego Portales in Santiago de Chile. In this case, the students were enrolled by their professor and none of them had ever approached topics related to gender cultures. The main challenge in these cases was the revision of the activities in order to adapt them to the relevant media context, considering that many of the students involved at Hallam University were not of British origin but came from non-EU countries with very heterogeneous cultures. On the one hand, this provided an opportunity for experimentation and adaptation of the workshops; on the other hand, it was a difficult element, as some of the countries of origin of the participants present situations of discrimination and sexism on different levels and with different urgencies. The biographies and direct experiences of the students in this case were also decisive in guiding and reviewing the activities. It was a delicate work based on continuous dialogue even during

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3.   A three-month exchange period abroad took place between November 2022 and April 2023 at the Gender and Design Network group at Sheffield Hallam University.

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the activities in order to try to adopt a vision as free of bias as possible, valuing each voice and each point of view. In these cases, the outputs produced are of lower graphic quality than in workshops conducted in a familiar environment, with students whose educational backgrounds are known, but the focus was mainly on communication strategies and the visual translation of messages. Of the four workshop models, the first was mainly tested, focusing precisely on its declination and adaptation to different backgrounds.

The experience at the Sheffield Hallam University
Two workshop activities of half a day each were conducted at Sheffield Hallam University. As mentioned above, the activities involved students from different backgrounds and origins, as the university environment in Sheffield is markedly more heterogeneous and multicultural than the School of Design at Politecnico di Milano. This was a decisive and primary element in the revision and planning phase of the workshops.

Another of the aspects to be taken into consideration is related to the diversity, although probably not substantial, of the British media landscape compared to the Italian one. This led to conducting a preliminary observation and collection of material and images from the UK media in order to work within the context of reference. In this case, the preliminary activity of familiarisation with the theme envisaged in workshop model 1 was replaced by a brainstorming session (see image on the previous page) based on the media images collected ad hoc. This had a twofold function: on the one hand, it helped the participants to get to grips with the topic, and on the other, it was useful to get a preliminary idea of the level of prior knowledge of the topic, in order to conduct the subsequent exercises with greater awareness and reach an adequate level of depth.
In addition, some support tools were introduced for the occasion, in particular cards to be used at different times during the workshop to support the activities. During the brainstorming, for instance, some basic definitions and data were provided to frame gender discrimination issues. Cards with definitions of communication strategies on which to base one's own counter-image were also provided during the design phase (concept of counter-images of denunciation). This was because not all of

the students came from the graphic design course, so it was necessary to guide them more in the visual translation and production phases of the complaint images.

In terms of the collection of feedback, the workshops held in Sheffield also provided an opportunity to conduct informal group interviews after about two months, aimed at capturing whether and what reflections the action had triggered. As mentioned, this is a sensitive issue and difficult to objectify or measure. Also because it is not certain that the workshop constituted an isolated stimulus.

What did emerge, however, was that the group of participants interviewed expressed greater attention to group dynamics in the university environment when making project choices. In the months following the activity, moreover, some stated that they had become more aware of the themes dealt with (in some cases, for example, the issue of gender discrimination was well known but not linked to design). These are clearly purely indicative statements, from which it would be incorrect to draw absolute conclusions. However, they helped to provide indications concerning the perception of the usefulness and necessity of the workshops, as well as the perception of the topics.

The online workshop and the reshaping of activities
One of the ten workshops was held online on the occasion of the International Gender Design Network seminar "Gender Design" (3-6 October 2022), at the UAM Azcapotzalco University (Mexico City) with a mixed group of design students and members of the staff.

The experience constituted a double challenge: on the one hand, interfacing with a group of people very heterogeneous in terms of knowledge and skills (from students to university staff members) once again led to the revision of some workshop steps (workshop model 1), on the other hand, the remote connection alley had important repercussions in the management of individual exercises.

The elements that needed revision and integration for the development of the workshop were mainly two:

(a) *Content customisation*. In this case, the only information available concerned the number and heterogeneity of the participants. Furthermore, the remote connection and the type of event (conference) did not allow a preliminary cognitive phase of the group involved. For this reason, it was felt necessary to integrate the activity with an initial lecture on the relationship between gender issues and communication design, providing some basic notions useful to face the workshop with greater awareness.

(b) *Tools adaptation*. That is, the declination of the workshop activities on digital tools, which in the face-to-face workshops had only been used as a support, e.g. for the sharing of material in the classroom or the compilation, in the forms at the end of the workshop, of shared summary documents. In this case, Miro was used, prepared in advance with the useful materials divided and organised into areas.
While the online "impossible moodboards" exercise was very effective, the counter-image design was the most critical, as, not being able to make suggestions remotely on the strategies implemented, the students acted in total autonomy and deviated from the brief. This led to highlighting as a possible future implementation the development of detailed tools that would allow them to conduct activities autonomously, without external support.

7.3 Experimenting tools to evaluate the long-term impact

Retrospective Group Interviews as a Method for Assessing Long-Term Impact
Evaluating the long-term impact of educational and awareness-raising activities poses a significant challenge. Traditional assessment methods, such as questionnaires administered immediately after a workshop or training session, can effectively measure immediate comprehension and retention of concepts. However, they often fall short in capturing whether and how participants integrate these learnings into their thinking and behavior over time. To address this gap, it becomes necessary to develop strategies that assess the extent to which participants internalize the acquired knowledge, critically reflect on design practices, and independently deepen their understanding of the topics discussed.

The initial questionnaire used for what was termed a 'first-level analysis' was designed to evaluate the participants' memorization of key concepts, understanding of processes, and grasp of the workshop objectives. However, it proved insufficient in determining the long-term effectiveness of the activities. If these initiatives are intended to serve as catalysts for de-biasing processes, a more robust evaluation strategy is needed – one capable of assessing whether participants alter their approach to design projects, adopt a more critical perspective on their own and others' work, and continue exploring relevant issues beyond the workshop setting.
In line with Decataldo and Ruspini's (2014) definition of gender-sensitive research, this study sought to adopt an ethical approach that fostered collaboration and encouraged participants to express themselves through their own cognitive frameworks. To achieve this, informal group interviews were conducted as a complementary evaluation tool. This technique effectively merges the advantages of in-depth interviews with observational methods, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of participants' motivations and behavioral changes. It provides insights into whether attending the workshop influenced their attitudes toward communication design.

Despite these efforts, the challenge of long-term impact evaluation remains an open question at the conclusion of this doctoral research. Fu-

ture research should consider the involvement of experts from the social sciences to ensure a more rigorous and comprehensive assessment of long-term outcomes – an area where design researchers alone may lack the necessary methodological expertise. Within the scope of this thesis, the retrospective group interviews functioned similarly to focus groups, fostering an empathetic and interactive environment that encouraged discussion and debate. This setup was particularly valuable in capturing the evolution of participants' perspectives and experiences over time.

One key advantage of this approach was its ability to account for the socio-cultural backgrounds of the participants. This aspect was especially relevant when working with international participants from diverse backgrounds. The group interviews revealed how each individual's experiences and cultural contexts influenced their engagement with gender and media representation topics. To further enrich the evaluation process, a preliminary discussion or written reflection session was introduced at the beginning of the workshops. This allowed for the collection of baseline data on participants' prior knowledge and perspectives.

A practical application of this methodology took place three months after a workshop held in November 2022 at Sheffield Hallam University. During this follow-up session, participants were asked whether they had since encountered and recognized biased design outputs, engaged in discussions about design choices they deemed stereotypical or harmful, or continued reflecting on the workshop themes. The comparison of pre- and post-workshop insights provided valuable indications of independent knowledge deepening and shifts in critical awareness.

The success of these interviews hinged on establishing a sense of trust and empathy among participants. In the specific context of the Sheffield workshop, this was facilitated by shared experiences: all participants, including the researcher, were foreigners in an unfamiliar environment and had a comparable level of English proficiency. The homogeneity in language skills fostered open discussion, whereas the presence of native speakers might have introduced an unintended hierarchy, potentially hindering participation due to language barriers.

The interviews began with general questions and initially elicited brief responses. However, as the discussion evolved, participants from China, Pakistan, and India highlighted how gender discrimination issues in their home countries were more pronounced and had severe societal repercussions. This cultural divergence initially posed a challenge in discussing gender representation in media, as some participants perceived these concerns as less urgent compared to the structural gender inequalities they had experienced. Nonetheless, once the discussion shifted towards media representation, the conversation organically evolved to reflect on the impact of the workshop.

Notably, participants reported increased sensitivity to subtle gender biases in media content. Two out of three students in one focus group stated that they had further explored topics introduced in the workshop, while all participants acknowledged that they had become more aware of gender stereotypes in the media. One student mentioned frequent discussions about gender issues, both in academic settings concerning design projects and in personal conversations within their domestic environment. Additionally, some participants later engaged in the WRHR[4] (Women's Rights are Human Rights) workshop in March 2023, where they were tasked with designing posters to combat gender-based violence. While this initiative was outside the original scope of the PhD research, it provided further evidence of the workshop's impact. During collective review sessions, students who had attended the November workshop actively contributed to discussions on gender representation and stereotypical portrayals, demonstrating their ability to critically analyze and articulate concerns about media messaging.

These findings underscore the potential of retrospective group interviews as a valuable tool for assessing long-term impact. While further refinements and interdisciplinary collaborations are necessary, this approach offers promising insights into the effectiveness of workshops in

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4.   The WRHR workshop was launched from Professor E. Resnick's larger project of the same name and involved M. Levick-Parkin and F. Casnati (tutoring activity). It was held at Sheffield Hallam University in February-March 2023.

fostering sustained critical engagement with gender representation and media discourse. In conclusion, the use of retrospective group interviews has proven to be a valuable method for assessing the long-term impact of workshops aimed at raising awareness about gender biases and media representation. While short-term evaluation tools, such as post-workshop questionnaires, provided insight into immediate understanding, they were insufficient in capturing the depth of participants' ongoing engagement and critical reflection. The group interviews, on the other hand, successfully provided an occasion for participants to revisit the themes of the workshops, revealing shifts in their attitudes and increased sensitivity to gender issues in media.

This method also highlighted the importance of considering participants' socio-cultural backgrounds when evaluating the impact of such educational initiatives. Despite the promising outcomes, the challenge of fully capturing long-term change remains, pointing to the need for interdisciplinary approaches in future research. By integrating social sciences expertise and refining the tools for assessment, the potential for more comprehensive evaluations of long-term outcomes could be realized, ensuring that workshops like these can be even more effective in promoting sustained awareness and critical thinking.

«That shift, [...] will not come unless and until a large number of designers (and design institutions) become convinced that equitable design outcomes are a goal that is important enough to warrant retooling».

(Costanza-Chock 2020: 54)

8.
Towards new layers of knowledge

The call for an intersectional critique of current design practices, as articulated by Costanza-Chock (2020), highlights a profound need for a paradigm shift within the design field. While there is widespread agreement on the necessity of radical change, the real challenge lies in ensuring that these discussions translate into tangible, sustained actions. The transformation required cannot happen overnight, but must be pursued through incremental steps that gradually disrupt entrenched systems of dominance and bias.

An intersectional critique of the ways that current design practices systematically reproduce the matrix of domination ultimately requires not only more diverse design teams, community accountability, and control, but also a retooling of the methods that shape so many design domains under the current universalist paradigm. That shift, however, will not come unless and until a large number of designers (and design institutions) become convinced that equitable design outcomes are a goal that is important enough to warrant retooling. (Costanza-Chock 2020)

This research is to be intended as a contribute to this ongoing shift by offering practical tools and strategies aimed at fostering long-term changes in the attitudes and behaviors of designers. It can be conceived as a new foundational layer upon which further theories and actions can be built. By addressing both theoretical and pragmatic aspects of design practice, the research encourages a rethinking of design processes and invites designers to engage in more equitable and inclusive practices. It is hoped that, over time, these small yet significant steps will accumulate, ultimately leading to a profound change in perspective that aligns design practices with the values of equity and justice.

The ongoing work of transforming design into a more inclusive, reflective, and socially responsible practice depends on the collective commitment of designers, educators, and institutions to pursue these shifts. Through such sustained efforts, it is possible to move closer to achieving the goal of a more equitable and inclusive design discipline.

8.1 Communication design and feminist studies, entering two evolving fields

The area delimited by Gender and Feminist Studies and Communication Design and Visual Cultures has been studied over time and is an ever-growing and evolving field that needs constant revision and reinterpretation, taking into account the developments of feminist movements and theories, and grasping and deepening their common areas.
In recent years in particular, there has been a proliferation of feminist movements that place feminist thought within a broader system of social, political, and climatic urgencies, adopting a perspective that identifies the humanist heritage and the capitalist model as the main cause of social inequalities today thus also fitting laterally into the broader discourse on decolonisation (Braidotti 2022; Delap 2020; Demaria 2019; Laboria Cuboniks 2018; Zylinska 2019;). Movements have arisen that call themselves eco-feminists

bringing together feminism and environmentalism, ecofeminism argues that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy and capitalism[1]

eco-eco-punk feminist (Zylinska 2019), where eco-eco stands for 'economy' and 'ecology', identifying patriarchy as the cause of the economic crisis and climate change; and again the post-human feminism theorized by Rosi Braidotti in the in the homonymous volume published in 2022.

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1.   See: https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/ecofeminism#:~:text=Ecofeminism%2C%20like%20the%20social%20movements,consequences%20of%20patriarchy%20and%20capitalism.

The continuous evolution of these theories and lines of thought – in parallel with the social and political events of recent years, from climate change to wars – has repercussions that are inevitably reflected in research and in the approach adopted to design. This influence is well exemplified in Sasha Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice*.

Reflecting what Ellen Lupton as well reminds us, feminism constitutes a real way of thinking and acting, a way of living and seeing the world. Consequently, it also permeates the way research and design are conducted, influencing and integrating the perspective on and from the discipline itself. Those who deal with design from a feminist perspective therefore enter a doubly fluid and constantly changing field and has the task of developing tools and strategies that keep pace with this change. For this reason, the reinterpretation of feminist theories and the exploration of the points of overlap between feminisms and visual cultures has been indispensable, leading me to redefine my position as a researcher and as a designer. Position that oriented the research and the outcome.

The navigation through diverse literatures and perspectives has been crucial for the investigation itself, enabling the development of a transdisciplinary approach that was applied and practiced throughout the research journey.

Building on evolving feminist theories, this research advocates for a radical transformation of communication design. It recognizes the importance of taking gradual, deliberate steps to challenge the patriarchal structures embedded in design systems. Drawing from feminist perspectives, the research also demonstrates how this transformation can begin with small, actionable tools and strategies that address issues like bias and inequality in design practices. These tools, developed through the research, serve both as practical resources for designers and as foundational approaches that can be adapted to address future social urgencies. Ultimately, the intersection of feminist studies and communication design demands that we develop frameworks that are as dynamic and evolving as the issues they seek to address. This contribution, through its transdisciplinary approach, intends to provide a valuable contribution to that ongoing evolution, offering a roadmap for future design practices that are inclusive, socially responsible, and deeply aware of the intersections between gender, power, and representation.

8.2 A new basin of practical knowledge

This research seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation at the intersection of communication design and feminist studies by expanding on existing knowledge and offering new insights. By drawing from an existing body of knowledge, the work further develops and deepens the understanding of how design practices can contribute to the pursuit of more inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible communication. Building on the foundations established by the dcxcg research group, this research not only extends existing methodologies but also introduces innovative tools and strategies that can be applied across various educational and professional contexts. This section reflects on the ways in which the research has expanded the existing knowledge base, offering a practical foundation for addressing long-standing gaps in design education and practice.

The research and the resulting output continue therefore on the path already traced by the dcxcg research group, in order to make a contribution in terms of knowledge and implementing tools and strategies in the field of design education, in response to a gap that is still substantial at university level and beyond. The knowledge acquired and organised in different forms by the group, and the methodological approach both to research and education in fact constituted a solid base from which the research path was started. It made it possible to set some initial fixed points, preconditions and a part of knowledge that could be considered established, from which to continue on three different levels.

Deepening – having a solid reservoir of content, data and information from both the group and external literature, if on the one hand it constituted a greater difficulty in identifying an original and innovative path, on the other hand it had the advantage of being able to start the doctoral research from certain fixed points, a part of knowledge that can now be defined as established and partly internalised by those working in this area. This made it possible to focus on areas that had already been explored and to identify specific areas to deepen and implement, working in terms of reorientation and knowledge enhancement rather than outlining a new area.

Proceeding – established knowledge made it possible to carry out a critical re-reading in the light of the transformations and developments in the disciplines discussed in the previous section, continuing a path already mapped out and integrating it. At the same time, the archive of educational activities, project and research actions through a reinterpretation and systematisation operation laid the foundation for the implementation of the de-biasing activities. The systematisation work carried out through the multiple case studies analysis thus made it possible to add a piece of knowledge, the findings of which constituted a starting point from which the system of de-biasing practices was articulated.

Re-focus – within this framework, the doctoral research fits in by orienting and shifting the point of view slightly, inserting and deepening the concept of bias and its relation to the domain of visual representation and the translation processes implemented by designers.
Furthermore, as anticipated, through the literature review, a personal position and philosophical perspective was matured and implemented to guide the research, which takes into account the changing and constantly evolving nature of the two main disciplinary areas involved: communication design and gender and feminist studies.

8.3 From experimentations to a replicable model: areas for further development and implementation

As far as the implemented system is concerned, its modularity and flexibility is one of its main peculiarities and potential features and set the basis to proceed, in the future, with further experimentations in order to remodel and re-apply it within different contexts. In fact, the system represents a consolidated and verified pool of methods and strategies that can be implemented and applied in different areas. In this purpose, three possible directions have been identified, which can co-exist and complement each other, which are summarized here.

The identification of extra-university contexts requiring de-biasing practices – The tools and strategies developed within the system can be functional in non-university contexts, with the involvement for exemple of professional associations and competent bodies, in order to broaden the coverage area by involving designers on a different scale.
The university constitutes, as extensively documented in the literature and the present doctoral research, the ideal environment to promote actions aimed at training gender-sensitive and conscious future designers, focusing on those counter actions that can have long-term effects, since actions that are defined as short-term – such as censorship – act downstream of the problem and represent mere palliatives (European Parliament, Policy Department C, 2013, *Women and Girls as Subjects of Media's Attention and Advertisement Campaigns: The Situation in Europe, Best Practices and Legislations*).

However, joint and multi-pronged action is needed, involving from the younger generation (e.g. graphic design schools) to professionals already integrated and active within the job market. A field that is also extremely sexist due to the latest news events in the summer of 2023, labelled the MeToo of communication besides the fact that it is proven everyday by the bad quality of the images in circulation. In this case, the research would involve additional steps for the definition of areas of action and the subsequent declination/implementation of activities.

Broaden the system to deal with different kind of discriminations
Expand the system's capabilities to address a diverse range of social discriminations. The ongoing research endeavors to confront the prevalent challenge of gender discrimination as manifested through communication design. This prompts an essential inquiry: can the system be extended to effectively handle various forms of social discrimination that have emerged as pressing concerns in contemporary society?

The primary focus has been on dissecting and mitigating gender-based discrimination within communication design. However, the broader question arises as to the adaptability of the system to encompass and effectively combat other forms of social discrimination that demand immediate attention in today's multifaceted societal landscape. As we delve into this exploration, it becomes crucial to assess the feasibility of extending the system's reach beyond gender discrimination. The urgency stems from the recognition that various types of discrimination persistently affect marginalized communities across different facets of life. By broadening the system's scope, it may addressed not only the specific challenges posed by gender discrimination but also to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable approach in facing a wider spectrum of social injustices.

The implementation would be placed in this case on the content level, and would imply the launching of a research phase aimed at investigating and collecting visual material that would give evidence of other forms of discrimination in the media context, going on to constitute new content around which to articulate and decline the 4 workshop models or build new ones from different combinations of the system modules.

The reorganisation of activities and the design of tools for autonomous use
The ongoing initiative revolves around the meticulous translation of the system activities, aiming to render them accessible for independent use. The focal point of this research lies in the adaptation of these activities into formats conducive to self-sufficiency, with an emphasis on the identification and development of tools and supportive strategies.

Within this context, the research endeavors to delve into the nuances of reorganizing the system's functions, ensuring that they seamlessly transition into formats that empower individuals to engage with the system

activities autonomously. A pivotal aspect of this exploration is the identification and refinement of tools that facilitate not only comprehensibility but also ease of use, addressing a diverse range of users.

The underlying principle guiding this endeavor is rooted in the belief that the desired transformative change can be effectively realized through the active involvement and activation of a substantial number of designers. The envisaged multiplier effect hinges on the collective impact generated by a widespread community of designers, each equipped with the knowledge and tools to autonomously contribute to and enhance the system. By fostering a collaborative and inclusive approach, the research seeks to instigate a ripple effect, propelling a broader community of designers to catalyze the change necessary for the evolution of the system into a more user-friendly and accessible entity.

By expanding the system's scope and empowering designers with the tools and knowledge necessary for autonomous application, the research aims to spark lasting change within communication design. The continuous adaptation and reorganization of activities, alongside the broadening of the system to address various forms of social discrimination, offer avenues for further refinement and growth. This approach not only supports the development of inclusive and socially responsible design practices but also fosters a collaborative environment where designers can collectively contribute to a more equitable future. Ultimately, these ongoing efforts provide the foundation for a more inclusive design culture that prioritizes justice, diversity, and sustainability.

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In a framework still strongly marked by androcentrism, how can we equip future communication designers to challenge gender bias and propose new perspectives that diverge from the hegemonic ones? The reflection on the depatriarchalization of Design is central to feminist debates on the discipline, as it opens up new critical pathways for rethinking both design practice and education. Emerging from a critical reinterpretation of the intersections between **FEMINIST THEORIES AND VISUAL CULTURE**, and building on the work pioneered by the *dcxcg* research group, this volume explores **STRATEGIES, TOOLS, AND METHODS** aimed at training gender-sensitive designers. Designers who are not only competent in generating sustainable communicative artifacts that respect and give voice to alterity but also advocating for a systemic revolution in communication design. This work can be seen as an attempt to respond — one among many possible responses — to the need of **SPREADING AND NURTURING A FORM OF FAIRNESS CULTURE IN DESIGN**.

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