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Social Changes and Age Obsession: The Role of Communication Design

Western society nowadays faces a progressive ageing of its population; nevertheless, age and ageing, especially feminine, are still seen as discriminating factors. Besides, mediascape plays a crucial part in conveying stereotyped models that influence self-perception and the resulting personal and collective identity.

The research project investigates the impact that visual design has in conveying and confirming gender stereotypes; to do so, the concept of ageism was introduced as the main interpretation key. The objective of this research was to identify and to cluster the formats in which media transmit age concern, in order to display a cross section of society and its short circuit of sense.

The first step of the research was aimed at investigating how mediascape influences the perception of women in relation to ageing. The method employed for gathering and analysing data was built upon elements drawn from other disciplines, mainly Cultural Anthropology. Subsequently, field-based data gathering was developed, taking into account the wide variety of communicative artefacts of everyday usage, from product packages to tv shows, magazines, posters, etc.

Data collection took a range of one month, in spring 2016, after having defined a circumscribed area. The images collected during that period were then organized in analysis sheets.

The observation leads to single out five significant areas of criticality which were synthesized in five short videos aimed at visually summarising the findings and at supporting awareness activities in the educational sphere.

In a second experimental phase, the videos were used as supporting tools to sensitise future designers.

Results from data analysis displayed a complicated situation in which elements such as anti-age treatments, plastic surgery, etc., together with limiting factors that are implicit in communication, influence the perception of non-young women in a negative way.

Besides, a series of communicative artefacts in opposition to the dominant models emerged from the observation, which provided a starting point to investigate the debate about ageing pursued by the media and the forms of communication that are used to dispute this phenomenon. The results show a gradually more marked tendency in taking an interest in this primary theme, especially for marketing purposes.

These cases show remarkable contradictions regarding sense; nevertheless, they represent a small step forward that designers should consider. The need for educational activities, therefore, arises to train conscious and responsible communication designers.

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