

The Social Significance of Gender Codes in Current Web Design

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The article highlights gender codes in design, particularly in web design, by means of current examples. Different aspects of gender-specific design are looked at in detail and their inherent problems discussed: on the one hand the development of a special solution (gender-specific for women), on the other hand, web design with reduced functionality and simplification of information (i.e. image representation) which sometimes even leads to a negation of technology. The article illustrates that gender codes and stereotypical role models can be embodied on different design levels of web design (use and artefact): in structure/navigation, in creative elements by the use of shape, colour and imagery and on a textual level. These design decisions have an impact on the power of users to act, their individual gender identity and the structural gender identity/social perception of gender. The article demonstrates that gender codes in current web design are very present and aims to sensitize the topic.

#design process

#gender-specific design

#composition

#gender-sensitive design

#gender stereotypes

Introduction

The impact of gender in the design of digital artefacts is complex and greatly underestimated with regard to its overall implications. First of all, the term design in itself is rather complex. Design is not just the end result (the designed artefact); it refers not only to the layout and composition but also to the design process (the development of designed objects) and the objects' use (handling and interaction). The category of gender in correlation with design can be found on all these levels. For a specific application, this means that not only the end product, such as a designed website, can contain gender codes, but that the design process during the development phase (compilation of development team, assumptions about users) and how websites are used also need to be inspected more closely.

Furthermore, design is always embedded in a spatial and temporal context. Thus, design always refers to a region or a country (Nordic design, German design) and can be assigned to a respective era (design of the '60s or '80s). Designers are also consciously or unconsciously in close interaction with the environment that affects them and which they in turn shape through their design (technologies, norms/values, zeitgeist) (cf. Kern 2005, 13).

Many complex approaches also exist with regard to gender. Within Western culture, gender is perceived as a dichotomy that divides people into two categories (man/woman). In this context, we also speak of the "everyday theory of binary gender system" (cf. Kessler/McKenna, quoted from Schirmer 2010, 22; Lübke 2005, 26). Even though there are more specific and non-binary definitions of gender today, binary thinking is still common.

It is critical to recognize that while I am calling for a non-binary treatment of gender with regards to theory, in everyday life binary treatments of

gender do exist in society. Individual identity and structural gender are created in relation to binary gender norms, though individual constructions can be non-binary. (Rode 2011, 398)

Due to the historically prominent position of men, this classification entails a stereotypical perception and prejudice that sustains unjust power relations and hierarchies. This dichotomy even illustrates problems that are threefold: firstly, the hierarchy contained therein in which men are superior to women, secondly, the homogenisation due to which the differences within a category of gender often become invisible and thirdly, the exclusion of other genders not to be found in these categories. Even if designers theoretically think and design beyond binary logic and take into account individual identities of gender, designs and actions are subject to the binary gender norms of society in everyday life.¹ Furthermore, the perpetuation of the female-male category is problematic because it can comprise hierarchy and judgment: woman or girl products are often smaller, of substandard workmanship but nonetheless often more expensive and the handling implies less confidence in the users. This includes the negation of technology, meaning that technology becomes invisible; the reduction of functionality; operating displays and information are reduced; and image representation, the use of images/icons rather than, for example, text and numbers (cf. Ehrnberger 2007, 2).

Possible implications are that female users who do not feel attracted to such a design are put off, they consolidate a technically incompetent self-image or they remain users, as they are dependent upon the application and have to put up with the restricted scope for action/use.

Designers have the power to define what is the "right" and what is the "wrong" input and interpretation of output respectively, thus standardising the permissible conduct of the

user. People who cannot adjust their behaviour accordingly because they do not dispose of the assumed abilities, skills and cultural habits, of experience, time, patience and motivation, of devices, money or social media networks cannot adapt the application to their needs. They are being excluded due to the technical design. (Maaß 2003, 216)

The so-called special solutions may lead to the ghettoisation of women: gender-specific special versions for women are thus perceived as outside the norm, as a deviation from the (male) standard (androcentrism) (Van Oost 2003, 196). This is also demonstrated in the devaluation of technological areas within the realms of products and work: technologies that are established in female living environments are no longer perceived as “proper” technologies, for example, the washing machine, the microwave, and the fridge. (Bath 2009, 40)

The opposite of custom-made products are gender-sensitive approaches that do not exclude anyone but are an extension of the conceptual, creative approach and possible uses. Here, positions that are often underrepresented within design (mostly female approaches, let alone other genders) are being heard and considered. Different needs can even lead to the same requirements. To name one example: the popularity of SUVs across all genders derives from different needs (security versus status symbol).²

The following design examples illustrate how common these gender codes are on current websites. These are meant as examples without claiming to be complete, and focus on certain aspects of websites, mostly in an exaggerated manner in order to present the facts in a particularly striking way. The goal of this article is to highlight hidden gender codes and to raise awareness of the topic. The sub-aspects mentioned below are examined and confirmed

by examples. In doing so, the following distinctive features are closely examined:

Addressing the ‘Development of a special solution (gender-specific for women)’: different aspects come into place like the product is smaller, the product is manufactured with inferior quality and/or the product is more expensive (despite substandard workmanship). Sometimes the product offers a larger selection of models (i.e. colour variants, the product is more colourful and more playful (i.e. circles, pastel colours, handwriting) and/or the product features decorative elements and additional accessories.

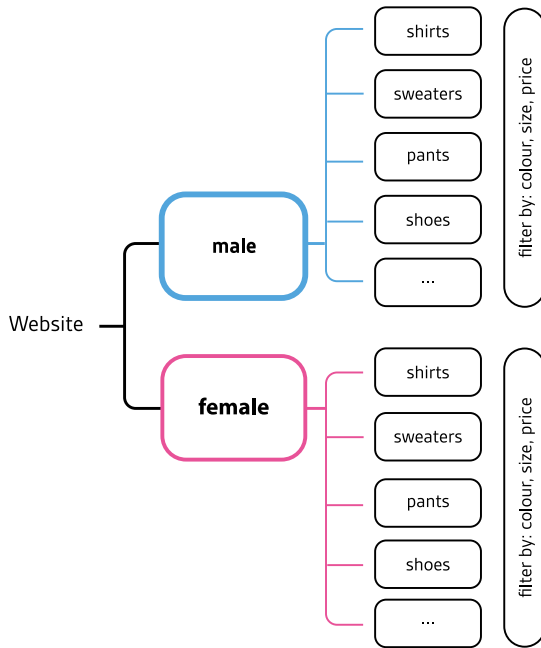
Focusing on reduced functionality/simplification of information or even negation of technology (women’s technical competence is underestimated): there are several indicators such as a reduction of operating displays/information (choice/configuration options), oversized operational controls and a tendency to use images/icons (instead of text and numbers). Some products offer limited possibilities of use, a reduction of functionality and/or a reduced ability to act (controlled interaction, i.e. Guided Tour). Another concept is that technology becomes invisible or is hidden. Operating with these features it defines female users (here only the female one is anticipated) as technically disinterested and incompetent.

The mentioned procedures mainly apply to product design or interior design, but many aspects can also be found in web design as well as a reflection of three-dimensional reality. The significance of the categorisation of products in relation to gender can be documented with the example of Nike (nike.com/de/de_de). On the German website of the American sporting goods manufacturer there are predominantly gender-based navigation points: men, women, boys, girls and personalise. It should be emphasised that the area of children is further differentiated

into boys and girls. The listing begins with the navigation point 'men'. This could be interpreted as hierarchisation but must not be overrated in this context (Puma differentiates women, men and children – in this order). A thematic search according to product groups, styles or areas of application (i.e. clothes, shoes, without a differentiation in gender) is conceivable here.

If users can only gain access to content through the “eye of the needle” of gender, gender problems immediately arise on several levels: users interested in both contents are disadvantaged on the usage level; they have to perform tiresome twofold searches (i.e. searching the category t-shirts for girls and boys consecutively without direct comparison). Furthermore, the socially established order of sexes is substantiated by the preceding selection. It communicates that users are entering “forbidden territory” if they do not adhere to it. And lastly: users who cannot or do not want to settle for one category are forced to do so by the navigation.

a) navigation based on gender



b) navigation based on products

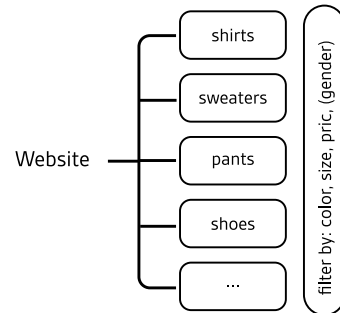


Diagram 1 (top): The British fashion company John Lewis was the first British company to abolish gender denominations in children's clothing; there is only one category: "Girls & Boys". The multifaceted prints and designs have not changed and the shop layout only has one designated area for children's clothing. ("A T-shirt should be just a T-shirt – not a T-shirt just for girls or just for boys.").³ Graphic: Claudia Herling and Katja Becker.

Figure 1 (bottom): Gender stereotypes can be found in several details of the Nike website. The sizing of children's fashion takes place in three steps: the category "Babies and Toddlers" is depicted rather gender neutral, while the category "Younger Children" is obviously attributed to girls (illus. skipping rope), and the third one of the older children to the boys (illus. playing football). Source: http://nike.com/de/de_de. Accessed: November 19, 2017.

IN JEDER GRÖSSE ANZEIGEN

GRÖSSENEMPFEHLUNG

 <p>BABYS UND KLEINKINDER</p> <p>Bekleidungsgröße: 0M – 36M Schuhgröße: 17-27</p>	 <p>JÜNGERE KINDER</p> <p>Bekleidungsgröße: 3 - 8 Schuhgröße: 27,5-35</p>	 <p>ÄLTERE KINDER</p> <p>Bekleidungsgröße: XS – XL Schuhgröße: 3 - 6</p>
<p>SHOW IN ALL SIZES</p> <p><i>Recommended Size</i></p>		
<p>BABIES AND TODDLERS</p> <p>Clothing size</p> <p>Shoe size</p>	<p>YOUNG CHILDREN</p> <p>Clothing size</p> <p>Shoe size</p>	<p>OLDER CHILDREN</p> <p>Clothing size</p> <p>Shoe size</p>

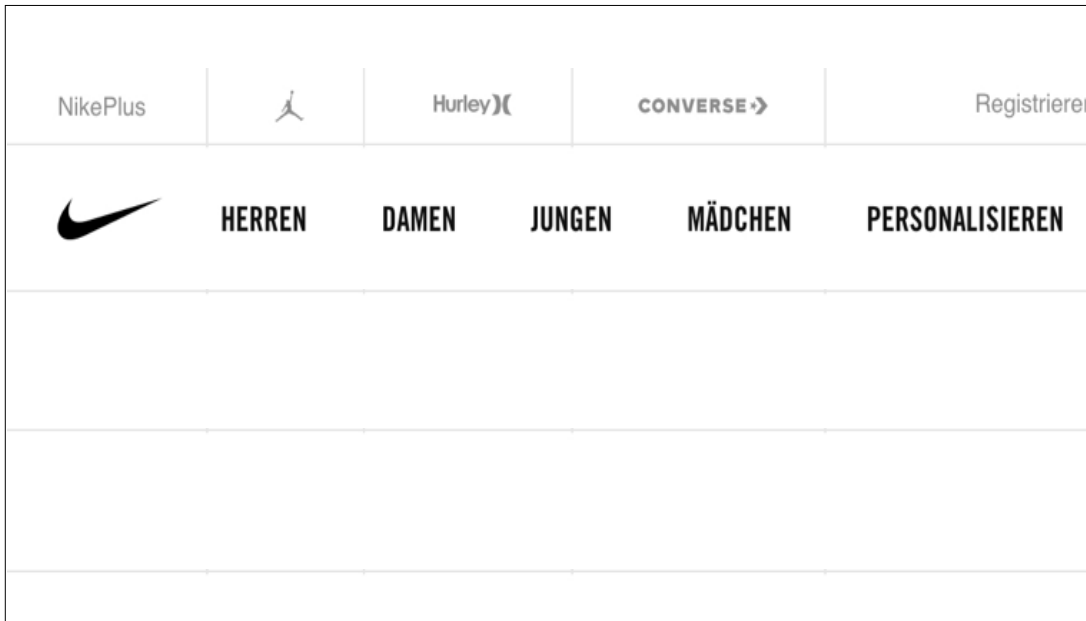


Figure 2 (top): The Nike website’s navigation bar is gender based even for children. Source: http://nike.com/de/de_de. Accessed: November 19, 2017.

Figure 3 (bottom): Also newsletter registration includes gender classification. In addition to e-mail address and the age check, only gender is verbally encoded and entered under “shopping preferences” as a mandatory field. Source: http://nike.com/de/de_de. Accessed: November 19, 2017.

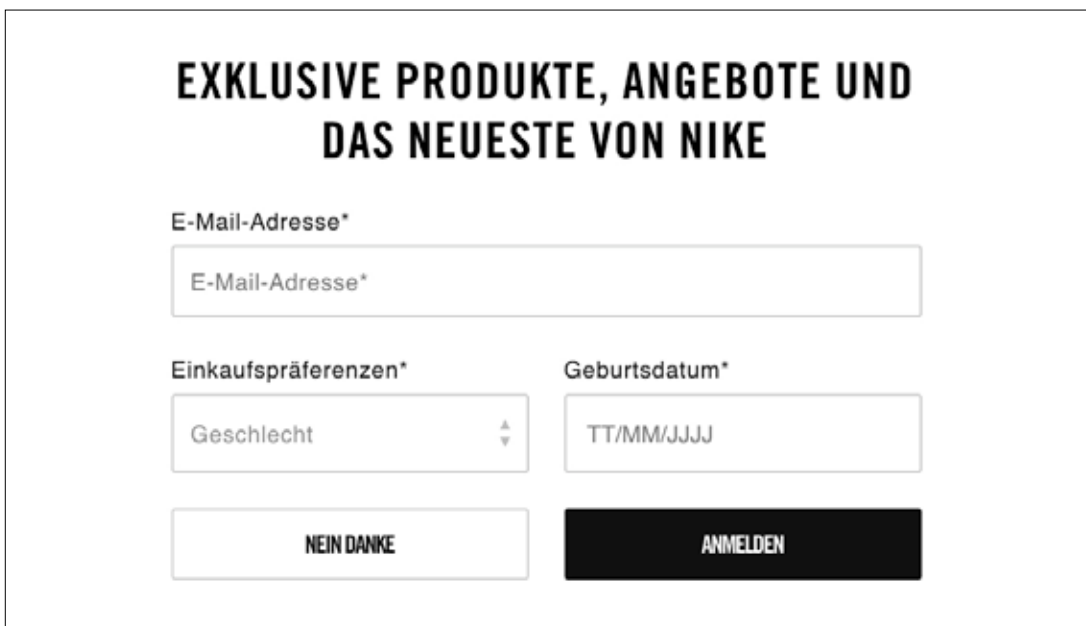
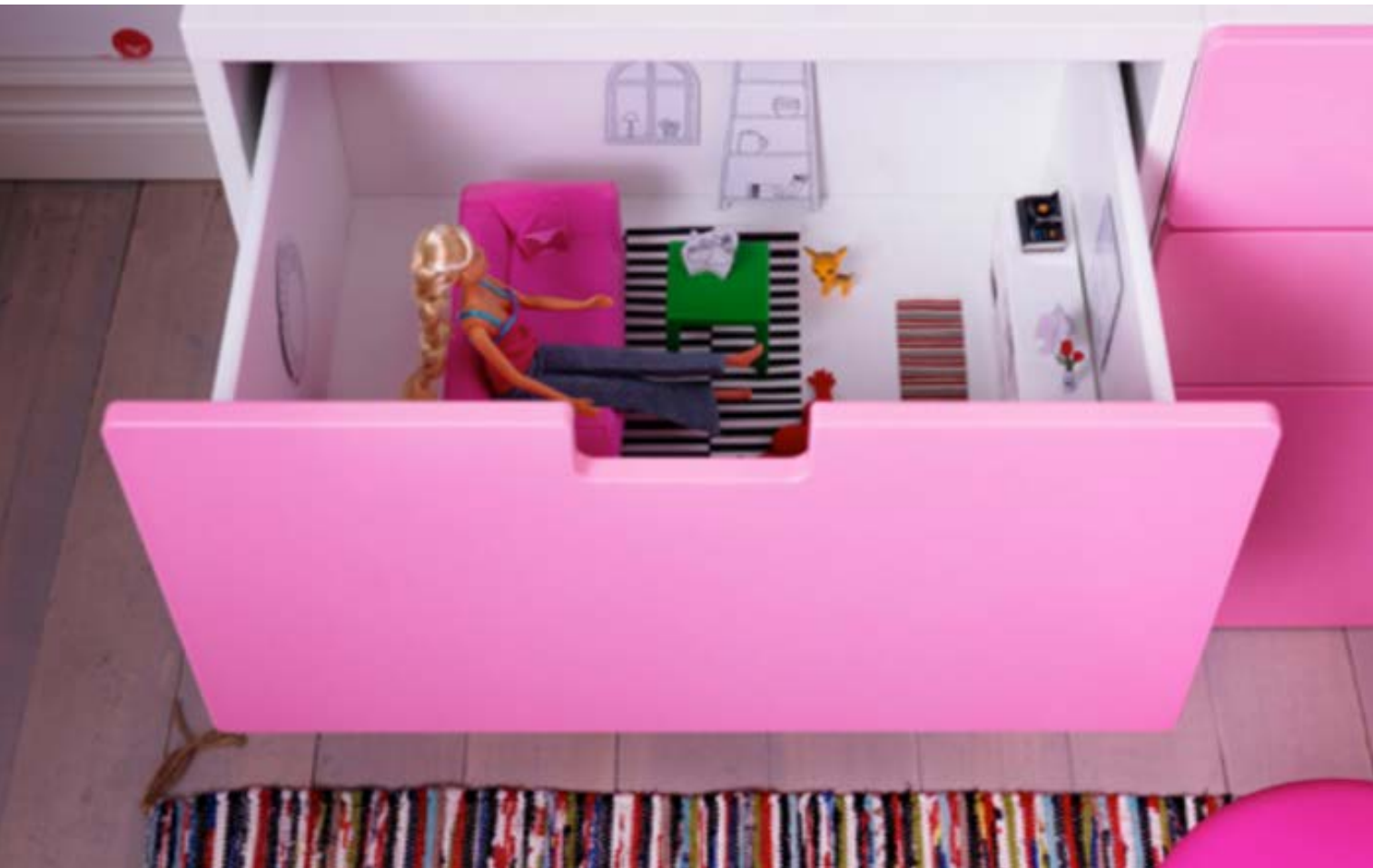




Figure 3: Obvious gender codes come to light within the product category of children's bras; next to the colour pink that has a female connotation (including basketball!), two supposed girlfriends are illustrated (cooperation, friendship) in one room, which is filled with all sorts of objects (homely), including a mirror. Source: http://nike.com/de/de_de. Accessed: November 19, 2017.

Figure 4 (opposite page): Structurally, alleged women's interests and creative activities are taken up as household tasks (furnishing rooms, dressing), communication (finding friends) and interests (fashion, shopping). The opposite strategy also exists, which does not explicitly mention gender but it becomes apparent which gender is clearly addressed through the imagery. Source: <http://ikea.co/de>. Accessed: November 24, 2017.



Puppenhaus-Ideen zum Selbermachen: Spielspaß garantiert

Die Kinder möchten „Haus“ spielen? Dann schau dir dein Zuhause mit ihren Augen an. Du wirst sicher in deinen bestehenden Möbeln jede Menge Möglichkeiten zum Spielen entdecken! Ob im Kinder- oder im Wo ...

Familienleben

Aufbewahrung

Do-it-Yourself Doll's House Ideas: fun Guaranteed!

The kids want to play "house"? Then look at your home with their eyes. You're sure to discover loads of possibilities to play in/with your existing furniture! Whether in the kids' room or in the liv...

FAMILY LIFE

STORAGE



Wandaufbewahrung gestalten ohne Bohren

Hände hoch, wenn du mehr Aufbewahrung brauchst. Dachten wir uns doch! Und deswegen waren wir sofort hellauf begeistert, als Designerin Therese sich diese zusätzliche Aufbewahrungswand einfallen ließ. ...

DIY

Aufbewahrung

Persönliche Note

Kleine Räume

Design wall storage without drilling

Hands up if you need more storage. Thought so! And that's why we were immediately thrilled when designer Therese came up with this extra storage solution...

DIY

STORAGE

PERSONAL TOUCH

SMALL ROOMS

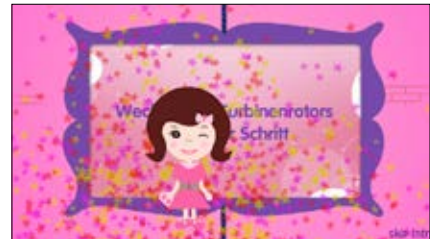
Minilu academy (miniluacademy.de) and shop is a website for budding dental assistants. Activities from everyday life are described here with the help of short web videos (explanatory films). The role model, 'Minilu', only has limited skills: she can only point with the hand (no fingers), cannot speak, only smile and fulfils the stereotypical passive role of an assistant. The name and setting comply with the 'pink it and shrink it' strategy (cf. Barletta 2005; Johnson and Learned 2004): the figure is small ('mini') and moves around in an entirely pink/purple colour setting combined with purely decorative, floral ornamentation and a rounded typeface. The objects (plants, cat) do not have any contextual connection to the subject of dental practice and technology. However, the speaker and broadcaster of knowledge (hierarchy!) is a man. This hierarchy is continued within the language of the film: it banks on simple, repetitive wording and encouragement such as 'it is actually really easy' and 'don't give up'. These imply that the viewers do not have the confidence

in themselves to actually perform the processes explained. The rather complex, technical tasks of a dental assistant (the website obviously does not give any consideration to a male occupying this job) are thus negated and are not acknowledged in this design. Although technical competence is to be achieved through this low-threshold offer in an executive function, it is not conveyed as a self-image. On the contrary, there is a concern that this design will only reinforce a technically incompetent self-image among users. It fits the phenomenon of the degradation of female professions: this rather technical occupation is not perceived as such.

The low-threshold offer itself is not being criticised but rather the associated unambiguous connection with the female gender based on the design. By comparison, IKEA also offers descriptions based purely on pictograms and a personal form of address but does not merely refer to women.

Figure 6 (opposite page): IKEA Furnishing/creating represents an activity which is structurally allocated to women, while drilling is a handicraft process that can be avoided. Source: <http://ikea.com/de>. Accessed: November 24, 2017.

Figure 7: Technical processes (turbine rotor replacement) contrast with a playful look (decorative elements, framing, colourfulness).



Wechsel des Turbinenrotors Schritt für Schritt
Rotor Replacement Step by Step

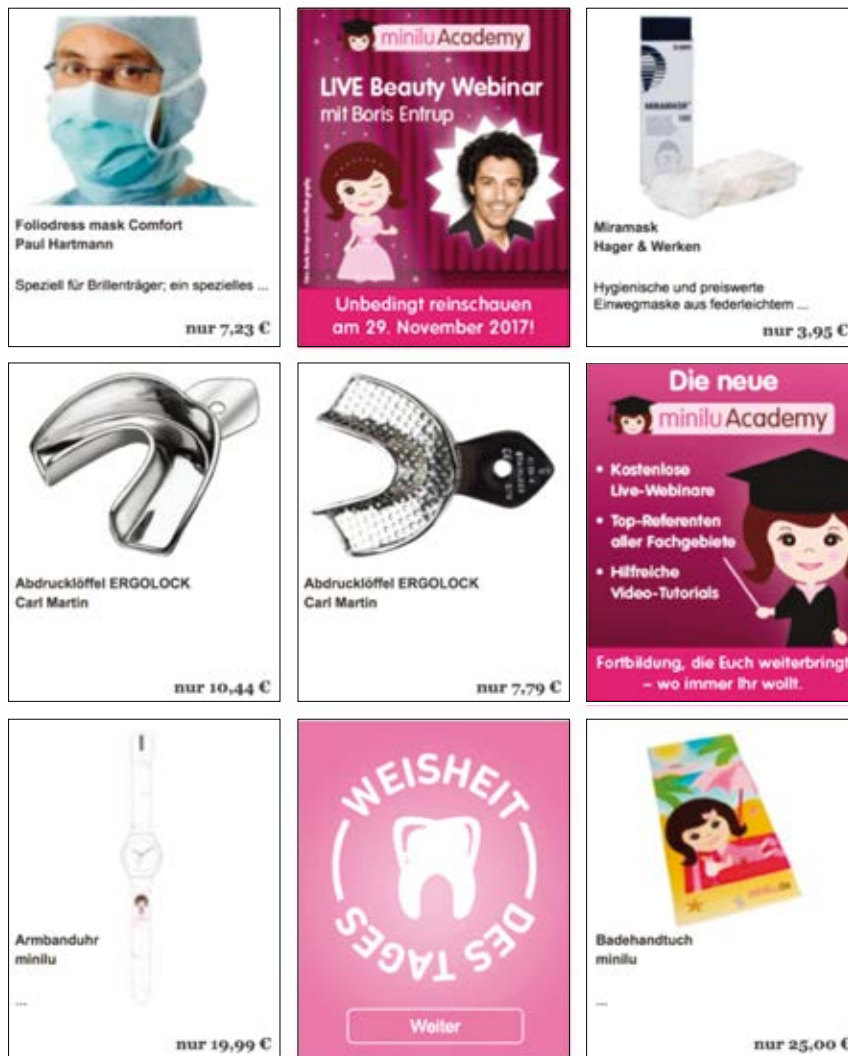


Nicht aufgeben: Don't give up!



Simple tasks are described in detail (step by step) and moreover explained without any background information or wider contexts. In addition, there are also calls for 'perseverance' or 'caution' warnings.

The dental practice is built up in pink/purple hues and floral elements; cat and flowers are out of place (cf. hygiene requirements). Source: <http://www.miniluacademy.de/minilu-academy/tutorials/>. Accessed: November 19, 2017.



Watch minilu

Towel minilu

Figure 8: The associated web shop combines technical products with references to beauty webinars and online videos. Fan merchandise is also available (Minilu towel and watch). With a combination of pink – impression spoons and protective masks – the beauty webinar has bizarre features. Source: <http://www.miniluacademy.de/minilu-academy/tutorials/>. Accessed: November 19, 2017.

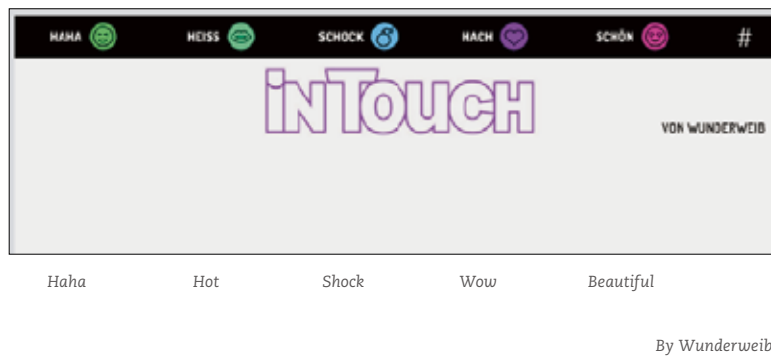
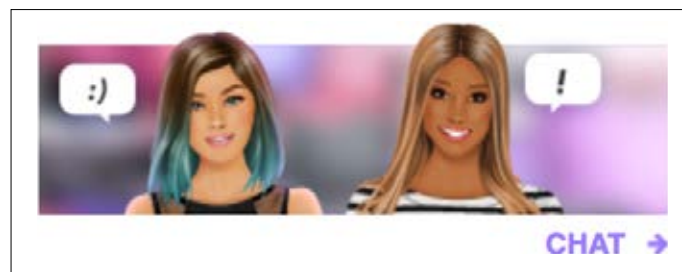
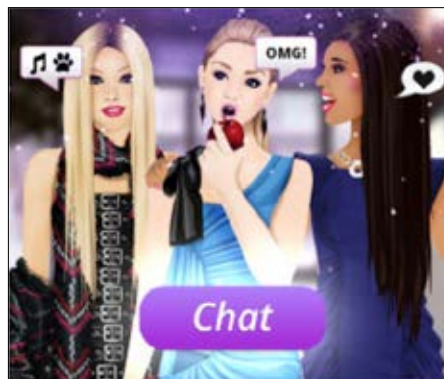


Figure 9 (top). Simplifying tendencies can be found in navigation elements. The website of the lifestyle magazine InTouch (intouch.wunderweib.de) (publishing house: Bauer People Magazin KG, circulation approx. 170,000 in Germany 3/2017) converts navigation nomenclatures into emotions. This means that there are no classic descriptions of categories but emotional statements such as "shock", "wow" or "hot". This phenomenon is supported by the fact that the printed magazine mostly consists of illustrations (more than a third).⁴ Source: intouch.wunderweib.de. Accessed: November 13, 2017

Figure 10 (bottom): This is no isolated phenomenon. The entertainment platform Stardoll (stardoll.com) for young girls also shows a chat banner depicting women with speech bubbles who only communicate by means of symbols (smiley and exclamation marks and music symbol/paw respectively, 'OMG' and heart). A sense of purpose is not recognisable here. No content is being communicated but only emotional expressions are presented. Women are being shown as passive beings in the role of an observer and are not represented in an active role. This is the icing on the cake of the already dubious body images (slim, long-haired, dressed-up, unrealistic). Source: stardoll.com. Accessed: November 17, 2017.



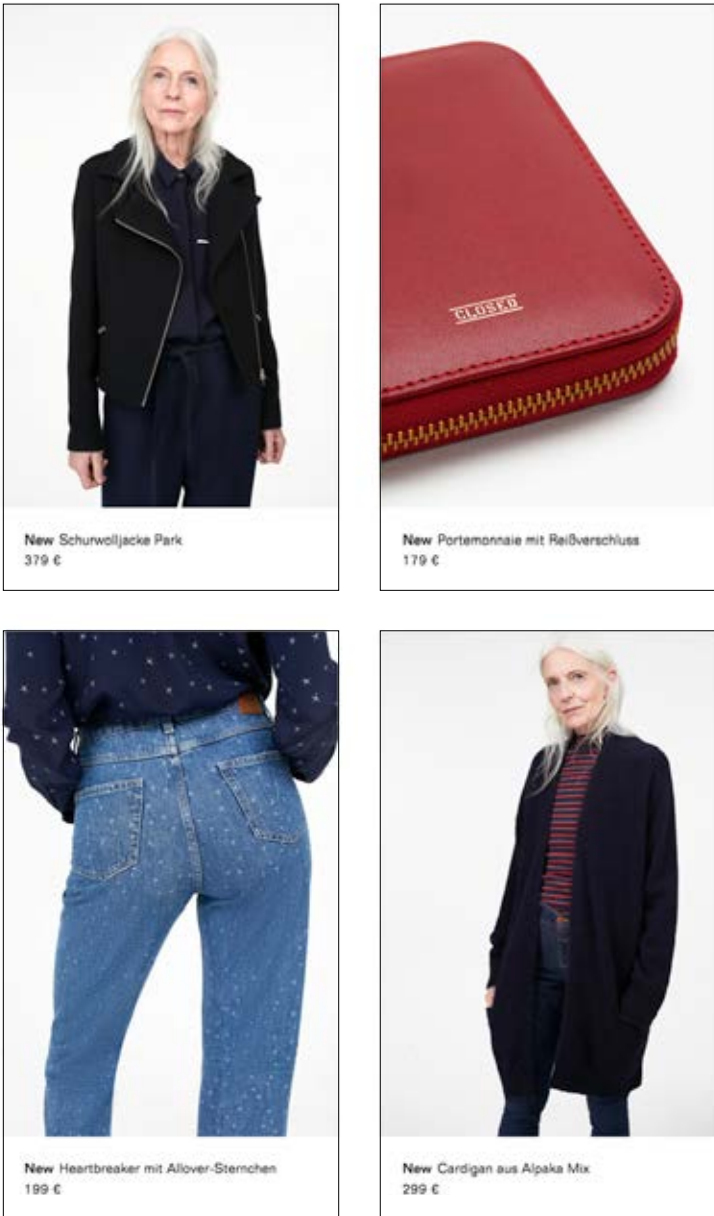


Figure 11: There are also counter-examples that break through these gender stereotypes. Exemplary for this is the German fashion label closed (closed.com) that presents younger and older female models in a natural, appreciative manner. Source: www.closed.com. Accessed: November 27, 2017.

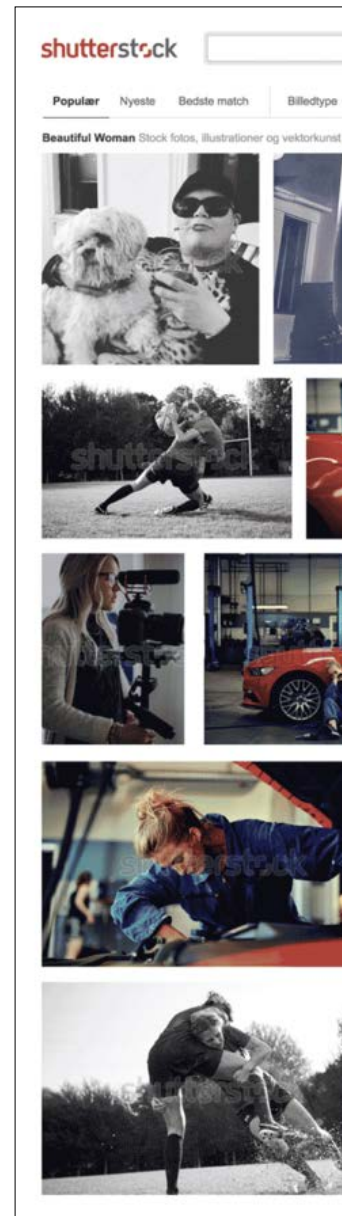
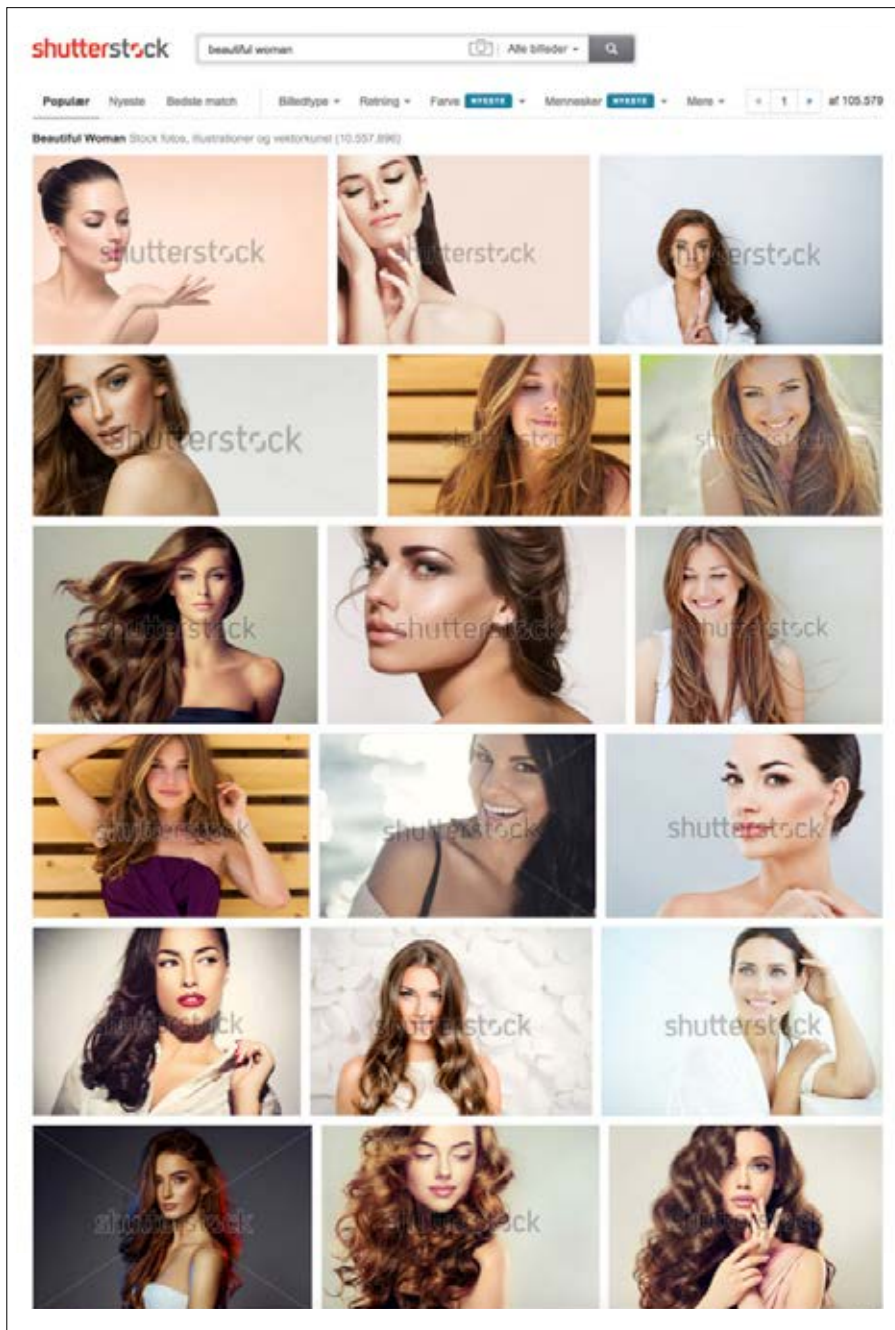
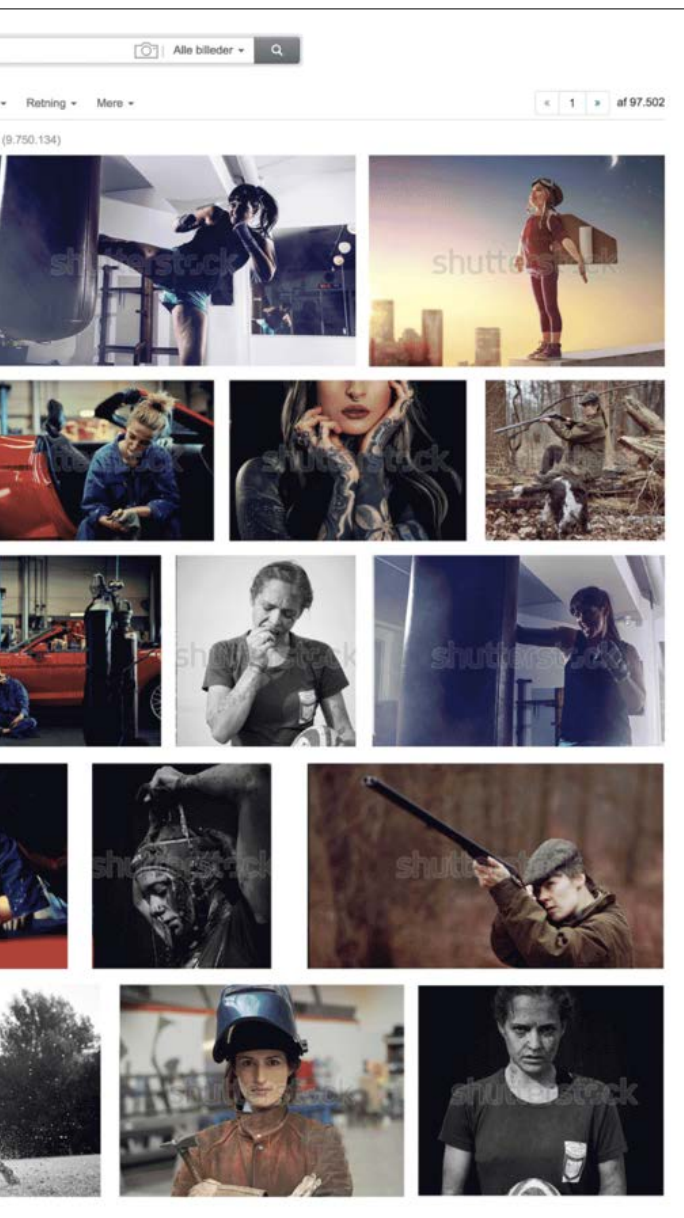


Figure 12 'Before Image_Hack' (left) and Figure 13 'After Image_Hack' (right): The iphiGenia Gender Design Award, founded by the international Gender Design Network (iGDN) in 2017, honours businesses and products that are innovative, gender-sensitive and that strike out in a new direction with regard to gender and design. Mindshare Denmark and their campaign Image_Hack is one of the prize-winners that

breached stereotypes of shape by hacking a stock photo agency from within, displaying contemporary image results under the keyword 'beautiful woman'. Photos: mindshare Denmark. Accessed: November 27, 2017.



The design of gender happens on three levels (Van Oost 2003, 195): the individual (skills, views, identities), the structural (i.e. gender-specific division of labour) and the symbolic level (cultural processes, norms, values). Aspects and characteristics with female or male connotations change with time and place and are thus considered a "dynamic and complex phenomenon" (Van Oost 2003, 195). As mentioned above, design is also a fluid phenomenon depending on time and space. Thus, design can be ascribed a special significance/responsibility in the shaping of gender.

The article presents a first approach to an analysis of websites with regard to gender references. Interesting areas of research are identified in relation to an analysis of individual target groups (children, adults), specific industries (sports, beauty) or the type of website (information, shopping).

Designers can break through the exemplified gender codes at different levels of the design process (see above). Unfortunately, the social impact of gender in design is still often disregarded and thus the impact of role models and role preconception is underestimated. The role and responsibility of designers should also be taken into account with regard to gender design and thus increase the awareness of designers.

Notes

1. Individual gender identity changes depending on requirements. Experiments in which the question of gender is psychologically forced into the background show that the behaviour of men and women converges. If the environment emphasises the role of gender, behaviour and self-perception increasingly conform to the respective gender stereotypes (Fine 2012).
2. "Beim Kauf eines SUV zählt allein das Image" ("When buying an SUV, only the image counts"). *Deutsche Welle*. 19.01.2018. Accessed: October 28, 2018. <http://www.dw.com/de/psychologe-beim-kauf-eines-suv-zählt-allein-das-image/a-42216577>.
3. <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/john-lewis-boys-girls-clothing-labels-gender-neutral-unisex-children-a7925336.html>. Accessed November 27, 2017.
4. Wikipedia Commons. "[...] *inTouch* deals mainly with the topics: stars and celebs, gossip and fashion – more than 30% of the magazine consists of images." Accessed: November 27, 2017.

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Bio

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