TRANSDISCIPLINARITY AMONG UNIVERSITIES AS A CATALYST FOR A GENDER-SENSITIVE REVOLUTION. STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN

LA TRANSDISCIPLINARIEDAD ENTRE UNIVERSIDADES COMO CATALIZADOR DE UNA REVOLUCIÓN SENSIBLE AL GÉNERO. ESTRATEGIAS Y ENFOQUES DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA DEL DISEÑO DE LA COMUNICACIÓN

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Abstract

One of the most influential and proven vehicles for sustainable development is inclusive and quality education. This is why it is crucial to promote gender equality in higher education and research, for only in this way can we build a fairer world where everyone has equal opportunities to contribute, create, fulfil their dreams, use their talents, and above all, develop a more sustainable world in collaboration with other human beings. This contribution intends to approach the issue of the university's role in closing the gender gap from the disciplinary perspective of Communication Design. The contribution therefore aims to fuel the reflection on the role and strategies that the educational path in design can experiment and equip itself with to promote a shift in perspective and contribute to a positive change. The presentation of the case study «A multidisciplinary awareness-raising campaign

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project against gender-based violence, from the university for the university» has the aim of supporting the argumentation. The case study constitutes a practical example of an inter-university multidisciplinary project, an awareness-raising campaign, in which the synergy and juxtaposition of different and complementary disciplines enable the activation of a virtuous circle of knowledge and awareness. The strategy implemented in this case involved the university on several intertwining levels: from the university, through the university, for the university. The actors engaged in the research and project were located at different levels of the academic pathway: Professors, researchers and students worked together and with different roles in the various stages of the project.

Keywords: Communication Design; Multidisciplinary; Transdisciplinarity; Inter-university; Awareness; Gender violence; Social campaign; Higher Education.

Resumen

Uno de los vehículos más influyentes y probados para el desarrollo sostenible es la educación inclusiva y de calidad. Por esto es crucial promover la igualdad de género en la Educación Superior y la investigación, pues solo así podremos construir un mundo más justo donde todo el mundo tenga igualdad de oportunidades para contribuir, crear, cumplir sus sueños, utilizar su talento y, sobre todo, desarrollar un mundo más sostenible en colaboración con otros seres humanos. Esta contribución tiene como objetivo abordar el papel de la universidad a la hora de cerrar la brecha de género desde la perspectiva disciplinaria del Diseño de la Comunicación. La contribución pretende fomentar la reflexión sobre el rol y las estrategias del proceso educativo en diseño para promover un cambio de perspectiva y contribuir a una transformación positiva. La presentación del estudio de caso «Un proyecto de campaña de concienciación multidisciplinaria contra la violencia de género, desde la universidad para la universidad» tiene esta finalidad. El estudio de caso constituye un ejemplo práctico de un proyecto interuniversitario multidisciplinar, una campaña de concienciación, en la cual la sinergia y la yuxtaposición de disciplinas diferentes y complementarias permiten la activación de un círculo virtuoso de conocimiento y sensibilización. La estrategia implementada en este caso involucró a la universidad en varios niveles entrelazados: desde la universidad, a través de la universidad y para la universidad. Los actores involucrados en la investigación y el proyecto se situaron en diferentes niveles del estamento académico: profesorado, personal investigador y estudiantes trabajaron en conjunto y con diferentes roles en las diversas etapas del proyecto.

Palabras clave: Diseño de Comunicación; Multidisciplinariedad; Transdisciplinariedad; Interuniversitario; Sensibilización; Violencia de género; Campaña social; Educación Superior.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of documents and appeals at the international level, including the UN 2030 Agenda, focusing on gender discrimination issues, highlighting how the path to equity is still long and arduous and calling for tangible actions and a collective effort to close the gender gap (UN, 1995; UN, 2015; UN Women, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2022). Assuming that «one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development is inclusive and good education», and as Skjerven & Fordham (2022) state:

> *GE in higher education and research are important to promote due to the SDG of building a fairer world where everyone has the same opportunity to contribute, create, fulfil their dreams and use their talents, and most of all to develop a more sustainable world in partnership with other human beings.* (pp. 83-84)

This contribution intends to approach the issue of the role of the university in closing the gender gap from the disciplinary perspective of communication design, presenting the work developed in the last few years by the research group DCxCG –Communication design for Gender culture of the Design Department at Politecnico di Milano and the joint work of the group within a network of 6 universities in Milan: The Gender Cultures Interuniversity Research Centre. This contribution aims to fuel the reflection on the role and strategies that the educational path in design can equip itself with in order to promote a shift in perspective and contribute to a positive change through the presentation of a case study: A multidisciplinary awareness-raising campaign project against gender-based violence, from the university for the university, carried out with the The Gender Cultures Interuniversity Research Centre. In the project, the DCxCG group contributed to the communication design level by involving, through the activation of a workshop, design students in the project of the communication campaign. The contribution opens by framing the role of communication design and the training of communication designers, then highlighting the need, intrinsic in gender studies, to adopt a transdisciplinary approach, presenting the case study as a virtuous and innovative example of multidisciplinarity.

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2. THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF DESIGN

We believe that communication is a tool for inclusion and a space to build creative forms of resistance (Bucchetti et al., 2022). Communication design is an area that has always been involved in terms of social responsibility in the production and dissemination of media messages. This study area spread a strongly androcentric worldview, fostering the processes of stereotyping and polarisation of identities. At the same time, it breaks the already slow progress towards an inclusive and social justice-oriented society. It is well-known and established that media images contribute to the visual construction of the social dimension (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012; Mirzoeff, 2015; Sartori, 1997), generating and reproducing reference models that structure social interactions. These media messages too often feed and confirm the stereotypes and social categories inherited from a model stemming from humanistic culture, in which, as Braidotti (2022) states:

> The point […] is that difference, being 'other than' or 'different from' 'Man', is negatively perceived as 'worth less than' 'Man'. This epistemic and symbolic exclusion is no abstraction: It translates into ruthless violence for the real-life people who coincide with categories of negative difference. (p. 19)

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) standard and *hyper-simplified* images and representations of reality that influence the collective thought (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014, p. 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 is a compromised system of production and reproduction of stereotyped models in which the communication designer plays a crucial role in social responsibility.

We can represent this system through the symbol of infinity (∞), which 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

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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). In «Invisible women», Criado-Pérez (2020) mentions the *inertia of thought*, «in a way a way of not thinking», a concept that can easily be traced back to the ordinary 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 practical, 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 do not realise it (Califano, 2022; Fry, 2017; Pater, 2021).

«With every design choice we make, there is the potential not just to exclude but to oppress; every design subtly persuades its audience one way or another, and every design vocabulary has history and context» (Kwandala, 2019, Decolonizing design work section, para. 5). This means that it is impossible to practice design without taking a position, without ethics, without politics, and this makes every action, every design choice, a political act. In that sense, design is a double-edged sword that, if used responsibly and consciously through a critical and positive approach, can become a powerful medium of social activism. At the same time, it can break the *vicious* circle of stereotyping and redirect it into a *virtuous* circle to bridge the gender gap. Communication design, therefore, has the duty and the tools to act on a twofold level. The first concerns the design processes themselves, the choices and methods put in place to arrive at the definition of the design output and the ability to foresee the latter's impact and orient it in a positive and purposeful key. Hence, there is a need to develop critical thinking about using expressive and rhetorical models, and thus, the training of designers capable of understanding the complexity of reality to trick gender stereotypes.

The second level deals with the role that design can play in raising awareness about gender issues and in educating people about a critical reading of the media landscape in which we are enveloped. Through its design activities, the communication designer can be involved in producing outputs that support public awareness and education. Referring to the

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term *antibody* (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012), the designer can act on the subject's thinking and culture, who benefits from the media message, to help make him or her *immune* to gender stereotypes. In this direction, visual cultures can contribute in terms of critique, awareness, and information, as well as formulating responses to the need to rethink the formats and rules of visual communication.

3. WHY DESIGN EDUCATION

How should the (communication) design educational context reflects and react to the contemporary socio-political scene from the gender and feminist perspective? What strategies can be activated at the level of design education and research? Where should we act to help break the endless loop of stereotyping mechanisms?

Within this framework, the education of future designers assumes a vital and responsible role that cannot 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 design projects, 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 helpful 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, p. 77). So while on the one hand «what is taught can reproduce» —not always knowingly— «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), 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.

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The discipline of design itself has, therefore, the vital task of training designers who are equipped with the critical skills to design responsibly, going beyond «competently reproducing aesthetics and concepts which are deemed acceptable within their community of practice» (Levick-Parkin, 2017) and thus reforming the media system from within in a long-term perspective.

As Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) states in *Design Justice. Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*, there is the need for 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 many designers become convinced that equitable design outcomes are a goal that is important enough to warrant retooling. From this perspective, it is a matter of promoting and activating processes that lead the new generations of designers to a perspective change, providing them with the tools to access the present critically –how can we design new futures if we cannot access the present critically? (Braidotti, 2021)– and then adopt an avant-garde approach, experimenting with new models and communicative languages to break through and overcome design's androcentrism.

The aim is to tackle the inertia of thought of current designers or future ones and awaken them from *media narcosis* (Pinotti, 2020), the condition of apathy and habit in which all of us, having grown up and been trained in a particular socio-cultural context, are in danger of stagnating. It is necessary for the university to achieve these objectives, to be active in research and teaching, exploring, and increasing knowledge in many different directions. For this reason, it is included basic research on the gender dimension in design from an ontological and theoretical point of view; research on and for training and teaching and thematic research on representation and gender stereotypes in media and design.

This approach would help reconstruct and monitor how the media landscape behaves and identify and deconstruct recursive and toxic models of representation; design research, which includes the design and experimentation of languages for communication aimed at raising awareness concerning gender issues.

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4. THE DCXCG GROUP: APPROACH AND ACTIVITIES

It is from these assumptions that the research group Communication design for Gender cultures of the Design Department (Politecnico di Milano) was conceived in 2012. The group is located around the intersection between communication design and gender studies. It was formed to offer a critical point of view regarding the forms of representation of gender. At the same time, the intention of supporting and developing, through research and experimental teaching, the proposal of new communication models, as well as opportunities/actions aimed at increasing sensitivity and awareness regarding gender issues in everyday life.

The group's approach is mainly based on two philosophical orientations, hybridising and declining them according to the methods and tools of communication design. We mainly refer to social constructivism because «the basic generation of knowledge of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. The qualitative research process is largely inductive; the inquirer generates meaning from the data collected in the field» (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). While of deconstructionism, we are mainly interested in the role assigned to language – iconic as well as verbal –as it «denies language the possibility of expressing unambiguous, absolute meanings and affirms, instead, the need to analyse any text –literary, philosophical, cultural in the broadest sense –by bringing out its internal conflicts and dissonances», an approach that is applied in the work of critical analysis and reading of the media landscape and design outputs and that we try to convey to students concerning what they *consume* and what they *design*. According to one of the principles drafted by Costanza-Chock in *Design Justice*, it means to «prioritise design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer» (third principle). At this point, from the perspective of communication, the design prioritises the meaning that a design output assumes when it is put into circulation and enjoyed by a particular social group to prevent and eliminate forms of discrimination perpetrated by media and design.

Over the years, the group's work has evolved and articulated into an increasingly dense and diffuse network of actions, responses, and experiments with different goals and objectives, ranging from university curricula

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to research projects. In this regard, it has formed a fabric of activities united by a single central objective: contributing to eliminating gender inequalities perpetrated around communication design and visual cultures.

4.1. Education – for new generations of conscious and responsible designers

«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, p. 80).

From the point of view of design education, it is a matter of training conscious designers and providing them with the necessary tools to correctly decode the media landscape (media literacy) surrounding them. At the same time, it estimates the impact of their way of practising design to stimulate critical thinking and experimentation with other representational models that can counteract gender stereotypes and contribute to a step-by-step revolution.

In response to these purposes, the course «Communication design and Gender culture» was activated and introduced in 2015 –the first of its kind in Italy–, aimed at master's degree design students at the Design School (Polimi). It is a transversal course – communication, product, fashion, interior and product service system design – that addresses gender issues from the perspective of communication design through a critical approach to raise the awareness of future designers using a multimodal approach –blended learning. The course is structured between lectures, thematic contributions and project activities that mix theory and practice to integrate a gender-sensitive perspective in everyday life and the shared construction of new hypotheses of intervention in the social context.

On the educational level, over the past years, some workshops have been activated about gender stereotypes in the media.

4.2. Research – increasing knowledge

In a continuous intertwining with the activities carried out in the field of education, the group has been working since 2012 on the research dimension –through doctoral paths, master's theses, and multidisciplinary research projects of a national and international scale– ranging between different

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levels from *research for education*. This approach focuses on the experimentation and project design of communication systems and tools for developing training and awareness-raising activities. To this end, aimed at design students but also at younger generations, involving secondary and primary school children and youths through media literacy activities; *basic research*, research of a theoretical nature on the gender dimension in design; *thematic research*, which includes research on representation and gender stereotypes in the media. It also refers to the design aimed at reconstructing a state-of-the-art concerning the pollution of the media landscape and observing and monitoring some critical areas. It also returns a series of evidence that can be turned around in a positive key to constitute a basin of good practices for gender-sensitive design *project research* involving the design and experimentation of inclusive language communication strategies. They can raise awareness of gender issues and identity systems for the communication and promotion of activities and initiatives.

4.3. Design projects – actions and counter-actions to raise awareness

It is impossible to draw a line between what we defined as project research and project; they are two levels that, in the academic context, are closely connected, and one can only exist with the other. By 'actions and counter-actions for awareness-raising', we mean projects carried out by the DCxCG group independently or in cooperation with partners such as organisations and institutions or other university departments from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Recently implemented projects include the «Manifesto for a gender-sensitive communication» (Bucchetti et al., 2022), an online manifesto whose objective is to state a stance and provide communication designers with a valuable tool to activate a series of inclusive good practices and to carry out a self-examination and critical reading of their work, with the manifesto, the group formally defines its position on gender issues and calls on the university to join and adopt strategies for a non-discriminatory language; the exhibition «Politecniche. Donne progettiste del cambiamento» (2021), held at the design campus to highlight the women who participated in the growth of the Politecnico di Milano since the early 1900s in slow and rarefied access

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to university. In this regard, the awareness-raising campaign against gender violence carried out in the Milan university context is a virtuous example of collaboration and integration of different disciplines (we are going to explore it in more detail in the following paragraphs); generally speaking, communication campaigns and awareness-raising activities, including, for example, those aimed at children and young people at events such as the Engineering Festival and the MeetMeTonight event for the «Researchers' night».

4.4. Dissemination

The work carried out by the group led to the articulation and formalisation, through publications, scientific seminars, and conferences about these issues and topics. In particular, the focus of study in this case is on the evidences that emerged from the research and observation activities and the strategies and experimental communication languages used in the design of actions and counter-actions. Through the publications –which have grown over the years since *Anticorpi comunicativi*, the first volume that marked the start of a path in 2012– contributions are collected and formalised to give an account of the research. These are different kinds of contributions involving professors, researchers and students or former students who have developed a master's thesis on gender and design to give a formal shape to the complexity and stratification of the contents.

In addition to these four points, there is a transversal issue that deserves a dedicated in-depth look: the multidisciplinary dimension in which gender studies is embedded and the joint work within the Gender Cultures Interuniversity Research Centre, which involves six universities in Milan to foster synergy and interdependence between complementary disciplines.

5. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

5.1. Multidisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity

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).

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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» (Pulkkinen, 2015, p. 1). 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.

The concept of *transdisciplinarity*, in our case, is understood as *multidisciplinarity*, the synergetic collaboration between researchers with different backgrounds, where the respective disciplines are juxtaposed (Holbrook, 2013; Mennes, 2020), and it is precisely the relationships and interconnection between the juxtaposed disciplines that make the output relevant.

5.2. A transdisciplinary university network

The Gender Culture Interuniversity Research Centre, of which the DCxCG group is an active member representing the discipline of communication design, was established in 2013 to boost, with the tools of expertise of each disciplinary sector involved in a multidisciplinary perspective:

> *Studies, research and positive actions – also on the internal university front – on the topics of gender cultures, in the spirit of art. 25 of the European Resolution of 9 March 2010, of the European Directive 113 of 2004 and of CEDAW, the international convention adopted in 1979 by the United Nations Assembly* (UN General Assembly, 1979).

The activities of the research centre focus on gender issues and are of a cultural and awareness-raising nature. Through the synergic collaboration of the six universities involved[1], representing different disciplines –including design, engineering, sociology, law, and medicine–, over the years,

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1. The six universities involved are: Università Statale degli Studi di Milano, Politecnico di Milano, Università Vita e Salute San Raffaele, Università di Lingue e Comunicazione IULM, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Università Luigi Bocconi.

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autonomous research projects or those commissioned by public institutions have been promoted and coordinated; social awareness campaigns; publications and conferences of both a scientific and educational nature that contribute to spreading a culture of gender inclusion outside and within the academic community. The advantage of a joint action in which universities and their research departments are compactly dedicated to gender cultures is remarkable. On this line, it is represented by the potential impact that the very existence of such a network can produce not only within the scientific community but also on the side of institutional relations with public decision-makers.

The topics of interest concern some of the many issues that highlight the persistence of gender inequalities in society: the wide-ranging and multifaceted topic of violence, inequality in the professional sphere, work-life balance, intersectional discrimination, the representation of gender in the media, online hatred and misogyny, the STEM issue. The diverse scientific background of the Scientific Council members is a guarantee of multidisciplinarity in the approach to issues concerning gender in all its social and cultural aspects.

5.3. A virtuous circle to spread the culture of inclusion in the academic community: University against gender violence

As mentioned, the Centre's topics of attention include the current and urgent issue of gender violence in its different forms, which implies a multidisciplinary approach. In this direction, the Centre in 2019 has activated a project to raise awareness among the academic community, a project that we believe represents a virtuous and innovative example of cooperation between disciplines and of the activation of «the university for the university».

In the research project, monitoring the activity of the forms of violence and harassment acted out within the university contexts was also launched, involving samples of students enrolled in the universities belonging to the Centre. The project involved the realisation of a campaign to raise awareness and prevent gender-based violence aimed at university students, which mainly involved three disciplines: sociology in the research and observation phase; the translation process management skills of communication design

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in the campaign design phase; and the tools of neuromarketing, to gather and evaluate feedback on the perceptual response of the campaign from the users to verify its impact.

6. A CASE OF INTER-UNIVERSITY MULTIDISCIPLINARITY, THE SYNERGETIC COLLABORATION BETWEEN COMPLEMENTARY DISCIPLINES

The project, a campaign to raise awareness and prevention of gender-based violence from the university to the university, was initiated by the Interuniversity Research Centre in response to the Istanbul Convention (Art. 13), which stipulates that action should be taken to «promote or implement awareness-raising campaigns or programmes […] to increase the general public's awareness and understanding of the various manifestations of all forms of violence […] as well as the need to prevent them». The campaign was launched on 25 November 2019, the 20th anniversary of the UN Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and provided an opportunity to make a direct contribution to the prevention of gender-based violence. The multidisciplinary approach made it possible to achieve a level of depth and effectiveness of the message that communication design, without equipping itself with the tools of qualitative research proper to the social sciences, would have had difficulty achieving.

6.1. The issue of gender-based violence – a look within the university context

The decision to focus on violence acted out within universities was taken not considering any explicit urgency but to document its presence, forms, perception, and awareness among students. The aim is to translate the findings of the observation into a communication campaign able to foster the processes of identification and message effectiveness.

The problem of male violence against women systematically crosses all domains of social life. Still, it manifests itself mainly in very different forms, from the most explicit, such as physical violence and feminicide, to the more subtle and invisible forms of psychological violence. The university represents an environment that is collectively perceived as safe; it is a context far removed from those that, in the collective imagination, we

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associate with gender-based violence. One might consider, for example, the media representation of gender-based violence in which physical violence and feminicide seem to prevail.

However, the phenomenon of male violence against women has many ways of expressing itself, some of which are recognised – neither by the victim nor by the perpetrator of the violence – and end up going unnoticed. At the same time, they are perceived as 'ordinary' attitudes and ways of relating to others, or, if not perceived as 'ordinary', considered as unremarkable and isolated cases. People who commit violence, however, Giomi and Magaraggia remind us in *Relazioni brutali* (2017), «are not nonconformists or psychologically disturbed perverts, but people who conform to a set of «masculinity norms» (p. 27. Authors' translation). Violence, from the most subtle to the most extreme forms, is something to which men and women have been socialised and which they have internalised as a *habitus*:

> It is a modality that men use as a habit, […] as an expression of identity, as a cultural mode of expression of their masculinity or virility, as a mode of affirmation, as an instrument of social control and domination, and finally as a mode of regulation of affective relationships. (Deriu in Bertolo, 2011, p. 117, author's translation)

The choice to put at the basis of the awareness-raising campaign the forms and experiences of violence acted directly or indirectly within the community to which the target groups themselves belong. This fact makes it possible not only to start a monitoring activity of the forms of violence in the universities that are part of the Research Centre, but also to foster processes of identification of the users, making them feel closer to the issue and directly involved. If people define themselves based on experience and on the process dimension of their personal experience (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014), reference to personal experience, or that of those we feel close to, becomes an essential step that must affect all stages of the process, from research to the design output.

The aim was to define an effective and immediate campaign which used verbal and iconic language entirely internal to the subculture of interest and which was able to circumvent the clichés and representative stereotypes peculiar to social communication, which tend to give a reductive and distorted view of gender-based violence, e.g., by empowering the victim;

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concealing the perpetrator; generalising and reducing the problem to physical violence, etc.

The social segment to which the campaign designers belong, therefore, coincides in terms of lifestyles, vision of the world, and cultural background with the social and cultural segment of the campaign recipients, in a virtuous circle in which communication design students were called upon to design for their peers.

6.2. The process and the synergy between complementary disciplinary areas

The design process considers the synergy between the three disciplinary areas involved, whose contributions, besides being temporally consequential, were complementary and unavoidable from each other. The starting point called for communication design and sociology to be involved in preliminary and preparatory work to outline some basic requirements to put at the basis of the communication campaign. As Giomi and Magaraggia (2017) points out, it is first and foremost crucial that gender-based violence is represented as a contextualised process considering the cycle of violence and not as a circumscribed act. To avoid falling into stereotypical and superficial representations of violence, one solution may be, for example, to provide an accurate and detailed representation of it. A further requirement concerns the familiarity of the language and the proximity to the target audience, not only to make the message correctly decoded by the target but also because the identification and recognition of one's context make situations less uncertain. The behaviour one wants to promote/encourage should also be presented as one everyone can quickly adopt in everyday life. It was further decided to consider an aspect that in social communication often falls by the wayside: the importance of addressing men as subjects directly involved –both as perpetrators of violence and as allies.

Starting from this background knowledge, the project was then articulated in several steps, managed alternately by the three universities involved in the front line and with different moments of sharing with the members of the Inter-university research centre in correspondence with the decision-making phases.

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–The contribution of the social sciences. Observing the subculture and collecting students' experiences. In this first phase, the aim was to collect and explore the episodes experienced or known to the students at the universities involved. For this purpose, the tools and methods of sociological research were fundamental, according to the approach of gender studies and feminism, for an in-depth reading of gender-based violence. One of the strengths of sociology, and its specific traits, is its empirical feature. Conceptual networks and crucial analytical hubs encounter flesh-and-blood subjects daily and give them a voice (Mainardi, 2022). Two methods were adopted for the research: participant observation in the students' social spaces and five focus groups with 6/8 students from different universities in Milan: Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca, Università degli Studi di Milano Statale, Politecnico di Milano.

The focus groups were significant for understanding the diversity of experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of different individuals belonging to the same subculture, taking into account the conceptual schemes of the social actors. The research produced empirical material consisting of two main elements: the communicative flow of explicit verbal expressions and the relational bond between the subjects involved (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014). During the focus groups, the students mainly talked about verbal violence and sexism and identified university sites where they had witnessed or experienced violence or sexism. They talked extensively about online violence, concluding with discussions on strategies deployed to react to forms of violence. Among the forms of violence, verbal violence was the most narrated during the focus groups, and according to the narrations –direct and indirect– it occurs both in formal spaces (e.g., the classroom) and in informal ones (e.g., the campus cafeteria). The fact that this happens in a university environment makes these prevarications even more severe in the eyes of those who suffer them since classrooms, corridors, bars, and university courtyards are expected to be safe spaces.

The collected accounts give further confirmation and evidence of how, even today, masculinity is constructed through contempt for the feminine and that homoeroticism is still at its basis, and it is often repressed through sexist jokes. As Kimmel (2002) states:

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> *Homophobia […] is more than the irrational fear of homosexuality, more than the fear of being considered gay. […] it originates from the fear that other men might expose us, question our masculinity, reveal to the world […] that we are not real men.* (p. 185)

The work undertaken by the sociology colleagues was organised and formalised (anonymously) within a research report that provided the fundamental tool for the next step: the formulation of targeted project briefs for communication design students.

– *The contribution of communication design–designing effective communicative systems, a double translational step.* The communication campaign took tangible form during a workshop held at Politecnico, aimed at designing communication concepts and artefacts to highlight –in order to denounce, counteract, raise awareness, and prevent– the problem of male verbal violence against the female gender within our universities. At this stage, the tools and methods of the communication design discipline and the designers' knowledge and skills related to inter-semiotic translation processes were at the core.

The working group responsible for this phase –communication design– first carried out a translation of evidence and experiences that emerged from the previous research phase to formulate project briefs to guide the students in designing the campaign, taking into account the heterogeneity of the narratives. As concerns the choices related to the structure and properties of the communication medium, it was decided to privilege the poster medium developed in two formats, static (printed posters) and kinetic, to optimise the physical spaces of the university on the one hand and on the other hand the institutional social media channels of the universities, to facilitate its dissemination and reach a more comprehensive number of users. In preparation for the workshop, the outcomes of the focus groups, in addition to the project briefs, constituted an essential database to trigger hints for reflection. The complete focus group report, the result of the research phase, was delivered to the class a few days before the workshop began and allowed them to approach and immerse themselves in the theme, beginning to reflect on the interpretative keys and develop their conceptual thread from which to weave the message.

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In this sense, the recurrence of the stories –reported by the students– was particularly relevant, stories from which emerged, for instance, 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. Equally remarkable, so much so that they were brought to the Centre of the project action, were the testimonies of ostracism towards those students who did not meet alleged aesthetic standards, manifested blatantly through verbal insults. Alternatively, again, among the stories that emerged, the ones in which the students struggle to understand and accept silence in response to repeated prompting or expressions of interest. The workshop experience thus takes on greater relevance in its double significance: 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 helpful moment to analyse and discuss the theme collectively.

The students (a group of third-year students from the Communication design degree course) worked for a week assuming the role of designer-translators and came up with verbal-visual concepts that stressed different aspects, accounting for the heterogeneity of the experiences witnessed and the forms of verbal violence narrated by the focus group participants. At the end of the workshop week, the results –eight systems of posters in their static and kinetic declinations –were firstly presented to the professors and to the sociologist's group who had dealt with the previous phase of research and secondly to the scientific commission made up of members belonging to the Inter-University Research Centre. The aim was to select the four campaigns assessed as most effective and suitable for the university context. The four selected campaigns were subject to further test and validation involving a third university contributing through neuromarketing tools and techniques.

– *The semiotic-interpretive contribution: The neuromarketing methods to verify the effectiveness of the campaigns.* The objective of the third project stage was to verify the effectiveness of the four previously selected communication campaigns, closing the design *iter.* To this aim, the disciplinary field of

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applied sociology in the advertising sector came into action with a *pre-test* –a specialist term referring to research conducted prior to the dissemination of the campaign– qualitative research, for which some techniques and tools of neuromarketing (or *sensory marketing*) based on the semiotic-interpretive approach were implemented. This is about to break down the bias inevitable in usual market research, according to which the subjects involved often produce responses in line with the ideal of the self and consequently is not necessarily sincere (Bucchetti et al., 2019; Morin, 2011).

Supported by neuromarketing laboratories at one of the universities involved, research was conducted to explore and verify the impact of design outputs. The testing activity was structured to respond to three objectives: the analysis of the emotional and cognitive impact of the posters on the visual and verbal stimuli of the four campaigns, to verify the effectiveness of the message as a whole; the analysis of the exploratory patterns and visual behaviour with the stimuli, to verify the correctness and effectiveness of the hierarchies between the elements and the structure of the visual composition; a comparative evaluation of the rational analysis between the shown campaigns, which gave an account of the motivation and opinions of the participants. The sample consisted of four male and four female students –once again in a university-for-university circle– who underwent various methods such as electroencephalographic analysis, analysis of physiological activation assessing the level of emotional activation, analysis using the eye tracker system to monitor visual attention and finally cognitive-rational analysis using questionnaires. Overall, none of the campaigns tested were found to be critical. The investigation using neuromarketing techniques allowed their effectiveness to be verified and documented. Although overall the feedback was positive, one of the four proposals emerged as the 'loser' because it was less easy to codify and understand. The results of the test activity were shared and discussed with the scientific committee of the Interuniversity Research Centre. They were helpful in the selection phase of the campaign to be finalised and implemented.

– The launch of the campaign to mark 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. The campaign selected as the best in terms of effectiveness concerning the target audience and locations

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(the 6 universities belonging to the Centre) was finalised and produced by the design working group. It was launched on 25 November 2019, the 20th anniversary of the World Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. To mark the occasion, a meeting organised by the Research Centre and open to the academic community was held, during which the campaign was presented, and the students who designed it were symbolically awarded. The campaign was structured starting with posters located in the 6 universities and continued online both on the universities' institutional websites and on social channels in a pervasive manner, to reach a larger target audience.

6.3. Design solutions, communication strategies, languages. A look at campaigns designed by design students

If the shared cultural trend is to delegitimize a form of power and disrupt the basis of inequality between women and men, it is imperative to act communicatively to change the collective imagination, creating new representations and models of one's own and the others' gender (Bertolo, 2011).

As anticipated, the students who participated in the workshop had to deal with the anti-violence campaign project by implementing interpretive and translative steps from the project briefs. Each group was thus faced with certain constraints related to the type of violence (e.g., indirect verbal, direct verbal) and the context in which it is acted out (formal or informal, real or virtual). The testimonies and recurrences of incidents of verbal violence experienced or witnessed were relevant, so much so that in some cases, the testimony itself, reformulated, was placed at the centre of the project action, constituting the main poster's element.
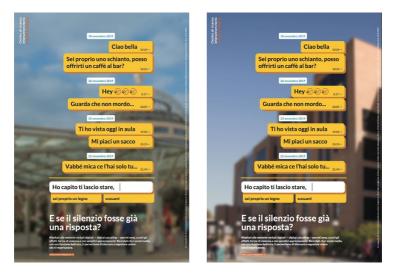
The process of the workshop, during which professors and experts on the subject were available to support students and engage with them, took into account some reflections, which are made on the most common forms of communication used to deal with the topic of violence, in particular the negative implications of what Semprini (2003, p. 257) calls the «reasonable distance» («la buona distanza»), that is, the tendency to adopt narrative strategies that make the object of discourse perceived as distant in space and time from the viewer. Indeed, messages that propose a simplified view of male violence against women risk conveying an unrealistic account of the

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phenomenon, which then becomes difficult to identify with everyday reality. Similarly, the choice to omit reference points that relate the incidents of violence recounted to the audience's daily life gives rise to a decontextualized narrative distant from the physical and cultural space experienced by the individual recipient, which risks not affecting or questioning him.

Students implemented different communication strategies, emphasizing a particular aspect. Among the proposals selected for the final testing phase, for example, the campaign proposal «Fuori Luogo» (Out of Place) translates the idea of inappropriate behaviour or language –precisely, out of place– being made to act provocatively directly to posters, according to guerrilla design principles, creating a disturbance within the environment (e.g., on a classroom door, blocking the entrance or on a blackboard). The poster, purely typographic, reads, «this poster is out of place», accompanied by text comparing it to specific out-of-place attitudes collected from testimonies.

On the other hand, the design proposal selected and subsequently implemented (Figure 1) focused on digital catcalling in student chats (verbal violence acted out in informal virtual contexts).

Figure 1. Some of the campaign posters, in which the background refers to the different universities involved

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The reference to the context is made immediately 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. It leaves 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 chat's background, there is a photographic image of the involved Athenaeum, which varies depending on where it is affixed. The images were graphically manipulated so the University would be recognizable without interfering and disturbing the message. Thus, the foreground conveys the chat's content, reformulated from the testimonies, and the background refers to the university context to contextualize the action.

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

7. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

Both gender studies and design are transdisciplinary disciplines by nature for different reasons and with different nuances. In addressing gender issues from a communication design perspective, a multi-disciplinary approach is therefore essential. In this sense, the case study presented provides a virtuous and practical example on multiple levels. It refers to how universities and disciplines can act collectively and synergistically towards a single-wide goal: the achievement of equality and the elimination of gender-based forms of discrimination.

The project can be seen as the first experimental case that enabled the Gender Culture Interuniversity Research Centre and the DCxCG group to test the effectiveness and potentialities of synergetic cooperation between different disciplines working in a complementary manner while respecting their boundaries. The value of the output lies in the compelling juxtaposition of the disciplines approached and involved. Much of the work also involves confrontation and mediation, finding the right balance in the

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dialogue between the research departments involved. In this, the joint work at the Research Centre was of considerable support. From a methodological point of view, the developed process, once systematised and translated into a model, could be applied in other contexts and on other topics that fall under the umbrella of gender issues, broadening to involve a more significant number of disciplinary areas.

One of the relevant aspects to which the project has brought attention is the virtuous circle of knowledge and awareness that the university can activate. The strategy implemented in this case involved the university on several intertwining levels: from the university, through the university, for the university. The actors engaged in the research and project were located at different levels of the academic pathway: Professors, researchers and students worked together and with different roles in the various stages of the project. With the design phase, for example, the design students not only advocated for change themselves through their communicative action but also deepened their reflection on male violence against women and gender issues in a broader sense. From an educational point of view, the designers also had the opportunity to experiment and reflect on the communication languages and strategies implemented by social campaigns. All the while, they develop critical thinking and learn how to circumvent commonplaces and clichés of the iconographic language that contribute to providing a distorted and superficial view of the phenomenon of gender-based violence. An experience that, on the whole, it is hoped might have a broader positive impact on their way of practising design, stimulating them to evaluate their own design choices so that their design outputs are socio-culturally sustainable, advocating towards a less androcentric worldview.

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