



## **Chapter VII**

# **Interpreting the Female User: How Web Designers Conceptualise Development of Commercial WWW Sites to Satisfy Specific Niche Markets**

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## **Abstract**

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*This chapter presents an investigation into the commercial WWW portal, “BEME.com,” as an example of gendered Web design targeting female users. It argues that Web designers need to be aware of processes implicated in such gendered outcomes. Thus, an analysis of the BEME.com design process is used to identify threats and opportunities in designing for female online users in order to formulate appropriate design guidelines. The chapter outlines several underlying factors that illuminate these processes, and their social, cultural, and political origins. It is argued that the prevalence and accessibility of WWW makes it a powerful vehicle of change both within design practice and in terms of gender structures more widely. It is in this context that the author seeks to contribute to the existing research by offering a feminist critique of Web design, arguing that Web designers have an opportunity and a responsibility to affect and effect changes to a gendered status quo.*

## Introduction

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Following the threat of economic collapse in 2001, technological development and new forms of access have revitalised interest in the Internet. Recent developments, such as the availability of “always on” connections via broadband, reduced cost, and an ever-growing population of users have had implications for the nature and reception of the Internet. In these circumstances, the role of Web designers has also shifted from that of “creative explorers” to a far more responsible, meaningful, and embedded position within the development of the World Wide Web (WWW). Furthermore, constant refinement of online niche markets has prompted further questioning and fine-tuning of Web designs to suit the needs of particular users. To facilitate a discussion of these issues, an investigation into a commercial WWW portal entitled BEME.com has been conducted as an example of Web design practice targeting female users. A product of IPC Media (IPC), BEME.com developed directly out of traditional women’s magazine publishing in response to a boom in dot.com industries at the end of the 1990s. This investigation questions how Web designers conceptualise development of such Web sites intended to meet the needs of their female audience. It draws on an analysis of public relations publications and interviews with the BEME.com design team.

Early studies of women’s WWW use focused primarily on raising awareness of a significant disparity between the number of male and female online users (Harcourt, 1999). However, as Martinson, Schwartz, and Walker Vaughan (2002) point out, “[w]hile current numerical parity on the Internet is one measure of progress, issues of gender equality are more complex than simple counts of who is logging on to the Internet” (p. 31). Recently, a number of scholars, including Rommes (2002) and Spilker and Sørensen (2000), have investigated various ways in which the WWW could become more inclusive of female users, and initiatives such as *Strategies of inclusion: Gender and the information society* (2000-3) have sought to address the complexity of women’s participation in the WWW (Faulkner, Sørensen, Gansmø, Rommes, Pitt, Lagesen Berg, et al., 2004). The issues discussed in this chapter sit between recognition of a need for strategies of online inclusion, and belief in and knowledge of the capacity of Web design practice to continually develop and innovate. An argument is constructed for the potential of portal design to offer alternative ways of communicating to female users in such a way as to resist and combat the gendered status quo. Contemporary design, Internet, and feminist theory provide illuminative lenses through which to explore these issues.

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