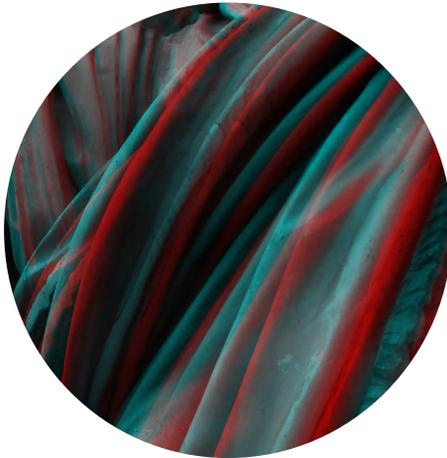


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Universal Visual Languages in a Male-oriented Society

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Abstract | Communication Design today plays a role of social and cultural responsibility. It represents, and at the same time shapes, the society, acting on both individual and collective biographies. An *inclusive* and *sustainable* Communication Design needs therefore to be able to take into account the multiplicity and diversity that characterize society, making itself an expression of pluralism and respect. The context in which we live and act is characterized by an enormous amount of media messages which still spread and feed, limiting and degrading gender stereotypes - both consciously or unconsciously.

The urgency to act towards a fair representation - free of negative gender stereotypes - is reiterated by the resolution of the European Parliament of 17th April 2018, which highlights the duty of the media *"to ensure [...] diversity of opinion and media pluralism, to promote respect for human dignity and to combat all forms of discriminations and inequality by, among other things, portraying diversified social role models [...]"* furthermore it *"stresses the role of the media as an agent of social change and its influence in the shaping of public opinion and calls on the Member States to promote content on gender equality in public media"*.

Starting from this context we intend to adopt the interdisciplinary point of view of Gender Studies, focusing on the consideration about the representation of the genders and the centrality of the white man, elevated to a "unique prototype of the human species" (Melandri, 2011). The contribution therefore means to focus on the gender asymmetries conveyed by schematic visual representations, specifically the pictographic language. The objective is to highlight how artifacts and communication systems, which are *universal* by definition and addressed to the whole community - therefore ideally representative of the multiplicity - are strongly asymmetrical and oriented to the male.

The subject of study are therefore the visual forms that are part of the pictographic language with an informative and prescriptive function, an area that has well-established origins in the history of communication design, starting from the studies of Neurath and Frutiger.

This kind of visual forms are characterized by a high degree of objectivity but at the same time they unconsciously translate models that include behaviours, duties, responsibilities and expectations linked to female and male identity, the subject of social expectations, which allows us to focus our attention around those gender roles to which women and men are encouraged to conform. The observation therefore concerns the forms of schematic representation which permeate everyday life. A both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the gender asymmetries (hierarchies, roles, contexts...) will allow to highlight through which modalities pictographic languages contribute to convey negative stereotypes towards women.

The proposed contribution is located in an area of communication design which is historically central but not widely investigated from the point of view of gender studies and which still results strongly unbalanced towards the male sphere. We therefore assume a gender-sensitive perspective to exercise an innovative point of view for the discipline of design (Decataldo & Ruspini, 2014), in accordance with a vision that enhances the multiplicity towards a fair and equal representation of genders in the media context.

KEYWORDS | PICTOGRAPHIC LANGUAGES, GENDER INEQUALITIES, IMPLIED STEREOTYPES, FAIR REPRESENTATION

1. Introduction

1.1 A polluted environment, the need of an *ecological* communication

Communication Design nowadays plays a role of undeniable socio-cultural responsibility. It has the task to "translate" (Baule & Caratti, 2017) the content into a visual form by making it accessible and it is therefore responsible for the resulting message and the effect it has on the community to which it is addressed. As Ezio Manzini states in *Designing as everyday life politics*:

“Design has always played a social and political role. Directly or indirectly and whether consciously or not, it has assumed all kinds of stances towards dominant social, cultural and economic systems: ranging from enthusiastic support to radical criticism and alternative propositions” (Manzini, 2016).

Design therefore acts on social reality, influencing opinions, expectations, attitudes and habits and it changes the perception that individuals have towards reality.

These premises highlight the urgency to outline a Communication Design which is *sustainable* from a socio-cultural and ethical point of view. The metaphor of the *environmental sustainability* can be traced back to a passage written by Bucchetti in 2019, in which he refers to the concept of “media landscape” and the pollution of the media landscape. We live in an environment overflowing with images and media messages. The quality of these messages — especially when reiterated — has important consequences on the construction of individual and collective biographies. It is also through Visual Cultures that harmful, *polluting* stereotypes are conveyed and amplified such as discriminations on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, age, etc.

That is why it is essential to rethink how communication could be defined *sustainable*. We need therefore a Communication Design: (I) able to take into account the complexity of reality and to face the multiplicity that characterizes the environment in which we live, act and relate, and therefore able to make responsible choices; (II) aware of its social responsibility and of the consequences that a stereotyped message can have on the group of individuals to whom it is addressed; (III) vehicle of values such as inclusiveness and equity rather than spreading disvalues that undermine, in more or less implicit ways, opinions and expectations towards certain social groups.

Our contribution is situated at the intersection between Visual Cultures and Gender Studies. The paper intends to provide a contribution from the Communication Design point of view, by assuming the perspective of Gender Cultures as analytical category. The use of gender as a descriptive axis allows us to carry on a wider reflection about the *implicit* stereotypes conveyed by the visual languages that every day characterize the environments in which we live and grow. We decided to focus the observation on the pictographic languages of everyday life, from wayfinding systems to instruction manuals. The pictographic languages represent an area of Communication Design — historically central — which is characterized

by a high degree of universality and perceived objectivity (Bucchetti & Casnati, 2020) but not immune to stereotypes. This represents an environment affected by forms of pollution that are less obvious than others — for example the advertising sector — but equally harmful. These forms of pollution act slowly and at an underlying level, which end up to be perceived as normal. Our aim is therefore to investigate whether and through which modalities and forms pictographic languages are actually representative of multiplicity or whether they — universal by definition — are influenced by a society still male-oriented and therefore subject to gender stereotypes.

1.2 Why Gender Studies – the urgency to reach gender equality

There are several reasons which led us to adopt the point of view of Gender Studies. The urgency to act towards the eradication of gender inequalities is, first of all, underlined by the institutions at international level. Starting by the Cedaw adopted by the United Nations in 1979, which represents "the most important international legally binding instrument on women's rights"; the World Congress Women's World; the Istanbul Convention of 2011, to protect women and fight against all forms of gender violence; up until the *ONU Agenda 2030*, which places gender equality at the top of the objectives to reach sustainable development: to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls [...], and all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere".

In this context the *Global Gender Gap Report* for 2020 highlights Italy's backwardness in achieving gender equality. The country occupies the 76th place out of 153 countries (six positions below compared to 2018). Measures were also taken within the field of media focusing on the forms of representation of women. One of the main examples is represented by the work of the Gender Equality Commission in relation to the issue *Media and the Image of Women* (Amsterdam 2013) and the resolution of the European Parliament of April 2018 (2017/2210 (INI)) on the impact of marketing and advertising on equality between women and men, which reaffirms the role of responsibility of marketing, advertising and media images and

“highlights the importance of promoting media literacy [...] so as to encourage young people to develop critical thinking skills and to help them identify and denounce sexist representations and discrimination [...]. Stresses the need for preventive measures [...]; points out that advertising can be an effective tool for questioning stereotypes”.

This contribution is part of a wider work carried out by the research group xxx. The group works on issues related to the representation of women in the media by experimenting new models and communication tools, focusing on the socio-cultural responsibility of the designer himself.

2. Communication Design, stereotype and social identity

Media images, by their own nature, communicate by models in order to be immediately recognizable and comprehensible to the social groups they are addressed and these *models* contribute to activate gender stereotypes which in turn are responsible for the definition of self-schemas. They affect both "cognitive resources" and "emotional reactions to sexist statements" (Camussi & Monacelli, 2010). Media communication draws from a collective cultural basin, using already established and consolidated models and returning them amplified. The designer himself is inevitably conditioned by his own socio-cultural background and, if he does not have the tools for a critical re-reading of his work, the project will result permeated by the dominant culture.

From this point of view social reality and media representation are part of a vicious circle in which the media take on the role of a "faithful and deforming" mirror of reality (Baule & Bucchetti, 2012). It could be defined as a feedback process that continuously pollute the *media landscape*. The designed images are in line with the sensitivity of the moment but, at the same time, have the power to shape it. The repetition of a stereotype leads to its rooting and its transformation into prejudice, ending up by determining expectations towards specific groups of individuals and consequently shaping social identity. This mechanism is most evident in contexts such as advertising and marketing, as highlighted by Clarke and Griffin (2007):

“[...] the cultural message about how women should look and act is endlessly disseminated on covers of women’s magazines sold at supermarket check-out counters, in the news media, on TV, in films and in advertising, all of which endorse a value system that preaches bodily perfection”.

The issue we wish to address concerns the role played by designed communication products — which are employed in society to circulate information, data, goods, services, etc. — in contributing to the development or maintenance of gender inequalities. We therefore wish to focus on iconic and pictographic representation which respond to prescriptive, orientation, guidance functions and which are by nature designed on the basis of normative principles. All those cases where the message of communication is perceived as universal and objective.

3. Universal visual languages

Starting from a consideration expressed by Bucchetti,

“Each “visual configuration” is a text: the place where its signification materialises and manifests itself; that place, in other words, where two levels may be recognised and distinguished, belonging to each language, to each sign system: the level of the signifier and the level of the signified; the level of expression and the level of content”.

Cecilia Robustelli refers to verbal language as it enables us to codify thoughts and express opinions and expectations. The same principle can be applied to visual languages. The content and the coding of the message itself provide information about the idea of gender owned by the speaker – or in our case by the designer – and may cause discrimination.

“A language which is respectful of gender differences constructs the message to avoid its reading in terms of subordination or discrimination, through the adoption of precise semantic or grammatical strategies, the former relating to the content and the latter to the use of the methods provided by the language system for recognising and specifying the existence of different genders” (Robustelli, 2015, author’s translation).

How do visual languages, which are defined *universal*, behave? Is it possible to apply the notion of *universal masculine* even to pictographic languages? If we consider language as the expression of a culture and interpretation of one’s own thoughts and opinions, how does the designer act in relation to multiplicity?

The reasons which led us to identify the pictographic languages as research field are briefly listed below (Bucchetti & Casnati, 2020).

1. They are simplified representations of reality. They make it possible to relate to the surrounding world through the adoption of *meaningful* practices and behaviours;
2. they are signs that should — by their own nature — be accessible and immediately clear to the entire population. The effectiveness of the sign is greater if it does not require the acquisition of new decoding rules. Interpretative rules should ideally be embedded in the socio-cultural basin of the target population;
3. they have a normative dimension, they have the task of transferring rules, indications and prescriptions;
4. they are addressed to a wide range of recipients, to the community as a whole, so they have a recognized universal value;
5. they are perceived and recognized as objective messages.

Starting from these assumptions, a first phenomenological research with a preliminary value was carried out, aimed at defining the study area. This represented a first on-field research which allowed us to identify and collect those pictographic signs which are peculiar to public and private environments that we are used to frequent and that characterize our routines. From public signposting to other wayfinding systems, pictograms on product packaging or instruction leaflets, focusing on icons depicting people. This first exploration allowed to isolate and identify issues that may give rise to specific in-depth analysis, aimed at extending the iconographic material basin and verify whether certain aspects, found in individual cases, are recurrent or not.

4. Gender discrimination conveyed by pictographic languages, three main areas

The observation highlighted how the pictographic representations of the male and female figure “give rise to denotative signs that refer, depending on the circumstances, to distinct classes which are not necessarily coherent with their own denoted, according to a vision closely related to male domination”.

“The strength of the male order is measured by the fact that it does not have to justify itself: the anthropocentric vision imposes itself as neutral and does not need to be enunciated together in speeches aimed at justifying it. The social order functions as an endless symbolic machine tending to confirm the masculine domination on which it is based” (Bourdieu, 1998).

Abdullah and Hubner (2006) underline the role of pictograms and the consequent need to be as independent as possible from culture:

“Pictograms are used to warn, guide or protect and need to be immediately decipherable. They must get right to the heart of the matter by visually conveying a vital piece of information in such a way that it cannot be misunderstood, and they should therefore be internationally recognizable and independent of culture”.

What emerged, on the opposite hand, highlights the tendency of communicative projects to inevitably reflect the culture and thought of the designer — who grows and forms within a certain social group and with a certain culture. As the verbal language, the visual configurations examined in the study reflect a historically located social situation, inevitably leading to judgements that “diminish, reduce and, ultimately, penalize the positions that the woman has come to occupy today” (Sabatini, 1993).

Therefore, three main areas that represent different ways in which gender stereotypes occur have been identified. Areas that, once delimited, can become the object of future in-depth studies or a starting point for the designer to reflect on.

4.1 *Man-as-default*

The public sphere was the starting point from which the observation originated. Signposting characterizes all public spaces and generally represents codes that are supposed to be assimilated by the community.

They are *neutral* and *universal* systems by definition, from which, however, inconsistencies that lead to a strong orientation towards masculinity emerge. Specifically, implicit elements have been identified which reflect and justify a clear condition of gender inequality, which has not been resolved yet. The predominance of the masculine is clear and seems to coincide with the representation of the neutral, i.e. used when the message is addressed to the whole community. The issue is emphasized by a low presence of female figures which, as

we are going to see later on, seem to be mainly related to the mother/family dimension or, more generally, to care roles.



Figure 1. Examples from the Italian public signage system

The definition of *neutral masculine*, drawing, once again, from the field of linguistics, indicates “uses of language that do not correspond to those of grammar but which attempt to justify themselves based on a misunderstood interpretation of sexual plurality. Everyday language and the press reinforce the use of the masculine plural grammatical gender in its extensive and inclusive interpretation, in other words, to indicate male and female referents” (Robustelli, 2015, author’s translation). The same happens when addressing the plurality of citizens through the use of icons. Figures with masculine traits are used when the message is addressed to both men and women, while for specific cases, i.e. when addressing circumscribed groups, the figures may assume feminine traits, for example if in relation to a child, therefore in the role of mother. The “non-marked male” is therefore identified with the bivalent function of the male gender, which refers both to the male sex and to both genders. We can also talk about *fake neutrality* of the masculine when one “claims that what is only of man is universal” (Sabatini, 1993). The *Man-as-Default* (Kotthoff & Wodak, 1997) seems so obvious to us that it ends to be considered *natural*, both the motivations and the processes are taken for granted (Ghisleni, 2004).

4.2 Hierarchies

In the previous section the notion of the *neutral masculine* was introduced. If, however, we consider the numerically inferior cases in which female and male figures are co-represented, our attention is immediately drawn to hierarchical relationships and to those parameters that lead the beneficiary of the message to perceive a subordinate relationship of women to men.

Dimensional relationship - In case of co-representation, the female figure appears smaller in size than the male figure. Among the examples collected, is particularly interesting the danger sign “crossing children” (Fig. 2), in which the female child is clearly smaller than the

male child. The difference is emphasized by details that characterize different age groups (the bag for the male and the lunchbox). Size, posture and connotative elements also subtend the role of the man as *guide* or *protector* of the woman, referring to the universe of gender roles.



Figure 2. Children crossing sign, Italian public signage system



Figure 3. Elderly people crossing sign, United Kingdom

Topological space - The spatial correlation between the female and male figures. In the representation of two or more subjects of different sexes, the female figure is perceived "behind" the male one. The perception of the position can be suggested, as in the case mentioned above, by the orientation of the two figures. The two kids (Fig. 2) are represented while running and their orientation defines who is in front, leading and assuming a role of responsibility and power and who needs to be led (the female kid). The same happens in the case of the "lift" pictogram which is part of the Italian public signage system. In this case the woman icon is placed in the middle (Fig. 4), between two male figures, to reiterate the need for protection.

Another modality of representation is well exemplified by the pictograms indicating "groups" and "groups with baggage" (designed for Zurich airport's wayfinding system) (Fig. 5), which place the woman icon in the background over the male figure thanks to an overlapping composition in which the male pictogram is read perceptively over the female pictogram.



Figure 4. Lift sign, Italian public signage system

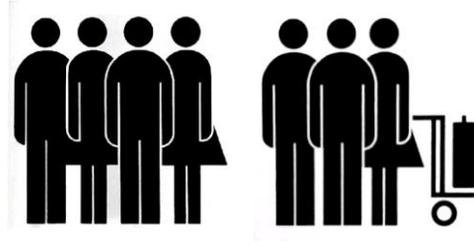


Figure 5. Groups and Groups with luggage signs, Zurich airport, Swiss

Quantitative Relationship (in representation of groups) - It concerns the numerical relationship between female and male figures. When multiple subjects are represented, as in the examples mentioned above, an unjustified numerical prevalence of the male figure emerges.

Type of Action Performed - The action that is represented and attributed to a male rather than a female figure implies another fundamental issue concerning gender roles, which is specifically dealt with in the next paragraph.

4.3 Gender roles

The third defined area concerns the roles attributed to the woman when the communication is specifically addressed to her. This area is more generally part of the issues concerning the fixed roles attributed to women in the media.

Female roles

“Women have long been the symbol of men's desire and fantasies, essentially bodies with no other history than the one defined by male interest, by the criteria of value/disvalue in practice in the patriarchal symbolic order that absorbed the feminine into the masculine and gave as the only possibility of existence subalternity or parity” (Pallotta, 2012).

The issue brings with it wide-ranging problem areas such as work-life balance, the issue of glass-ceiling, inequalities in work, etc. The observation highlighted the fact that, even in the case of pictographic languages, there is a fixity of roles. The woman is mainly attributed the roles of mother, caregiver, housewife. By way of example, it is useful to mention the pictogram placed on the shopping cart of an important distribution chain, which represents a female figure (Fig. 6) in the act of pushing a shopping cart inside which a child sits. The supermarket in this case is Esselunga, whose wayfinding system uses a visual language very similar to that of public signage, in which the *male-as-default* prevails. The designer's "need"

to decline the icon to the feminine emerges from the relationship between a child and the act of shopping.



Figure 6. Accompanying children on escalators, Esselunga supermarket, Italy



Figure 7. Pedestrian area sign, Sweden public signage system



Figure 8. Safety signs on escalators, Italian public signage system

The icon of the mother occurs in other cases of co-presence with pictograms representing children, an example is given by the signage in stations, airports or shopping malls near escalators. The sign usually carries a series of warning or danger messages. In all messages the subjects are declined to men, even if in groups or couples, except for the signal indicating that children must be accompanied by an adult person, relegating once again the woman to the maternal and care dimension (Fig. 8). The same happens in some road signs placed near pedestrian areas (Fig. 7). On the sign, part of the public system, we can see the pictograms of a walking man, the icon "crossing children", with all the considerations previously stated, and a third icon representing a female figure in the act of pushing a baby carriage.

Furthermore, the representation on the packaging of household products — detergents, cleaners, etc. — denotes deep-rooted gender stereotypes. Only female figures alone or accompanied by children are represented on this type of products. Even when warnings for use or dangers are given, the figures are marked feminine. An emblematic example is the icon that most laundry detergent packages display to encourage correct behaviours. The message is "keep out of the reach of children". To transmit this information, a little girl is depicted stretching to pick up the product placed on a shelf above her. The action performed by the child confirms that the product is aimed at a female audience (the symbol

is similar if not identical on other products of different brands) and implies the role that she will play as she grows up. The girl is represented with a dress, ponytails and a doll in her hand, a key reference that symbolizes the learning of the roles of care we have seen to be of female domination.

Male roles

If the woman is attributed roles that relegate her to the domestic sphere, the male figure is attributed active roles, which refer to positive values. From a first observation on the same product category mentioned above — household detergents — only one case was found depicting the male figure. It is a stain remover that shows some male silhouettes on the packaging. While the woman is represented doing the laundry or, in some cases, as a simple silhouette, to highlight the target audience, the man is represented as a sportsman. The product is called *sportswear*, *penetrating anti-odour*, *specific sanitiser for technical garments* and the three silhouettes represent a skier, a cyclist and a runner during their respective sporting activity (Fig. 9).

Still in the field of technical/sporting products, if we observe the forms of pictographic representation that have a prescriptive function and guide to the "correct doing", which are developed in sectors such as clothing and technical/sporting equipment, we can see that they are addressed to a male audience even when the product is not differentiated according to sex. An example is given by the sport climbing equipment (harnesses, safety devices, etc.), unisex products whose images of instructions (on tags, pendants, websites, etc...) present mainly male figures. The female figure is represented when, talking about safety devices, the practice of *couple control* is described and her role is passive (Fig. 10).



Figure 9. Sportswear package detail

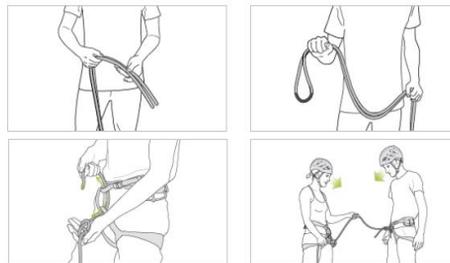


Figure 10. From Petzl instructions, climbing devices

The assignment of active or passive roles on the basis of gender is recurrent in other areas such as the emergency instructions. In three of the collected cases — referring to material distributed by airlines — the actions to be carried out in emergency conditions, in which some passengers have to take an active and collaborative role, are explained through a sequence of images. In the first one the company is Ryanair, the man has an active role (he wears a mask and life jacket, he takes care of the emergency exit) while the female figure is represented in the passive act of descending the emergency slide. Another case that deserves our attention is the one from Lufthansa, in which the subject is a female stewardess — represented in the action of taking care of a young boy by making him wear a mask and life jacket — but still, the “strength” operation — to turn the lever to open the hatch — is done by a man. The female image returns in the storytelling to show that kids and children should be picked up on the emergency slide, so once again in relation to the caring activity. In the last case (SAS) the man once again takes care of the opening of the door, assuming the role of hero and guarantor, while the woman is represented exclusively to focus the attention on the obligation to remove heels before using the inflatable slide, referring to a dimension of frivolousness.

5. Towards a sustainable Communication Design

The three identified areas highlight the persistence of gender stereotypes in areas of communication that have a recognized value of universality and neutrality. These are stereotypical forms less evident than others but which characterize everyday life by polluting it. Any kind of recurring image, despite not paying particular attention to it, ends up appearing so obvious to us that it is considered "natural", even by the designer himself. Referring back to a Ghisleni's passage in *Sociologia della quotidianità* (2004), everyday reality and the images that are part of it are expressions of "practices of reciprocity which, being mostly unconsciously assumed, tend to make everyday life a world taken for granted"

We deem that the work carried out so far may constitute a further piece within the perimeter of Communication Design for gender cultures, but we also believe that it may represent a model for a wider reflection in the direction of a communication design suitable to deal with contemporary issues (*Agenda ONU 2030 for Sustainable Development*). This kind of design should be: (I) inclusive; (II) fair to the social groups it addresses and to all individuals; (III) representative of multiplicity; (IV) promoter of values rather than a vehicle of disvalues. “Social design is the practice of design where the primary motivation is to promote positive social change within society” (Resnick, 2019).

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