

The Pussyhat Project: How Designer Respond to the Current State of the World in a Responsible Way.

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Abstract: In the digital age, the internet has become a powerful catalyst for raising awareness about pressing social issues, sparking grassroots movements for positive change. This phenomenon has seamlessly intertwined with the realm of design, which is now intricately linked with these revolutionary social initiatives. The pervasive influence of visual symbols, amplified by the internet, has led both governments and the general populace to recognize their potential as potent tools for future public endeavors. This paper meticulously explores the intricate tapestry of gender inequality within women's communities, delving deep into the symbiotic relationship between visual designs, social media communities, and political engagement. Conventional modes of activism have lost their resonance in the contemporary landscape; instead, designers have emerged as pivotal agents of change, redefining existing systems and inspiring future civic participation. By examining a craftivism case study, this paper illuminates visual design symbols as innovative educational tools in the age of connectivity, especially concerning gender education. It not only offers profound insights into the intricacies of designing spaces that facilitate active engagement in cyberspace but also presents a visionary designer manifesto. This manifesto serves as a profound reflection on the contemporary world while outlining the future of design practice, transforming designers into proactive activists and educators. Within these thought-provoking discussions, this paper underscores the transformative potential inherent in active engagement. It underscores the crucial role of designers in shaping a more equitable society and leaves an indelible impression, highlighting the profound impact of design in fostering civic participation and paving the way for a inclusive future.

Keywords: Design Activism, Active Engagement, Gender Education, Social Media, Pussyhat Project.

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, people have faced multiple misfortunes in a dynamic and complex world. The internet has provided a global perspective, which allows people to become more empathetic and aware of social issues like sexism. Citizens are eager to promote social changes for the suffering women through grassroots activism. However, the forcible activism of protesting and resisting in the past can not draw our new generation of activists. They are looking for a more positive and powerful method to interact with political issues. According to Ann Thorpe, "as generative activists, designers have a hugely important role to play in transforming our current systems into those that would support a sustainable world" (Thorpe, 2020). Rather than being resistant, designers engage people in activism with appealing visuals and influence people's attitudes toward sexism in innovative practices. This essay will discuss a leading example of design activism for sexism as well as explain how the organizers use knits to interact with people and create impacts on society in this digital age. Secondly, it will show my design manifesto as my thinking about the contemporary world, and the declaration of my future design practice.

2. The Pussyhat Project

2.1. Design Activism as Catalyst to engage the Political Participation

The Pussyhat Project is a prominent example of craftivism in the current political landscape. Craftivism is a portmanteau referring to the merging of craft and activism. For decades, most citizens engaged with political issues through activism. They took protests on the streets to ask for social and political advancements in our society (DESIGN ACTIVISM, 2020).

Whereas, with the society growing, traditional activism was argued as normalized and powerless. The public was tired of the institutionalized activism, which resulted in an interest-based form (Sandra, 2019). Accordingly, to interact with the activists, founders have to consider cooperating creative practices in political activism. The Pussyhat Project is a successful example of using crafts as a vehicle for activism. Figure 1 is the manifesto of the Pussyhat Project, which encapsulates the mission of knitting Pussyhats and protesting for women's rights. In this way, the project organizers, Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman recognized traditional women crafts as a tool to empower individuals to join in the Women's March. As Krista explains, some people think that they do not belong in activist circles because they do not have a public policy degree (McGough, 2017). Nevertheless, the Pussyhat project started in a crafting community, so anyone who loves knitting and stands up for women can be a political activist. For instance, a 70-year old woman who participated in the Pussyhat Project said, I have never been political before, but now I knitted these hats to support women in the protest (McGough, 2017). By January 19th, more than a hundred thousand hats had been crafted, and 4 million people took part in the Women's March around the world (Walker, 2017). The Pussyhat Project illustrates how crafts as a gateway to civic participation. As a result, it has also laid the role of design as a catalyst in future political participation.

3. The Innovative Method of Implementing Gender Education in Public

3.1. Promoting Wide Dissemination of Gender Inequality Problem through the Social Media

The success of the Pussyhat Project is attributed to its appreciable online organizing, including online advertising and an online community. According to Ann Rees, “At times protesting, researching, and connecting can feel defeating” (Rees, 2013). Nevertheless, the advancement of the internet has changed the way people communicate. In this case, the Pussycat Project saw the online community as a platform to provide particle and socio-emotional support. More specifically, Ravelry is a free online community for knitters, where users can learn weaving skills and associate with other craftsmen. In November 2016, the knitting designer Kat Coyle published the first Pussyhat pattern (see Figure.6) and the information of the project on the Ravelry to encourage people to join in feminist activism (Biron, 2017). Subsequently, the universal activists can learn how to knit the hat by clicking on the teaching documents on the right. Moreover, Ravelry allows people to ask for help and discuss knitting or politics on the discussion board (see Figure.7). Learning and sharing interests on the Ravelry has enabled people to make bonds with other individuals, and it also helped to generate worldwide support for Pussyhat Project. Additionally, the smart marketing strategy of social media plays a huge role in this project. As Zweiman said, we launched our manifesto and project information via Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook on the night before Thanksgiving. Since the words would spread rapidly while people were together with families and friends (Klich, 2017). As a consequence, only three days after the post, there were more than 6000 Instagram posts tagged with #pussyhat (Biron, 2017). This phenomenon has demonstrated the power of social media in grassroots social movements. It also asks designers to think about how social media can engage with the target audiences in the digital age.

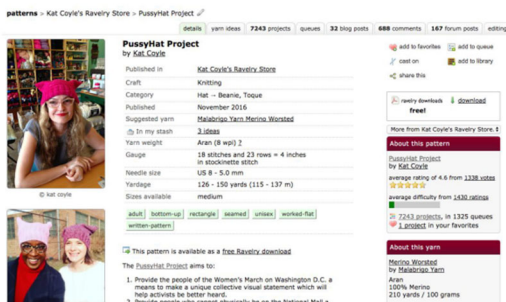


Figure 6. The Pussyhat in the British Museum

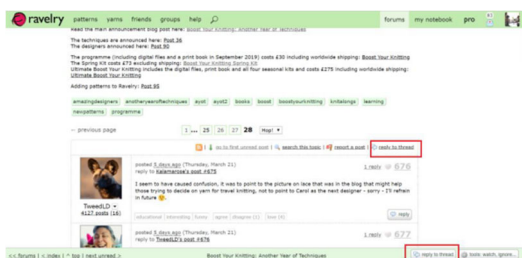


Figure 7. The Discussion Board on Ravelry

3.2. Initiate Positive Social Change by Utilizing the Visual Language

Since the pink pussy sign spread, women are enabled to live in a safer environment, especially in a protected working relationship. Before 2017, Federal sexual harassment law and most state laws did not ensure independent workers. As Alexia Fernández Campbell reported in 2016, millions of American women are self-employed. They have no place to turn if they are harassed at work since they have little legal recourse. (Campbell, 2016) However, a visual icon derived from the Women’s March became a symbol of support for women. According to Peeter Selg, in semiotics, an iconic visual or slogan can communicate specific meaning and enable positive changes (Selg & Ventsel, 2019). Figure 8 depicts an abstract pink pussy sign, which is reminiscent of the Women’s March in Washington. The icon echoes the mission of helping every woman in need. For example, an interviewee told Julia Brucculieri that, I saw a Hispanic woman tell her girl, “If you got harassment at work, go to one of the ladies in the pink hats. They’ll help you”(Brucculieri, 2019). Besides, the exposure of the pussy icon in other industries grabbed people’s attention after the protest. As you can see the cover design of The New Yorker magazine in February 2017 (see Figure.9). The New Yorker referenced the pussy icon to encourage their female readers against inequality. Fashion designer Angela Missoni also asked all the models to wear Pussyhats in her Milan fashion show (see Figure.10). The icon became a trend. People talked and shared pictures about this abstract pussy icon on the internet. Until 2019, there were still more than 1000 posts associated with Pussyhat on social media (Biron, 2017). Consequently, the governments started to take action. According to the Pew Research Center, seven countries including America enacted new laws against sexual harassment between 2017 and 2019 (Dalton et al., 2020). That is not the end, spreading this super symbol in our society will contribute to influencing people’s attitudes toward sexism and solving other women’s inequality problems.



Figure 8. The Visual Sign of the Women’s March on Instagram



Figure 9. The New Yorker Magazine Cover in February 2017



Figure 10. Angela Missoni's fashion Show in Milan Fashion Week

4. Design Manifesto

I do like the idea of the design manifesto. Asking myself questions about what is a good designer allowed me to figure out what are my strengths and values. I wrote down these answers in order as a compass for my future design life. It would help me to keep a rational mind and make judgments when I get into the design industry after two years. Finally, the manifesto was created into a poster (see Figure 12), so I can hang it up on my wall and look at it every morning to remind myself of the responsibility of an ethical designer.

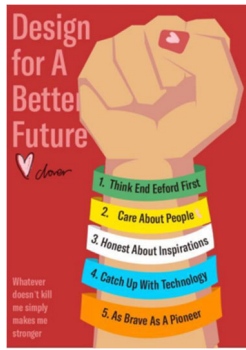


Figure 11. My Design Manifesto

4.1. Think End Before Start

Before designing everything, we should always think about its results. And how the results would affect our environment and society. At present, although 80% of the design could be recycled, chemicals emitted during the recycling process would cause secondary pollution. Whereas, in the book "Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things" William McDonough (1951) states that everything is a resource for something else (McDonough & Braungart, 2002). That is to say, we must consider how the end of our design can promote food for another. For example, choosing biodegradable materials so the design can serve as soil fertilizers.

4.2. Think End Before Start

A good designer should not only work for money. We should be sympathetic and give people voices in our visual languages. In my last design practice, I collaborated with a mental health organization that is working on social phobia. People with a social phobia usually feel anxious and nervous when they meet strangers. Thus, in the poster (see Figure.12), I used negative space to metaphor a worrying people in the shadow. In this way, I want to represent the loneliness of social phobic people and persuade others to offer them help and understanding. Although it is a non-profit project, I am so proud of myself when the poster helps to improve others' lives. And since then, helping people in need become my design motivation.



Figure 12. The Poster for Mental Health Organization

4.3. Honest About Inspiration

We must put clear credit on the original ideas that we get from others. The internet allows designers to share their works on design websites like Behance and Pinterest. However, when we easily get access to abundant designs, it is common for us to borrow ideas or directly grab others' work without any reference. Although we may not get any punishment, the behaviors of intellectual property plagiarism are against integrity. As my father taught, Integrity should always be a priority whatever we do. Accordingly, we need to reference every inspiration in our design process.

4.4. Catch Up with Technologies

Designers need to keep up with technological advances. It is almost a cliché to say that we are in an age of unprecedented technological change. However, it is not only about learning new skills. Knowing how to attract the target audience who using the technologies is more important. As I discussed above, the organizers of pussy hat project used social media and the online community to associate with their audience. The internet and social media provide an effective platform that allows people across the globe to see the design and share it with others. Accordingly, we should be responsible and care about the effects after we post our work on social media because the internet will massively affect our audience.

4.5. As Brave As A Pioneer

As a design student, I have been struggling with whether I should compromise with teachers for a higher mark until I saw the graphic designer David Carson (1955). Carson is best known for his experimental grunge style. As you can see the cover design of his magazine RAY GUN (see Figure.13). He seems to rebel against every principle of graphic design in this work by using blurry typeface and disordered layout. This work was regarded as ugly at first. Whereas, the extremely experimental work has changed people's conventional perceptions of graphic design (Stinson, 2021). The design has the ability to promote changes. That is to say, we should be bold to face disputes and make a breakthrough in our design.



Figure 13. The Poster for Mental Health Organization

5. Conclusion

At a broader level, this essay has examined how design can collaborate with activism and contribute to the political changes in the current state. By analyzing the pussy hat project, this paper confirmed that crafts have the ability to engage the new generation of activists in the political movement. Also, it is more effective to communicate in the online design community. In addition, applying semiotics in activism has allowed organizers to change people's attitudes to the unfair treatment of women. Overall, these findings highlighted the significant role of design in catalyzing contemporary political and social changes. In the future, it is conceivable that more and more people will pay attention to social problems and ask for positive changes in society. That requires designers to think about how to use visual languages to promote positive behavioral changes in this digital-driven world.

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