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**Women's Internet Portals:  
Negotiating Online Design Environments  
within Existing Gender Structures  
in Order to Engage the Female User**

.....  
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**2005**

**PhD in Design Studies**

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.....  
**Abstract**

This thesis encapsulates my investigation of women's commercial Internet portals as examples of design practice targeting female users. I present a case study of BEME.com, an Internet portal created as a direct development of the traditional women's magazine publishing industry in response to a boom in dot.com industries at the end of the 1990s. I explore the design environment responsible for the interpretations of the aims of the publishing house into material outcomes and analyse the ability of design practice to develop strategies to counter gender representations within the women's magazine publishing industry. It is my argument that there is a need for Internet designers to be aware of how gender is represented and furthermore be conscious of their ability and responsibility to apply this awareness to design practice. Most importantly, the notion of 'many truths' rather than one 'design practitioners' truth', introduces the possibility of alternative epistemologies. This is crucial to the question of how design practice as a tool of creative production can embody alternative meanings through recognition of existing gender structures. Furthermore, locating the BEME.com case study within feminist postmodernism incites a new way of understanding the problematic relationship between design practice and theory, the Internet and female users. Therefore, I assert the potential of online portal design to offer alternative ways of communicating to female users in such a way as to resist and combat the gendered status quo. The new knowledge obtained from this research provides important insight into the ways design practice attempts to reconcile a critical agenda with gender structures. It also illuminates female users' tendency to disassociate with identities constructed in gendered niche marketing. It is clear from my research that current commercial imperatives are deeply implicated in gendered structures. Therefore, three key indications for better design for a female niche market emerge from the BEME.com case study. They are (a) centre all aspects of the design process on the actual end-user; (b) consciously recognise the folly of using gender alone as an appropriate description of female audiences; (c) be aware of social, cultural and political factors that exert influence over the design process. Finally the obtained knowledge offers insight into the general lack of interest on the part of designers working within industry that trades heavily in gender stereotypes, to problematise this process and their role within it. Rather, as feminist critiques of design practice reveal, design practitioners maintain gender values by constructing consumer profiles by means of gendered assumptions.

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# **Chapter 1**

Introduction



## Chapter 1: Introduction

Following initial proliferation and commercialisation of the Internet, the harsh reality of its temporary commercial decline and renewed interest in the development of new forms of access, a need to conduct rigorous research into its effects has become crucial. Recent developments such as the availability of 'always on' connections via broadband, enhanced access, reduced cost and an ever growing population of users has implications for the nature of their access to and reception of the Internet. These new forms of access have revitalised focus on the Internet after the scare of economic collapse in 2001. In this thesis, I present my investigation of women's commercial Internet portals as examples of design practice targeting female users.

Access via rapid broadband connections mimics more closely the relationship women have with hard copy magazines. Indeed the introduction of broadband could potentially reshape the role this technology plays in the daily lives of female users, particularly when considering their ever increasing career and domestic commitments. Given the long standing practice of women's print media which, I would argue, trades in stereotypical and normative representations of feminine identity, the question of how gender representation within Internet design relates to this wider circulation, is one to which this thesis responds. It is my argument that there is a need for Internet designers to be aware of how gender is represented and furthermore be conscious of their ability and responsibility to apply this awareness to design practice. I present a case study of BEME.com, an Internet portal created as a direct development of the traditional women's magazine publishing industry in response to a boom in dot.com industries at the end of the 1990s. I explore the design environment responsible for the interpretations of the aims of the publishing house into material outcomes and analyse the ability of design practice to develop strategies to counter gender representations within the women's magazine publishing industry.

Early studies of women's Internet use focused primarily on raising awareness of a significant disparity between male users and female users online (Harcourt 1999). However, as Martinson and Schwartz (2002) point out, '[w]hile current numerical parity on the internet is one measure of progress, issues of gender equality are more complex than simple counts of who is logging on to the internet' (p. 31). Recently, scholars such as Rommes (2002) and Spilker (2000) have



investigated various ways in which the Internet could become more inclusive of female users and initiatives such as *Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society* (2000-3) have sought to address the complexity of women's participation in the Internet (Faulkner, Sørensen et al. 2004). My research is positioned between the recognition of a need for strategies of online inclusion and the ability of Internet design practice to continually develop and innovate. I assert the potential of online portal design to offer alternative ways of communicating to female users in such a way as to resist and combat the gendered status quo. Thus, three main areas of practice are subjected to critique: (a) design practice, highlighting the gendered position of women as design theoreticians, practitioners and consumers; (b) the women's magazine online publishing industry in the UK, in particular the role of women's magazines in promoting and trading in normative representations of feminine identity; and (c) Internet technology as a communication medium offering new opportunities and ways of constructing meaning and representation. Contemporary design, Internet and feminist theory provide illuminative lenses through which to explore these issues.

Feminist critique of design practice has highlighted continuing problems women have as design practitioners and design consumers (Clegg and Mayfield 1999, Farrelly 1995, Sadowska 2002). In particular, the commercial context in which Internet design exists does not encourage questioning of how it may be involved in the perpetuation of existing gender structures. This is in spite of recognising the capacity of design practice to embody ideologies through their materialisation in consumable artefacts such as women's Internet portals. As Gauntlet (2002) states, '[b]y spreading a variety of non-traditional images and ideas about how people can appear and act, the mass media can serve a valuable role in shattering the unhelpful moulds of 'male' and 'female' roles which continue to apply constraints upon people's ability to be expressive and emotionally literate beings' (p. 151). Hence, this thesis argues that design processes can offer a path to 'betterment' through ongoing questioning, evaluation and reflection on design outcomes. However, notwithstanding that Internet technology and design offer new means of communicating with women, a feminist critique highlights that particularly within a commercial context there is an unwillingness within design practice to embrace



ideological change. Therefore, today's design practitioners need to recognise the significance of questioning women's participation in and consumption of, design practice. On the other hand, the Internet is an interactive technology and as such demands that the feminist critique of design practice is extended to respond to the implications this has for designers as much as for consumers.

My interest in design practice and the women's magazine publishing industry is of long standing. As a design practitioner I have dedicated much time to examining the ways in which women's magazines come together as design outcomes in paper and online format.

Significantly, I began to expand my view of women's magazines to conceive of them as more than merely design artefacts and rather as consumer products which are part of a social, cultural, political and economic milieu affecting women's identity constitution and production. Therefore, the importance of a feminist critique of the women's magazine publishing industry and design practice became of great concern, prompting this current investigation.

Furthermore, as a white middle class woman with a liberal university education, I have drawn on my involvement in design at the levels of practitioner, consumer and researcher as a source of interpretive insight whilst recognising the partiality of my own views as to the role design can play in everyday life. It is therefore a position from which I examine, reflexively, the role of design practice in perpetuating gender structures through its involvement in production of artefacts used on a daily basis.

I begin this investigation with a review of current literature theorising design as a practice, whilst highlighting the feminist critique of the discipline. I locate the women's magazine publishing industry within literature which documents both its origin, development and its relationship to theories on consumption and identity. A historical perspective is taken to locate and plot the gendering of the Internet followed by an examination of literature relating to the relationship between female users and Internet technologies. Chapter three outlines the methodologies used in this research. From within a feminist paradigm I discuss my decision to employ a constructivist grounded approach which draws on a variety of data sources including secondary

## Chapter 1: Introduction

documentation and qualitative interviewing. The women's portal publishing industry provides the focus for chapter four which looks at the history of women's online portals, surveys of online women's markets and events which have questioned women's representation on the Internet. Chapter five offers an insight into the deployment of commercial portals targeting specifically UK female audiences supported by an analysis of the visual language and its communication of gender. This is followed by chapter six, which presents an analysis of female user's expectations of the Internet, their attitudes towards and commentary on the visual outcomes of the Internet. This is supported by online professionals' observations as to how the Internet can be conceived as beneficial to female users. Chapter seven presents a case study of BEME.com, a women's online portal, giving a timeline of events, the design process involved in the portal development, intended experience of the portal and its visual outcome. The chapter also includes a critique voiced by online professionals concerning limitations of the Internet. Discourses shaping the design of the portal are also examined, locating the site within a wider social and cultural context. The final chapter draws the research together, presenting a review and discussion of research findings and their epistemological implications for design practice.

The thesis itself can bear witness to only a moment in Internet development which is dynamic and its artefacts at times ephemeral and fleeting. Nonetheless, as I set out to show, the design practice involved in the Internet and the social and cultural values pertaining to gender which manifest themselves in its outcomes have appeared neither in a cultural vacuum nor without links to a longer history in design practice. Equally, it is possible that while its effects are as yet not sufficiently understood, its prevalence and accessibility make the Internet a powerful vehicle of change both within design practice and in terms of gender structures more widely. It is in this context that I seek to contribute to the existing research by offering a feminist critique of Internet design epistemology, practice and consumption and argue that design practitioners have an opportunity and a responsibility to affect and *effect* changes to a gendered status quo.



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**Chapter 2**  
Literature Review

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

I begin my literature review with a discussion pertaining to five themes within the broad rubric of 'design'. I commence by way of introducing the reader to debates regarding the ways in which design is defined by its own practitioners and researchers. I draw on a variety of literature which looks at design practice and consumption to contextualise design processes and the culture of consumption currently prevailing. Furthermore, I outline the debates regarding how design knowledge is constituted and the relationship it bears to design practitioners. Building on this relationship, I discuss the issue of design and its responsibility(ies) in preparation for and in support of the focus of this research, namely designers' opportunity to affect and *effect* changes to a gendered status quo. In support of this argument I include a critique of design from a feminist perspective to draw attention to the positioning of women as possible design users, practitioners and theorists, thereby highlighting the need for change.

### Design Practice

The term 'design practice' encompasses design processes, practices, expertise, experiences and knowledge(s) associated with the design discipline. It can therefore apply to general, specific or abstract aspects of design. For example, in terms of online design practice, the term does not exclude design process, but rather specifies the context in which it is applied, becomes meaningful and should be understood. Krippendorff (1995) explains: '[t]he etymology of *design* goes back to the Latin *de* + *signare* and means making something, distinguishing it by a sign, giving it significance, designating its relation to other things, owners, users, or gods' (p. 156). Such reading of the term makes explicit the design practitioners' ability not only to create something new within pre-existing conditions, but also imbue it with meaning to be decoded and understood by others. As Krippendorff further suggests, this capacity to offer new solutions or be innovative is combined with the '... reproduction of historical continuities' (p. 156). Hence, design practice can be conceived as being located at a juncture where the creation of new solutions meets the need to maintain the existing status quo. Understanding what it takes to create a design outcome crucially requires acknowledgement of the boundaries and constraints within which design practice must operate. Whilst specific limitations vary based on the design



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

context and specific design problem, the influence of societal, cultural and/or political structures need to be considered.

### ***Design Practice and Consumption***

Many design scholars discuss and interpret design outcomes in terms of the various consumption patterns embodied and imbued with meaning through design. Here, the notion of consumption is understood in terms of use or utility. It is about an interaction, pleasurable or not, with an artefact. It may take into account time prior to the ownership of an artefact, for example the period of information gathering, searching, browsing, shopping, as well as its acquisition. It may involve human senses such as looking or touching, but it can also represent a time based experience. Hence, consuming can take place in variety of ways, locations and moments. As a phenomenon, consumption has been positioned by scholars either as a '... docile activity over which producing agents dominate (Frankfurt School)', as '... an emancipatory power or even an agent of resistance (de Certeau, Fiske)' or '... as an expression of its own postmodern logic (Baudrillard, Eco)' (in Julier 2000:64). Consumption has also been conceived as 'intrinsically a cultural process' (Julier 2000:48) in so far as '[c]onsumer culture includes the balance between a quest for achieving meaningful ways of life and the resources available to be able to do this. It is therefore about 'having' rather than 'being' (Julier 2000:48). It is about exercising personal choices in the process of acquiring goods that have been produced for an imagined consumer. Hence, the culture of consumption is often identified with personal freedom and individualism. Slater (1997) argues that consumption has frequently been characterised as a private act representing personal pleasure rather than public good. In commercial terms the culture of consumption is defined by constant expansion and renewal of demand: '[i]ndeed economic organisation is fuelled by an insatiable desire to produce more wealth, acquire power and thus more consumption' (Julier 2000:49). And in contemporary society consumption is viewed as a leading means by and with which individual identity is constructed. Finally, it incorporates '... virulent mechanisms for the production and representation of commodities as signs' (Julier 2000:49).



Julier (2000) argues that it is the goal of a design professional to mediate between a product, production and consumer in order to de-alienate commodities. Gardner (1989) believes that ‘... [t]he designer is out to achieve what Marx believed was ultimately impossible under capitalism, to bridge that yawning gap between private production and public consumption’ (p. 74). Julier (2000) suggests that design practice is implicated across the spectrum of consumption, active and passive, meaningful or meaningless; the key being an observation that design practice is involved in the ‘... refining and controlling the flows and patterns of meaning which pass from production to consumption (Julier 2000:64). This point is supported by Kazmierczak (2003), who proposes that outcomes of design ‘... are shortcuts through and to meaning’ (p. 52). She continues, saying that as such designs ‘... “show” what is meant, and thus benefit from the efficiency with which humans process visual information’ (p. 52). Her argument is based on the belief that design outcomes do not simply represent objects or services as they are. Rather Kazmierczak maintains, ‘[t]hey are schematics. Designers strategically bring into designs only those aspects of the object that are essential to the design objective’ (p. 52). She argues that as such design outcomes offer a ‘... selection of sensory cues necessary for the immediate grasping of an adequate interpretation’ (p. 52). They become interfaces that mediate between the intentions of the designers and the audience. Therefore, it is the role of the designer to trigger an ‘appropriate contextual frame’ (Kazmierczak, 2003:54) for the audience to receive the meaning and engage in its consumption. As Julier (2000) observes, ‘... design historians have moved entirely away from a design and production approach towards foregrounding the role of the consumer in the biography of objects. Their interest has been in the taste, social customs and the role of the objects and spaces in the forging of human relationships and self-identity’ (p. 47). That design practitioners’ account of society, its wants and needs, might not be the only credible or appealing version, was a realisation that triggered greater interest in the consumer: ‘[t]hus they impart a recognition that no matter how much the designer tries, he or she cannot fully control the process by which the public read, interpret or even straightforwardly use the objects, images and spaces they shape’ (Julier 2000:47). Furthermore, Forty (1986) argues that design practice is implicated in a paradox whereby design practitioners are both in charge of what they do and yet they can be un-witting agents of ideology representing the bigger



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

system. '... both conditions invariably co-exist, however uncomfortably, in the work of design' (Forty 1986:242).

### ***Design Knowledge and Design Practitioners***

'Designer', 'design practitioner' and 'design professional' are terms used to define a particular group of people who actively engage with design practice. Used interchangeably in this thesis for ease of reading, the terms refer to individuals who have obtained a level of design expertise, which allows them to work within a professional design context. The terms can refer to the individual who practices design or to specific designers who have been employed to work on an Internet project. Within the latter sections of the thesis the three terms are used to refer to design practitioners producing women's online sites or those who are specifically involved with the BEME.com portal design as part of my case study. When the terms are used in a more specific context discussing online design practice, the terms represent practitioners who consider themselves online design experts. Although their design background might have included other types of design expertise, at the time of this research they would have been practicing online design.

Grounded in the daily activities and practices of its professionals, design encompasses practical elements just as much as theoretical reflections emerging from design research. Schön's (1983) argument highlights this combination. He puts '... trust in the abilities displayed by competent practitioners, and [believes there is a need] to try to explicate those competencies rather than to supplant them' (in Cross 2001:53). From within a constructivist paradigm, he encourages a search for 'an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict' (Schön in Cross 2001:53). When achieved, such conditions of practice Schön calls 'reflective practice'. Alternatively, Cross (2001) argues that designers are truly experts in the human-made world, what he calls the 'artificial world'. Furthermore, he maintains that designers' know-how focuses on how to propose/make additions to and changes to the world of



artefacts. 'Their knowledge, skills, and values lie in the techniques of the artificial. ... So design knowledge is of and about the artificial world and how to contribute to the creation and maintenance of that world' (Cross 2001:54-55). Along with Cross, Vitta (1989) talks about the 'artificial world' referring to production of objects. In his discussion, he includes processes, technologies and services, as well as their distribution and consumption. However, for Vitta these issues come under the rubric, 'culture of design'. His definition of 'culture of design' includes '... the totality of disciplines, phenomena, knowledge, analytical instruments, and philosophies that the design of useful objects must take into account' (p. 6-7). However, what makes his 'culture of design' of value to a feminist perspective is his inclusion of the '... context of economic and social models that are ever more complicated and elusive' (Vitta 1989:6-7).

Vitta's (1989) view of design as culture fits well with Buchanan's (1995) exploration of '... the discipline of design as a new form of rhetoric suited to an age of technology' (Margolin and Buchanan 1995:xiii). In his discussion of the 'wicked problems in design thinking' Buchanan argues that '... design is a liberal art of technological culture, concern with the conception and planning of all of the instances of the artificial or human-made world' (p. xiii). Here he includes '... signs and images, physical objects, activities and services, and systems of environments' (Margolin and Buchanan 1995:xiii). Thus, Buchanan refers to design as '... a discipline of thinking that may be shared to some degree by all men and women in their daily lives and is, in turn, mastered by a few people who practice the discipline with distinctive insight and sometimes advance it to new areas of innovative applications' (Buchanan 1995:6). In addition, this process that is common to designers various activities has been termed by Buchanan (1995) as a process of invention. He observes that innovation within design stems from the '... rich, diverse, and changing set of *placement*, such as those identified by signs, things, actions, and thoughts' (Buchanan 1995:10). This process is then accompanied by extensive planning of outcomes, requiring '... the integration of knowledge from many fields and disciplines ...' (Margolin and Buchanan 1995:xiii). Although, this process of inventing might be beset by many constraints, designers use these as a background to their creative and innovative activities. Buchanan points out that this belief in the creative and resourceful side of design, allows its



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professionals to get involved in a whole array of projects, supporting an ongoing change of the discipline and the outcomes it produces. He also maintains that ‘... design is continually evolving, and the range of products or areas where design thinking may be applied continues to expand ... Designers deal with possible worlds and with opinions about what the parts and the whole of the human environment should be’ (1995: 25). At the same time, the evolution of professional expertise draws on designers’ practical experience and wisdom that produces outcomes based on design judgement.

Such positioning of a discipline indicates an environment where all the processes and activities of the professional are as integral as the success of its outcomes to the definition of the discipline. Buckley (1989) critiques that ‘... designers do not design merely by courtesy of innate genius ... they have been constituted in language, ideology, and social relations’ (p. 260). As Buckley aptly puts it, designers are among the first to see and attach meaning to design. Moreover, I agree with Buckley and her questioning of the centrality of the designer as the determinant of meaning in design. She argues for the recognition of ‘... the complex nature of design development, production, and consumption, a process involving numerous people who precede the act of production, others who mediate between production and consumption, and those who use the design’ (p. 259). Thus, Buckley explicitly acknowledges the ‘collective process’ forming design, where ‘... its meaning can only be determined by an examination of the interaction of individuals, groups, and organisations within specific societal structures’ (Buckley 1989:259). This collective process has also a historical dimension whereby design exercises the depth of its convictions, communication and persuasion patterns that draw meaning from an embedded context of social, cultural, political, and economic interactions (Buchanan 1995). As Kazmierczak (2003) suggests, designers are key players in triggering appropriate contextual frameworks, which in turn will be interpreted by others.

## ***Design and Responsibility***

As Borgmann (1995) explains, the role of a designer resides with his/her artisanship just as much as with the good of the society placed in their trust. As Borgmann argues, the '... good of design is the moral and cultural excellence of the humanly shaped and built environment. More particularly ... designers are charged with making the material culture conducive to engagement' (p. 18). At the same time, designers not only create the artefacts or imbue them with value, but also constitute 'the common memory of practices of engagement' (Borgmann 1995:18). In other words, design practice carries many responsibilities that manifest themselves not only in material outcomes resulting from the design process, but in the effect these outcomes have on the greater social good. When creating 'new products' it is the designers' responsibility to review the situation they are asked to consider. By questioning the appropriateness of the artefact, the best economic and ergonomic means with which to produce it and by examining the area in which this artefact will be used and understood by the public, they are in a position to gain an overview of the given situation and resolve it through appropriate mediation (Schön 1983). However, designers cannot always reconcile the tensions between creativity, production, consumption and responsibility. Cohen (1994) provides an example in mass production and marketing, where design becomes divorced from responsibility. He argues that design consultancies are '... quick to associate mass production and mass marketing with the 'massification' of the individual' (Cohen 1994:177). He suggests that in order for people to consume various products marketers and designers rely on strategies that build a link between these products and expressions of identity. Hence, the various artefacts through their design generate personas for consumers to buy into and as Cohen argues, if they resist or '...opt not to conform, [they are] ... liable to be treated merely as having swapped one stereotype for another, labelled 'alternative', which will almost certainly soon be colonised by the mainstream market. In this manipulative strategy, style is supposed to displace individuality' (Cohen 1994:177).



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Cohen's views are supported by Whitley (1993) who argues that '... consumer-led design not only manipulates people and makes them dissatisfied, but encourages them to be excessively materialistic as well' (p. 3). In such an environment, Whitley points out '[l]ife becomes a matter of what you consume, and more public and altruistic values are diminished in importance' (p. 3). Those within society who have little power or agency in the market-place become 'simply ignored' (Whiteley 1993).

Reflecting on the positioning of design and its effects on society, I want to stress that designers are just as subjected to such manipulative strategies as any other person. Therefore, by 'blindly' creating solutions to suit social conformity, the designers limit their own right to identity and self as any other human being. As Whitley further states: '[t]he design profession needs to be both introspective and outward-looking' (Whiteley 1993:3). He calls for design practitioners to reflect on their practices and values and the implication these have on the society and the world at large. 'Designers can no longer take refuge from responsibility for their own actions and continually repackage the same old type of consumer goods at a time when issues about consuming and its relationship to the world's resources and energy need urgently to be acted upon' (Whiteley 1993:3).

Through an acknowledgement of '... individuals' consciousness of their difference from each other, of their distinctive identities, even though these may be masked by the social glosses of stereotype, orthodoxy, category or collectively imposed identity' (Cohen 1994:65-66) design can reconcile tensions between creativity, production, consumption and responsibility. As de Kerckhove (1994) suggests '[t]he responsibility of design is to make this world liveable, not just for those who have the means, but for all' (p. 156). At the same time, he stresses that design practices have to reflect responsibility towards '... greater good and the larger reach of people and the greatest respect of differing cultures' (p. 156). However, any responsible action on the part of a design practitioner will always be undermined if the design discipline continues to blindly subscribe to gender structures. As Clegg and Mayfield (1999) make the case: '...if the dominant discourse represents design practice as "male" and women as "problem"', the issue of



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design responsibility will never be fully addressed (p. 16). Margolin and Margolin (2002) argue that it is time for design to be looked at not just '... as an artistic practice that produces dazzling lamps, furniture, and automobiles ...' but rather there needs to be a general shift on the part of the discipline to '... demonstrate what a designer can contribute to human welfare' (p. 28). In order to do so both scholars advocate developing an 'agenda for social design' addressing a number of questions such as:

*'What role can a designer play in a collaborative process of social intervention? What is currently being done in this regard and what might be done? How might the public's perception of designers be changed in order to present an image of a socially responsible designer? How can agencies that fund social welfare projects and research gain a stronger perception of design as a socially responsible activity? What kinds of products meet the needs of vulnerable populations?' (Margolin and Margolin 2002:28).*

By supporting an agenda for social design, emphasis is shifted from being solely on outcomes for sale to the satisfaction and amelioration of human needs. This does not mean that designers should not concern themselves at all with meeting market requirements. Rather as Margolin and Margolin (2002) argue they need to remember that '... products designed for the market also meet a social need but ... the market does not, and probably cannot, take care of all social needs, as some relate to populations who do not constitute a class of consumers in the market sense ... people with low incomes or special needs due to age, health, or disability' (p. 25). Although, women are considered valuable consumers, in light of the Margolin and Margolin argument, unless they conform to the gender stereotype accepted by the market place, their needs may not be addressed through design.

### ***A Critique of Design from a Feminist Perspective***

Buchanan and Margolin (1995) observe '... growing recognition that the design of the everyday deserves attention not only as a professional practice but a subject of social, cultural, and philosophic investigation' (p. ix). Thus, a number of scholars have demonstrated a desire to contribute to ever growing and changing design knowledge. Scholars such as Buchanan, Margolin, Fry, Papanek, Borgmann, Morello, Manzini and others have dedicated their time to



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define, evaluate and re-define design on academic and professional levels. However, in spite of this vigorous writing on and about the discipline of design, women's position as theorists, producers and consumers of design has not been significantly addressed (Attfield 1989; Attfield and Kirkham 1989; Buckley 1989; Whiteley 1993).

Whiteley (1993) writes, '[t]he feminist critique makes us uncomfortably aware of the ideology and values of consumer-led design, their implicit social and gender relations, and the gloomy future of the unchecked consumerism of our capitalist society' (p. 6). Furthermore, Attfield (1989) argues, a feminist framework '... offers design ... a range of historical/critical methods which challenge the mainstream about how it defines design as a practice, about the parameters of what type of designed objects it should examine, about what values are given priority in assessing it, and even who it calls designers' (p. 200). For example, throughout the history of design, women have been identified with particular areas of design practice at which they seem to excel. Areas such as textiles, ceramics or interior design. As Anscombe (1984) writes, '... [historically, design] publications have been almost exclusively about men's role in ... [recorded design] movements – despite the traditional belief that a woman's touch transforms a house into a home' (p. 11). In her investigation, Anscombe discovered that women '... first gained entry into the world of design through the iconography of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, whose medieval visions included Chatelaine at work upon her embroidery' (p. 11). In her writing Anscombe gives the following reasons for the imposition of a gendered role on women in design:

*'The decorative arts – delicate, painstaking, refined – were thought by Victorians to be peculiarly suited to female talents and indeed, natures, whereas the fine arts, which required ambition and strength and purpose of vision, were suited only to men. Decorative art, in the hands of women, was considered to be the more successful for gracefully accepting its limitations, in seeking only to enhance the home, where women guarded love, sanctity and honour against those very elements of challenge and contention so praised in men's art' (Anscombe 1984:11-12).*

As time passed and the social, cultural and political forces changed under the influence of external events, women's roles in design evolved (Anscombe 1984; Attfield 1989; Attfield and Kirkham 1989). However, still influenced by their supposed social and cultural association with



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nature, women's involvement was restricted to areas that required dexterity, explored textures and natural materials rather than man-made materials, large-scale machine production or three-dimensional forms (Anscombe 1984). Furthermore, much of design history saw women excluded from theoretical exploration of the field (Anscombe 1984; Rakow 1988; Attfield 1989; Wright 1989). This only perpetuated general notions that women's participation in design practice is limited in terms of the process and its outcomes and served to cultivate and leave without critique, a gendered design epistemology. As Anscombe (1984) argues: '[w]omen are caught within a system of values which they cannot outwit, for it judges women's potential to be limited, when it is the system itself which limits what women can achieve ...' (p. 197).

Therefore, Anscombe strongly believes that as long as women merely remain within fields where their contribution is expected or welcomed '... they are merely fulfilling a prescribed 'natural' destiny' (p. 197). Furthermore, Whiteley (1993) states, '...when you buy a product you are consuming a total mix of the product and its meaning' (p. 138). Therefore, a historically grounded approach to women in terms of design is reflected in the outcomes of that practice, where gender stereotyping results in a sexist portrayal of women and a disregard for them as end-users.

Buckley (1989) calls for a much broader understanding of design and its positioning vis-a-vis patriarchy. Patriarchy is understood as '...a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex, which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable' (Pollock 1982:10). She believes that '[p]atriarchy has circumscribed women's opportunities to participate fully in all areas of society and, more specifically, in all sectors of design, through a variety of means – institutional, social, economic, psychological, and historical (p. 252). This relation between patriarchy and design, Buckley observes, has established a 'hierarchy of value and skills based on sex' (p. 253-254). This process has been legitimized on an ideological level through '... dominant notions of femininity and materiality [manifested in] institutional practice' (Buckley 1989:254). Where Martin (1985) states that, '[d]esign in its broadest sense is power, control and defining new possibilities to aim for' (p. 26), Buckley (1989) warns of the patriarchal position of



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design, where '[t]he resulting female stereotypes delineate certain modes of behaviour as being appropriate for women' (p. 252). In the same vein Whitley (1993) points to feminist criticism of 'market-led design' stressing its stereotyping of '... women in a sexist way, and ... its disregard for women as end-users' (Whiteley 1993:137). Moreover, Whitley concludes that the criticisms are interrelated due to their situatedness within patriarchal society – a society that positions women as inferior to men. He supports this argument with recognition of the popular conception of women's status as '... provider of sustenance and primary needs; or the sex object who underlines a man's status, power or attractiveness' (p. 137). Buckley (1989) expands by observing that '[t]hese stereotypes have had enormous impact on the physical spaces – whether at home or at work – which women occupy, their occupations, and their relationship with design' (p. 252). She concludes with the following: '[j]ust as patriarchy informs the historical assumptions about women designers' skills, so it defines the designer's perceptions of women's needs as consumers' (p. 256). Such an understanding can lead to a whole plethora of design outcomes that are inappropriate for women as users (Goodall 1983; Martin 1985; Bruce and Lewis 1989). Due to an identification of women as 'universal users' design artefacts may either be useless or injurious to female users.

In her evaluation of the role of design practitioners, Buckley (1989) argues that conceiving of design outcomes as singular and determined by designers is not appropriate any more. Instead she strongly believes that 'design is a process of representation' (p. 258). Contrary to Buchanan's (1995) more abstract 'doctrine of placements', Buckley – from a feminist perspective – identifies critical aspects such as '... the political, economic, and cultural power and values within the different spaces occupied, through engagement with different subjects' (p. 258). This enables Buckley to acknowledge the role of gender in design, its processes, histories and practices. Through encoded meanings '... which are decoded by producers, advertisers, and consumers according to their own cultural codes ...' (p. 258), design outcomes become gendered. Wolff (1981) attests to Buckley's observations by stating that '[a]ll these codes and subcodes are applied to the message in the light of [a] general framework of cultural references' (p. 109). She goes on to state that '... the way the message is read depends on the



receiver's own cultural codes' (p. 109). Wolff indicates that cultural codes operate as mediators between '... ideology and particular works by interposing themselves as sets of rules and conventions which shape cultural products ...' (p. 64-65). Furthermore, Wolff notes that as such these cultural codes must be used by 'cultural producers' such as designers to achieve meaning (Wolff 1981).

Buckley (1989) applies Wolff's reasoning to her argument on design and patriarchy, acknowledging that '... codes or signs by which design is understood and constituted, in an industrial, capitalist society such as our own, are the product of bourgeois, patriarchal ideology' (p. 259). Here, she draws from Barthes (1977) who writes '... the reluctance to declare its codes characterizes bourgeois society and the culture issuing from it; both demand signs which do not look like signs' (Barthes 1977:116). Buckley believes that '... by presenting its designs as neutral and ideology-free and the receiver of these codes as universally constituted, that is, the singular and unproblematic user or producer', allows ideology to obscure the cultural codes (p. 259). In her opinion '... this obscurity presents a problem ...' when taking into account the '... designer or consumer as gendered individuals with specific class allegiances who then bring particular sets of meaning to design' (p. 259). Moreover, through combination of the historical, cultural and social positioning of design, the discipline has also developed a particular understanding of women's taste – a vital element in terms of consumer culture. According to Sparke (1995) '...[s]urprised and threatened by women's ... increased authority in the marketplace, masculine culture attempted to redress the balance of gender power by condemning and devaluing the alliance between aesthetic, commercial and feminine culture' (p. 12). Furthermore, Sparke argues that in its place patriarchal society insisted on adopting a form of high culture that is based on '...universal values and the pure logic of function' (p. 12). In such terms, design that slavishly follows the rules of the market place can only perpetuate such beliefs by creating universalistic androgynous products that bear no relationship to their users.

Moving away from the abstract issues discussed above, I am going to concentrate now on the feminist critique of design and its effect on everyday life. To locate these everyday practices, I



turn to Attfield (1989) who maintains that design is involved in shaping '... the environment and makes assumptions about women's place in terms of buildings, public spaces and transport. It also provides the imagery women use to form their identity through fashion, advertising and the media generally' (p. 203). However, in recognising this she warns that '[t]he role of design in forming our ideas about gender power relations often remains invisible, while at the same time it makes them concrete in the everyday world of material goods' (p. 203). Furthermore, design '... segregates sexes through artefacts by endowing these with unnecessary gender definitions' (Attfield 1989:203). In the case of women this occurs through the everyday practice of becoming feminine. To support my argument I turn to a model of 'textually mediated discourse' suggested by Smiths (1988) in relation to femininity. Smiths' definition of 'textually mediated' femininity is grounded in the following:

*'[Femininity's] ... social character is achieved in and through what actual individuals are doing in the everyday settings of their lives. The concepts, categories and images in which we talk and find 'femininity' are part of those practices. They are embedded in and intelligible only in the context of the complex [practices] of which they are part, as well as being integral to its organisation and accomplishment' (Smith 1988:38).*

This complex of practices that women engage in can be seen as a discourse of relationships between different elements. Such discourse is then 'textually mediated' in form of actual practices (Smith 1988). Women exposed to this discourse take part in constant interaction between the mediated meanings, where interpretations take place on the local level (Skeggs 1997). Furthermore, Smith observes '... [c]ertainly in our time, to address femininity is to address a textual discourse vested in women's magazines and television, advertisements, the appearance of cosmetic counters, fashion displays, and to a lesser extent, books' (p. 41). However, Smith (1988) does not believe that this discourse is external to women. She argues that it '... involves the talk women do in relation to such texts, the work of producing oneself to realize the textual images, the skills involved in going shopping, making and choosing clothes, making decisions about colours, styles, make-up and the ways in which these become a matter of interest among men' (p. 41). It also exposes the economical and commercial application of the social and cultural meanings. It interprets this phenomenon as a "motivational' structure, which returns the purchaser again and again to the cosmetic counters of department stores, to



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the fashion boutiques in the malls, to the magazine racks displaying women's magazines' (Smith 1988:41). In order for the practice of becoming feminine to exist, design becomes crucial a mediator between the artefacts and their meanings. As Smith reasons:

*'There is then a productive process which creates the symbolic artefact through which the commodity enters discourse – the specialised work of advertisers and the makers of women's magazines, of fashion designers, etc., etc. These provide the direct material organisation of the discourse which mediates and structures a market for an extensive organisation of industry, garment, shoe, fabric, cosmetic, and many other manufacturing enterprises' (p. 41).*

In other words, design, by providing the 'symbolic artefact' enters 'textually mediated discourse' and is implicated in the practice of becoming feminine. This practice occurs on a daily basis, is acted and re-enacted.. As Smith points out, '[t]he discourse is produced commercially by magazines, in advertising, on television, in movies, etc' (p. 43) making design integral to this re-enactment.

### **Magazines Produced Specifically for Female Audiences**

To further contextualise the study, I review literature which documents and debates the ways in which, over a number of decades, the magazine publishing industry has targeted female users based on concepts of gender to build a picture of their readers. In her review of women's magazines from a feminist perspective, McRobbie (1997) argues that '[o]ne way of initiating such a debate is to play a role as an interested party, to explore how the magazines are produced and by whom, and also to consider how different groups of young women consume them' (p. 203). Hence, the review highlights the role women's magazine industry has played in constituting its female readers identities, grounded in feminist theorising around the notions of women and identity in general. To further our understanding, I delve into issues of consumption, gender and women's magazines in order to highlight this important yet complex relationship.



### ***Origin and Development of the Industry***

To begin with, it is important to distinguish women's magazines from the spectrum of currently available periodicals. At one end is the respectability of academic journals often obtained by subscription with peer reviewed content. These periodicals symbolise the intellectual achievements of any particular society. They may cover highly specific themes or represent the achievements of entire disciplines, as is the case with *Design Studies* or *Social Science Computer Review*. At the opposite end of the scale are located the 'disreputable' magazines catering to the pornographic industry. Whilst these magazines visually might represent high-end design, due to their content, culturally they will always be associated with the 'trashy', low-end part of the spectrum. In between these two extremes exists a plethora of magazines catering to specific interests, activities, interest groups, ethnic groups and philosophies. In terms of cultural significance women's magazines have always occupied a particular place within this spectrum. Women's magazines represent one of the largest category of periodicals (McCracken 1993) stretching from midpoint of the spectrum towards the lower-end. It is '... a multi-million dollar business which represents pleasurable, value-laden semiotic systems to immense numbers of women' (McCracken 1993:1). Gouch-Yates (2003) says that '... Britain might currently be 'the toughest market in the world' for women's magazine publishing, but the financial rewards for those who develop successful brands, however, are too significant to ignore' (p. 152). As an example of what Geertz (1983) terms a 'blurred genre' (in Hermes 1995:6), women's magazines extend from politically driven periodicals, through glossy posh magazines to women's gossip magazines. Within this broad category Hermes (1995) identifies three subgenres: 'traditionally oriented magazines, feminist magazines and gossip magazines' (p. 6). Although, she does not rank these in terms of quality, she does make distinctions between them in terms of their cultural significance and position. She describes 'traditionally oriented magazines' as consisting of domestic weeklies focused on giving practical advice and selling within a moderate price range. In addition, they include high-priced monthlies (glossies) that are often franchised and published within various cultural contexts (Hermes 1995). The 'feminist magazines' subgenre does not always have a strong following due to its political



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character; hence many of the titles such as *Spare Rib* do not survive for a long time. While they last, Hermes (1995) explains, they circulate as monthlies and are often not cheap as women's papers which rely on inexpensive printing and voluntary work. On the other hand, 'gossip magazines' Hermes associates with the low end of the spectrum, referring to them as 'tasteless'. They are inexpensive, except for royalty magazines, and readily available from bookshops with magazine stands, to corner shops.

Whilst women's magazines are not positioned at the high-end of the periodical spectrum, as alluded to above, they form a highly profitable industry. It is an industry the success and profits of which derive from its appeal to a female readership defined by gender. As Beetham (1996) points out: '[t]hroughout its history, the woman's magazine has defined its readers 'as women'. It has taken their gender as axiomatic' (p. 1). However, Beetham maintains that such an approach cannot be equated with a uniform representation of femininity. She suggests: '... femininity is always represented in the magazines as fractured, not least because it is simultaneously assumed as given and as still to be achieved' (p. 1). These products of design and the publishing industry take on the role of constructing and promoting 'a collective social 'reality'; the 'world of women'" (Shevelow 1989). In opposition to men's magazines that emphasise particular interests, women's magazines specialize in gender itself. Their focus is fixed on the readers: women. As Shevelow (1989) explores, the gender bond that builds up between women and women's magazines is then reinforced by a secondary one based on the status of women as readers of these periodicals. However, firstly and most importantly, women's magazines are designed as commodities. As Beetham (1996) suggests they are '... products of the print industry ... [and] ... a crucial site for the advertising and sale of other commodities ...' (p. 2). Furthermore, she argues that they are '... deeply involved in the capitalist production and consumption as well as circulating in the cultural economy of collective meanings and constructing an identity for the individual reader as gendered and sexual being' (p. 2). Beetham (1996) final description of women's magazines positioning stems from her belief that as products, they are situated at the crossroads of the following agendas: 'money, public discourse and individual desire'.



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From a historical perspective Shevelov (1989) describes the social role of women's magazines:

*'... in [an] eighteenth-century progressive view of women's education, a "little learning" was not a dangerous thing, for it was not only enough to suit the capacities of the softer feminine mind, but was also sufficient to serve its primary function of regulating and channelling women's intrinsic domestic genius. ... Rather than the ameliorated course of instruction in quasi-scientific subjects offered by the mid-century women's magazines, late-century magazines began to instruct their readers in the arts of femininity itself' (p. 188).*

The conceptualisation of women's magazines as 'guide books' on accepted norms of femininity has remained a *raison d'être*. However, throughout decades of the industry's development the ways in which this task has been approached has differed and changed. As Gough-Yates (2003) points out, '[i]n the immediate post-war years, the women's magazine industry has used demographics to help them imagine and classify their readership and to predict their consumption patterns' (p. 2). The use of demographics resulted in women being ranked according to the occupation of the head of the household (often male), in combination with factors such as age and marital status (Gough-Yates 2003). However, from the late 1950s – as argued by Winship (1987) – the publishing industry attempted to make a shift from a demographic approach to 'segmentation by attitude' (p. 46). This shift was a consequence of growing reliance on forms of 'motivational' market research that focused on the behavioural psychology of consumers constructing a much more diverse view of a 'women's market' (Winship 1987:46-47). Hence, the female audiences of these magazines could be seen through a more differentiated lens. Nixon (1996) identifies an attempt on the part of the industry to produce magazines for the 'New Woman' distinguishable from the 'housewife' through a greater range of experiences and 'motivational distinctions' (p. 93). However, Gough-Yates (2003) states that by late 1970s the 'motivational' research gave ground to 'lifestyle' segmentation that '... represented consumers as more diverse and changeable than ever before, and produced more individualistic images of them. Moreover, lifestyle research emphasized the differences between consumer groups in cultural, as well as economic and motivational terms' (p. 2). Furthermore, Gough-Yates argues that it was this approach that helped shape the 'New Woman' represented by the glossy magazines from mid-1980s onwards. The significance of this development is highlighted by Winship (1987) who sees the 'New Woman' representation



as a commercial ‘... appropriation of the cultural space of feminism opened up minus most of the politics’ (p. 150).

*‘... the steady post-war rise of married women’s employment and the effect of sixteen years of women’s movement have meant that these women tend to have personal spending money beyond the purely domestic sphere. If the High Streets in Britain have witnessed a crop of Next, Principles and Country Casuals shops springing up to provide for these ‘mature’ women’s fashion needs, so too the magazine world has begun to look to her custom’ (Winship 1987:156).*

This unobtainable ‘Superwoman’ embodied by the ‘New Woman’ model stemmed, Winship argued, from the growing financial independence of middle-class women in their twenties and thirties. With reference to women’s magazines of the 1980s and 1990s, Gough-Yates (2003) builds on Winship argument, by observing:

*‘[i]n the media celebration of ‘post-feminist’ emancipation, changes in patterns of gender relations were misunderstood and distorted. But for some women – mainly white, young and middle class – opportunities did arise for an improved quality of life ... the attempt to address this group of relatively affluent, upwardly mobile women as a distinct market segment was a key factor in the development of ‘the glossies’. Pitching themselves to a ‘New Woman’ who could please herself, be self-sufficient and autonomous, the glossies were constituent in the fabrication of a ‘post-feminist’ emancipation’ (p. 38).*

Furthermore, she suggests that the reason for the success of these magazines was a result of an ability to connect with experiences of the ‘... fortunate minority of women who were enjoying the fruits of the commodity culture ... [and it was] these women whom the magazine industry took as symbolic of femininity during the 1980s and 1990s, ... developing a range of techniques to address these women as a distinct ‘community’ of readers’ (Gough-Yates 2003:38). In the mid- to late 1990s, however, the women’s magazine circulation began to decline in numbers and the publishing houses needed to rethink their strategies in order to stay in business. As Gough-Yates highlights, ‘[a]t the heart of these developments remained publishers’ ambition to distinguish their magazines from those that had gone before, and this included breaking from many aspects of the ‘New Woman’ lifestyles they had so vociferously proposed in the late 1980s’ (p. 133). The new approach required that they remained in-tune with middle-class women; however even when this was achieved, it did not always guarantee advertising revenue due to advertisers’ far more sceptical approach. Hence, the publishing of women’s magazines



became, in the late 1990s, 'an increasingly perilous enterprise' (Gough-Yates 2003). The industry was also challenged by other forms of communication encroaching on its territory such as cable and satellite TV and the Internet.

Blackman (2004) argues that '[m]agazine culture is a good site for examining the kinds of cultural translations that occur in relation to recent sociological arguments which suggest that changing economic, social and cultural circumstances are creating new forms of subjectivity and social identity' (p. 222). Furthermore, as Walkerdine (1995) suggests, there is also a growing attempt to '... credit audiences with agency to resist media influence, often underpinned by an American discourse of empowerment' evidenced by a shift in emphasis from text to audience in Anglo-American cultural studies (in Blackman 2004:222). Moreover, Blackman draws attention to the concept of 'dilemma' that has framed the way in which magazines targeting female readers have been analysed. Here, she refers to '[t]he complexity of embodiment and its relationship to the dilemmatic ways in which discourses function and compete within particular context' (p. 222). With reference to femininity and ways in which it is being shaped and regulated 'through a range of contradictory sites', Blackman argues that it sets '... the parameters of debates within studies that oscillate between the 'fixing' and 'unfixing' of femininity' (p. 222). Ferguson (1983) observes women's social position as '...one which requires separate consideration and distinctive treatment' evidenced by the existence of the women's magazine publishing; an industry she sees as contributors, along with '...other social institutions such as the family, the school, the church and the other media, ... to wider cultural processes which define the position of women in a given society at a given point in time. In this exchange with the wider social structure, with processes of social change and social continuity, these journals help to shape both a woman's views of herself, and society's of her' (p. 1). On the other hand, McRobbie (1999) develops an argument which suggests that magazines present an 'unfixing of femininity' evident in the change in representation of femininity within the media. McRobbie argues '... magazines' increasing engagement with feminist issues and themes has transformed the genre to such an extent that the new fictional identities on offer make and remake femininity beyond patriarchal concerns' (in Blackman 2004:223).



### ***Identity, Female Readers, Consumption and Women's Magazines***

Many of the above debates around women's magazines focus on the capacity of these artefacts to affect their readers' identity construction. To inform this discussion, I turn to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. Foucault's line of reasoning suggests a valuable insight as to how power relations can operate within a social context as well as how individuals rely on various strategies for making sense of their daily lives. In brief the power of Foucault's work lies in the way he suggests we should look at the self, identity sexuality and 'modes of living' as a way '... to develop our understanding of identities and the media in the modern society' (Gauntlet 2002:115). In his work he focuses on the notion of power which he does not see as '... an asset which a person can *have*; rather, power is something *exercised* within interactions' (Gauntlet 2002:117). Foucault (1998) states: '[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere ... Power is not an institution, and not a structure: neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with: it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (p. 93). Furthermore, Foucault in his writing on power explains that not everybody has equal access to power. To explain, he proposes the notion of 'forced relations' as a platform of social inequality against which all the power interactions take place. Moreover, he points out that these can form 'states of domination' where the power relations become so entrenched that they appear 'one-sided and unchangeable' (Foucault 2000:283). As Gauntlet (2002) sums up, the point Michel Foucault puts across remains: '... power simply cannot be *held* by one group: power is everywhere and plays a role in all relationships and interactions ... Power does not exist outside of social relationships; it's exactly *within* these relationship[p that power comes into play' (p. 118). However the value of Foucault's argument on power stems from his believe that 'where there is power, there is resistance ... points of resistance are everywhere in the power network' (Foucault 1998:95). Therefore, just as power flow through network of power relations so do points of resistance appear all over. These might become strategically mobile or remain dissipated and disorganised (Foucault 1998:95).



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Another aspect of Foucault's thought that is of relevance is the notion of 'technologies of the self'. His argument draws from his thinking through on the issues of ethics, where he focuses on '... the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself' (Foucault 2000:263). With the technologies of the self, Foucault considers how human beings utilise various internal and external practices to achieve/embody such ethics. Technologies of the self allow individuals to consider and explore ways in which they can become a person. In his works, Foucault considered historical and cultural perspectives that could represent technologies of the self. Such an approach allowed Foucault to highlight '... that no particular way of conceptualising the person is fixed or necessarily correct' (Gauntlett 2002:128). Therefore, the value of Foucault's discussion of technologies of the self stems from recognising that today's practices of becoming a person are one amongst many: '... our ways of 'understanding' ourselves do not necessarily represent the truth, as such. Rather they are strategies – not necessarily bad ones – for making sense of modern life' (Gauntlett 2002:128). The relevance of technologies of the self in the context of women's magazines can be illustrated through the ever present mission of such periodicals to promote continuous improvement/discipline of female bodies. These magazines often provide various guidelines or technologies of the self that can be fulfilled through consumption. As Cronin (2000) states: consumerism promises women self-transformation and appears to validate women's choices. Yet, even as subjects, women have faced an impossible imperative 'to be ourselves' though 'doing ourselves', mediated by 'doing' make-up (making yourself up), fashion (fashioning yourself), dieting and exercise (re-forming yourself)' (p. 279).

On the other hand, Judith Butler's analysis of the process by which an individual assumes a subject position provides a useful lens through which to unpack the consequences of women's magazine consumption by female readers. Furthermore, Butler, rather than starting from an essentialist point of view, where identity is self-evident, argues for a processual understanding of identity constructed in language and discourse. To account for such a process she traces the genealogy of the conditions of emergence of a subject position. Her genealogical investigation into the construction of the subject assumes that sex and gender are effects rather than causes of institutions, discourses, and practices. As Salih (2002) comments, 'Butler has collapsed the



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sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender' (p. 62). This suggests that all bodies are gendered from the moment of and due to their social existence and there is no existence outside of the social. This leads Butler's argument to point to a reading that it is not about what someone is, but rather it is about what someone does, a sequence of acts, a 'doing' rather than 'being'.

*'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender' (Butler 1999:33).*

As Butler argues, gender is a particular process not just any process. Furthermore, she does not suggest that the subject is free to choose which gender they will enact, rather it is always determined by the 'regulatory frame' in which the subject has limited choice. Moreover, her focus on the 'doing' of gender brings her to a discussion of performativity. To understand how Butler deploys this concept in her analysis, it is important to observe the distinct difference between performativity and performance. Where '... performance presupposed a pre-existing subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject' (Salih 2002:63). Hence, [t]here is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1999:25). Butler also makes the links between performativity and language. Because gender identities are constructed and constituted by language gender is an act that brings into being what it names and it cannot precede language. 'There is no 'I' outside language since identity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings' (Butler 1999:145 in Salih 2002:64). Butler's further analysis of gender identities presents them as neither 'straight, straightforward [n]or singular' but rather 'unstable' and 'resignifiable' allowing for subversive 'working against the grain' practice (Salih 2002:71).

In relation to mass media, one could argue that by spreading representations of non-traditional images and ideas, an opportunity could arise to portray traditional representations of gender as



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unstable hence allowing for subversive reading. However, a 'strength' of the women's magazine industry is its ability to present to female readers, a well packaged and easy to consume version of gender identity in the form of femininity. Whilst as commercial products, there is no denying the success of women's' magazines, Blackman (2004) maintains that these artefacts in the end do not shape how women think of their own lives.

*'Magazines have been credited at different historical moments with the power to dupe (particularly women's lives), to provide forms of escapism to lives shot through with patriarchal fantasies or as being meaningless recipes of advice, confession and injunctions to consume that are picked up, put down, but do not significantly shape how (mainly women) think about their own aspirations, fears and desires' (Blackman 2004:222).*

On the other hand, Radner (1995) draws attention to the '... contradictions inflicted by feminine identities in which femininity is defined through a specular relationship to an image in which it is precisely the woman herself who must take command of this image – of these images – even as she subjects her body to the rigorous discipline of reconstruction' (p. xiii). In agreement with Judith Butler, Radner (1995) sees identities not as a moment but as '... trajectories of perpetual movement within the confines of a specific social and cultural architecture – itineraries of dissatisfaction but also of pleasure in the movement itself, of returning and departing, only to return again – in the activity of "shopping around"' (p. xiv). Radner's reflection on femininity and its link to women's magazines is based on a recognition that '[f]emininity *can* be achieved with a minimum of effort for a certain socio-economic class able to afford the consumerism invoked through the image' (p. 177). However, she acknowledges that the images contained in women's magazines 'impose a tyranny' that the supporting text tries to deny. Where the images classify women's worth through the way they look supported by elaborate consumerist strategies, the accompanying text questions how far women buy into these ideologies. Nonetheless, Radner suggests that the images put forward by women's magazines imply that women have already 'bought it, wrapped it up and taken it home' (p. 177). On the other hand, she believes that this process does not take place only once, but rather both women and women's magazines return to it each month. On the one hand, women's magazines grant their readers a position of autonomy from which to continuously renegotiate the 'taken-for-granted-



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ness' of their daily life. On the other hand, women are seen as complicit in the consumerist system that signifies them as subjects (Radner 1995:178). Radner explores this process further by observing: '[s]he [female magazine reader] is that subject who represents herself for herself, but she is also another subject who consciously creates, manipulates, and compensates for the figurability of an imaginary subject that projects cohesiveness as its founding assumption through a fictional body' (p. 178). Moreover, Radner continues: '[t]his fictional body is created element by element as part of a narrative process grounded in product consumption. The woman as subject is invited to take control of the process whereby she represents herself. At the same time, she is constantly reminded that she must submit to a regime that externalizes her figurability through product usage' (p. 178). Here, Radner (1995) points to the fact that women's magazines actually call into question 'the new reconstructable body as a means of speaking the feminine' (p. 178). Through their visual and textual discourse, they do not advocate the postmodern concept of human freedom from bodily determination, but rather subscribe to idea of freedom through product usage supported by pre-determined disciplining of the body, resulting in a form of a spectacle evoked by an array of images (Radner 1995). On the other hand, as Radner argues, women's magazines do not '... trivialise the feminine imperative to "image" a "self" ...' but rather they displace it from ' a meta-critical discourse onto the minute decisions of a contingent day-to-day practice in which absolute categories cannot be maintained from moment to moment' (p. 178). Hence, the construction of femininity as a gender identity is about investment and return. It is the result of a negotiation where the value of pleasure is always measured against its costs, within an ever-changing set of terms (Radner 1995), where women's magazines figure as one available discourse framing this negotiation.

Miller's (1987) theory of consumption posits that '... in certain circumstances segments of the population are able to appropriate industrial objects and utilise them in the creation of their own image. In other cases, people are forced to live in and through objects which are created through the images held of them by a different and dominant section of the population' (Miller 1987:175). Debates surrounding the question of how women consume women's magazines have been characterised by diverging views. In the late 1970's McRobbie suggested that



female readers would consume the stereotypically-feminine-and-obsessed-with-romance content of the magazines, in direct way. However, more recent research has rendered this view untenable. A study conducted by Frazer (1987) revealed that readers of women's magazines did not absorb the stories directly, but rather laughed at them and criticised them as unrealistic fiction. Similarly, Hermes (1995), from her research, suggested that women did not attach great significance to their reading of the magazines in any case. She postulated that women saw magazines as easy to pick up and put down, although there were parts of magazines that she found women did attach meaning to. She also maintained that the relationships that exist between media products such as magazines and those who consume them were not always passionate in nature. In 1999 Currie presented her own findings into the consumption of women's magazines. Her work investigated a younger audience than that of Hermes research, where results suggested a far more enthusiastic approach. Although her work was more complex and reflexive, it did not depart from the underlying assumption that women's magazines offered 'patriarchal' content for women's consumption (Gauntlett 2002). In the 1990's McRobbie returns again to the topic of women's magazines offering a reading that not only questions what type of women's magazines feminist scholars would like to have, but she also reviewed the changes magazines have gone through over the years. In addition, Gauntlett (2002) in his work offers a commentary on contemporary patterns in and styles of women's magazine consumption:

*'Analysis of the interviews suggests that female readers of women's magazines, from various developed countries, tend to share a feeling of ambivalent pleasure about these publications. They enjoy the magazines, and may at time learn bits and pieces – ideas for how to look or behave, as well as more straightforward information about health, popular culture or social issues. At the same time, these readers would not often argue that the magazines are 'perfect' or 'ideal' in terms of how they address women' (p. 196).*

On the other hand, Radner (1995) who, like McRobbie (1999) argued for inclusion of both producers and consumers in the critique, combines study of the ways in which women consume the magazines with looking at the design of the artefacts themselves. In her assessment, she points out that although a magazine has a certain order it does not contain a regulated flow. The order that it supplies is 'architectural' in nature imposed through the process of designing



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the information and it does not stem from the narrative. Radner argues that the material construction of a magazine is created on the basis of disorder that only a reader can put together into a coherent whole: '... a house that readers walk through at will rather than a movie in front of which viewers sit captive' (Radner 1995:133). Furthermore, the relationship between text and images or within individual articles is so 'unsystematically inscribed' that the reader has to take on a role of active participant to deduct the meaning communicated by the magazine. 'Thus, on the one hand, by disrupting any sense of natural order, the magazine accords a large degree of autonomy to its reader. On the other hand, by refusing its reader a coherent narrative, the magazine gives the reader an impression of complete freedom' (Radner 1995:133).

Radner's line of theorising allows her to argue that since there is no narrative explicitly promoted by a magazine, the reader does not have a narrative to situate herself against in order to produce 'reading against the grain' (p. 133) apart from what Radner identifies as '... a global ideological function grounded in consumerism transformed into the signifiers of "style" – as a purely individual expression' (p. 133). Moreover, direct opposition to such an ideological function will always encounter the heterogeneity of the magazine narrative, rendering it less effective. On the other hand, Radner together with other scholars '... observes that a global ideology of consumerism does not guarantee uniformity of effects' (p. 133). Tension between the dominant and occulted generates magazine discourse which, by its nature, is open to other readings. However, in conclusion Radner offers a note of caution, that although there is room for dispersion of meaning, the nature of the magazine will always re-centre it back to the magazine's focus on the female body and its definition through product consumption. She states:

*'One of the paradoxes, then, of consumer culture is that perhaps the women's magazine does a better job of speaking for women, of empowering their voices, than does the feminist scholar who has set this as her task. I am not suggesting that we see women's magazines as some emancipatory institution, as the site of an authentic resistance to the patriarchal norm ... rather, I would like to suggest that as feminists we might learn from the women's magazine as a pedagogical model, one that meanders yet remains contained, that offers information within a heteroglossia of narratives rather than from a*



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*univocal position, that accumulates rather than replaces, that permits contradiction and fragmentation, that offers choice rather than conversation as its message' (p. 135).*

As the debate continues, new technologies have entered the domain of publishing to cater to the needs, whims, desires and interests of female readers. This introduction has revealed both how the status quo can be and has been maintained but also identifies some new opportunities. The introduction and positioning of the Internet within women's magazine publishing is the focus of the following section.

### The Internet

Literature on the Internet ranges from scholarly debates to popular culture opinion pieces and at the time of this research, there is still much enthusiasm for the subject. As Sano (1996) points out, '[o]ne of major advantages of publishing on the web is the distributed nature of the Internet and the ability to access timely updated information' (p. 4). On the other hand, Veen (2001) sees the Internet and its associated technologies more than just a distribution of information. He enthusiastically observes, '[t]he web is a hobby. The Web is big business. The Web is a medium for personal expression, and a conduit for a commerce revolution' (p. x). It is a phenomenon constructed through and influenced by social, cultural, political and economic forces (Paasonen 2002; Rommes 2002; Sadowska 2003) and as Wakeford (2000) points out: '... the variety of purposes and formats cannot easily be summarized. Some are clearly advertisements, others are for public information. Some are transparent as to their authorship and location, and others appear to float free of any identifiable geographical base, and/or authorship is unclear' (p. 34). Considering that this research focuses on commercial Internet pages designed to target female users with an online version of a magazine, this section presents a brief history of the medium to contextualise the study. It will also discuss interactivity as a unique characteristic of the Internet, followed by commentary which questions the role of design and gender vis-à-vis the Internet.



## ***Internet Use and Development in 1990s***

Initially dominated by military, scientific and academic interests, it is only in the 90's that the Internet becomes of any major interest to the commercial sphere. With growing and broadening interest, new fields of study emerge in the 1990s; at first it was wired journalists and 'early adapters' writing about the medium, publications which Silver (2000) refers to as 'popular cyberculture'. 'Significantly, what began as an occasional column in a newspaper's technology section soon developed into feature articles appearing on the front page, in the business section and in the lifestyle supplements, as well as within the new media/cyberspace beat of many mainstream magazines' (Silver 2000:19-21). As Silver goes on to discuss, these writings were mainly descriptive in nature and presented to the non-technical audience, a series of new terms and concepts. But it was also evident from the writing that the technology inspired a mixture of fear and awe, expressed in either 'dystopian rant or utopian rave'. As Silver observes:

*'[f]rom one side, cultural critics blamed the net for deteriorating literacy, political and economic alienation, and social fragmentation ... [on the other side] vocal group of writers, investors and politicians loosely referred to as the technofuturists declared cyberspace a new frontier of civilisation, a digital domain that could and would bring down business, foster democratic participation and end economic and social inequalities' (p. 20).*

The metaphor of the 'final frontier' became the main discursive image. As is often mentioned, the term 'cyberspace' was coined by Gibson (1984) in his novel the *Neuromancer*. It was a literary term for the Internet and referred to the conceptual space in which the network hardware, software and users converged. It is also within the *Neuromancer* that the idea of a new frontier emerges that is less a geographical space than a digital location. The 'new frontier' metaphor encouraged exploration. The metaphor fitted very well with the popular cyberculture writings and evoked romantic sentiments of conquest. However, the metaphor not only inspired many to engage with the new technology; like the geographical frontier from which the metaphor is derived, it had gendered implications (Miller 1995), as discussed below. Popular cyberculture did not fade out when Internet technologies became far more recognised. Rather, it spawned 'cyberculture studies' which, building on previous developments, recognised cyberspace



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(including the Internet) as social spaces where people come into contact with each other and interact; resulting in interactions which take on different meanings due to the nature of the space (Stone 1991). References to social space often led to discussion of what were called 'virtual communities'. The well recognised scholars of that time were Howard Rheingold and Sherry Turkle, both avid commentators on virtual communities. In his key text *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold (1993) commented with enthusiasm on the Internet and its possibilities, although he concluded with a cautionary note on the effects: '[t]he vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of 'the electronic agora'' (Reingold 1993:14). Whilst similarly enthusiastic about the technology's potential, Turkle (1995) focused predominantly on the issue of identity construction within this new space. Overall, the cyberculture studies were noted for the focus on virtual communities and online identities. Scholars at that time defined online spaces, including the Internet, as sites of empowerment, creativity and community (Silver 2000:23).

In the mean time, the Internet service providers have began to introduce and encouraged user-friendly access. As Silver observes, '... with the growing popularity of user-friendly internet service providers such as AOL and CompuServe and the widespread adaptation of Netscape, by the mid-1990s, the great internet rush was on. Significantly, the introduction of the Web was not only a *technological* breakthrough but also a *user* breakthrough' (p. 23). There was not only a lot of interest in Internet technology, but also there was general enthusiasm for being connected on the part of both users and non-users. Alongside the rush to 'get connected' there was ever growing interest on the part of the academy to investigate these developments. By the late 1990s such scholarly interest was transformed into what is often referred to as 'critical cyberculture studies'. Rather than trying to describe the phenomenon – as in earlier commentaries – critical cyberculture studies sought to contextualise the Internet in order to carry out more complex, problematised analyses. Critical cyberculture studies did not simply join the chorus of enthusiastic Internet supporters, but rather explored the array of online interactions, the ways in which they are embedded in various discourses, factors influencing interaction and



the nature of technological decisions and/or design processes informing the interface between the Internet and its users (Silver 2000). Wakeford observes that, '... developments in related communication technologies are constantly changing the way in which the Web is produced, represented and consumed' (p. 34). Moreover, the arising overlaps between television, the Internet and personal computing coupled with corporate mergers like the America Online (AOL) acquisition of Time Warner (2000) introduced what Wakeford refers to as 'the rhetoric of technological convergence' (p. 34). These changes were further compounded by the development of new delivery devices such as Wireless technologies and ongoing improvements in online access and personal computing. All of these changes have had an impact not only on the way people interact with the Internet, but also on how it is being understood, consumed and studied, driving the historical shift from military/academic use to private use to the commercial application of this technology.

The above review has indicated that a particular take on the Internet emerged, a take which prioritised its value in terms of educational exchange of knowledge rather than commercial application. Moreover, the use of the Internet strictly prohibited commercial application or any use for personal gain. Goggin (2000) suggests that '[t]his was sustainable when the majority of users were based in educational and research settings, where the public-good characteristics of the nascent computing networks could be championed and safeguarded' (p. 104). However, with the World Wide Web protocol in 1990-1991, introduced by Tim Berners-Lee, and further developments of graphic browser interfaces, access to the Internet has become far more user friendly. In the more developed countries, this resulted in an exponential growth of online usage from 1993 onwards (Goggin 2000) which suggested untapped commercial possibilities. As Goggin points out: '[s]low to appreciate the virtues of an often anarchic, communal, public-spirited and text-intensive internet culture, it was the advent of the Web that spurred profit-making corporations to finally get wired' (p. 104). To accommodate such developments in 1992, the National Science Foundation Act was amended to allow for commercial traffic online. By the end of the decade corporations were rushing to establish their presence on the Internet in the hope of securing for themselves and their shareholders substantial profits. As Goggin (2000)



observes, commercial interest had a fundamental effect on the Internet, ‘... a worldwide communications system developed, run and funded for much of its life by governments, not-for-profit research institutions, universities, individuals and associations working on a voluntary basis’ (p. 103). Therefore, he argues: ‘... commercialization poses distinct challenges for the way the public spheres of citizens’ interaction on the internet have and can be conceived’ (p. 103).

Corporate interest in the Internet went hand in hand with a move on the part of various governments to rethink the Internet as a publicly-owned, free access non-profit research and information resource. The problem of shrinking governmental budgets and telecommunications reforms with ever growing online usage found its solution in the commercial sector. As Goggin comments, ‘[b]y the end of the 1990s, access to the internet was largely in the grip of a bewildering array of commercial internet service providers and telecommunication companies’ (p. 105). One of the side effects of such a transformation was the sensational stock market fortune made by newly established online ventures, often based on initial virtual profit listings. The commercial sector followed governments and academic institutions in their enthusiasm for the Internet. However, corporate enthusiasm was driven by a different set of interests, specifically the sale of goods and services. As Goggin points out, corporations suddenly had an opportunity to set up their shop fronts online that would be open 24 hours and through the technology combine many of existing ways to attract customers with new ways made possible by the technology itself. The commercial development of the Internet also resulted in the appearance of online advertising. Such a turn of events has fuelled debates to this day, particularly around the introduction of spamming, giving rise to the criticism that corporate investors lack understanding of Internet culture (Clarke 1999).

The Internet attracted commercial interest not only for its potential to approach consumers in a novel way but as Dawson and Foster (1998) argue, because it complemented commercial interest in the ‘artificial stimulation of demand’. As Miller (2000) explains, ‘... this ability to target consumers is what makes the internet attractive to business. By its very nature – interactivity –



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the information highway and internet offer the possibility of much more effective ‘artificial stimulation of demand’ (p. 113). Dawson and Fosters (1998) point out that there is no doubt that the Internet opens up vast new markets, ‘... which also means expanding the range and effectiveness of targeting, motivation research, product management, and sales communication – that is, total marketing strategy’ (p. 58). However, they argue that initial commercial desire to produce a ‘perfect market-place’, which is meant to displace an entire system of organised capitalism with an ‘electronic republic’ will not materialise (p. 51). Such enthusiasm stemming from the popular understanding of the Internet as a place offering wealth, whether in terms of knowledge or commercial profit, Dawson and Foster argue, is unfounded. To substantiate their belief, they draw on the political and economic history of communications, which ‘... is one increasingly dominated by oligopoly – a state of limited competition between a few powerful companies’ (in Miller 2000:113). Dawson and Foster (1998) maintain that the Internet will be no exception.

Finally, the early attractiveness of the Internet – for its ‘anarchic’ structure, decentralised networks of communication upsetting the previously established media patterns alongside the rise of fragmentation resulting in marginalised voices being heard – gave rise to belief in a future that is more not less democratic replacing monopoly with a ‘choice’ (Poster 1995). However, the commercialization of the Internet, and particularly the development of portals demonstrated that such claims may have been over optimistic. As Miller (2000) concludes, investors and markets prefer oligopoly since it is a sign of stability, hence the process of commercialisation of the Internet has pushed towards such stability: ‘[i]n short, the markets, through portals, have displaced the idea of the internet as a democratic, decentralised medium and put in motion its domination by a few very large old and new media firms’ (Miller 2000:120). And so just as the 1990s exhibit ever growing enthusiasm for the Internet as a tool to promote new democratic social futures, it is also a time when the Internet goes through aggressive commercialisation that tries to deny its decentralised nature. Such rapid commercialisation redefines the context within which the Internet is consumed and becomes meaningful to its users. However, it is not just the history of the Internet that can offer a useful perspective for understanding this medium; a focus



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on interactivity provides interesting insight into the positioning of design practice as an online activity.

### ***Interactivity***

#### **Defining Concepts**

On an ideological level, Lister et al (2003) argue that interactivity '... is understood as one of the key 'value added' characteristics' of the Internet, where before there was 'passive consumption' today people are offered interactivity. In defining interactivity Lister et al states: '[t]he term stands for a more powerful sense of user engagement with media texts, a more independent relation to sources of knowledge, individualised media use, and greater user choice' (p. 20). It is important to note that this understanding of interactivity draws on neo-liberal discourse, where the user is predominantly seen as a consumer and values are measured based on the notion of commodity. Within this view the user is seen as a person in change of their individual lifestyle defined by choices and possibilities of the market place (Lister et al. 2003). Therefore, interactivity is seen as a process of maximising choice whilst interacting with the Internet. Lister et al (2003) argue '... it is necessary for the user actively to intervene as well as [view or read] ... in order to produce meaning. This intervention actually subsumes other modes of engagement such as 'playing', 'experimenting', and 'exploring' under the idea of interaction' (p. 21). Until this point within design processes, the viewer did not have such freedom of engagement. Much was prescribed by the designer. In the interactive environment however, the design approach has to change to accommodate this flexibility and participation on the part of the user. Lister et al. (2003) go on with further unpicking of the notion of interactivity discussing 'hypertextual navigation' whereby users rely on computer hardware and software to make reading choices from the media texts. 'The end results of such interactions will be that the user constructs for him or herself an individualised text made up from all the segments of texts which they call up through their navigation process' (p. 21). Furthermore, the navigational environments may be 'extractive' or 'immersive'; the first is '... text-based experience aimed at finding and connecting bits of information' and the latter one offers to the users' '... sensory



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pleasures of spatial exploration' (Lister et al. 2003:21). Lister et al. also refers to 'registrational interactivity' which describes users as having the power/opportunity to 'write back into' the information they are viewing. Although the interactivity as a term is predominantly linked with recent phenomena of ICTs, its definition also has an historical dimension.

For the most part a layperson's understanding sees interactivity as the '... ability to facilitate interactions similar to interpersonal communication'. (Kiousis 2002:356) However, such a definition is ambiguous at best. In his discussion on interactivity Kiousis begins by referring to the Shannon and Weaver (1949) model, which allows receivers of a message to feedback to the sender of the message. Since 1949, the ability to provide such feedback became central to theorising and defining notions of interactivity. In 1988, Williams et al. proposed a shift in the understanding of interactivity by introducing the notion of 'third-order dependency', (Williams et al. 1988:10) which focused on the 'interconnected relationship' between the transmitted messages (in Kiousis 2002:359). Thus, the notion of interactivity developed from one that dwelt solely on feedback into encompassing relationships established between various transferred parts of content. In 1997 Rafaeli and Sudweeks put forward a broader and more comprehensive definition of interactivity that they summarised as follows: '[i]nteractivity is not a characteristic of the medium. It is a process-related construct about communication. It is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages' (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997). However, this definition did not account for the technological environment in which interactivity occurs or the role of the individual within this process. In her search for an interactivity model encompassing the individual's perspective McMillan (2002) acknowledges that, '... the individual user comes forward to a conceptual centre stage' (p. 275). She refers to work by Williams, Strover et al. (1994) and observations that '... understanding individuals' uses of ... [new technologies] is a key step in the theory-building process' (McMillan 2002:275). Furthermore, scholars such as Wu (1999) and Johnson (1998) recommended study of interactivity from the user-centred perspective as the most effective way to arrive at a plausible definition.



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In reviewing conceptualisations of interactivity that could apply within design I return to Kiouisis's (2002) proposition. He identifies three aspects: structure of technology, communication context and user perception (p. 372) that when combined present a plausible taxonomy of interactivity. Thus, interactivity is a '... degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency)' (p. 372). In addition, Kiouisis observes that it is important to acknowledge the users participation in defining interactivity through the perceived simulation of '... interpersonal communication and increase in their awareness of telepresence.' (p. 372). The value of such a definition is its acknowledgement of interactivity as a situated experience. Recognition of aspects of situatedness such as 'structure of technology', 'communication context' and 'user perception' provides designers with a more comprehensive, theoretical understanding of a highly practice – and experience – based phenomenon. However, whilst Kiouisis's definition of interactivity accounts for these aspects, there are still some critical questions that remain unanswered. Lister et al. (2003) point out three issues: problems of interpretation, problems of defining interactive texts/spaces and problems for producers. The difficulty of interpretation stems from the fact that the meaning of the information is not securely encoded, but rather depends on the path and process of decoding by the audience, which can differ from user to user. Moreover, not only is the process of interpretation fluid; in an interactive environment the information on offer is changing, each experience can be different and hence needs to be conceptualised as such. Finally, Lister et al. (2003) propose that the producers (for example designers) face a dilemma: '... how much control to give the user and how much control to retain' (p. 23), a dilemma located and worked out in the way the 'interface' between the user and the information is designed. 'As a place of interaction, the interface becomes a place where the potential for the creation of knowledge exists. As a place of knowledge, this is where we find meaning and create experiences which are memorable' (DiSalvo 2002:77).



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### Production and Consumption

Prior to the proliferation of digital communication the consumption of media was limited to a standardised number of sources. As Lister et al. (2003) describe, in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a shift has occurred resulting in a very large number of media outlets with highly differentiated information. From a way of life where people had access to limited number of TV network broadcasts, possibly no access to recording technologies like VCRs and DVD players, rather limited use of computers as tools of communication and no access at all to mobile media, they found themselves confronted by an unprecedented availability of media. As Lister et al. (2003) suggest: '[n]ational' newspapers are produced as geographically specific editions, network and terrestrial TV stations are surrounded by independent satellite and cable channels, the networked PC in the home offers a vast array of communication and media consumption opportunities, media telephony and ubiquitous computing offer a future in which there are no 'media free' zones in everyday life' (p. 30).

In such an environment, interactivity exerts an important influence. As Sabbah (1985) observes, the new communication media do not equate to 'mass media' as it has dominated for decades, where a limited number of messages were sent out to a homogenous audience. As she points out, '... [with] the multiplicity of the messages and sources, the audience itself becomes more selective ... it tends to choose its messages, so deepening its fragmentation, enhancing the individual relationship between sender and receiver' (p. 219). Hence, interactivity plays a crucial role in mediating patterns of consumption. There can be no more reliance on a standardisation and uniformity of content, distribution and production process. The new technologies bring with them decentralisation of the way information is communicated. This is reflected in forms of regulation and control, what systems are developed '... for professionalisation of communicative and creative process ...' and how consumers distinguish themselves from producers (Lister et al. 2003:31). As already mentioned the way users 'consume' the information interactively leads to greater customisation, serving their particular wants or needs. However, this should not be conflated with what some scholars argue is a democratisation of the media. As Castells (1996) points out, the multiplication of choices and



interactive possibilities has been accompanied by mergers of many media corporations: '... we are not living in a global village, but in customised cottages globally produced and locally distributed' (Castells 1996:341). The patterns of consumption have had effect on production. Although the literature review has focused on production in terms of design practice, here I would like to illustrate the connection. 'The traditional boundaries and definitions between different media processes are breaking down as craft skills of media production become more generally dispersed throughout the population as a whole in the form of IT skills' (Lister et al. 2003:32). Furthermore, certain types of information and communication technology encourage consumers to become producers due to the technical ease of hardware or software or interactive nature of the content (Lister et al. 2003). Lister et al. conclude that these new technological forms generate dispersed communication. This means '... at a level of consumption ... we have seen multiplication, segmentation and resultant individualisation of media use ... at a level of production ... we have witnessed the multiplication of the sites for production of media texts and a higher diffusion within the economy as a whole than was previously the case' (p. 34). Studying consumption within the context of an interactive Internet, can offer interesting insights into the identities of those who consume and the choices they make. As Mackay (1997) observes, '[r]ather than being a passive, secondary, determined activity, consumption ... is seen increasingly as an activity with its own practices, tempo, significance and determination' (p. 3-4). He also suggests that production of the technologies that are used to create interactive environments in many cases is affected by the way in which they are consumed. Recognising this dependence is important in the context of interactivity and design, where interactivity mediates consumption and production.

### **Implications for Design Practice**

That the definition of 'audience' in an interactive environment changes from a 'viewer' of visual culture to a 'user' and from a stable path of generating meaning to fluid interpretation, has important ramifications for design process. Following Veen (2001) interactivity is what sets the Internet apart in terms of design from other media like print, film or animation. In addition, within design, interactivity is seen as the way of the future. But most of the utopian, futuristic or



technologically determined theorising of interactivity within the design discipline does not necessarily correspond with the day-to-day reality of designing interactive web sites (Julier 2000). Although designers striving to work at the cutting edge of this technology might have access to the appropriate software, the end-users at present do not necessarily have the capacity to access latest developments. Thus, within the context of design a more appropriate formulation of interactivity can be seen as a '... narrative [situation] to be described in potentia and then set into motion – a process whereby model building supersedes storytelling, and the what-if engine replaces narrative sequence' (Cameron 1998 in Julier 2000:179). In this case, the designers act as creators and mediators of the potential models of interactive environments, where the users are in a position to act upon their own demands or needs. Such a definition alters significantly the relationship between designers and users. In this context, design, albeit still deeply entrenched in daily experiences, cannot exercise its 'dictatorial power'. As Julier (2000) argues, in the digital media '... [this] process contributes to 'decentring' of the message, so that not just one, but several messages may be configured by the reader' (p.178). Thus one feature that seems to come to the fore is the design process as negotiator and mediator of human intention to affect the virtual environment. As such, the creation of the actual content ceases to be the sole focus of the design process; rather the final aim is the '... presentation of the situation, in the provision of structures, sets of relationships and possibilities of narratives and flow which are experienced through them ...' (Julier 2000:177). The interactive Internet environment requires designers to be facilitators of communication through the supply of expertise and communication tools but it is the users who are required to find their own voice and significance.

From a feminist perspective, interactivity is seen as a possible tool of empowerment. As Warwick (1999) indicates, '[i]nteractivity has been identified by many as a positive means by which a personal intervention can be effected ...' (p. 16). She stresses that it allows the individual to construct '... relevant narrative from the material available. This foregrounds and lays bare the more usually concealed process of narration by permitting and encouraging the user to become conscious of her own arrangement and interpretation of information ...' (p. 16).



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In the process of users developing their own narratives, Warwick puts forward that they can overcome the traditional and often gendered narratives (in Martinson, Schwartz et al. 2002).

### *Internet and Female Users*

Before I begin to discuss the relationship between the Internet and female users, I want to draw attention to feminist theorising around the broader notion of women and technologies. Terry and Calvert (1997) make an observation about technologies: '... from the simple to the complex – [they] permeate the many seemingly discrete domains of our lives, and in so doing not only *reflect*, but, indeed at times, *structure* and *produce* the hierarchically organised binary opposition of masculinity and femininity that characterizes our present system of gender' (p. 7). This suggests that men and women are differently located vis-à-vis technology. Many feminist scholars have echoed the view that '... there are vast differences in this regard as to which women have access to technologies, under what conditions they have access, and to what uses different women put machines' (Terry and Calvert 1997:8). Differences also need to be acknowledged as to the types of tasks for which women use computers. As Terry and Calvert point out, '[t]here is a big incongruity between using a computer for tedious low-paid data entry jobs versus using it to analyse and process information in the service of maximising one's own profits' (p. 8). In her reflection on information technology and gender post-Beijing Conference, Regan Shade (1997) observes, '[a]ccess to the information infrastructure encompasses not just physical and technical mechanisms but a myriad [of] economic and social factors' (p. 182). Therefore, the context in which female users' relationship with the Internet [as a technology] exists needs to include factors like lack of money, exclusion from technical training and various socialising processes that discourage women from thinking that this technology is their's to use and invent. Much difficulty also stems from the history of the medium's development. As is documented, the Internet '... has its roots in the so called military-industrial complex, which according to many feminist critics inevitably constitutes it as a medium deeply embedded in masculine codes and values (van Zoonen 2002:6). With the broadening of Internet application into academia, these online technologies still remained a male domain. Hence, it became



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another programming tool contextualised by heavily male dominated computing industries and sciences. As Scott (1998) argues, '[a]lthough there were several notable women pioneers of the field, such as the flamboyant and brilliant Ada Lovelace ... those who first explored the possibilities of this new form of communication were generally males working within the field of computational science within private institutions'. Thus, unavoidably, '... the use of cyberspace by males within a specific context has significantly influenced its present culture' (Scott 1998). The initial predominantly male origin of the Internet would have had a significant influence on how this technology and its content would have been seen and contextualised by its users, both male and female. Under such circumstances, this emerging technology would instil and propagate a gendered divide between what is appropriate for men and what is fitting for women. As Stewart Millar (1998) argues, '... [i]n contemporary western culture, men are assumed to make the machines, and, if culturally appropriate, women may use them'. She goes on to explain such thinking as grounded in '... traditional images of masculinity [representing] ... the technological 'Progress of Man' from so called barbarism to civilization' (p. 15). According to Stewart Millar '[s]uch an identification is reinforced by millennia of historically constituted gender constructions that have come to define our very notions of what it is to be male and female' (p. 15). Furthermore, in my discussion on the history of the Internet I referred to the metaphor of the final frontier. Returning briefly to this notion and its effect on the way female users interact with online spaces, Silver (2000) observes that '... the net-as-frontier metaphor serves to construct cyberspace as a plane of manly hostility, a space unsafe for women and children' (p. 26). Miller (1995) further points towards the dangers of such metaphors and their possible effects as to how female use of the Internet can be limited. '... the idea that women merit special protections in an environment as incorporeal as the net is intimately bound up with the idea that women's minds are weak, fragile, and unsuited to the rough and tumble of public discourse' (Miller 1995:57). Moreover, Doheny-Farina (1996) maintains that the metaphor of frontier '... conjures up traditional American images of the individual lighting out from the territories, independent and hopeful, to make a life' (p. 16). The metaphor also connotes 'notions of the Internet as a 'boystown'' often represented in the various magazines and newspapers that



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discuss the medium (Silver 2000). All of these readings do not offer encouragement to or present an inviting place for female users.

Despite the potentially hostile environment, women have nonetheless participated in its use and development. Feminist scholars referred to this participation in various ways, including highlighting its subversive potential. Spender (1995) claimed that Internet technology is close to the core values of femininity. Braidotti (1996), on the other hand, contended '... that it enables a transgression of the dichotomous categories of male and female, constructing transgender or even genderless human identities and relations' (in van Zoonen 2002:6). In 1997, Wakeford argued for recognition of the positive sides of becoming connected. She pointed out that '... media coverage of instances of sexual harassment of women on the Net and in chat rooms has served to underscore the restrictive stereotypes of women as victims of male aggression, for whom cyberspace is characterised as unsafe space' (in Terry and Calvert 1997:10). Wakeford (1997) believes these stereotypes overshadow the creative and political uses to which female users have adapted the Internet sometimes across geographical and cultural differences. Although she does not deny that the Internet is dominated by men, she notes that Internet use, '... for nerdgirls and geekgirls is a way to build community and take part in the creative opportunities of feminist and anti-racist self-representation and political opposition fashioned through a strategic use of information technology' (in Terry and Calvert 1997:10). Moreover, when extending the meaning of what constitutes technology to embrace traditionally feminine areas such as the domestic sphere, there are numerous examples of women's involvement with technology and contributions to its innovation (Plant 1997). However, as Singh (2001) points out, the domestication of the use of the Internet is still new: 'Unlike the telephone, TV and the radio, the PC and the internet have not reached the stage where there are multiple and personal access points in the home, as has happened with older media (Livingstone 1999 in Singh 2001). 'The focus on the diffusion of the internet is still on the implications for the market rather than its social context and affects' (Singh 2001:396-397). Although the Internet and associated technologies are not considered women friendly, female users appear to combat some of these problems, by creating spaces that pertain just to women's interests (Spilker and



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Sørensen 2000; Rommes 2002). In many cases, these areas act as safe havens for their users, offering information ranging from specific problem solutions to tips on how to use the technology itself. Finally, Pohl (1997) comments that whether or not women find specific places or ways to behave or interact on the Internet, these will always be gendered: 'Gender-specific behaviour can be found on two levels. The first is the actual behaviour of the Internet users, and the second focuses on the stereotypes and images people have' (Pohl 1997:193).

The commercial women's publishing industry has also recognised the potential of spaces created for female use only. However, here the motivation is not necessarily to create safe-havens but rather to offer female only consumption opportunities defined by gender stereotypes. As reviewed in the February 2001 issue of Metro 'Web Focus', '...the web has been a male domain, an exciting new playground for geeks and chancers, but this has changed as it has matured in to mainstream medium ... business have spent billions attracting women online' (Associated Newspapers Ltd. 2001). According to Internet surveys, women tend to go online with a purpose in opposition to men who tend to surf randomly (Tran 2001). It is this purposefulness that the publishing industry wants to tap into. Basing their experience on the paper tradition, publishing companies and household/demographic surveys are very aware that women control the majority of household income and spending decisions (Azhar 1999). By making products accessible at home, via the Internet, the publishing industry tries to reach a new market that might not have been accessible before. Weale (2000) observes that this is '...one of the key differences in the way women are targeted. They are seen first and foremost as shoppers; everything is dictated by the commercial imperative'. Due to such a narrow definition, Internet portals targeting female users mostly focus on providing shopping experiences to match already existing habits. However, what they offer does not necessarily explore women's full potential as self-aware individuals but rather sees them as 'unadulterated shopaholics' (Weale 2000). According to Weale, the Internet sites she investigated '... sadly, barely ignite a spark'. Her quick survey conducted with women working in the web industry, brought back comments about these sites such as 'banal', 'patronising' and 'disappointing' (Weale 2000).



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Such observations reflect two sides of the relationship between female users and the online publishing industry. Firstly, the reluctance or inability of the publishing industry to use the technology to generate appropriate experiences and not simply reproduce the existing formats based on mail order catalogues. Secondly, inability on the part of the industry to abandon female gender stereotypes when targeting female audiences. As Dukes (2000), founder of *thinknatural.com*, comments:

*'... Everybody's in a bit of a rush to capture market share ... They are going for what they think is a big target market, ie women, but which may prove not to exist. They are trying to be all things to all women. I do not think you can meaningfully target 'women'. Targeting women just as women is about as meaningful as targeting men just as men' (in Weale 2000).*

As it can be seen from such comments the existing gender structures are perpetuated even though the communication medium has changed. It is still about exploitation and dependency disguised as respect for the so called new niche market consumer. As Stewart Millar (1998) observes '... [p]atterns of consumption play a significant role in the creation of the new digital age. Consumerism provides a way to spread digital technology throughout society thereby insuring its future dominance and creating dependency' (p. 154). Furthermore, I would attest to Pohl's (1997) observation that '[w]hen computer [Internet] usage is seen as gender specific, the expertise of women will, by definition, always be limited' (Pohl 1997:191). Hence, as Wakeford proposes, '... further investigation of women's presences on the web will require a far wider variety of metaphors in a continuing attempt at a new vocabulary of women and technology' (p. 63). Recalling the dilemma mentioned earlier, one way to begin developing such a vocabulary is through questioning the design processes that produce that technology and define its users' interfaces. In the following section I will discuss precisely that relationship between production of the Internet through design and its consumption by users.

### ***The Implications for Design Practice***

In terms of design practice computer technologies played an important role as design tools prior to the development of the Internet, affecting the development of design processes within the print industry. However, it did not take long for designers to discover that computers can be



more than just tools; in the case of the Internet, they also constitute a design product (Julier 2000; Veen 2001). Whilst designing for print media such as a magazines presented designers with many complexities and required in-depth knowledge encompassing both skill and experience, the Internet provided additional design challenges. As Sano (1996) argues, '[d]esigning [a] large-scale web site essentially requires a collaborative team involved in a design activity, working closely together on a continual basis, yet dependant on different skillsets' (p. 8). In addition, when the designers are required to structure users' experience, in the case of magazines they attempt to guarantee a linear content progression. In the case of the Internet however, due to its hypertext format and interactivity, the experience could follow any particular direction; hypertext – meaning text which includes links to other documents – encourages users to move from one bit of text to another. Such a reading indicates that the user can move from one idea to another in a multi-linear, non-sequential manner (Gauntlett 2000). Thus, the need arose to formulate new understandings of this medium in design terms. As Julier (2000) points out, '... the designer takes on a larger and more challenging role in the editorial arrangement of the content' (p. 170). As the Internet industry gathered momentum, it gave rise to flexible design organisations that were not composed just of designers. According to Sano (1996) such organisations would consist of programmers, visual designers, interface designers, editors and writers as well as marketers. They thrived on cross-disciplinary collaboration addressing all the complexities of the given situation. As Julier (2000) observes, '... designers in this domain provided a mixture of technological know-how and narrative creativity ... [They became] both cultural and technological intermediaries' (p. 173). However Hammerich and Harrison (1996) criticise that '... almost everyone who works in Web development makes judgements based on their own experience as users' (p. 11). Furthermore, due to lack of 'historical record' of high and low quality sites, Hammerich and Harrison highlight an absence of quality standards. 'Only a few know about researchers who analyze Web sites for usability with regard to readability, visuals, and navigation, and even fewer are aware of the work being done by semioticians who have started to explore how different modes of communication interact and make meaning when combined in a document' (Hammerich and Harrison 2002:11).



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When discussing the Internet and design practice, one cannot help but look at the very practical aspects of this relationship. As McGovern, Norton and O'Dowd (2002) describe, '... Web design is about content design. It's about laying out content so that it can be read easily. It's about organizing content so that it can be navigated and searched with ease. It's about getting the right content to the right reader at the right time' (p. 17). The main requirement is that the Internet is usable. As Nerone and Barnhurst (2001) have so eloquently observed, '[f]or the benign dictatorship of the editor, web technology substitutes the tyranny of the mouse. Content gains its prominence in the online environment from frequency of user activity, not from priorities of public affairs reporting' (p. 471). McGovern, Norton and O'Dowd (2002) maintain that '[s]tudy after study reinforces the practical, functional mindset of the person who comes to the Web' (p. 17). The objective of the designer is therefore to create an Internet environment that is user-centric, '... concise, well written, well organized, well presented, and well targeted' (McGovern, Norton et al. 2002:31). However, most importantly it needs to be simple in its access and interaction, making the user feel '... comfortable, feeling familiar, feeling that they know how to navigate quickly' (McGovern, Norton et al. 2002:27). As Veen (2001) states, '... designers had to stop relying only on experimentation with interfaces, and concentrate on building sites that were simple and consistent.' (p. 31). To juxtapose these very practical design prescriptions with a more in-depth approach to online design Veen (2001) draws out the historical connection to other design industries that have been influential in this environment. By pointing out the connection between the publishing industries standardisation of layout through a 'markup' or 'indirection' and HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) used for Web design, Veen highlights a historical tradition. In this way he links the longstanding history, tradition and design processes of paper publishing together with the emerging Internet technologies. 'In the historical tradition of authoring, editing, and designing information, the Web browser became the automated typesetter for standard set of general document codes' (Veen 2001:11).

Finally, I would like to return to Julier (2000), who sees the relationship between designers and online based outcomes as '... the exposition and guidebook, they promise both immersion and detachment, random sensual chaos and structured mediation and regulation' (p.189). Hence,



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the design of an interface that mediates between the technology and the users has an impact on the intentions and success of the Internet spaces (Silver 2000). This focus on the notion of participation has developed into a new field of study called 'participatory design'. Schuler and Namioka (1993) define it as '... a new approach towards computer systems design in which the people destined to use the system play a critical role in *designing* it' (p. xi). However, the efforts on the part of designers to recognise the need to involve users in the design process have not always amounted to much, particularly if those users were women. In the following paragraphs I present examples as to how online design practice approached the issue of creating outcomes for female users.

As previously discussed '... the entrenched masculine practices of the [design] profession have constricted the development of work by women, both as practitioners and theorists, though there have been some important recent contributions' (Warwick 1999:14). For example Matlow (1999) suggests that the introduction of new technologies is symptomatic of a paradigm shift from 'modernist graphic design towards fragmented postmodern approach' (in Warwick 1999:15). This shift is exemplified by '... the consequent movement away from rigid structures and principles to the transparent and ephemeral which exists for the most part within virtual dimensions' (Warwick 1999:15). However the question arises as to how much design practice itself has been affected by such a shift and the extent to which this has become evident in the representation of gender in its outcomes. Oudshoorn, Rommes and Stienstra's (2004) research on gender and design cultures in ICT suggests that there is often a mismatch between the intended target group and the eventual users and if the mismatch is acknowledged it is often too late for it to be addressed through design since the technology is already stabilised and there is no room for additional alterations on the ground level (Oudshoorn et al. 2004). Frequently the target audiences are either defined as 'everybody' or as 'all women' or 'all men'. Such definitions and their relation to the Internet as technology Oudshoorn, Rommes and Stienstra maintain, cannot be seen as isolated events but rather should be considered in the larger context, particularly if these contexts play a major role in defining the user. As Oudshoorn, et al argue, since many technologies have a history with strong male connotations this has an effect



on how the users are being defined. Therefore, they suggest the design of services mediated via the Internet need special considerations to overcome the gender-bias being built in when creating user profiles. However, Oudshoorn et al maintain that configurations of the user which incorporate a particular gender-bias has its roots in design itself. Such a process they refer to as the use of 'I-methodology'. This means that '[i]nstead of assessing the interests and competencies of users by formal procedures, designers ... generally took their own preferences and skills as major guidelines in the design' (p. 53). As the project teams in these cases consisted mainly of men and few women, the design '... largely adopted a masculine design style, [where] the interests and competencies inscribed in the design were predominantly masculine' (Oudshoorn et al 2004:53). Therefore they argue, it is not just important to study the identities of the users and their relationship to the Internet, but also it is crucial to investigate the identities of the designers and their impact on the design outcomes. Oudshoorn, Rommes and Stienstra (2004) conclude that generalist profiling of online users to fit the design process does not begin to address the complexity of the actual people who engage with that design. Although they acknowledge that their research did not account for the fact that users themselves may appropriate and shape the technology in various ways, Oudshoorn et al's research illuminates a gap between design strategies and the definition of the user. 'Due to lack of differentiation and the use of the I-methodology, ... [online sites] were designed not for everybody but primarily for men' (2004: 54). This particular study raises a very important point about how design process embeds particular gender values into design outcomes. It also indicates how the introduction of new forms of communication does not necessarily provide design practitioners with totally new paradigms to work within, nor guarantee fresh thinking. The work of Oudshoorn et al suggests that the relationship between gender and design practice has not changed even when investigated within the new context of the Internet. Simultaneously, there is a great need to investigate alternative ways to tackle gender and its influences on the design of Internet technologies. The following paragraphs provide brief examples of the different ways in which design practice is used to create online spaces and the gender consequences of these designs.



My first example is a case where design processes are used to insert gendered assumptions about products and consequently about users in order to achieve broader market availability. In their discussion of design and computer entertainment technologies, Martinson, Schwartz and Walker Vaughan (2002) observe this condition. Their focus on women and leisure investigates reasons why women would or would not engage with Internet technologies. Their findings point towards design as the key reason why women would not consider online participation and activities as part of their leisure. Martinson et al advocate that computer entertainment technologies in general (including the Internet) are designed for 'all' participants. However, they argue that 'all participants' means implicitly, 'mainly men' (Martinson, et al. 2002). Such a design approach allows for a variety of gendered assumptions to be built in to the product, rendering it 'uninteresting' for other users. Therefore, Martinson et al suggest that due to a generic design approach, it is not that these technologies '... are not compelling for women, rather than that, women are not interested in ... [them]' (p. 46). Furthermore, they conclude: '[d]esigning with women in mind might lead to adaptable entertainment technologies that will appeal to broader market segments. Conceivably, computer-based leisure needs to become more versatile in order to meet the needs of a more diverse population and wider audience' (Martinson et al. 2002:46). What Martinson et al (2002) propose is that the Internet becomes gendered by design because of the longstanding tradition of assumptions about what constitutes the user. The assumptions are rarely questioned by designers, who are too busy trying to meet their deadlines or accommodate their clients. Even though the Internet technologies offer new possibilities, through the process of design these opportunities become gendered (Martinson et al. 2002).

Another example of gendering of design for the Internet is proposed by Rommes (2002), who questions the number of women designers involved in the new technologies. Rommes observes that initial reasons for low female Internet participation was lack of online spaces designed for female users. She argues '[i]n the course of time, some places for the empowerment of women were created. But why did it take so long before places for women were created on the Internet?' (p. 401). Her diagnosis of the problem puts the blame on design.



Initially Rommes points to the male dominated design of the Internet technologies themselves. However, she does acknowledge Henwood's (1993) argument warning against such generalisations. '... we should be wary of arguments that suggest that more women in systems design will, in and of itself, effect change in the design process itself and lead to new and more progressive priorities being adopted' (Henwood 1993:43). Therefore, Rommes (2002) concludes that women who design within masculine environments such as in the early stages of the Internet might not be in position to address issues of gender discrimination. However, she believes the answer might lie in giving '...women's organizations influence in the design process of new technology with the specific task of paying attention to women's issues' (p. 421). Rommes, however, forewarns that '[d]esigners, women's organizations and subsidizing organizations should ... take care that this influence is given space from a very early stage in the development of the technology' (p. 21).

The questioning of the relationship between gender and design within the context of the Internet has also been addressed by other scholars. Of particular interest are studies that use design as a tool tackling gender issues within these new technologies. These studies often follow what is generally termed the 'third wave' of research on women and computers (Spilker and Sørensen 2000) and a realisation that computers are becoming more and more part of everyday communication and cultural exchange. Such recent studies of gender, design and ICT highlighted '... acknowledgement of flexibility in the frames of reference' (Spilker and Sørensen 2000), as well as realisation, genderwise that these technologies form part of quite varied set of practices (Berg 1996; Aune and Sørensen 1998; Lie 1998). Thus, these studies identify and legitimate a relationship between gender and technology, where one is constructed by the other and vice versa (Spilker and Sørensen 2000).

The case studies presented by Spilker and Sørensen (2000), give examples of the development and implementation of design strategies that would be in position to manage gender in a digital technological context. As Spilker and Sørensen observe, JenteROM (a CD-Rom targeting female users) demonstrated '... a clearcut example of a mutual reconfiguration of technology



and gender' (p. 280). The CD-Rom makes an attempt to transform this type of technology into a 'feminine artefact' paralleled with what Spilker and Sørensen refer to as the '... effort to change some aspects of the definition of femininity' (p. 280). On the other hand the HjemmeNett web service, they observe, uses design strategies to create spaces for both male and female participation, relying on gender as an important consideration in developing such outcomes. They argue that each artefact uses different design strategies embodied by what both researchers term 'action concepts', to achieve its goal. As Spilker and Sørensen (2000) indicate, JenteROM inscribes its technology with the dichotomous opposition of female vs. male in order to acknowledge gender, where as HjemmeNett sees male and female genders as end points within a continuous scale. Thus, as an alternative to Rommes (2002), who points to the inclusion of women in the practice of design, Spilker and Sørensen (2000) believe that design process itself has to address gender exclusion. In citing this case study, I fully agree with Spilker and Sørensen in their assertion that '... JenteROM and HjemmeNett indicate a profound change in gender dynamics of computers and multimedia' (p. 281). Furthermore, I would argue that this phenomenon is starting to appear in different geographical and cultural locations. This stance also goes in line with Sørensen's (1997) insistence that the mass media consumption of the Internet and related technologies with its incessant desire to attract ever new users has displaced the location of these technologies, from being 'leading-edge' to becoming an increasingly mainstream medium of communication and information. Such a shift thus allows and can become a nurturing ground or a starting point for, alternative methods of inclusion through designing gender rather than a historically based use of gender exclusively. However, cases like JenteROM or HjemmeNett are still rare and more often than not researchers come across discourses suggesting a gender divide when investigating the Internet as a medium of information and communication.

As Whiteley (1993) concludes, '...[c]onsumerist design trades deeply and – in its terms – successfully on gender stereotypes for constructing the meaning of and the context for a product, and it will remain fundamentally conservative' (p. 157). However, Schön (1983)



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

elaborates that there is a need for the designer as a professional to analyse the different ways of framing a given design situation or problem. He presents the following analogy:

*'When a practitioner becomes aware of his [her] frames, he also becomes aware of the possibility of alternative ways of framing the reality of his [her] practice. He [she] takes note of the values and norms to which he [she] has given priority, and those he [she] has given less importance, or left out of account altogether. Frame awareness tends to entertain awareness of dilemma.'* (p. 310).

Although Schön does not address issues of gender, he does present an alternative approach through his 'reflective practice'. Therefore, it is within the designers' power and in their interest to search for new ways of communicating, whilst as producers, to question the framework and usefulness of the executed products. However Wakeford (2000) reminds us that it is important not to forget the politics of identity involved in designing. She poses the question as to what effect this might have on the production of the Internet and how could this be studied. This research provides one of possible answers to that question with its focus on design of commercial online spaces for female users; users whose '... interaction [with the Internet] is both public and private, conformist and rebellious and forms just a small segment of a much longer international, historical conversation where women and girls continue to grapple with a range of definitions of what it means to be feminine' (Davies 2004:48). In addition the literature strongly suggests that to resolve the complexity of the relationship between gender and design it is not enough to just 'add women and stir' (Harding 1986). Rather as Oudshoorn, Rommes et al. (2004) postulate, there is a need for '... a transformation of the dominant cultural image of technology, a drastic change of the technology push orientated routines and practices of current design communities, and a renegotiation of gender identities in relation to technology' (p. 54).

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## **Chapter 3**

Methods



### Conducting Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an approach to inquiry with a long history and tradition of generating knowledge through various methods. It is not the intention of this chapter to provide a comprehensive survey of what constitutes qualitative research but rather outline significant points to enable the reader to situate the epistemological and methodological choices explained in subsequent sections.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) offer the following definition of qualitative research: it '... is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations' (p. 3). Furthermore, as Strauss and Corbin (1990) note, these practices use qualitative forms of analysis to obtain insights into the problem at hand. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) go on to explain qualitative research as a study of '... things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of their meanings people bring to them' (p. 3). Such study can involve a wide variety of means of collection and sources of empirical data from '... case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artefacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, ... [to] visual texts' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:3). All the obtained materials have the potential to describe events and their meanings in human lives, a potential that is also a source of rich debate. As Denzin and Lincoln state '... the field of qualitative research is defined primarily by a series of essential tensions, contradictions, and hesitations. These tensions – many of them emerging after 1991 – work back and forth between competing definitions and conceptions of the fields' (p. xi).

Becker (1996) argues that qualitative research is distinguished by five significant characteristics: (a) uses of positivism and post positivism; (b) acceptance of post-modern sensibilities; (c) capturing the individual's point of view; (d) examining the constraints of everyday life; and (e) securing rich description. Positivism and post positivism science traditions '... hold to naïve and



## Chapter 3: Methods

critical realist positions concerning reality and its perception' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:9). Historically, qualitative inquiry was positioned within a positivist perspective. Vidich and Stanford (2000) argue that positivist methods of qualitative inquiry are just one way to conduct research presenting stories about society or social world. Richardson (2000) maintains that methods located within a positivist or post positivist paradigm are no better or worse than any other methods, however it is important to recognise that they present different kinds of stories. However, Flick (1998) points out, '... traditional deductive methodologies ... are failing ... thus research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them' (p. 2). More recently, many qualitative researchers have rejected the positivist approach to follow 'poststructural and/or postmodern sensibilities'. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) argue such an approach to qualitative research allows for inclusion of '... verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, an ethic of caring, political praxis, multivoiced texts, and dialogues with subject' (p. 10), a sensibility which allows qualitative researchers to capture the individual's point of view through methods such as detailed interviewing and observation. Qualitative researchers can allow themselves to move close to subjects of their investigation, as they are released from the constraints of 'inferential empirical methods' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Furthermore, due to the interpretative nature of qualitative research, its practitioners are more likely to have to confront the complexities of the everyday of the social worlds they are investigating. Hence, Denzin and Lincoln maintain, qualitative researchers are in position to examine 'the constraints of everyday life'. They are '... committed to an emic, idiographic, case-based position, which directs their attention to the specifics of particular cases' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:10). Finally, qualitative researchers believe in the value of 'rich description'.

In terms of understanding research methods available to qualitative researchers, Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) characterisation of qualitative research as 'a set of interpretative activities' (p. 6) is a helpful cue. They write that this approach to inquiry does not '... privilege ... single methodological practice over another ... It has no theory or paradigm that is distinctly its own ... nor does qualitative research have a distinct set of methods or practices that are entirely its own' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:6). Nelson (1992) attests to this, saying that all qualitative



research methods ‘... can provide important insights and knowledge’ (p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) thus offer a highly comprehensive list of possible methods available to qualitative practitioners. ‘Qualitative researchers use semiotics, narrative, content, discourse, archival and phonemic analysis, even statistics, tables, graphs, and numbers. They also draw upon and utilize the approaches, methods, and techniques of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, rhizomatics, deconstructionism, ethnography, interviews, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, survey research, and participant observation, among others’ (p. 6). Ultimately, the decision of whether and importantly, how to conduct qualitative research lies with the researcher themselves. As Nelson, Treichler et al. (1992) suggests, ‘[q]ualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multiparadigmatic in focus ... [Its practitioners] are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretative understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions’ (p. 4).

In choosing to conduct qualitative research, I position my research within a genre of activities, philosophies and interpretive practices. This choice has been based on what Nelson (1992) observes as dependency ‘... upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context’ (p. 2). My methods were therefore chosen from those available to qualitative inquiry and guided by appropriateness to this particular research.

## **Epistemology, Methodology and Method**

Feminism continues to provide a rich source of ingredients to debates regarding research methods, methodology and epistemology and I begin with a brief discussion of how these terms have been understood in feminist research.

Following Stanley and Wise (1990), *method* is understood as a set of ‘techniques’ or research practices. A feminist researcher draws on a variety of methods, many of which – it must be added – are not the monopoly of a feminist approach, including discourse, documentary



analysis and qualitative interviewing. *Methodology*, according to Stanley and Wise, is understood as a perspective or broad theoretically informed framework that may or may not presuppose particular methods. Stanley and Wise (1990) go on to define *epistemology* as ‘... a theory of knowledge which addresses central questions such as: who can be [a] knower, what can be known, what constitutes and validates knowledge, and what the relationship is or should be between knowing and being (that is, between epistemology and ontology)’ (Stanley and Wise 1990:26) and Harding (1987) proposes that epistemology provides the foundation for both method and methodology. My research is concerned with unpacking the epistemology of gender and consumption manifest in the context of a commercial women’s online portal. The methods and methodology therefore need to accommodate a great degree of flexibility in order to withstand and be responsive to, what is an ever changing technological and social environment. Acknowledging the competitiveness of industry characterised by tight deadlines, the methodology and methods need to attend to time limitations. Finally, the research context calls for sensitivity to the accessibility of people working within the industry and their willingness to participate in the research.

### ***Feminist Postmodernism***

It is my argument that there is a need for Internet designers to be aware of how gender is represented and furthermore be conscious of their ability and responsibility to apply this awareness to design practice. In a design context which has traditionally aimed for near-clinical objectivity and attendant distance from its audiences, such concerns go somewhat against the grain and may not always find a voice. As McCoy (2003) observes, ‘[t]he myth of objectivity unfortunately does much to disengage the designer from compassionate concerns ... abstraction, modernisms’ revolutionary contribution to the visual language of art and design, further distances both designer and audience from involvement’ (p. 5). I therefore consciously choose frameworks that will illuminate the biases within this pursuit of the universal, the objective and/or the androgynous. In particular, I situate my research within feminist theorising which hinges on ‘... a premise that the nature of reality in western society is unequal and



hierarchical' (Skeggs 1994:77). Moreover, within feminist research the notion of scientific objectivity has been subject to constant and critical scrutiny (Mies 1983; Maynard 1994; Maynard and Purvis 1994).

Knowledge produced by the design discipline has presented for the most part, a male perspective (Anscombe 1984) thus organising and defining women's contribution in a particular, often biased and limiting way. Whereas, I perceive feminism as encouraging a '... provocative and productive unpacking of taken-for-granted ideas about women in specific material, historical, and cultural contexts' (Olesen 2000:215). In its many forms and variants - as Olesen (2000) points out - feminist qualitative research '... centers and makes problematic women's diverse situations as well as the institutions that frame these situations' (p. 216). It allows for a far more comprehensive approach to the analysis of gender. Conceiving of the '... production and realisation of gender ... [as] a complex matrix of material, racial, and historical circumstances' (Olesen 2000:228) it widens the scope of critique to include design, among other disciplines, in its purview.

Feminist theorising now offers the researcher several ways of conceptualising epistemological concerns: *feminist empiricism*, *feminist standpoint epistemology* and *feminist postmodernism*. Feminist empiricism '... does not critique the norms of science itself but the way in which the scientific method has been practiced' (Letherby 2003:43). Feminist standpoint epistemology on the other hand, proposes that '... experience should be the starting point for any knowledge production and insists on the need to investigate and theorize the social world from the perspective of women (Letherby 2003:44). Although both these routes can be very informative in tracing the unequal positioning of women within design, it is my belief that feminist postmodernism offers the most insightful perspective from which to question design knowledge and its production. Waugh (1998) notes that postmodernism '... completely rejects the possibility of the objective collection of facts and insists that knowledge is rooted in the values and interests of particular groups' (in Letherby 2003:51). This position does not assume or aim for universal or 'grand theories'. 'Rather, it refers to subjugated knowledges, which tell different



stories and have different specificities' (Letherby 2003:51). In a design context, it is a stance which recognises and addresses the various layers of knowledge belonging to different interest groups which converge in their interaction with a design outcome. It presents an opportunity not only to question the male production of women's design history and/or design practice, but also to account for facets such as women's experiences and knowledge production as design theoreticians, producers and consumers. As part of its construction of knowledge, feminist postmodernism takes into account the specificity of time and place (Williams 1996). Opposed to the generation of categories that can be used as universal tools of definition, Abbot and Wallace (1997) propose that within postmodernist thinking there is not one truth but many truths, none of which are privileged and each existing within different discourses. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault (1975) argues that power and knowledge are joined together in discourse. Design knowledge can therefore be seen as constructed through and existing within various discourses which, following a Foucauldian argument, include the regimes of design practice, gender and consumption. 'Thus, discourse, or a particular discursive formation, is to be understood as an amalgam of material practices and forms of knowledge linked together in a non-contingent relation.' (McNay 1994:108)

A problematic aspect of feminist postmodernism however, is its relativistic tendencies. In its rejection and/or destabilisation of universal categories – including that of 'woman' – feminist postmodernism has met with the charge that in so doing, it undermines both the possibility and validity of challenging 'women's oppression'. Alcoff (1988) asks '... how can we speak out against sexism as detrimental to the interests of women if the category is fictional?' (p. 20) and Hartsock (1990) argues that from a postmodern perspective, the claim that it is wrong to oppress women cannot be sustained as neither categories, 'women' nor 'oppression', can be clearly defined. And furthermore, Jackson (1992) questions how the claim that a feminist reading is more valid than another can be upheld.

An additional difficulty is posed by the assertion of postmodernist theory that meanings are communicated in language and discourse. As Ramazanoglu (1993) maintains, women's



experiences often point towards men's power dominating through forces that cannot be understood simply through discourse. Millen (1997) argues that feminist postmodernism exposes a tension between feminist theory and research. Providing a powerful critique of traditional epistemology and methods, this in turn brings to light the relationship between power and knowledge. At the same time, the particular form this critique takes can seriously undermine the political capacity of feminism in terms of its effect on gender relations and inequalities.

As indicated in the literature review, issues of gender (and) inequality have not received much attention in design theory and practice and the 'objective and androgynous' status quo in design has remained to a great extent intact. Notwithstanding the problematic aspects of a postmodernist approach as identified by feminist scholars, it offers a useful starting point to critique and challenge what is a predominantly male design history and epistemology. Locating the BEME.com case study within feminist postmodernism incites a new way of understanding the problematic relationship between design practice and theory, the Internet and female users. As Olesen (2000) states, rather than '... producing more than a partial story of women's lives in oppressive contexts, postmodern feminists regard "truth" as a deconstructive illusion' (p. 225), a theoretical stance and interpretive practice which prompts a '... study of lived cultures and experiences which are shaped by the cultural meanings that circulate in everyday life' (Denzin 1992:81). It invites questions regarding gender and consumption of gendered design outcomes. Most importantly, the notion of 'many truths' rather than one 'design practitioners' truth', introduces the possibility of alternative epistemologies. This is crucial to the question of how design practice as a tool of creative production can embody alternative meanings through recognition of existing gender structures. It validates a search not only for alternative material design outcomes, but also seeks to have effect at the level of design practice and knowing. As McRobbie (1994) argues, this stance '... postulates accountability, a recognition of relations of responsibility between writer and reader [or design practitioner and audience]' (p. 68).



## ***Constructivist Grounded Theory***

According to Charmaz (2000), positioning grounded theory within constructivist thought prompts an open-ended approach where methods are seen '... as flexible, heuristic strategies rather than as formulaic procedures' (p. 510). She describes constructivism as assuming '... the relativism of multiple social realities, recognis[ing] the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aim[ing] toward interpretative understanding of subjects' meanings' (p. 510). Such a combination of constructivist thought and grounded theory calls for a methodology that is neither '... rigid [n]or prescriptive' (Charmaz 2000:510). As Charmaz argues, '... a focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers, rather than limits, interpretative understanding' (p. 510). A crucial element of constructivist grounded theory is therefore acknowledgement of its own limits; it can represent no more than 'slices of social life'.

Design is a discipline creative by nature and temporal in form. As the subject of this research, it demands that the methodology reflect traits of flexibility and creativity in data gathering and analysis. For example, ongoing 'comparative analysis' is prompted by acknowledgement of the very tangible and complex matters surrounding the design process involved in the chosen case study. Due to the sensitive nature of the information provided by the women's online publishing industry and the ongoing changes within Internet technology, the case study concerns itself not only with physical aspects of the portal, but also the larger disciplinary context. Grounded theory presents itself as the most appropriate methodology, including as it does, analytical tools such as the 'conditional matrix' (Pidgeon 1996; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Therefore, the combination of constructivist grounded theory and a case study approach satisfies the '... need [for] accurate description and subjective, yet disciplined, interpretation' (Stake 2000:444). Furthermore, it allows for what Stake (2000) refers to as '... a respect and curiosity for culturally different perceptions of phenomena; an emphatic representation of local setting – all blending ... with constructivist epistemology' (p. 444). As a methodology, constructivist grounded theory, prompts destabilisation of design epistemology and practice by questioning the discipline's historical inclination to produce objective and/or androgynous designs.



## **A Case Study Format**

The decision to develop a case study arose inductively from the research process, as focus on one particular web site – BEME.com – offered the most appropriate tool for investigating ‘the particular’. A product ‘.. of naturally occurring social situations’ (Gomme, Hammersley et al. 2000:3) the site affords an examination not only of itself but also the social context in which it is embedded. In addition, the decision to use BEME.com site was based on it fulfilling criteria of ‘balance and variety’ and identification of it as an ‘opportunity to learn’ (Stake 2000:447). As a ‘bounded system’, it fulfilled what casework researchers recognise as a prerequisite for this type of research (Gomme, Hammersley et al. 2000; Stake 2000). Characteristics of BEME.com as a case study include: patterned behaviour, prominence of coherence and sequence and most importantly, certain features which are exclusive to the case and others which are characteristic of its wider context. It contains its own ‘unique history’ and forms a ‘complex entity operating within a number of contexts – physical, economic, ethical, aesthetic, and so on’ (Stake 2000:439-440). In addition, the decision to treat BEME.com as an *instrumental case study* was an apposite choice. Stake (2000) describes instrumental casework as a way to ‘... provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalisation’ (p. 437). Interest in the BEME.com artefact in its self is therefore somewhat secondary to the insight it provides into the potential of design as a tool of empowerment (see Stake, 2000).

Stouffler (1941) argues that case study researchers seek ‘the common’ and ‘the particular’ in their investigation, enabling a move towards ‘the uncommon’. To address both the ‘common and particular’, Stake (2000) points out that the case needs to draw on a variety of sources such as: (a) its historical background; (b) its physical setting; (c) other contexts – social, cultural, political or economic; (d) other comparative cases; and (e) its informants. However, regardless of the breadth of field informing the particular, the question remains as to what extent one can make generalisations. As this research is positioned within constructivist thought, Lincoln and Guba's (2000) critique and search for ways to address the tension between the particular and the general is apposite. They argue for the ‘... transferability of conclusions from one case to

another' based on 'fit' between the two. Therefore, the BEME.com case presents findings that can operate at this level of transferability. It can illuminate other cases of women's Internet portals only on the basis of a 'fit'. (For further discussion of the issue of transferability versus generalisation see Lincoln and Guba 2000.)

As a case study, the research into BEME.com is of great value in terms of informing design epistemology and identifying underlying gender structures. It allows for an in-depth investigation of a situation and the circumstances in which gender structures exert their influence. In addition, Stake (2000) observes that the case study method '*... has been tried and found to be a direct and satisfying way of adding to experience and improving understanding*' (p. 24). This succinct observation is an apt remark on the intentions and experience of my own research.

## Research Procedures

This thesis bears witness to a four year investigation into one case involving a long and arduous process that relied much on the kindness of participants as well as the existing literature. The research began at a time of growth and development of the Internet. Although its expansion was well documented within the popular press, academic writing was at the time still nascent. Over the four years however, a number of research projects have been completed which contribute to the academic literature and, significantly, compliment and substantiate the insights of this investigation. The initial dearth of such academic writing about the Internet inevitably had an impact on defining the scope of this research. As the literature became available however, it has been incorporated to support, clarify and contextualise the analysis.

The passage of time not only affected the academic context in which this research took place but very importantly, the technology under investigation – which itself thrives on the notion of change – altered continuously. Hence, the sensitivity to change over time with which a research process ordinarily has to grapple takes on an added dimension whereby the research



becomes as 'live' a record as possible of a field which is itself preoccupied with avoiding repetition and reinventing itself through time. This aspect of time and change has had an enormous influence on the research. This could have been seen as a threat that needed to be controlled but is uncontrollable. However, rather than continuously fighting it, a choice has been made to conceive of it as an opportunity, in spite of the numerous challenges it posed. For example, where problems might have been seen as insurmountable with the passage of time they can simply disappear. Suffice it to say, the research procedures are carefully selected to suit an environment that is always in flux.

The chosen research procedures engage with the social, cultural, political and economic environment in which the publishing industry is located and from which it draws its meanings. This environment is deeply embedded within the women's online publishing context to provide 'information rich' data to the research whilst at the same time making the boundaries of a single case study extremely complex. As such, there is no one particular source that could be identified as an ideal for data collection. As Harding (1990) observes, in conducting their studies, feminist researchers resourcefully borrow and create, '... to escape damaging limitations of the dominant social relations and their schemes' (p. 101). Therefore, it is appropriate to explore a variety of data sources, (a) to address women's (in)visibility, (b) to combat the difficulties arising from the confidentiality of the women's online publishing industry, and (c) to obtain 'information rich' data and to ensure reliability and validity (Charmaz 2000).

These issues led to a key concern in the selection of data sources. As a researcher, I had very limited control over the availability of documents or participants. Their availability was guided by the very specific and complex environment of the women's portal publishing industry. As noted above, the passage of time was a significant issue. Documents or participants became available or denied access with the passage of time. I therefore identified key sources of documents and key participants to obtain data that was 'information rich' yet did not infringe on the confidentiality of the industry. The sources of data cover: (a) public records of events and activities, (b) corporate publications, (c) market surveys, (d) visual records of women's portals,



(e) interviews with BEME.com production team, (f) interviews with target audience, and (g) interviews with industry professionals.

Overall the research process can be divided into five phases distinguished by different activities. Phase 1 focused on investigation of all the available literature pertaining to design, the Internet or publishing. The feminist literature was also examined in order to make explicit the gender structures in the three areas. Due to the nature of the investigated disciplines and the time factor, phase 2 concentrated on the collection of documents. The subsequent phase 3 focused on interviewing identified participants. Phase 4 was dedicated to analysis of the data obtained. It is important to mention that due to the nature of grounded theory, this particular phase partially overlapped with the data collection phases. The final phase included the writing of the thesis. Taken as a whole, the research process and its phases relied on 'snowballing', a technique of long and firm standing within the academy for negotiating access to participants and information and conducting rigorous research.

### ***'Snowballing'***

Due to the specificity of the portal publishing context and the importance of networking to it, the best procedure to gather any data can be described as 'snowballing'. Within the publishing industry, the importance of confidentiality runs alongside a strong belief in social networks of information exchange. Thus, coming from outside of this networked system of acquaintances, my initial access to sources of information was quite restricted. Using 'snowballing' as an approach to data collection opened up possibilities whereby sources were asked to suggest further leads – thereby in some way mimicking the methods of information exchange within the industry. The 'snowballing' approach was crucial in prompting the gathering of documents and visual materials and carrying out interviews with various participants. The documents did not just yield data but also provided references to possible interview participants. At the same time, the interviews themselves prompted additional textual sources of data.



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Many initial interview contacts were at times 'hit and miss' and relied heavily on the good nature of the informant for the success of the lead. In some cases, the lead did not move beyond the initial connection. The pivotal point in developing a network of data sources was the first interview with the BEME.com senior producer. Her input not only provided the necessary descriptions of BEME.com, but also included a detailed account of 'who was who' and the different roles each member of the team played in relation to the BEME.com production. She also supplied a lead in contacting the designers who worked on the BEME.com interface design and allowed her name to be used as a reference. These steps set the precedent for most of the interviews with the production team, as each member recalled the others. In all but two cases participants agreed to face to face interviews. The two exceptions were interviews conducted by email. These interviews although quite informative did not provide the richness of data when compared with the interviews conducted in person.

In the case of industry professionals the interview approach had to be modified. Here, I could not rely on initial contacts and had to implement 'cold-calling'. When discussing 'cold-calling', I refer to emailing people who have not been recommended by a previous lead and might have no direct contact with BEME.com. As I could not use other participants as reference I had to heavily rely on the good will of the contacted person. Thus, to develop a network of contacts, participants were asked during the interview if they could suggest anyone else as suitable for subsequent interviews. The use of 'snowballing', through its reliance on one piece of data suggesting another, provided for interesting and sometimes unexpected data sources. It was crucial in enabling the whole research project to progress within the complex context of the women's portal publishing industry.

### ***Documentary Analysis***

In reference to this research the documents are considered as 'instructional' texts informing a general and particular understanding of BEME.com (Prior 1997). 'Such texts are of importance for qualitative research because, in general terms, access can be easy and low cost, because

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information provided may differ from and may not be available in spoken form, and because texts endure and thus give historical insight' (Hodder 2000). According to Prior (1997) '... a text instructs us how to see the world, how to differentiate the parts within it, and thereby provides the means by which we can engage with the world' (p. 67) and in some cases the documents can become the only way we can get to know the world (Prior 1997). Thus, the documents demonstrate the ways in which different actors involved with BEME.com might have been instructed to conceptualise the site, historically.

### Data Sources

#### Public Records of Events and Activities

There was an initial difficulty in obtaining contact details related to sensitive industry material which might breach confidentiality codes operating in the women's portal publishing industry. I therefore turned to news media in search of articles relating to the women's portal publishing industry in the UK. The online archives of the major news providers in UK such as the BBC, The Guardian and The Observer have transpired to be a significant source of this type of data, offering a record of the last four years. Importantly, the data contains a record of two particular events that shed light on the attitudes of the women's magazine publishing industry professionals (See Table 1 p. 87). Although, these records provide a subjective view, they nonetheless represent historically located 'live' evidence. Thus, they are treated as 'factual' reporting and are used to identify the larger events and activities surrounding the rise and development of women's Internet portals in UK.

**Table 1: Public Records of Events and Activities describing the women's online publishing industry (D-PREA)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
D-PREA1	News Articles	News articles published by the BBC on their site referred to women's Internet portals. The articles were obtained throughout the duration of the entire data collection.	The news articles were used as a 'live' record of the events occurring within the women's portal publishing industry. Due to the confidential nature of the women's portal publishing industry, these articles being in the public domain



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			circumvent this issue. The BBC as a news provider has a long standing tradition of broadcasting in the UK, offering one particular perspective.
D-PREA2	News Articles	News articles published by The Guardian on their site discussing women's Internet portals and the Body Image Summit. The articles were tracked throughout the entire data collection period.	Just as with the BBC publications, the Guardian articles were used to inform understanding of the women's portal publishing industry context. They presented a form of diary documenting events. The Guardian as a news provider is associated with a more liberal agenda, providing a slightly different take on the news.
D-PREA3	News Articles	News articles published by The Observer on their web site presenting articles commenting on the Body Image Summit. The articles were obtained throughout the entire data collection.	These particular articles discussed the issues surrounding the Body Image Summit. Since I did not attend the summit, they were a readily available and major source of information about the event.
D-PREA4	Event Report	Reference made to the Body Image Summit on The Eating Disorders Association web site, obtained during the initial data collection.	The reference presents brief information about the Body Image Summit from the perspective of public health issues addressing eating disorders. The information discusses the event from a non mass media stand, focusing on social aspects.
D-PREA5	News Article	News article obtained from the telegraph.co.uk web site during the initial data collection.	The article reports on the Body Image Summit including the Media response to this event. This record of the Media response is crucial as a data source.
D-PREA6	Event	Body Image Summit – an event that took place on the 21 <sup>st</sup> of June 2000 at the Downing Street offices.	An event organised by the current government Minister for Women to address possible links between women's eating disorders and women's representation within the fashion publishing industry. Due to central political location and characteristics of participants in attendance, the summit provided a credible support to those who

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			argued for change in women's public representation. The event in itself was important to this research since it reflected general public interest in re-evaluating the way women are portrayed in the mass media.
D-PREA6	Event	A seminar supported by the Women in Journalism Association that took place on the 10 <sup>th</sup> of December 2000.	The seminar focused on the representation of women in the mass media, in particular women in positions of power. I attended this meeting however, I was asked to keep the names of all participants and all information confidential. Only the fact that the event took place is used in this research.

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### Corporate Publications

Initial documents gathered contained references to the corporations involved in the women's online publishing industry and the launch of different women's portals in the UK. This prompted a further search for detailed documents discussing the corporations identified. Therefore, the data collected under the category of corporate publications refers to information obtained from the corporate documents, the majority of which were available online (See Table 2 p. 90). The information provided ranges from brief descriptions of a launched portal, to companies' mission statements. The corporate publications frequently include the intended vision for the created portals and a collection of press releases. The advantage of inspecting these press releases is two-fold. They provide much information directly pertaining to the portal in question and include references to people involved. The most important advantage of using these documents stems however, from their public availability. In an environment that is highly exclusive where success of its ventures relies on the confidentiality of the undertaken activities, access to corporate information can be very limited. Therefore, the ability to gather evidence already in the public domain circumnavigates such difficulties. At the same time, I am very aware that the contained data has been specifically created for public viewing and that included information has been pre-screened. Nonetheless, as with previous documents the corporate publications are seen as



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data informing the case study context. Thus, the corporate publications provide a glimpse of the public face of the corporate world, where the documents give value and justification to the existence of women's portals.

**Table 2: Corporate publications describing women's online portals (D-CP)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
D-CP1	Press Releases	IPC press releases obtained from the IPC Media web site covering the various developments relating to BEME.com from February 2000 to August 2001	The press releases provided publicly available documentation of the developments and corporate reasoning behind BEME.com. Due to the general difficulties in obtaining information from IPC, these press releases were an easily available and important source of information of 'behind the scenes' corporate decision-making process.
D-CP2	Company Structure	A document obtained from IPC Media web site detailing the structure of IPC Connect the brand of IPC responsible for the publication of women's magazines including BEME.com	This document represented the corporate structure and BEME.com positioning within the IPC company. It highlighted the hierarchies within the decision-making process and the relationship of BEME.com to the rest of the IPC published products.
D-CP3	Vision	A document highlighting the IPC vision for its women's market, obtained from the IPC Media web site	This document described how IPC envisioned its female target audience and how this vision has encompassed not only paper publishing industry but also the Internet in the form of BEME.com. The document made explicit the relationship between gender and the female audience, as defined by IPC.
D-CP4	Brand Profile	A document obtained from the IPC Media web site describing the brand profile of BEME.com	The profile described in detail BEME.com as a branded environment and highlighted IPC move to refocus from a publishing company to branded company in order to stay ahead of competition in the publishing industry.

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D-CP5	Closing Letter	A web page published on the BEME.com site after the closure of the BEME.com by IPC.	The letter's significance mainly stems from its existence.
D-CP6	Company Structure	Documents obtained from handbag.com web site and the companies that launched the site (Hollinger Telegraph New Media and Boots plc)	A selection of documents presenting the corporate information about handbag.com. The documents also include information about the companies that have launched the site. This particular information is used to describe the context of the site and its origins.
D-CP7	Company Structure	Documents obtained from the iCirle.com site describing the reasoning behind the portal and the company that launched the site (Freeserve)	Documents briefly describe the reason behind the portal, its target audience and the marketing approach. The documents referring to the Freeserve corporation include the corporate information. This documentation is used to inform the context of the site and its origins.
D-CP8	Company Structure	Documents collected from the Associated New Media web site discussing femail.co.uk	A selection of documents offering description of corporate information about the site itself as well as about Associated New Media. As with the previous documents, this information is used to illuminate the context of the site and its origins.

### Survey Reports

Unfortunately, the initial market reports for BEME.com were unavailable to this research owing to the passage of time and BEME.com closure. Therefore, the initial data sources did not include references to market research. In the process of investigating BEME.com a selection of survey reports that would have been used by the women's' portal publishing industry in general was identified (See Table 3 p. 92). Some of these reports were already in the public domain and others were sent to me following a source investigation. The surveys pointed to yet another 'slice of the women's portal publishing industry life'. Whilst they did not refer to BEME.com in particular, they describe and locate greater market patterns that affected women's portals in general. Overall, these documents provide a glimpse of the economic rationale shaping the



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understanding of women's portals role, market positioning, trends in communication and possible response by the target audience.

**Table 3: Survey reports describing women's uses of Internet (D-SR)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
D-SR1	IPC Media Women and Internet	A survey conducted by IPC for the Thomas Cook launch of Thomascook.com. The aim of the survey was to investigate the Internet habits of British women and what strategies can be used to communicate to women online. (IPC Media 2000)	The survey report offered a summary of finding describing an average female user of the Internet in 2000, the year in which BEME.com was launched. This report provides a picture of IPC's understanding of women and their online use and habits in the UK. Although, the survey was not conducted specifically for BEME.com's launch, its findings would have been considered as relevant in shaping the corporate notions about the portal.
D-SR2	Europe's Women Catch-up Online	A survey conducted by Forrester Research, an agency identifying and analysing '... emerging trends in technology and their impact on business' (Forrester Research 2002).	The value of this survey stems from its investigation, acknowledgement and review of the gender gap existing in the use of Internet technologies. The fact that the survey is published in February 2000 makes it very relevant to BEME.com, also launched in February 2000.
D-SR3	Who is Bringing Women Online	A survey conducted by Forrester Research, an agency identifying and analysing '... emerging trends in technology and their impact on business' (Forrester Research 2002).	This survey demonstrates the different modes of access to the Internet in 2001. It evaluates the Internet Service Providers and their subscription base. Considering the closure of BEME.com in 2001, the survey offers interesting insights into the general uses of the Internet by female audiences.
D-SR4	Women Reshape Online Shopping	A survey conducted by Forrester Research, an agency identifying and analysing '... emerging trends in technology and their impact on	This survey offers statistical information about women's uses of online commercial services in 2000. Since BEME.com is considered a

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		business' (Forrester Research 2002).	commercial site, a survey of such kind revealed the different aspects of female behaviour when engaging with the Internet technologies as sources of e-commerce.
D-SR5	Which?online Annual Survey 2001 & 2002	A general annual Internet survey conducted by Consumer Association, researching on behalf of the consumers, to offer 'independent, unbiased advice' about various products and services' (which?online 2002).	As a general yearly survey, the report offers information about women's Internet use over a longer period. It is not focused to a specific topic, but rather reveals more general tendencies. In comparison to the other surveys it is a good contextual tool against which other concepts or surveys can be compared.

### Visual Records of Women's Portals

Considering the outcome based nature of design, it was important to obtain data that made reference in visual terms to the case study. Therefore, this data source comprises of screen shots taken from the four women's portals launched in UK. These portals are: BEME.com, handbag.com, femail.co.uk, iCircle.com. The screen shots representing the BEME.com portal were especially difficult to obtain. This was mainly due to the unfortunate developments at BEME prompting its closure. Therefore, the visual record of BEME.com portal is small in comparison to the other sites which still remain online making the data collection far simpler. Here, the visuals of handbag.com, femail.co.uk and iCircle.com consist of screen shots of home pages obtained during a period of two weeks on different days within the week. (See Table 4 p. 94 for descriptions and Appendix Figures 14-40 p. 286-299 for visual reference.) The need to obtain the visual records of the four UK women's portals was in accordance with the procedures of a case study. Thus, the few images of BEME.com are informed by the selection of images from the other portals. As such the data, through other cases, can address the particularity and commonality intrinsic to BEME.com as an online portal (Stake 2000).



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It is important to state that the difficulty in obtaining these visual records is attributable to the ephemeral nature of the online industry and Internet technology. This research has to reconcile the fact that with the passing of each day, the visual record changes. Over a longer period it is not only the content that alters, but also its overall presentation. Therefore, data obtained can only reveal overall trends and patterns informing the relationship between gender, design and the Internet.

**Table 4: Visual record of women's Internet portals (D-VR)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
D-VR1	BEME.com	A women's portal published by IPC as a response to the economic boom in the doc.com industries	The key to selecting this site as the case study was its direct development out of the publishing industry. The site was editorially lead and came closest to a representation of an online magazine.
D-VR2	handbag.com	The first women's portal launched in UK by Boots plc and Hollinger Telegraph New Media to capture the female share of the Internet market	For comparison reasons handbag.com stems from a mixture of a publishing industry (Hollinger Telegraph New Media) and a commercial imperative (Boots plc). Thus, the site combines both a strong newsy content and variety of products for online shopping.
D-VR3	femail.co.uk	A women's portal launched by Associated New Media drawing its content from the daily local newspapers in combination with the interactive abilities of the Internet	In comparison to BEME.com, femail.co.uk also originates within the publishing industry. However, due to the source of its content located within the newspaper-publishing sector, it represents more of an online newspaper than an online magazine.
D-VR4	iCircle.co.uk	It is the last of the large women's portals launched in the UK by Freeserve. Its aim is to attract women using the Internet technologies and interactive content	iCircle.co.uk is a portal purely driven by a non-publishing company. Thus, in the context of this research it represents a women's portal stemming from a very commercial background.

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### ***Interviews***

Converse and Schuman (1974) suggest that '[t]here is no single interview style that fits every occasion or all respondents' (p. 53). Although, I did choose an overall category descriptive of my interview style, each interview demanded that I adjust to the participants' personality and conditions of the interview context. As Kahn and Cannell (1957) argue, it is not enough just to know how to conduct an interview. It is just as crucial to know and understand the circumstances of the interviewee. Particularly in the context of design discipline, where time is of the essence, insider's knowledge of the context is of great importance in order to arrange and conduct a successful interview. Due to the intrinsic nature of the interview as a 'conversation' between the researcher and participant, the obtained data has a dynamic and ephemeral quality. The conversational and immediate negotiation of questions and answers between the researcher and the participant created an environment in which the interviewee was asked to share their constructed understanding informing the women's portal publishing industry. Although acknowledged as primed, somewhat planned and constructed conversations (Brenner, Brown et al. 1985), the interviews offered unique and personal representations which like documents, illuminated understanding of the women's portal publishing industry.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi structured interviews were used. These gather data from individuals where the format is open-ended and aims at in-depth investigation, characteristic of unstructured interview style. Spradley (1979) suggests that the unstructured characteristics prompt the development of a 'human-to-human' relationship with the respondents. Such a relationship allows the semi-structured interview data to act as tool of understanding not merely an explanation. The semi-structured interview, does attempt '... to understand the complex behaviour of members of society without imposing any a priori categorisation that may limit the field of inquiry' (Fontana and Frey 2000:653). Thus the semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for questions which whilst focusing on the research specifics, allow participants to express themselves without being constrained by the interview format.



The decision to use semi-structured interviews was based on my intimate understanding of the professional design context which is fast-paced, often excluding, and protected by confidentiality; a world in which structured interviews would have felt out of place. Nonetheless, the interviews could not be structure-less. Considering the setting of the publishing and design industries, the interviews had to contain structural elements in order to maintain respondents' interest and not appear a waste of time. As a practicing designer, I had an advantage in understanding the context of my respondents. However, I still found it important to prepare a deeper comprehension of the background from which I selected my participants. In a number of cases, the participants themselves expected me to have specific background knowledge and used it in interviews to connect with their position.

As Fontana and Frey (2000) indicate, participants are not always readily available or even identifiable. In such cases, researchers need to consider that anyone can become a valuable source of data. Locating informants was paramount to the success of the research process and 'snowballing' became the most effective means. Finally, gaining the trust of the respondents and establishing a rapport was not only important to the success of the interview, it reflected my commitment to working within a feminist framework.

### **Interview Structure**

The flexibility afforded by the semi-structured interviews allows the interviewer to digress from the prescribed structure if necessary. Thus, I was able to gain control of the research process and not allow the method to take over. However, to ensure consistency across the disparate sets of interviewees I used an interview protocol based on an established four key points informed by the research question. These were:

- interviewees role/relationship towards BEME.com or the Internet or publishing industry
- interviewees understanding of BEME.com experience or experiences of commercial portals dedicated to female users in general
- interviewees understanding of the role of design practice within women's online portals

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- interviewees understanding of interactivity within women's online portals

These key points were then developed into interview prompts taking into consideration the specific circumstances of each participant. Appendix Tables 11-16 p. 303-306 represent the particular prompts supported by a brief description of what they were to illuminate.

The interviews were procured and sustained by an array of rigorous activities. Initially, a link was established between myself and a potential participant. For the most part, the contact was maintained via email. Each email was printed and catalogued as a record of that activity (See Appendix Figures 41 and 42 p. 300-301). At the same time, a diary of events was kept to document the entire process through a set of observational personal comments on successes or difficulties of collecting the data. These notes and observation were later used to contextualise some of the understandings of the data obtained.

### **Data Sources**

#### **Production Team**

The production team interviews were intended as a platform to provide a voice for those involved in the process of creation of a women's online portal. Locating interviewees involved contacting the different organisations engaged in BEME.com production. Most of the names of these organisations were provided in IPC press releases and the difficulty lay more with identifying the physical location of the people involved as almost two years have passed since most of the production team worked on the BEME.com project. Table 5 p. 98 presents the different organisations from which the interviewees were identified.



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**Table 5: The organisations involved in conceptualisation, production and launch of BEME.com**

	IPC Media	IPC Electric	BEME.com	Wolff Olins	Wheel:	AspectGroup	decoda
Organisation	The mother company housing the business	Providing technical and financial expertise necessary to develop an effectively digital business	Responsible for the day to day site operations, design, promotion and editorial content	Responsible for brand concept and design	Responsible for original design concept and site template	Responsible for site architecture	Contracted to rework the design of the home page and the six channels

The role of the interviews with the production team is to provide access to the invisible design processes and human interactions involved. The purpose of the interviews was to make explicit the different ways in which the BEME.com experience is created and the role design practice played in this production. Table 6 p. 98 offers a description of the specific production team participants and their role within the BEME.com design process.

**Table 6: Interviews with BEME.com production team (I-PT)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
I-PT1	Marketing Consultant	(Female) was part of the IPC team responsible for the marketing aspects of BEME.com site	The participant was contacted with a request for an interview due to her specific involvement in the marketing side of BEME.com. She was the only accessible participant who had inside knowledge of the marketing strategies driving the site. Unfortunately, she insisted on answering questions via email and did not offer any detailed information regarding the prompted topics.
I-PT2	Editorial/Creative Director	(Female) hired by IPC to establish the vision; interview and recruit a team of 30 journalists; launch and introduce the website to the media; set the editorial tone and style; and run and direct a very busy office	Being in a position of power to make decisions about BEME.com from its editorial content to the creative team, this participant was seen as one of the most valuable sources of information about creation,

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		where content changed daily	development, production and the launch of BEME.com from a corporate perspective. Initially the participant agreed to an interview, however, she changed her mind and in the end only answered emailed questions. Even in brief, her answers were insightful, representing the public relations face of BEME.com
I-PT3	Design Manager/Designer	(Male) member of the Pres.co team hired to design the interface and navigations structure as well as the entire look and feel of BEME.com	The participant represented the design side of BEME.com. He was involved in managing the design decisions about the interface architecture and look and feel of the site. His input described not only the design process or visual design decisions, but also he described the behind the scenes human interaction that accompanied the entire process of creating BEME.com. He was interviewed in person.
I-PT4	Brand Designer	(Male) member of Wolff Olins brand strategy consultancy, responsible for developing BEME.com brand	The participant's involvement covered the beginning stages of BEME.com creation. Since his role was to create, define and solidify what BEME.com was all about, his comments during the interview were an invaluable source of information about the origins of the site and the driving ideas behind BEME.com. He was interviewed in person.
I-PT5	Senior Producer	(Female) member of Pres.co team hired to produce BEME.com site. She was involved in mediating between IPC (the client who commissioned BEME.com) and the designers, programmers or any other persons involved in BEME.com creation and production. She was also directly involved in interpreting the brand strategy into	This participant was the first to agree to an interview, during which she offered an overall description of the production process, people involved and the different types of politics involved. Due to her role in the production process, her comments were also invaluable in developing an insight into the complexities of the design process.



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site interface architecture.

She was interviewed in person.

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### **BEME.com Female Target Users**

Once all the members of the production team were interviewed, the next step in obtaining data was to contact participants who fitted the profile of a possible target audience of BEME.com. Initial BEME.com female users' age range and interests were believed to spread from 18 to 60 and covered a wide range of different lifestyles. Following the mid-point re-design of the site, the target audience was revised. The new target audience comprised of 20-35 ABC1 women (See Appendix Table 18 p. 311 for code clarification.). The female users were assumed to have high disposable incomes. Therefore, the audience sample to be included in this research was based on the same profile parameters as intended for the BEME.com audience. In practical terms, all the participants were female, between age 20-35, employed and computer proficient. All had Internet access and used it on daily bases (See Table 7 p. 100).

Until now, all the obtained data has positioned the users as the invisible audience with no voice. By interviewing a small sample of the intended female target users, I gained data that presents a more complete picture of the case study. At the same time, I address the gap that the document sources and other interviews made invisible.

**Table 7: Interviews with Beme.com female target users (I-TU)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
I-TU1	Programmer, Reuters Treasury Solutions	(Female) British-Asian, married, home-owner (with her husband)	A participant with a professional career focused within the area of computing, access to the Internet at work place and home, familiarity with Internet technologies and financial stability defining her as ABC1. She also represented a specific socio-cultural background being British-Asian. She was interviewed in person.

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I-TU2	Software Designer, Trace Group, Plc	(Female) South African, working in Britain, single, home-owner	A participant coming from a non-British social and cultural background with a professional career focusing within computing industries, access to the Internet at work place and home, familiarity with Internet technologies and financial stability defining her as ABC1. She was interviewed in person.
I-TU3	Technical Consultant, Reuters Treasury Solutions	(Female) British, single, home-owner	A participant with an established professional career focused within computing. Access to the Internet at work place and home, familiarity with Internet technologies and financial stability defining her as ABC1. She was interviewed in person.
I-TU4	Personal Assistant to the Head of Europe on the trading floor, City Group	(Female) British, single	A participant with a highly time demanding professional career outside the area of computing, access to the Internet at work place familiarity with Internet technologies and financial stability defining her as ABC1. She was interviewed in person.

### Industry Professionals

To investigate how alternative representations of gender can be built into a commercial women's Internet portal within the existing status quo, the publishing/Internet industry professionals were interviewed. The choice to interview the industry professionals was based on theoretical sampling. The data representing BEME.com as an experience and the opinions of the targeted female users prompted the return to data collection. This occurred towards the end of data collection during the process of identifying any possible gaps. Thus, the selection of industry professionals was based on identifying a need for an independent perspective within the data sources and addressing it. The participants were not involved with the production of BEME.com. Hence, their names and contact details were obtained from documents devoted to



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the discussion of topics related to women and the Internet. The main criteria guiding selection was their engagement in organizations that focused on supporting women's uses of the Internet as well as businesses that foster Internet ventures (See Table 8 p. 102). The choice to obtain this particular data set was to provide an independent voice in contrast to those directly involved with production of BEME.com or other women's portals.

**Table 8: Interviews with industry professionals (I-IP)**

Code	Organisation/ Participant	Description	Reasoning
I-IP1	Director, DigitalEve	(Female) a '... London-based investment professional working on investment, tax and regulatory compliance issues for Perpetual Unit Trust Management, UK. As Director of DigitalEve London, she oversees all Europe-based activities.' A former member of Hong Kong Webgrrls and a founder of the London Webgrrls (DigitalEve 2002).	The participant's interests in an organisation promoting women's engagement with technologies proved to be a valuable source of information and critique on the present condition of women and the use of Internet as producers of this technology. She was interviewed in person.
I-IP2	CEO and co-founder, eZoka Group	(Female) appointed as one of the top 100 Technology Pioneers to the World Economic Forum at Davos in 2001 and elected as one of Management Today's leading 35 businesswomen in the UK. Her professional career focuses on raising funding for Internet ventures, including her own eZoka Group. Her experience in telecommunication and IT sector goes back to 1987 (eZoka Group 2002).	The participant's business expertise in the Internet industries made her an excellent choice for a commentary and reflection on BEME.com as an Internet venture. Her role as a financier of Internet ventures represented the process in which BEME.com might have been reviewed from the financial/commercial perspective. She was interviewed in person.
I-IP3	Senior Associate, Ariadne Capital	(Female) founder and manager of '... IBIS Solutions, an IT consultancy based in Cairo, Egypt. While at IBIS Solutions, she designed and implemented IT solutions in the areas of tourism, retail and distribution for various conglomerates. She also worked	The participant's involvement in IT solutions for various companies in a non-western environment provided an interesting clue to the interpretation of the Internet as a tool of empowerment. Although, the research is focused within Western cultural context, her commentary on

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		with internet start-ups, including launching one of the first financial internet portals for the Arab world, developing the initial business plan to raise \$6m. In addition, [she] was a consultant to the Private Equity group of one of the Middle East's largest investment banks to help assess and develop IT and internet investments (Ariadne Capital 2002).	the Internet uses and priorities in non-western contexts provided an important tool of comparison. She was interviewed in person.
I-IP4	Senior Production Editor, Women's Own Magazine	(Male) a member of the production team at IPC involved in publishing a women's weekly magazine Woman's Own. His responsibilities focused on the process of production quality management, rather than content approval.	The participant's expertise within women's magazines production and his employment at IPC provided two valuable strands of information. His involvement in the daily production routine of a women's magazine and reflection on BEME.com as an online women's portal, offered an expert source of feasibility comparison between paper and the Internet publishing industries. His longstanding employment at IPC had also provided insiders commentary on the political structures and behind the scenes activities that underpinned the success/failure of BEME.com. He was interviewed in person.

## Data Analysis

The analysis process began during the data gathering in accordance with grounded theory methodology. The main method of data analysis is discourse analysis. With reference to my research, discourse is understood as spoken interaction (formal and informal),, all kinds of written texts as well as documents using visual language to communicate (Potter and Wetherell 1987). Thus, discourse analysis takes as its object of analysis any of the above. Its appropriateness stems from the data representing textually and visually, forms of



communication, where discourse analysis allows for an investigation of such patterns of communication prompting a deeper reading. Potter and Wetherell (1987) observe, '... people are using their language to construct versions of their social world' (p. 33). Thus, language becomes a form of representation, whether textual or visual, of that social world. In making this connection I follow Prior's (1997) definition of 'representation', where it '... should be understood not as a true and accurate reflection of some aspect of an external world, but as something to be explained and accounted for through the discursive rules and themes that predominate in a particular socio-historical context' (p. 70). Furthermore, Prior's reference in this context to Foucault's argument vis-à-vis the empowering potential of discourse provides the appropriate theoretical context for understanding and conceptualising of the obtained data. As Prior (1997) reflects '... in many respects one might say that discourse empowers certain agents to create representations, and thereby to authoritatively pronounce on the shape and form of the world' (p. 71). Hence, discourse analysis supports a feminist framework in its investigation of the locations of power. It also makes explicit the role of design practice through the process of making representations of the external world, making it an invaluable tool with which to address a research question focusing on gender, design and the Internet.

Before discourse analysis could take place the interviews which had been recorded – each one side of a 90 minute audio tape in length – were transcribed for easier data handling. Each transcript was formatted for initial reading and marked with emerging, analysis prompting ideas. Once all the interviews were transcribed, the formatted print outs were catalogued for record keeping. At the same time, the digital versions of the interview texts were inputted into qualitative analysis software, NUD•IST (QRS N5).

Lofland and Lofland (1984) advise researchers to '(a) take notes regularly and promptly, (b) write everything down no matter how unimportant it may seem at the time; and (c) analyze their notes frequently' (in Fontana and Frey 2000:656). Throughout the analysis diary entries recorded my observations of the process. It was a record of (a) the ups and downs of the analysis, (b) the different opportunities and threats encountered at the time, and provided (c) a



tool of reflection about the affects of analysis on myself as researcher. The diary also fulfilled the role of a record of my position as a researcher in relation to the research as a whole. For example, the entries allowed for a reflection on the possible biases that might influence the process of analysis. When all the interviews were coded, a listing was printed to identify emerging relationships and recurring themes. These were followed by further observations. Finally a small collection of 'transferable concepts' (Lincoln and Guba 2000) was identified. These were cross referenced with existing theories and the literature in order to challenge their content.

### ***Coding***

The coding process began as soon as enough data was collected to allow meaningful analysis. Making the coding categories consistent with the life that is being researched assures its foreground position within the study. As such the coding becomes active, preserving the 'reality' of the studied experience (Charmaz 2000). QRS N5 was used during coding procedures. 'Base data' coding divided the obtained data into descriptive categories. These categories contained information about the attributes of collected data (documents or interviews), gender of interviewee and their professional position. As such, the base data coding qualified the data across the different sets, representing the descriptive attributes of what was collected.

The base coding was followed by 'line-by-line' coding (Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2000). An advantage of such coding practice stems from preventing the researcher from '... [imposing] extant theories or our own beliefs...' (Charmaz 2000:515). It also prompts the researcher's ongoing questioning of the data and investigation of possible gaps. Often the descriptors were drawn straight from the data to provide the closest match (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Pidgeon and Henwood 1996). During the line-by-line coding the categories which developed indicated conceptual gaps within the analysis. Thus, I obtained further data to compensate for this. This process is referred to in grounded theory methodology as 'theoretical sampling' (Strauss and



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Corbin 1990; Guba and Lincoln 1994; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2000). With the aid of theoretical sampling and comparisons I could establish the relationships between the categories and the conditions of these relationships. Out of these I could then tease out the theory formulating concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

The coding process was supported by the use of appropriate analysis software. Coffrey, Holbrook et al. (1996) observe that software packages provide researchers with quick ability to do multiple searches using multiple coding terms and visually mapping the developing relationships. As I have already briefly mentioned QRS N5 software was used to code the obtained data. The software assisted in line-by-line coding, attachment of observations and visual output of the data structures. However, to prompt theoretical sampling another software package was used (MindGenius from Gael). This particular software allowed for quick entry of arising categories in order to visually develop connections between them.

### ***Data Presentation***

In the context of feminist research, identification with the respondent prompts a multitude of perspectives and the need to recognise the respondents' visibility. Such an approach is in line with Hertz's (1997) questions about whose voices are being represented during data collection and writing up. Ultimately, it is the researcher who chooses what story will be told. Therefore, the use of first person makes the position of the researcher explicit within the research, whilst remaining alert to the position of power assumed by the researcher (Olesen 2000).

Participants' quotations are used carefully and comprehensively through the research to clarify the researcher's relation to the respondents, supporting the notion of 'multiple voices'. In referring to documents and interviews a conscious stylistic choice is made to use the present tense. This decision is based on the need to make explicit the immediacy and implicit partiality of such 'multiple voices'. At the same time, the present tense is used as a literary tool bringing the discussed issues closer to the readers' attention and concerns, 'preserving the "reality" of

the studied experience' (Charmaz 2000). Moreover, such stylistic choice makes explicit effects of the passage of time on the research project.

Denzin (1989) tells us that 'gender filters knowledge' (p. 116). His observation is based on the acknowledgement of the socially and culturally bounded context of documents and the interviews, where the gender of the interviewer and the interviewee matters. Thus, in writing the thesis the documents are referred to by their descriptions. The interviews are referred to by the interviewees' gender and their job title. At the same time, each piece of data, documents or interviews are given a code. Appendix Tables 9 and 10 p. 281 and 285 contain a full reference for each piece of data or participant and the appropriate code. Such an approach makes explicit gender positioning and maintains confidentiality, whilst representing the rigour of the research.

The results of the data analysis are broken up into four chapters. Each chapter presents findings from a distinct data set to maintain clarity and structure. The chapters follow a pattern 'from context to particular case'. This structure is put in place to address the ability of design practice to create alternative representations of gender in order to question the production of artefacts that heavily trade in values that perpetuate gender status quo.

## **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity are important considerations in any type of research. The researcher has to ensure an open and clear description of the research process and the role documents and participants play in the analysis and arising conclusions. Therefore, Fine (1992) urges researchers to '... articulate how, how not, and within what limits' (p. 217-219) voices are framed and represented within research to become valid. In the case of documents and interviews reliability and validity are based on the acceptance of the information as accurate or at least taken at face value. The researcher acknowledges that the given documents represent the pre-screened publicly available contents. Therefore, for the documents to be reliable and



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valid, the researcher has to ensure the source of the documents during the analysis. In addition, the reliability and validity of interview data is based on participants providing detailed and accurate responses in a truthful manner. Here, the researcher needs to acknowledge the participants positioning, whilst conducting the analysis.

As a case study, the research process is an in-depth examination of a particular from many different perspectives (Stake 2000). '[M]ethodological triangulation' (Denzin 1978) can support a study of a singular problem using multiple methods, data, perspectives and participants to inform research outcomes based on '... rigor, breath, complexity, richness, and depth ...' (Flick 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). However, recently the use of triangulation has been contested in favour of crystallisation. According to Janesick (2000) crystallisation '... recognises the many facets of any given approach to the social world as a fact of life' (p. 392). Richardson (1994) refers to crystallisation as a 'post-modern project'. Denzin and Lincoln (2000), on the other hand, propose that '[t]here is no "correct" telling of ... [the] event. Each telling, like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective on ... [the] incident' (p. 6). Furthermore, they argue, it invites researchers and their audience to '... explore competing visions of the context, to become immersed in and merge with new realities to comprehend' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:6). Therefore, crystallisation becomes the most suitable form of reliability and validity check by prompting awareness of hidden concerns just as much as the explicit knowledge. Richardson (1994) observes, '[c]rystallisation provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic' (p. 522). Such positioning corresponds with research underpinned by a feminist framework. It ensures the acknowledgement of 'multiple voices' (Olesen 2000), but does not establish universal truths.

Janesick (2000) offers a key definition of crystallisation, describing it as the '... incorporation of various disciplines as part of multifaceted qualitative research design' (p. 392). Her supposition that crystallisation incorporates other disciplines such as art, sociology, history, design or anthropology builds on the need to generate a better understanding of the research process and its substance (p. 392). Hence, the cross-disciplinary focus of this investigation on gender,

design and the Internet through the use of crystallisation broadens research awareness and enriches analysis. The use of a feminist framework in an investigation of the Internet context thus offers the possibility of a sensitive understanding of online design practice. In addition, my own in-depth knowledge of design practice further informs my views of the conducted research. As Janesick (2000) maintains, crystallisation allows the researcher to move beyond the comfort of their own established knowledge and take into account the obvious and/or the implicit.

Finally, it is crucial to the reliability and validity of this thesis to acknowledge that the grounded theory research is a continuous process. This manifests itself in the use of 'snowballing' in obtaining the data as well as in data analysis which happens from the outset in order to refine questions for further data collection and analysis. In addition, the writing-up of the thesis is also informed by this ongoing process of refinement and reflection.

## Summary

This research project is composed of a 'bricolage' of strategies, methods and data that are intended in a most appropriate way, to illuminate the research question (See Becker 1998 Denzin and Lincoln 2000 Nelson, Treichler et al. 1992). The research design and methods are not chosen haphazardly, but are closely linked with the theoretical thinking underpinning the research. The key to generating new knowledge within this study lies in the suitability of the combination of a feminist framework with constructivist grounded theory and the case study approach. The appropriateness of this theoretical combination matches the cross-disciplinary field of this study exploring gender, design and the Internet; the methods are primarily chosen because *they make it possible* to conduct research in such conditions. They allow for a rigorous investigation of the ephemeral, ever-changing worlds of design and the Internet within existing gender structures.



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## **Chapter 4**

The Women's Portal Publishing Industry

## Chapter 4: The Women's Portal Publishing Industry

This chapter gives due attention to the issue of women's online portals by discussing in detail the structures and institutional systems involved in the publishing industry both online and in print as the backdrop of the women's online portals. The choice to begin by building the 'big picture' ties in with the intended data presentation that follows 'from context to particular case' pattern. Therefore, through its detailed portrayal of events and activities of women's portal publishing, the chapter generates a platform on which to base further discussion that comprises the BEME.com case study. The information and analysis presented delivers an overview of normative and historical continuities seen as a framing mechanism for the in-depth study of the BEME.com portal itself.

### Female Users Recognised as a New and Lucrative Online

#### Market

Nineteen-ninety-nine witnessed an explosion of women focused e-commerce in the UK. It was a trend started initially in the US with a creation of sites including iVillage and Women.com. These particular sites rapidly achieved success with iVillage reaching a value of \$80m by Autumn of 1999 (D-PREA2a). Similarly, a journalist in the UK Press observed '... publishers and service providers have been tripping over each other to catch the revenue stream from corporate sponsorship, partnerships and advertising deals now available' (D-PREA2a). The rush to invest in UK women's portals was prompted by the arrival of boo.com, a fashion portal supported by an investment of '...£200m from Goldman Sachs, Benetton and LVMH' (D-PREA2a). *The Guardian* describes the portal as follows: 'It offered leading edge labels and technology, including the first step in VR changing rooms. It was the first British site to editorialise products with an interactive style magazine which had the grit of the Face or Sleaze Nation with the values of Colors' (D-PREA2a). The door was then wide open for new investment and the aim was to capitalise on 'the intelligent ABC1 British female'. Media observations such as '[t]he statistics were showing that women were the fastest growing segment of the market, at 20% a year. There were already 4m women online in Britain, the



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majority amongst the 16-24 age-group. And yet, in May [1999], there was not one British female site online' (D-PREA2a) set the tone of discussions focusing on women's portals. By the end of 1999 three major investors launched three sites to capture the female online market. Hollinger Telegraph New Media (subsidiary of Hollinger Telegraph Group) embarked on a joint venture with The Boots Company plc to launch handbag.com with a mere £5m. It was quickly followed by Associated New Media with a launch of CharlotteStreet at a cost of £10m. iCircle was the women's portal launched by Freeserve and the last one in the initial 'mad rush' (D-PREA2a).

In September 1999 IPC Media revealed that it was to support the launch of BEME.com with an initial investment of £25m and other media giants were expected to follow their lead. As the *Guardian* announced on November 8<sup>th</sup> 1999: 'Emap, Lonely Planet and BBC magazines have just closed a deal to link into handbag.com in the next few weeks' (D-PREA2a) and there were speculations of Time Warner and Rupert Murdoch following suit. In business terms, the online market presented a gap that was inviting new investors with speculative promise of great returns. As such, money seemed to be no object and there seemed to be significant peer pressure to join the rush to success.

An interesting aspect of this almost frenzied rush to invest in the women's portal market was the type of companies involved. If one looks at the profiles of the corporations launching the portals, they are predominantly publishing, media and entertainment orientated. Thus, the roots of women's portals were deeply set within the publishing, media and entertainment industry, and therefore its concepts and attitudes. It is important to point out that apart from companies such as IPC Media and Boots plc, none of the corporations could claim to have longstanding experience in providing *women only* products or services. It is therefore an interesting set of circumstances considering that in 1999 these corporations claimed to be experts in niche markets targeting women.



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However the Internet boom and the euphoria that had gone with it did not last very long. Just a year later strain was beginning to show as the portals required ongoing financial investment and did not seem to produce any significant returns. In September 2000 it was commented in the UK Media that:

*'... [f]or the publishers of Handbag and its peers-in-combat iCircle, CharlotteStreet and BEME, the past 12 months have amounted to a costly and nerve-wracking experiment. Valuable lessons about this fledgling market have been learned, but huge cash piles have been used up, and there has already been one loser' (D-PREA2a).*

In this particular case, the Associated New Media portal CharlotteStreet.com was beginning to fail and a decision was reached in 2001 to re-launch it under a different name as femail.co.uk. Everywhere Internet investors started to read signs of failure. In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2001, the BEME.com launch editor comments, '[w]e have all our advertising booked up and we are the envy of our competitors, but the lack of e-commerce will be the death of the women's portal' (D-PREA2f). The UK market was becoming even more turbulent as American portal investors were threatening to enter the UK market with '... iVillage, backed by Tesco, and Hearst-owned uk.women.com under the aegis of NatMags' (D-PREA2f). Whatever revenues were being generated by the already strained market were at risk of being snapped up by American competition. The speed with which the women's portal market collapsed was reminiscent of its rapid rise to success. The most common reasoning offered for such a turn of events was its lack of e-commerce strategy; as *The Guardian* observes on 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2000, '...women's portals have been too general in their offerings, failing to distinguish themselves sufficiently from each other and too slow to develop their commerce strategies' (D-PREA2f).

In 2002 *The Guardian* reviews the women's portal market stating, '[d]espite the increasing numbers of women venturing online, the established women's portals still have some way to go until they wield the same influence among advertisers and readers as the likes of Cosmopolitan, Glamour and Marie Claire' (D-PREA2o). However, by 2002 the decline in the number of sites available to women has finally started to produce results. According to the news media, the



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market has stabilised itself enough to attract the required numbers of readers as well as advertisers (D-PREA2o). MediaGuardian.co.uk reports the top rating portal for women at the end of April 2002 was iCircle from Freeserve, with a 20% market share. The site is closely followed by handbag.com with 16% market share, which draws on the support of Boots products to drive its e-commerce. In the case of handbag.com the support of major cosmetic brands such as L'Oreal and Clarins help to boost its revenue (D-PREA2o).

Clearly, the development of women's online portals was turbulent having to undergo dramatic changes at a very fast pace. The staggering speed with which the industry had to respond to developing events is characteristic of the technologies inherent in this communication medium. It is part of a general understanding of the Internet to factor in two essential characteristics: time and change. In such an environment there is neither much time available for learning about the new and unexplored potentials of the Internet, nor room for manoeuvre to correct mistakes. It has to adapt and move on relentlessly. This does not mean however that a deterministic view of technology is the only way to understand the Internet and its environment. What is important is acknowledgement of its complexity. The women's portal publishing industry kept a close watch on the competition to win the market. Whilst consisting of few 'players', one small move sent powerful reverberations throughout the entire industry; an environment that has shaped the case of BEME.com just as much as BEME.com is implicated in this phenomenon.

### **Female Users and Online Market Research**

Events and decisions made that shaped the women's portal publishing industry were strongly informed by continuous market reviews and research conducted both prior to investment in the market and throughout its existence by the investing corporations or independent research organisations. The resulting reports took on different roles depending on their timing within the history of the industry. For the most part however, they provided the industry with conceptual tools and guided the industry's response to economic fluctuations affecting the Internet. The

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following section will review a selection of market research reports which have had an influence on the women's portal publishing industry.

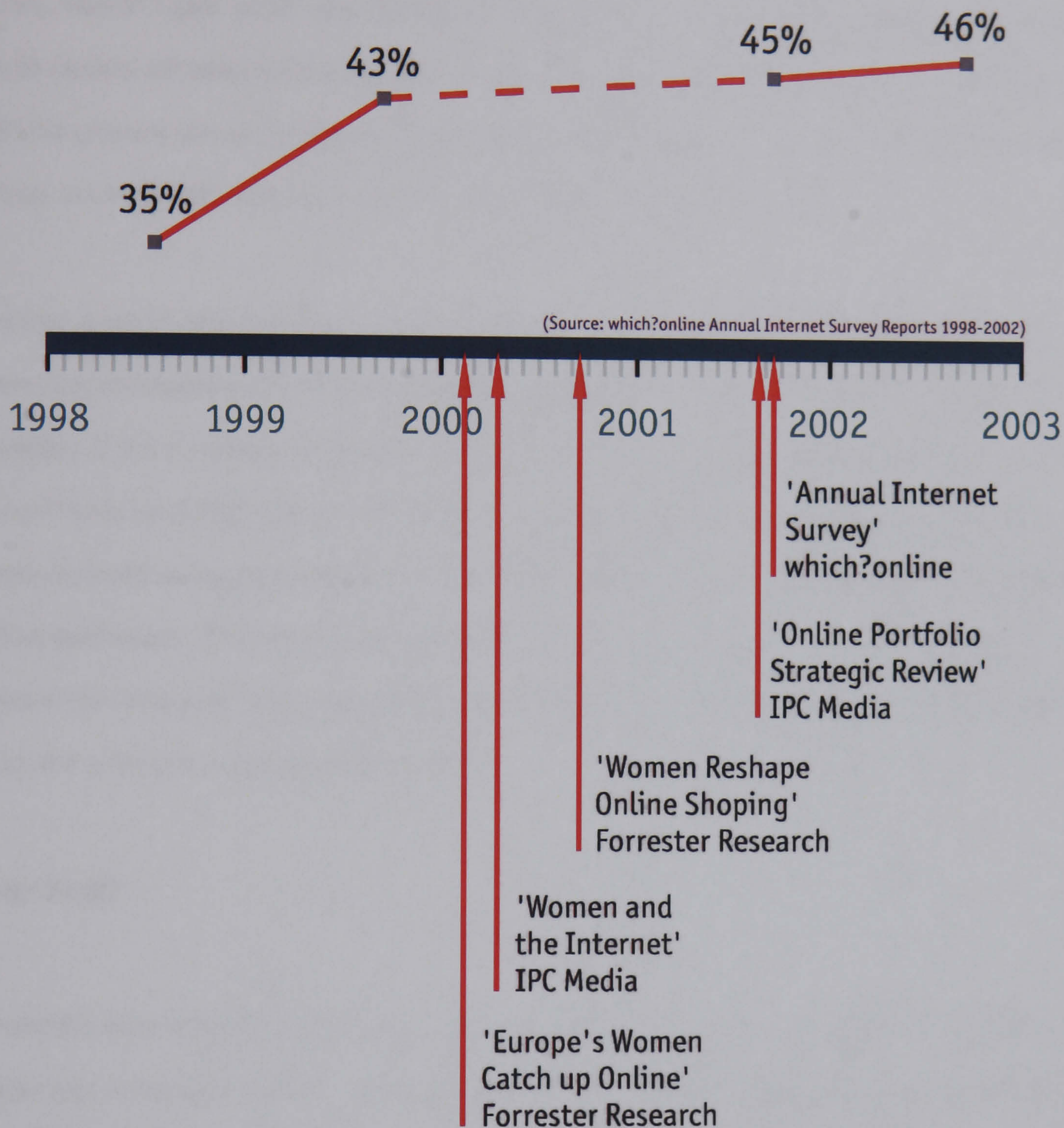
Economic trends and patterns identified by the market research had a powerful effect on the development of the women's portal publishing industry. Most commonly, the industry has put high value on market research which identifies the number of female users already online. The research would also present the likes and dislikes of these users, thus characterising a desirable target audience. The resulting qualifying audience would underpin the women's portal publishing industry's understanding of itself.

Figure 1 p. 116 presents a graphical view of the development of the women's online market between 1998 and 2002. The upper part of the diagram represents the women's Internet use over the four years as it is estimated by which?online surveys conducted annually (which?online is an online resource providing independent and unbiased information about consumer products). The lower part of the diagram identifies the surveys used to define the positioning of women as a targeted online niche market.



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Figure 1: An historical overview of the women's growth as Internet users 1998-2002, including time reference to the surveys discussed.



As Figure 1 p. 116 suggests, there has been a steady increase in the number of women using the Internet. Prior to this rise in female online users, there had been various discussions about efforts to raise awareness about the lack of women online. In March of 1998 the BBC reported that '[c]omputers and the Internet must be marketed better if the gender gap in information technology is to close' (D-PREA1e). However, over the period 1998-2002 the rise in the number of female online users surprised everyone. It seems that by the new millennium women were quickly closing the online gender divide. In July 1999 the BBC again reports on 'the women and the Internet' issue stating, '[w]orldwide, the number of women on the Internet is



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growing faster than the number of men, according to research by the CommerceNet and Neilson Media Research' (D-PREA1c). A year later, the BBC reports that '[a]ccording to recent figures, women make up at least 35% of UK web users, and the number is growing so fast that female surfers will soon outnumber their male counterparts' (D-PREA1a). This is such that in 2001 the general opinion is very optimistic: 'Women are fuelling a surge in Internet use in Britain as they catch up with men, according to new research' (D-PREA1d).

However, I would argue that the increasing numbers of female users have not necessarily altered the gendered perception of women as online users. As a BBC report observes, '... according to the providers, it's "lifestyle" features such as health, gossip and horoscopes that women really want from the web' (D-PREA1a). Such confidence in identifying very specific female pursuits is deeply rooted in a gendered perception defining the interests associated with female audiences. The next section shows how these assumptions are formulated and prepared for implementation through careful market research guiding the financial investments within the women's portal publishing industry.

### ***Year 2000***

Around the time of BEME.com launch, the online market was characterised by a significant gender gap in numbers and understanding of the Internet use. Leading research agencies such as Forrester Research, Inc. clearly observed the ever-present gender divide between male and female users. In a report published in February of 2000 Forrester Research argues that the gender gap is still quite significant. However, they feel very optimistic about its closure with the Internet becoming to a much greater extent, a mainstream communication medium (D-SR2). Furthermore, the report supports a belief that this process can be accelerated by consciously reproducing experiences women have grown to rely on and expect in their daily lives. According to the Forrester Research, a possible way to achieve this is through creating content specific to the target audience. In addition, Forrester Research points out that recreating *online* the social conditions familiar to female users' *offline*, might be the key to winning them over (D-



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SR2). Hence, the market research at the beginning of 2000 supports the production of portals with a specifically gendered content. The acknowledgement of gender as a key to understanding female online users becomes the market's driving force. It supports the recent developments of creating portals for female users and it fits in with the increased numbers of women online. However, contrary to Spilker and Sørensen's (2000) suggestion that a focus on gender could potentially eliminate exclusion and discrimination, gender is used as a tool to specifically attract female audiences and arguably, perpetuate a gender divide.

From within its own ranks, IPC conducts a survey in April 2000 which looks at the relationship between readership of women's magazines and that readership's use of the Internet. Whilst recognising difference in the use of the Internet between men and women, IPC's key findings point to the use of magazines as a medium to promote online participation (D-SR1). Thus, a traditional view of female readers is transferred to and shapes the view of new female online users in the eyes of the industry. Existing women's 'glossy' magazines become the framework for women's online portals. Thus, IPC's findings only strengthen the link between traditional – and significantly, gendered – women's publishing and women's online portals. Instead of supporting experimentation with alternative approaches to portals such as BEME.com, the IPC survey links and propagates the patriarchal environments sustained by the traditional women's magazine industry. The initial intention of BEME.com design was to attempt to break away from the gendered norms. However, because of its ownership supported by in-house market research such as that referred to above, the site in the end fits into IPC women's publishing context. The guiding ideology is therefore one that defines female users as particular gendered beings.

However, the traditional view of female online users is not propagated solely by IPC. In September of 2000 Forrester Research presents a report which analyses women's online shopping habits. Whilst shopping may traditionally be seen as a female activity, *online* shopping presents more challenges, since initially it is not widely accepted by female users. However, Forrester Research suggests that this is changing. Women online shoppers' numbers



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are increasing and they tend to buy earlier than men, begin the opening paragraphs of the report (D-SR4). The survey's assumption that women are naturally more interested in shopping presents an already gendered view of the online Internet audience. However, the report also points out that not only are more women shopping online, but their shopping habits are characterised by a preference for traditional brands and reliance on word-of-mouth for recommendations (D-SR4). This purportedly gender neutral report positions online female users in a traditional gendered context. Against the progressive possibilities offered by an increased number of female online users, the report suggests that it is the traditional approach to women that will increase product sales. Such reasoning attests to the conclusions of earlier reports supporting gender-specific content, for example, the recommendation for shopping combined with the traditional women's publishing industry, embodied by Woman's Own, Cosmopolitan or ELLE.

### ***Year 2001***

As the brief history of women's online portals suggests, by the end of 2000 and into 2001 the wider online market climate has been changing for the worse. The lack of predicted returns accompanied by portal closures such as that of CharlotteStreet.com, prompts IPC to conduct a strategic review of its own online business. Concurrently with the review, an air of uncertainty around women's online portals is setting in. At the time, *The Guardian* article entitled *IPC Media Loses Faith in Women's Portals* quotes IPC director of communications admitting that the company '... no longer believes in the broad portal model for the women's market' (D-PREA2k). Such observations indicate changing opinions of female users within the women's portal publishing industry. With the declining fortunes of the dot.com industries in general, the decision to review IPC's online investment suggests a lack of confidence in previous characterisations of and assumptions about the intended audience. Even more strongly than before, IPC looked to the traditional understanding of its target audience in relation to online investment. This is manifested in a change of vision for BEME.com resulting in its complete re-design creating a site that relied heavily on a traditional understanding of female users.



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By August 2001, the results of the IPC review of its online portfolio were published and proved detrimental to BEME.com's existence. The review reported on a waning level of support for online business and consequently, the strategy for IPC online investment changes. The online portfolio was reduced to six sites that '... can deliver strong commercial returns as well as protect and enhance the magazine brands' (D-CP1j). One of the sites to fall under the IPC knife was the only women's online portal published by the company – BEME.com. In the eyes of IPC, the portal did not respond to any commercial or strategic opportunities within the changing online economy. Such a turn of events made it clear that an investment in gender specific content does not automatically result in greater financial returns. There was some irony in the fact that just as IPC pulled the plug on its women's portal, a general survey about the Internet use was conducted in the UK by which?online observing that women had finally '... made their mark on the Internet scene this year [2001], narrowing the gender divide to the extent that 45% of all surfers are now female' (D-SR5). Similarly, in December 2001 the BBC reported that, '... the number of women using the web leapt 12% on last year compared with a minimal change in figures for men' (D-PREA1b).

A review of market research surveys such as the one above provides insight into the economic and commercial context in which the women's portal publishing industry is embedded. As with any other industry operating in a capitalist system, it is at the mercy of economic trends. In this context, the surveys take on extra significance in terms of providing the points of reference which frame the women's portal publishing industry. They become the tools on which the industry relies when responding to economic demands and expose gender patterns that shape the industry's understanding of women.

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### Other Events of Potential Consequence to the Development of Women's Portals

At the same time the publishing industry was realising the potential of women's online portals as investment opportunities, other voices were beginning to be heard. Here I would like to draw attention to two events, The Body Image Summit 2000 and Women in Journalism Seminar, which took place in 2000. These sought to address issues within the publishing industry and the media pertaining to women as consumers. What is particularly interesting about these two events is that, happening within a relatively short period of time, they responded to a need that had been identified to question women's representation in the mass media and the types of messages being conveyed to the female users.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, 2000 a Body Image Summit was organised in London, UK by the Cabinet Office and the Eating Disorders Association. The summit was organised at the behest of two Ministers for Women in the current British Labour government, Tessa Jowell and Margaret Jay. The summit invited the participation of the publishing industry and the mass media industry to debate the representation of women within the current media (D-PREA4), prompted by ever increasing numbers of women suffering from eating disorders and a possible relationship between this trend and media misrepresentation of women's bodies. The main focus of the summit was not necessarily discussion of eating disorders themselves but more the use of imagery portraying unrealistic female bodies. In the *Guardian*, the Minister for Women commented, '... women are stopped from achieving often because they're, we're, sapped by poor body image which leads to low self-esteem, but surely, too, we focus too much on our bodies, our weight, as a way of not addressing other problems as well as other possibilities' (D-PREA3d). The Body Image Summit indicated that there is a need to re-evaluate women's positioning and representation in the mass media.



The importance of such a meeting stems from the fact that it openly questions the women's traditional magazine publishing industry. In the public eye, the summit pointed to the imagery presented in magazines such as Vogue, Cosmopolitan or ELLE, identifying gendered and destructive messages such imagery can convey. As the participants were not only government ministers but also those from the mass media sector and related industries, the summit called for self-evaluation. It prompted a form of moral questioning and accountability on the part of those who produce distorted and/or unrepresentative images.

The initial outcomes of the summit seem like a huge step for a highly traditional industry, towards recognition of the influence of patriarchal values on women's representation. The day after the summit, *The Guardian* printed the following description of possible actions to be undertaken by the publishing industry and the Broadcasting Standards Commission:

*'Fashion magazines are to adopt a self-regulatory code under which they will refuse to use unhealthily thin models and blacklist agencies which persistently provide them ... the broadcasting standards commission is to monitor media images on television in an attempt to evaluate whether a sufficiently diverse group of women appear as presenters and guests' (D-PREA2q).*

Such propositions indicate and focus the public's attention on the acknowledgement that a problem exists with women's portrayal in the magazine industry. At the same time, if carried out, the policies would force the industry to deal with the issue of gendered women's representation and finally question its traditions. The summit signifies a shift in how women as consumers are conceptualised that can potentially lead to changes in social values. However, a 200 year old tradition is hard to break. Although the initial response suggested an openness to change, within days the industry in question went on to trivialise the issue and evade responsibility:

*Of course, the pushers of this aesthetic and all that went with it ducked responsibility. Fashion, design, aesthetic are harmless fun they said. We aren't creating insecurities. We aren't influencing them negatively. Perhaps we tip over the few who would be screwed up anyway, but in general, we help. Look, we are a successful export industry; British design sells. Leave off. Girls, we were told, just want to be beautiful. And indeed they do' (D-PREA3b).*



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The editors of various fashion magazines appear to laugh off the issue. Telegraph.co.uk reported that '[t]he Government's initiative to tackle eating disorders suffered fresh embarrassment yesterday after magazine editors denied that they had agreed to what was promoted as a principal part of its proposals' (D-PREA5). The Broadcasting Standards Commission seemed to have backed out from the discussion. From a position of monitoring the diversity of women appearing in the public media, the Commission retreated to '... merely ... "considering" asking for academic research into the area' (D-PREA5). Such a response only further diminishes the issue's importance. The editors responding negatively to the initiative by voicing their opinions via a public platform take away any credibility from the summit. Ultimately, it became a debate of 'us versus them', using news media as the medium to carry the message. A year later, few would have remembered the summit and even fewer would look for possible changes prompted by the initiative.

The second event which took place served to enlarge upon the women's portal publishing industry context, was a meeting organised by *Women in Journalism*. *Women in Journalism* is a non-profit organisation that promotes women's interests within the print industry. It is a social network of women in media from beginners to the most senior positions. On the 10th December 2000, I attended a seminar which focused on women's representation within the media. It is important to point out that I was allowed to attend the meeting provided I did not record any part of the meeting or take any notes. I was also obliged to keep particularities of the discussions confidential. The description of the meeting can therefore only be limited, for example I can refer only to the fact that the meeting occurred and to the general topics around women's representation in the media that were discussed. What I can say is that it was attended by a tight network of women from various areas of the media. It is important to mention that both Ministers for Women (Labour and Conservative) attended the seminar. The presence of current Government officials at meetings focusing on women's representation in the media does raise the profile of these issues. The seminar took place after the Body Image Summit and whilst the latter seemed to fail to produce pro-active results, the very existence of the Women in Journalism seminar suggested that the cause did not lose all its momentum. The same women



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who would have attended the summit, met six months later to discuss similar issues around the distorted representation of women in the media.

The value in presenting both events is two-fold. Firstly, the events describe occurrences that appear to be few and far between in recent years. Where previous critique of women's position in Western society has at times been dismissed as an exclusively feminist perspective and time and again considered of little value by the 'mainstream' media sector, the summit and the seminar stem precisely *from* the mainstream and suggest a shift in the conceptualisation of women's role in society. In addition, the summit and the seminar provide a rare glimpse of the inner workings of the women's magazine publishing, the industry responsible for producing portal content for female users. The very existence of the summit and the seminar point to the fact that there is a recognised need for re-evaluating the status quo in which women are situated. Concomitantly, it exposes how deeply particular gender ideologies run within the women's magazine publishing that also shape women's portals like BEME.com. On a positive note, both events suggest a possibility of change, an alternative route that is within reach. At the same time, both the summit and the seminar indicate the women's magazine publishing industry's inability and/or unwillingness to act on this vision. Even if change is prompted by the output technology such as the Internet, it is unlikely to be embraced by the industry. This represents an ideological inertia which it is necessary to understand as an important factor affecting the women's portal publishing industry world.

### Findings

The literature review and research data reveal the world of women's portal publishing as a complex entity, striving for financial stability and success whilst deeply influenced by market forces. The literature review presents an historical backdrop to the introduction of women's portals noting a number of significant changes within the global media industry itself. The introduction of various digital technologies, such as the Internet, has facilitated a variety of ways to communicate, on a local or global level and the interactive capacity of online content has



## Chapter 4: The Women's Portal Publishing Industry

challenged the meaning of the terms 'consumer' and producer' (Lister et al. 2003). At the same time, the women's magazine publishing industry has itself undergone restructuring, creating an oligopoly as the driving portal economic model. As Miller (2000) summarises:

*'... investors are speculating that the majority of these portal companies will be bought out (at a favourable share price) by large 'old media' firms who are increasingly interested in 'hedging their bets' with the internet phenomenon ... However, the trend is clear: portals are being pushed into partnerships with large media companies and analysts are expressing concerns that those ... that do not have a big media partner will not be competitive in the long run ... At the same time, investors and markets also like to see traditional oligopolist firms investing, providing even further perceived stability and centralization of a potentially decentralized mode of communication.'* (Miller 2000:120)

A review of the literature has also revealed great enthusiasm for commercial exploitation of the Internet, manifest in over inflated investment. However, Miller (2000) and Dawson and Foster's (1998) critical analysis suggests that overall, market forces seem to deny the development of new commercial paradigms and rather push for stability through corporate merger resulting in control resting with a small number of key players. Such historical developments have also exerted influence over the particular markets targeting female users. In their analysis of women's magazines, scholars such as Beetham (1996), Winship (1987) or Ferguson (1983) frequently refer to decades of tradition dominating the targeting of female users. Whilst operating in a different medium, the women's portal publishing does not necessarily invent new means of communication, but rather carries on within these well accepted canons adapted to the new technology. The combination of literature review and my analysis presents a picture of the industry as an amorphous body made up of a tightly woven network of social relations and interaction. It is an environment steeped in practices of confidentiality and guarding of its interests and outcomes. Anyone who is not part of the system is an outsider – as my data gathering experience revealed. This network is both supported and buffeted by economic currents and power relations inherent to a capitalist system. The need to compete drives each corporation away from the others, installing mistrust and lack of a common, greater good or purpose. It is also an industry that does not easily or willingly reflect on its own activities, as the response to the Body Image Summit has shown.



## Chapter 4: The Women's Portal Publishing Industry

At the beginning of the dot.com boom, when there are no specific online experts in targeting female users, suddenly the publishing, media and entertainment industries come to the fore. Their claim is an investment in a new niche market – female online users with 'newly' acquired financial independence. Hence, women are being constituted as potential new consumers. However, the literature reveals an already existing important link between women and patterns of consumption. In their research, Lury (1996), McCracken (1993) and Winship (1987) refer to the historic ability of women's magazines to envision female audiences as consumers within a specifically defined 'female' territory. Moreover, the gendered environment of women's magazine publishing provides a rather successful guide to ways of targeting female users. Hence, the women's portal publishing industry – a newly established combination of publishing, media and entertainment industries – becomes, overnight, a women's portal publishing expert, by simply importing an already existing model. It is not just the experience of how to target female users that informs this new venture; an understanding of the portal market economy becomes a key driving influence of the commercial women's online publishing. This need for the industry to define itself through the generation of revenue has clear parallels with magazine publishing, as Winship (1987) suggests: '[t]hose market pressures have built up from the 1950s and decisively shaped not only the available range of magazines but also, in highly significant ways, the contents of any given magazine' (p. 39). Ferguson (1983) makes a similar point: '[f]or in so far as women's magazines are responsive to the world outside ... their response is heavily conditioned by the commercial imperative, and the search to find a message which will sell it' (p. 183). The generation of revenue becomes the only way for the industry to comprehend the value of women's online portals. This value is measured through ongoing surveillance of the online market and decisions are made in response to it.

There seems to be little doubt that the way the women's portal publishing profiles female users is problematic. Scholars such as Ferguson (1983) define this industry as beset by a 'cult of femininity'. Such terminology allows her to recognize the industry's built in gender and power structure and its consequences. She states that '[w]omen's magazines ... provide the syllabus and step-by-step instructions which help to socialise their readers into the various ages and



stages of the demanding – but rewarding – state of womanhood ... These journals [portals] attempted to promote a collective female social 'reality', the world of women' (Ferguson 1983:185). On the other hand, McCracken (1993) discusses the broader narratives in which the women's publishing industry is embedded, which '... succeed quite well in channelling women's desire into consumerism' (p. 301). Her critique highlights inequality in power relations between the women's portal publishing industry and its female users, where the female users '... have little input into the monthly representations that claim to be about their lives' (McCracken 1993:301). At no point are female users being acknowledged as potential producers of the interfaces or communicated meaning by means of the Internet's interactive capacity or the use of hypertext navigation. Whilst in its early days, many commentators highlighted the value of the Internet as tool for individual expression (Poster 1995), the women's portal publishing has more or less avoided recognising this potential vis-a-vis their target audience. Whilst this limiting approach has frequently been questioned, these critiques have tended to derive from the academy and rarely hold much sway in the commercial sector.

Nonetheless, the industries themselves have begun to question their approach. As the two events described above suggest, a context is developing that is more sympathetic to questioning women's representation in the mass media. However, this critique is dominated by centuries of a gendered positioning of women within society. At the moment the critique does not have the power to instigate any major changes in the ways female users are positioned as gendered beings. As McCracken (1993) states, '[r]eaders' individual and sometimes shared modes of resistance to representations in magazines have not affected radical changes in the structure of the capitalist society nor even in the magazines themselves' (p. 301). Thus, the women's portal publishing industry is not only a complex system of human interaction, economic influence and product consumption but also a place of an ongoing conflict between personal interests, corporate prerogatives and global power struggles. It is an industry underpinned by a much more fundamental struggle between what is considered a greater or moral good and the need to secure a profit.



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**Chapter 5**  
Women's Commercial Portals in the UK

## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals

Building on the discussion and analysis in previous chapter, I delve in greater depth into three particular Internet sites to offer an insight into the dominant visual language of women's portals published in the UK. I begin by presenting the historical developments that affected the development and design of the particular three portals. However, the focus is not on the general trends of the industry as in the previous chapter but rather on the details of what constitutes an online portal and the particular organisations responsible for creating and launching the portals in question. It is also important to mention that due to the inherent nature of the Internet, the three sites are continually changing. In each case, the content is updated on a daily bases and the technological innovations implemented as they arise. Therefore, the factor of continuous change informs the analysis by making specific references to the dates of the visual outcomes.

### Portals and Their Deployment

Coming into use in 1998, the terms 'portal' and 'Web portal' refer to a technological application hitherto known as a 'search engine' (Miller 2000: 117). This chapter seeks to contextualise the BEME.com women's portal vis-à-vis portal technology per se and in terms of the origin, aims and format of other women's portals such as handbag.com and femail.co.uk. The visual communication of gender within these portals is then addressed with the overall aim of framing subsequent discussion of the BEME.com portal.

Very simply, a portal is an online 'gateway' which is considered a starting point for users when they connect to the Internet. That is why portal providers intend that their portal will become an 'anchor' site from which users will begin their searching and so act as an organiser or catalogue of how the Internet is used. Portal genealogy can be traced to what were originally only known as 'search engines'; programmes which allowed users to search for keywords listed on Internet sites. Miller (2000) comments that search engines have become the most supported commercial enterprises online but that, '[b]y the spring of 1998 a new bit of vocabulary had entered the new media world: 'portal' or 'Web portal'. The switch from search engine to portal



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals in the UK

was based on the adoption of a 'consumer service model' by search services. This was done through the provision of an increasing array of free services to build upon the search technology already given successfully for free' (Miller 2000:117). Hildreth (2002) comments that, '...portals are an increasingly popular method for uniting disparate applications and data sources behind a single user interface'. Their appeal also stems from their capacity to combine advanced online technology with ever-changing content, offering the potential of interactivity and ease of updating. They range from being generic gateways and niche gateways defined by audience and/or topic. Familiar generic portals include: Yahoo, Excite, Microsoft Network, and America Online's AOL.com and examples of niche portals are Fool.com (for investors), SearchNetworking.com (for network administrators) and BEME.com (for women). Whilst users may not be aware of either the change in nomenclature or enhanced technological capability, portals have increasingly become the preferred choice for online publishing. Hildreth states that '[t]he global market for portal software will reach \$2.6 billion by 2006, according to IT research company International Data Corp. That's up from an estimated \$461 million in 2001. The Meta Group, another research firm, predicts that 85 percent of companies will deploy a portal by 2004, and 90 percent will deploy one by 2006' (2002). Basic services provided by a portal include: '...a directory of Web sites, a facility to search for other sites, news, weather information, e-mail, stock quotes, phone and map information, and sometimes a community forum' (Whatis.com 2003). In the case of portals targeting niche markets these services are both expanded and tailored to suit the respective target audience. In the case of women's commercial portals, the general format is customised to include suitable editorial content and appropriate elements of interactivity. Portals are likely to include discussion forums, means and opportunity to contact experts for advice, email facilities and access to voting or gaming abilities. Alongside these features, the portals also include a wide variety of advertising.

Recent innovation in Internet technology has meant that portals have begun to include means for users to, in some way, personalise a portal. This capability relies on 'portlets' or portal 'applets'; visual components brought together within a portal framework to generate an online page. 'Typically, when an end user requests a personalized Web page, multiple portlets are



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals

invoked when that page is created' (Schaeck and Hepper 2002). Frequently the delivered content will be textually based. This is rapidly and easily retrievable, guaranteeing easy user access and a better rate of user return (Whatis.com 2003). From a financial point of view, '[c]ompanies with portal sites have attracted much stock market investor interest because portals are viewed as able to command large audiences and numbers of advertising viewers' (Whatis.com 2003). However, as Hildreth (2002) points out, '...while portals offer a cure for many integration headaches, they are beginning to cause a few interoperability pains of their own'. The modular use of portlets to generate online pages requires compatibility on a local level with an ability to call upon remote components. However, in the absence of uniform technological standards, these components are not necessarily compatible with each other causing problems for portal customers, application vendors, content providers and portal software vendors. It was not until September 2003 that Internet development industries called for the implementation of standards for the design of portal software. These are: the use of JSR (Java Specification Request) 168 and WSRP (Web Services for Remote Portals). JSR 168 supported by Sun Microsystems' Java Community Process, is designed '... to establish a standard portlet programming API' (Application Programme Interface) (Moore 2003). On the other hand, WSRP developed by the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards' (OASIS) '... leverages Web-services standards to integrate remote content and applications into portals' (Moore 2003). The compliance with such standards will allow various online developers and service providers to incorporate portlets from different sources, offering users a higher level of content interactivity and flexibility. These standards are in place to address technological issues and therefore have no control over the look or feel of portals. The 'visual language' remains in the hands of portal designers whose aim is to make the format appealing to the target audience, as well as offering the opportunity for users to individually modify aspects of the portals. Nonetheless, the nature of portlet technology has an affect on the look and feel of the interface. The modular, pre-set portlet format and their specific uses within portal frameworks have a standardising effect on the visual language used to communicate with users. Hence, portals targeting similar audiences such as female users might appear to conform to a certain standard of design.



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals in the UK

Portal technology remains the primary means of generating commercial sites targeting female users. Nonetheless, the content of these portals has been formatted with already existing women's paper magazine aims and structures as a template (IPC Media 2001). (See Appendix Table 17 p. 307 for comparison between online portals and women's traditional paper magazines.) As McCracken (1993) points out, '[t]he ostensibly authoritative grand narrative of reality developed month after month in these texts appears to be a women-centred articulation of the world' (p. 2). In the case of women's commercial portals this narrative is delivered on a daily basis. By '[r]endering thousands of aspects of everyday life as knowable, controllable entities ... [women's commercial portals] suggest ... that an apparently comprehensive and straightforward detailing of the everyday life can capture reality discursively for readers' (McCracken 1993:2). Furthermore, as with women's magazines, women's portals are commercial enterprises deeply rooted in advertising and the selling various commodities for female consumption. Hence, the content of these portals is driven by years of what has been traditionally established as 'women's concerns'. Notwithstanding the portals' technological capabilities, for example the opportunity to add features which make the visual language appear polysemic, it would appear that there is a strong conservative gendered stamp on the design of women's portals. However, after the Internet bust, some of the women's portal content providers began to question the appropriateness of such broad-cast portals in targeting female users.

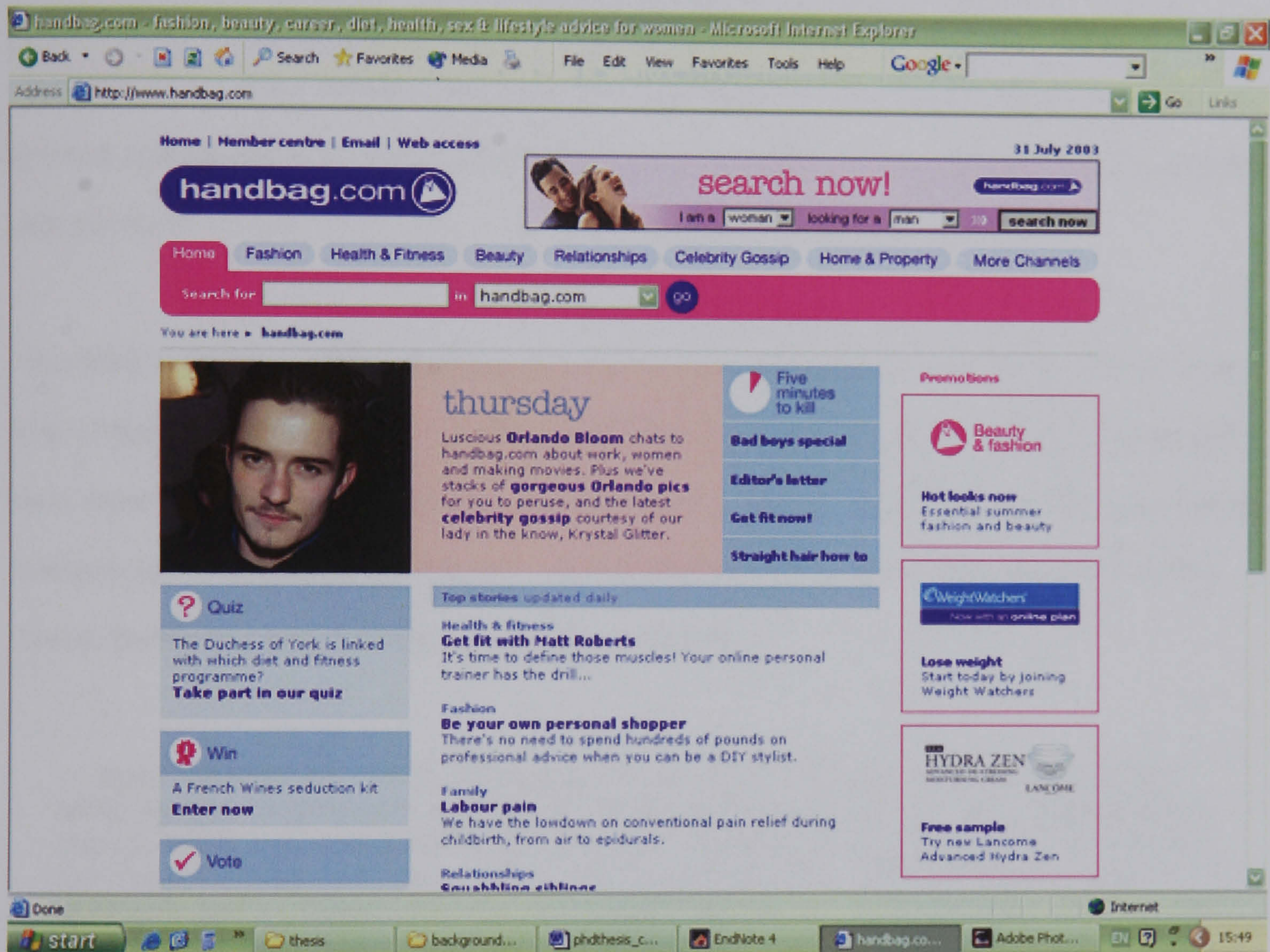
Having sketched the technical development of portals, the following section turns to portal visual language in more detail. This is in order to situate BEME.com amongst examples of its peers and highlight overall trends in design for female audiences.



### A Closer Look at Three Portals for Women

#### i) Handbag.com

Figure 2: Homepage of handbag.com (31 July 2003), a women's portal launched by Hollinger Telegraph New Media and Boots Company plc.



handbag.com is a 50/50 joint venture between Hollinger Telegraph New Media and Boots Company plc. Hollinger Telegraph New Media specialises in digital and new media activities in UK and Europe as part of Telegraph Group Limited. As such, the Telegraph Group Limited is a newspaper publisher with a portfolio of titles including The Daily Telegraph, The Sunday Telegraph, The Spectator and The Weekly Telegraph. However, Telegraph Group Limited is not a stand-alone enterprise. According to corporate information gathered it is owned by '... Hollinger International Inc, an international newspaper publishing company with approximately 200 newspaper properties in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Israel' (D-



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CP6d). Boots Company plc on the other hand, is a supplier of healthcare products and services of strong repute, having been in existence in some shape or form for over a century (D-CP6e). handbag.com is therefore backed by proven expertise in publishing on the part of Hollinger Telegraph New Media and the commercial success and knowledge base of Boots Company plc. The underlying portal corporate strategy can 'piggyback' on customer loyalty to Boots Company plc and trust that has built up in the publications of Hollinger Telegraph New Media. Its e-commerce strategy is grafted itself on to these sources. handbag.com often is associated with the upper share of the market throughout the boom and bust of dot.com industries and its survival is attributed to an e-commerce strategy heavily relying on Boots Company plc products and services.

Launched in October 1999, handbag.com is the first women's portal to be published in the UK. It is a 'lifestyle' online portal for female users, although recently its creators began to refer to it as a 'mass-market site' (D-PREA2f). The site claims to offer inside information for busy women covering current issues pertaining to '... relationships, health, careers and beauty' (D-CP6a).

The corporate text positions the handbag.com user as:

*'... aged between 25 and 45, with a median age of 31. She is likely to be ABC1, and either married or living with a partner in the home she owns. In her spare time (of which there is little!), she enjoys the cinema and reading magazines – particularly the women's and home improvements titles. There'll be a bottle of good quality wine in her weekly shop, and she is constantly on the search for a good book. As a voracious shopper, she purchases by mail order and online' (D-CP6a).*

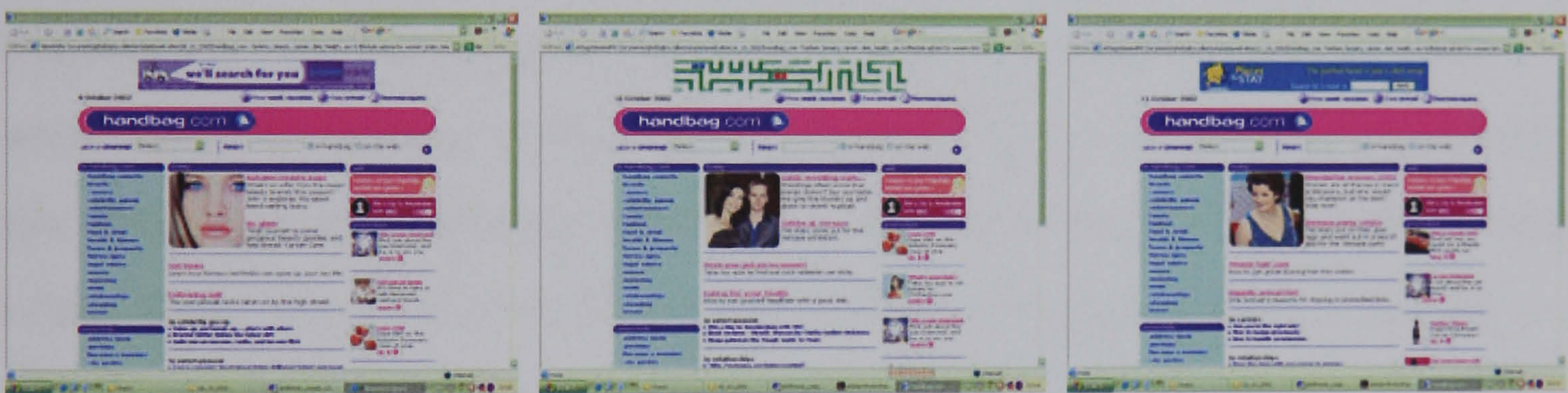
Such a description indicates the site's relevance to a person who has a professional career, is an independent and focused and a self aware modern individual. It is therefore somewhat surprising that the site relies on a mixture of feminine stereotyping and 'feminist' ideas to create associations and attract its customers. As the name of the portal suggests, it is a woman's '... handbag of the future' (D-PREA2n), the idea of a handbag being a typically female artefact. From the medium point of view, a 'handbag' fits well with conceiving of a portal as a site that contains everything its users would ever need – a virtual handbag. In addition, the portal also claims to provide information and advice for female users who want to be '... informed,



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals in the UK

empowered and entertained' (D-PREA2n). However, the visual language chosen to promote these values relies on well established, traditional magazine cannons vis-à-vis the representation of women. Reliance on the feminine stereotype serves to undermine the portal's commitment to notions of empowerment. Similarly, its content does not stray far away from what is traditionally represented in women's magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Vogue or Woman's Own. Although the site does offer information on supposedly less feminine or less gender specific topics such as money and motoring, these topics are presented as less significant. Content which has the greatest visibility and takes up the most space is that focused on celebrity gossip and shopping (D-VR2) led by titles such as 'Autumn beauty buys' and 'Go glam' (8 October, 2002) or 'Measure your body fat' (18 October, 2002).

**Figure 3: A selection of handbag.com homepages showing the layout template. The screenshots are taken on 8 October, 16 October and 21 October, 2002 (from left to right).**



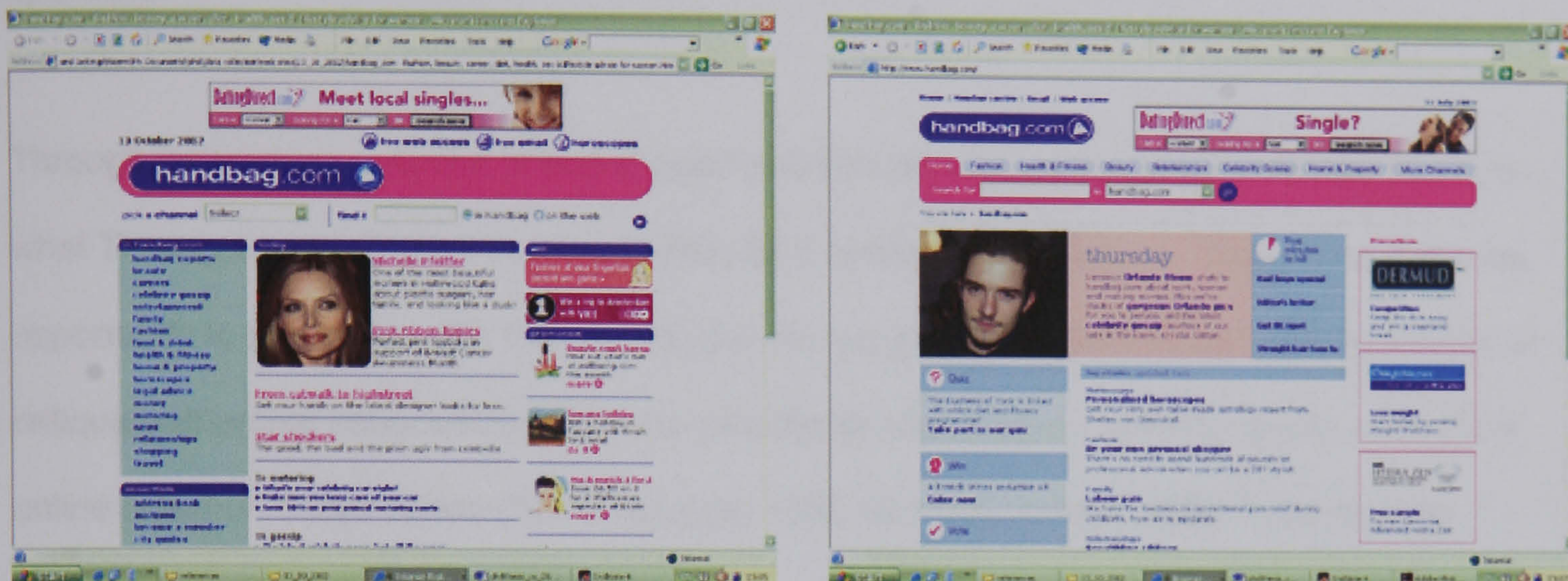
handbag.com has always relied on what can be characterised as a visually clear and assertive design, keeping its selection of graphics to a minimum of blues and pinks and rounded shapes. Such specific selection communicates a site identity often associated with a traditionally feminine look and feel, yet allows for differentiation through the use of colour. While colourful images complement the articles, they have to compete with an abundance of soft pinks and light blues. Themed channels do not seem to use any particular system in colour coding although there are colour variations. The emphasis seems to be more on the consistency of the initial graphical elements. The typography is straightforward, although it has recently been supplemented with headlines in a rounded 'funky' font which, arguably, disturb easy viewing (See Figure 2 p. 133). As online publishing technologies continually develop, different trends in



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visual language emerge. For example, Figure 4 p. 136 illustrates several design updates of the handbag.com site, reflecting merely technological changes.

**Figure 4: An example of handbag.com homepages from 13 October 2002 (on the left) and 31 July 2003 (on the right), illustrating minor template changes.**



In October 2002 handbag.com home page greets the user with what are a set of frequently used online portal templates. The layout of the homepage follows a straightforward newspaper style with a masthead supported by a three column grid centred on the web page (See Figure 3 p. 135). Such a layout subscribes to quite a typical design developed for online portals, for example news focused sites (See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>; <http://www.cnn.com/>; <http://online.wsj.com/public/us> for examples.). The masthead contains a banner advertisement followed by the handbag.com logo and a selection of buttons. The three columns are assigned specific functions, as visible in the screenshots (See Figure 3 p. 135). The purpose of each column has not altered with time. The left hand side column contains an extensive menu system. Split into two sections, the first 'handbag.com' menu presents the overall content of the portal whilst the second section is the 'essentials' menu containing links to more interactive features such as email, address book and discussion groups. It is this latter section which allows the viewer to personalise aspects of the portal. Moving towards the right, the centre column presents the actual content of the portal. It consists of an eye catching image in the top left hand corner and a selection of 'top stories'. As is common in web design the feature articles are presented as titles and one lead sentence serving as links to the full text. The less important articles are grouped under various categories and only represented as a title link. The



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content column often ends with a quiz or vote section to entice the user to return to the site.

The right hand side column is dedicated to product advertising. It features 'promotional' and 'offers' sections with a selection of products that link to more comprehensive advertising pages.

These pages are not part of the handbag.com portal but rather supplied by the product sponsors.

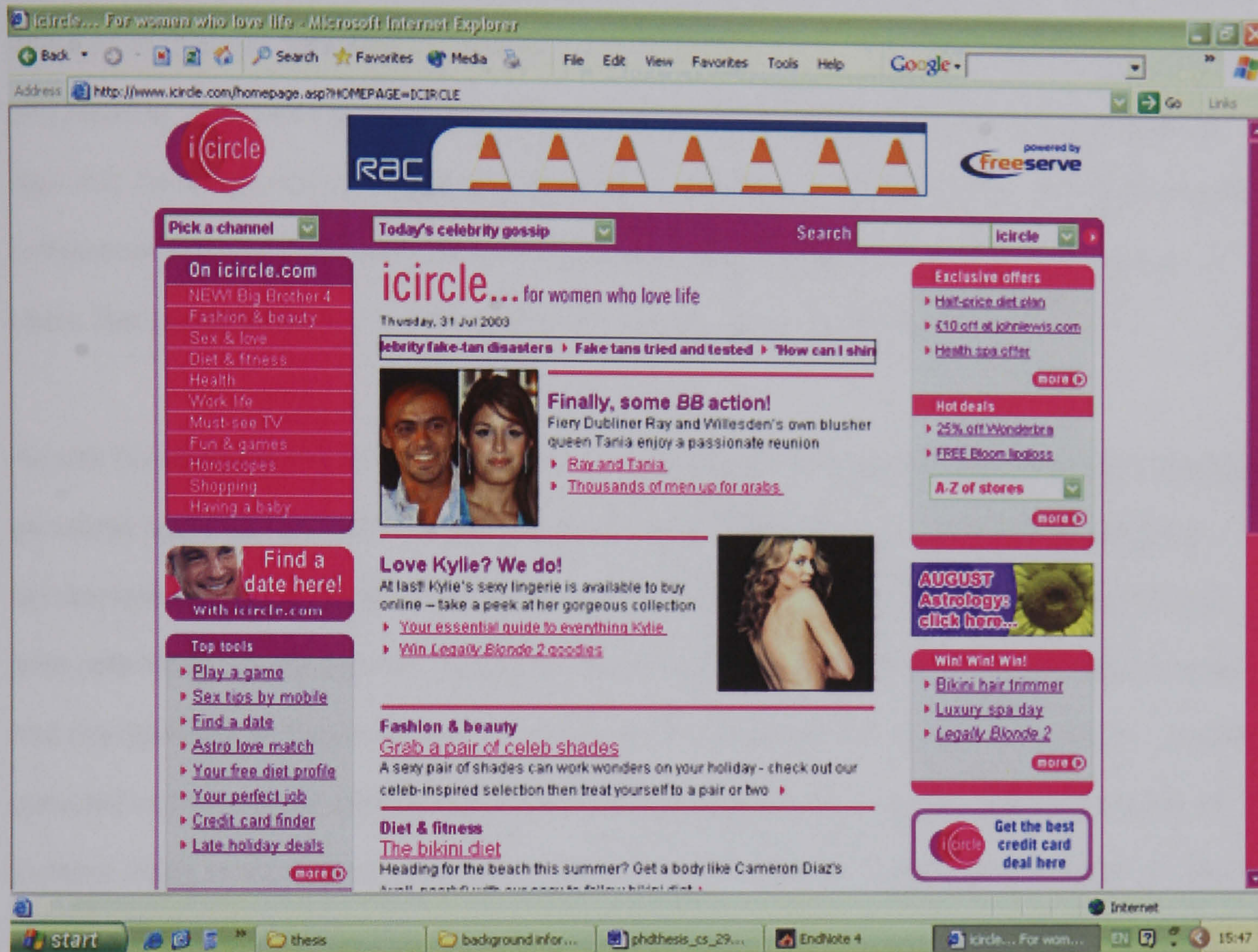
Through its predominant use of soft shaped and pink/blue visual language, the site draws on what Threagold and Cranny-Francis (1990) term feminine stereotypes. Rather than take the opportunity to play on or with the stereotypes as many feminist sites do, in order to expose or critique patriarchal associations, the site uses these connotive graphics to create a feminine online communicative space (See Ferguson, 1983 and McCracken, 1993 for supporting discussion). Through this conjuring of 'feminine feeling' the portal aims to distinguish itself as a niche portal targeting a female audience. The use of gender in this particular case functions as a marker to demarcate this portion of online space.



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### ii) iCircle.com

Figure 5: Homepage of iCircle.com (31 July 2003), a women's portal launched by Freeserve.



Launched by Freeserve at the end of October 1999, iCircle is, unlike other portals discussed in this thesis, owned by a non-publishing focused enterprise. Freeserve is an Internet access provider owned by Wanadoo, a company based in France supplying online media and services (D-CP7e). Freeserve's corporate strategy involves providing '...an integrated offering of UK-focused content, e-commerce and services plus free and simple Internet connection, including email, personal webspace and online customer support' (D-CP7e). As described by corporate sources, the portal is a 'community channel for women' (D-CP7b).

iCircle.com is a distinct but related 'wing' of Freeserve's general portal, the aim being that women will move from the general portal to this niche portal, as well as accessing iCircle.com



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals in the UK

from elsewhere. The portal user is characterised as a young, carefree individual who wants to enjoy life. The aim of the site is to provide information in a quick, easy and enjoyable way. As the corporate information states: '[w]e recognise that women want to relax, find solutions fast, and have fun – and that's why we're here' (D-CP7a). The site also claims to be very successful at providing just the right kind of content. This is '...due to a mix of great ideas, expert advice and buzzing discussion boards, where you can exchange views on everything from where to find belly-dancing classes to getting the best deal from your bank' (D-CP7a). The presentation is therefore friendly, light hearted and sometimes even frivolous with the aim to make female users feel comfortable and not threatened by the use of the technology.

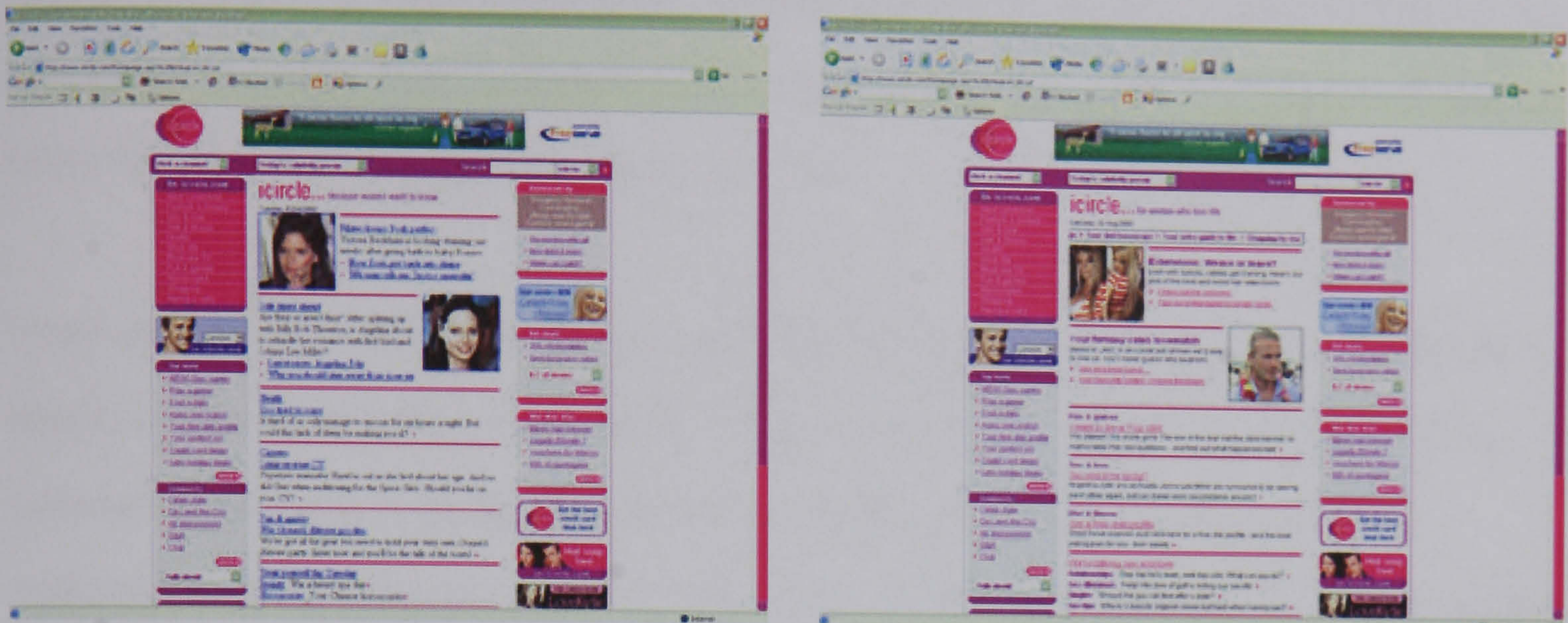
As with handbag.com, iCircle.com focuses specifically on female users and employs a strongly gendered approach in communicating with this target audience. The 'iCircle' title has been accompanied with the slogans: 'because women want to know', and 'for women who love life', both potentially gender neutral. However, according to iCircle.com *what* women want to know and the *type* of lives they love is again deeply rooted in gendered notions of femininity. This is reflected in the types of articles that the site makes available to its users. For example on 11 October 2002, female users are offered the following headlines: 'Catherine gets fruity' or 'Sex & love: Halle hath no fury' and on 20 of October 2002, the lead feature begins, 'Get a Bond girl body' (D-VR4). Gender is again used as a marker to identify an online space focused on and suitable for female users.

One feature which distinguishes iCircle.com from handbag.com is its insistence on providing an online community for its female users. There is strong emphasis on the notions of community within the portal, in fact the name is meant to indicate a circle of friends with an individual user belonging to this circle and community, online. This commitment is supported by a menu section specifically dedicated to community's activities and another menu offering the opportunity to join the community.



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Figure 6: Two iCircle.com homepages from 8 October 2002 (on the left) and 23 August 2003 (on the right), showing the portal design template with almost no layout alterations.



iCircle.com – like handbag.com – uses a typical portal template to communicate its information. It also has a masthead supported by three columns positioned in the middle of the page. The most prominent part of the masthead contains advertising banners and a bar with drop-down general menus. The iCircle logo becomes a less significant element in the top left hand corner. The visual message of the portal focuses on the consumption rather than communication of, its brand. The three columns again have distinct roles. The left hand side column contains all the navigational information ranging from the content menu to ways in which one can join the community. The right hand side column acts as a promotional, advertising strip, listing sponsors, latest deals or ways to win with special offers and the centre column refers to the portal's content. The centre column also repeats the name of the site and associated slogan. In more recent editions of the site the portal title is supported by a scrolling bar with a selection of links pertaining to a range of topics. These links are more commercial than editorial in nature. Fitting in with general online design practice, the centre column contains links to feature articles. The top two stories are represented by their respective title, a brief introduction and further links related to the theme of the article. These top two articles are always accompanied by an image. The remaining articles are grouped within categories and appear mainly as a title with a very brief introduction. The column ends with a voting section, where the question changes periodically. The most striking feature of the iCircle.com portal is its colour scheme. Its homepage is two-tone pink and purple whereas the subsidiary channels of the portal vary



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals in the UK

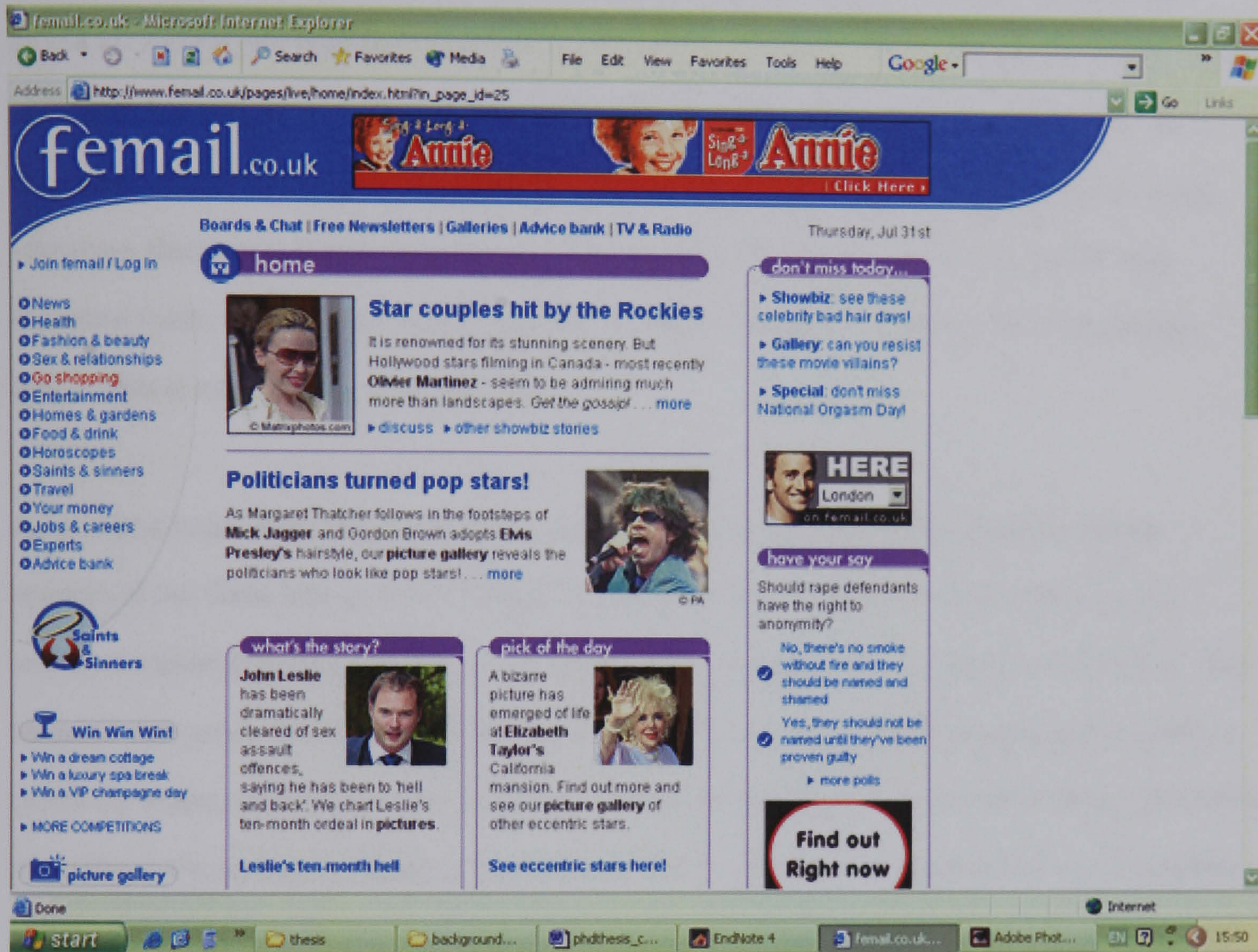
from shades of pink and purple to soft blues. The colour scheme creates a strong impression and an overwhelming visual experience. There is no place where the eye can rest due to such abundance of colour. Even incidental or decorative elements such as horizontal or vertical lines follow the set colour scheme (See Figure 5 p. 138).

However, overall, the iCircle.com design conforms to the canon of portal design. Whilst this structure makes it an easy and navigable environment, the overwhelming pink/purple colour scheme together with relatively traditional women's content means that it can easily be compared to glossy magazines. The gendered approach to what constitutes female community online means that the portal does not need to depart from the pre-set cannons of communicating femininity. In trying very hard to create a familiar environment for its female users, the portal succeeds in reiterating types of content and ways of communication found in traditional women's paper magazines, which have after all, succeeded in this market for a long time.



### iii) Femail.co.uk

Figure 7: Homepage of femail.co.uk (31 July 2003), a women's portal launched by Associated New Media.



The origins of femail.co.uk are slightly more complicated than the other portals discussed here.

Launched by Associated New Media (ANM), it originally went by the name CharlotteStreet.com.

According to corporate texts, Associated New Media is:

*'... the digital publishing division of Associated Newspapers Ltd, one of Britain's premier national newspaper groups, which publishes the Daily Mail, The Mail on Sunday, Evening Standard and Metro. Launched in 1995, ANM publishes some of the UK's most successful new media resources and services' (D-CP8b).*

Like handbag.com and iCircle.com, CharlotteStreet.com portal was launched in October 1999, reflecting well the online publishing environment at the time. The site aimed to support its female users in terms of making everyday decisions and the portal information was arranged to



## Chapter 5: Women's Commercial Portals in the

give the impression of personalised and intimate communication (D-PREA2n). The portal target audience was '... 25 to 50-year-old women 'in a hurry' although insiders later admitted it was all "guesswork"' (D-PREA2p). The portal contained information on 'female' activities including pregnancy and babies, health, home and shopping. However, it did not target its audience based on individually specified interests and/or needs, but rather on assumptions based on their sex. Within a very short period of time, it became apparent that the portal was failing. As a Guardian article pointed out, '[i]ts monthly user figures are thought to be well below its rivals, Handbag, Beme and iCircle who all claim around 200,000' (D-PREA2p). A decision was therefore made to both redesign the site and re-launch it under a different name in January 2001. This is how femail.co.uk was born.

As part of a large newspaper publishing network, femail.co.uk is initially targeting female readers of the Daily Mail and The Mail on Sunday (D-CP8d). As both newspapers publish women focused supplements, the portal offers an online option for this female readership. The targeted age group is between 25 and 50 years and mainly from ABC1 demographic profile, a group for whom, according to the corporate vision, family issues are the main interest (D-CP8d). In addition, the production team of femail.co.uk works with the premise that the target audience is either married or lives with a partner and children (D-CP8d). Finally, femail.co.uk corporate information describes its target users in the following way: 'They [women] tend to place nurturing the needs of their children and husbands before their own. They are however strong minded women who are concerned with issues which are political and outside the home' (D-CP8d).

Although the portal offers information pertaining to a wide variety of interests that are often typically associated with women such as horoscopes, recipes or relationships, its main focus is on health. The portal makes available a large number of articles pertaining to a wide array of health issues. In addition, the site provides access to advice from a variety of health experts. Finally, capitalising on the interactive capabilities of the Internet, the portal includes video dairies also focusing on health issues.



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In general, the overall content of the site can be said to converge with what the other portals discussed, amongst others, offer to women. Nonetheless, the site relies on the association with the 'Female' Daily Mail supplement for women, for its brand extension and consumers. The more traditional focus on family care and nurturing gives femail.co.uk an edge to differentiate itself from the other two portals. This difference is evident in the type of content the site offers, such as 'We test the best kids' software' (13 October, 2002) or 'Get inspired for a fun half-term – search our Days Out guide!' (19 October 2002). The health focus is apparent in features including: 'Could a light therapy cure your winter blues?' (19 October 2002), 'YOU tell us the best health advice you've ever been given!' (13 October 2002) and 'How the way you eat can improve your workout' (8 October, 2002). However, the site also contains references to other subjects such as fashion, shopping news and various events in the UK arts scene.

The content of femail.co.uk is somewhat more conservative than the frivolous iCircle.com or business-like handbag.com. Here, the gendered approach towards its audience is embedded within patriarchal definitions of womanhood, family and domesticity. The corporate statement that '... [women] tend to place nurturing the needs of their children and husbands before their own' (D-CP8d) reveals quite clearly the gender stereotypes the site promotes. I would argue that this approach is symptomatic of the print/newspaper side of the publishing industry, the conservative values of which, still sell papers.

Figure 8: femail.co.uk homepages from 15 October 2002 (on the left) and 24 August 2003 (on the right), showing the portal design template.





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The femail.co.uk layout combines the design practice typical of other women's portals with just a few alternative solutions to set it apart. The overall design relies on a modular system to position its content around the page. The colour scheme is shades of blue with a selection of channel specific colours used to accent and separate different content modules. Such colour treatment allows for additional visual navigation throughout the site where the content channels are colour coded. In opposition to the other two portals that heavily rely on text-based information with minimal visual support, femail.co.uk uses small images throughout, to accentuate and add variety to the layout.

Like handbag and iCircle.com, femail.co.uk is also based on a masthead supported by a three column grid. However, the layout of the page is not centred and relies on the edge of the page to provide visual balance (See Figure 7 p. 142). The masthead incorporates both the logo of the site as well as the advertising banner within a blue stripe forming a complete unit. Such an approach sets it apart from the other portals that tend to separate the banner from the logo. As with previous portals the left hand column contains site navigation. The included links are grouped into categories for easier access with the ones relating to site content at the very top. Of particular interest is the 'Go shopping' link that is the only red coloured button in the left hand column. All the other links are blue. Such differentiation of the link makes it much more prominent on the page attracting attention. Thus by default, it prompts female users to notice the link thereby increasing the chances of the button being clicked. However, it is also an example of gender assumptions in operation, in terms of associating womanhood with shopping, as well as going towards fulfilling the commercial imperative of the online publishing industry. The centre column contains the site's main content, starting with a selection of easy links to other aspects of the portal. The body of the column is subdivided into smaller sections using a modular approach meaning that articles and promotions can be placed next to each other without it becoming confusing. What differentiates this content from the previous two portals is its inclusion of special offers in the editorial column. In fact promotional material is sprinkled throughout and becomes just as much part of the editorial content. In terms of presentation, articles and promotions conform to the standard practice of titles functioning as



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links. The right hand column contains tit-bits of information ranging from additional advertising to TV listings and weather forecasts. This column acts more as a collection of miscellaneous and light hearted information.

Overall, the design of femail.co.uk does point towards a much more refined understanding of the use of women's portals. The fact that the current site is the result of a previous failure and subsequent re-think is evident in its design. The careful visual language of the portal is suggestive of lessons learned and the site now focuses on particular interests that might appeal to female users. It also demonstrates an awareness of the existence of other women's portals in the UK, adapting elements that are deemed successful by all women's commercial portals. However, the typecasting of female users by their gender and the portal's conservative approach to family issues means that like the previous two portals discussed, femail.co.uk remains tethered to well established norms in women's publishing.

### The Visual Communication of Gender

To further expand my analysis of women's portals as spaces embedded in and defined by gender structures, I refer to a taxonomy established by Aitchison and Jordan (2001) whose interest was in the ways in which cultural constructions of the body are mediated through the different leisure activities. Their analysis of a number of women's magazines between January and June 2001 led them to identify five categories that best described the effect achieved on/by a range of women's bikini body images. The five categories of effect are: homogenized, sexualised, disciplined, scrutinized and invisible (Aitchison and Jordan 2001). I would argue that their belief that the '... marketing of tourism through association with particular images of women potentially exerts an important influence over women as consumers of tourism', (Aitchison and Jordan 2001) applies equally to other cultural and consumer industries, including the Internet. It articulates how female online users may be shaped and/or taught by the medium itself to become consumers of women's commercial portals. The relevance of this taxonomy and the insight it offers can be transferred across media to demonstrate that, like their paper



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counterparts, online environments are similarly implicated in the gendered representation of women.

### ***Five Categories of Effect***

The following is a more detailed explanation of the five categories supported by a discussion of each of these categories in relation to the presented portals.

#### **'Homogenised'**

The category, 'homogenized', encompasses representations of women that do not allow for variation. It embodies the normative system imposed by society on femininity. This femininity is to be sought by all women, and centres around a 'one type' ideal body. Therefore, the images of women's bodies included in women's magazines do not reflect the diversity of bodies in reality (for example the average women's size is in fact 16, not 10 or even 8) but represent the ideal which is also billed as normal. Through continuous repetition and reinvention of this homogenized ideal, understanding of this ideal is cultivated and maintained.

The notion of 'homogenised' is not always easily apparent within the visual language of the portals discussed. Firstly, the portals rely mainly on textual content as a way of communicating with female users. Secondly, fewer opportunities to incorporate images online require that the choice of pictures be much more particular than is the case with paper magazines. However, these two limitations have not deterred the sites from using representations of women that subscribe to normative ideals of femininity. For example, on the 8 October 2002 all three portals include on their homepages images of slim, 'flawless' and pristine women. Due to the nature of these images and the use of digital technologies, it is likely that the images render the women photographed even more perfect than in real life. The use of digital technologies has allowed for feminine perfection to be more accentuated and any indication of diversity or 'imperfection' removed. The images are accompanied by articles with the following titles: 'Autumn beauty buys' (handbag.com), 'Pilates keeps Posh perfect' (iCircle.com) and 'Don't miss



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our brand new fashion bargains!' (femail.co.uk) (D-VR2; D-VR3; D-VR4). The written content becomes a guiding tool for the female users in decoding the message intended by the publisher of the site. The aim of the message is to present a 'homogenised' ideal of femininity for all female users to both desire and consume.

### 'Sexualised'

The 'sexualized' category would include images which in some way objectify or commodify women's bodies in terms of sexual appeal. For example, it describes images of femininity which cast the female body either in preparation for or as an invitation to, a sexual encounter. The readers of women's magazines are encouraged to see the portrayed women's bodies as objects of sexual desire open to scrutiny, admiration, and imitation.

The 'sexualised' content within the three portals' imagery is a much more subtle part of the visual language. Although all of the portals dedicate channels to sex, love and relationships the imagery functions on a much more subtle level. The 'sexualised' portrayal of women comes across more clearly in the pose of a model such as in a femail.co.uk photo accompanying the article 'View Versace at the V&A' (13 October, 2002) (D-VR3). Here, the model has her face looking downwards away from the viewer. However, the pose of the body is open and revealing, inviting the gaze. The play between, or ambiguity of the image in terms of innocence and invitation creates a 'sexualised' tension within the image, objectifying the female model. On the same day, iCicle.com presents actress Renee Zellweger with the top feature article (D-VR4). The accompanying image of the actress carries a similar message to the case above. The photograph is cropped to include just her head and torso. Although facing the viewer, the picture does not show the actress engaging in eye contact with either the photographer or reader/viewer. Her head is tilted downwards with an inviting and playful smile on her face and whilst it may merely be this, the image is open to interpreting her pose as coquettish. Just as with the other model, the actress is out of reach yet suggesting possible availability. Through the head pose and the facial expression the actress radiates innocence laced with sexual tension. It is this particular category that demands finesse on the part of the designer in order to



achieve something that is neither too explicit nor too muted. In other words, it is implicit communication of the 'sexualised' imagery that makes it so potent and effective.

### **'Disciplined'**

Women's magazine images that can be categorised as 'disciplined' are those which represent female bodies which are subject to or the topic of control. The portrayed bodies are seen in the context of differences and imperfections with discipline providing a way to overcome these differences. The discourse communicated by these images is one which associates strength with self control, sacrifice with perfection and as a corollary, lack of control with failure. At the same time, an added but unspoken element of this discourse is that the ideal norm is also unobtainable regardless of much self control one exercises; as long as there are is advice on how to become the feminine ideal, it is likely to be a perennial quest, particularly as much of the advice is contradictory at some level.

When browsing the three portals it seems that images and content fitting into the 'disciplined' category is their speciality. Whether it is through the choice of imagery or the article content, all three portals are fountains of knowledge for any female user who ever wanted to alter their body shape. However, depending on the portal's corporate strategy, their approach to the 'disciplined' body varies although all begin by inviting the user under the broad umbrella of 'health'. handbag.com presents a traditional approach to discipline with article such as 'Eating for your health: How to eat yourself healthier with a good diet' (16 October, 2002) (D-VR2). iCircle.com takes up the typical obsession with weight loss with features entitled, 'My diet's stopped working', and 'Worried because you're no longer losing weight on your diet? Dr. Ann Robinson has the answer' (16 October, 2002) (D-VR4). In the particular case of iCircle.com feature, the accompanied imagery represents a female body already fitting into the feminine ideal, yet still subjected to further continuous discipline. On the other hand, femail.co.uk has more subtle approach. As the portal has a strong emphasis on health generally and attempts to target a family-oriented audience, a straight forward approach to disciplining the body does not work. Rather, the notion of discipline is tackled via 'positive' health focused articles such as,



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'How to boost your immunity and winter-proof your body! If you can feel that nasty chill in the air then it's time to boost your immunity. Read our brilliant guide to winter-proofing your body' (16 October, 2002) (D-VR3). However, even in the case of femail.co.uk and its semblance of a medical understanding of health, imagery accompanying the article represents a disciplined female body.

In all three cases the notion of discipline refers to the need for female users to be in continuous control of their bodies, whether it is for health or beauty purposes. As with women's print magazines, their online counterparts are intended as guides to the pursuit of achieving the socially prescribed feminine ideal. Here visual language lends credibility both to the advice and to the possibility of attaining the disciplined body. This function or effect is often criticised by feminist scholars for instilling insecurities within female users only to prompt them to consume suggestions that provide no final solution (Ferguson 1983; McCracken 1993).

### 'Scrutinised'

Images coming under the 'scrutinized' category relate to the idea of a role model, quite often a celebrity or celebrities. Portraying women who represent the achievement of a certain lifestyle – 'the rich and the famous' – allows these images – as strange as it may seem – to be normalized as achievable realities, which can be reviewed and scrutinized by magazine readers. Once accepted as an expression of an ideal, this 'reality' becomes 'an object of desire'. The women represented take on iconic status, symbolic of success or perfection in ways that are then desired, mimicked and sought after by following a regime of discipline and control.

As with women's paper magazines all three portals offer a generous helping of celebrity gossip. And like their paper counterparts, women's commercial portals assume that female users will be interested in gossip, celebrity lives and lifestyles. All the homepages contain a variety of links to articles about celebrities, both female and male. Thus, on the 18 of October 2002, each of the portals includes a headlining article making reference to a celebrity or an event attended by one. Kim Cattrall is featured in a femail.co.uk article discussing the use of sex enhancing drugs for



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women (D-VR3). handbag.com describes a charity fashion show in support of breast cancer care and includes an image of British pop star Geri Haliwell and the wife of the current British prime minister (D-VR2). Finally, iCircle.com presents the marriage tribulations of a celebrity couple, accompanied by a photograph (D-VR4). In each case the images of celebrities are there to attract the female users' attention, but they also prompt the users to review their lives against these celebrities whose lifestyles offer a benchmark of success, beauty and wealth. Celebrity status is drawn on to sell products, give credibility to social causes just as much as set standards for socially accepted lifestyles and the visual language is used to attract attention. Images of the celebrities are open to female users' scrutiny and comparison, but also are intended to guarantee female users' interest. The visual language is therefore a tool that both invites scrutiny and serves to fulfil the portal's commercial imperative.

### 'Invisible'

The category 'invisible' refers to the unseen 'other' that exists outside the norm that is indeed conspicuous by its absence. On the whole, the mainstream publishing industry does not engage with representations of the 'other'. If 'invisible' women's bodies are represented, they are most likely the subject of scrutiny or discipline.

The women's commercial portals discussed here do not give a lot of space over to representations of the 'other'. The few images used in the portal designs clearly do not represent the diversity of women. For example, on the 21 October 2002, the homepages of femal.co.uk, iCircle.com and handbag.com do not include one single image of a woman whose figure, complexion or dress is outside of the feminine norm. Even handbag.com which on that day celebrated women at the top of their professions in 2002 included an image that still subscribed to the social ideal (D-VR2). There are two reasons why the category of the 'invisible' is so prevalent – or 'visible' – in women's commercial portals. As mentioned above, representation of the 'other' is not a common occurrence within the traditionally located women's publishing industry. The purpose of the industry is to provide guidance on how to achieve one feminine ideal. Representation of the 'other' in contexts other than how they might



be on their way to normality or as examples of what went wrong, are not part of this discourse. The aims of women's commercial portals, deeply rooted in the traditions of the women's publishing industry, do not diverge a great deal from these tried and tested traditions. Where few images are included in a portal, choices have to be made as to what to include. To choose to represent the 'other' would be against the established and accepted canons of the women's publishing industry whether online or offline. Thus, the visual language rarely contains any reference to the 'other'. Being a primary tool for expressing the ideals of the femininity, it renders the 'other' invisible within women's commercial portals.

### Findings

#### ***Design Practice Implicated in the Commercialisation of the Internet***

This analysis points to BEME.com being located within a specific historically framed design genre in the UK. The circumstances of the three portals investigated reveal a recurring and closely related set of design practices being applied to Internet output. The very similar design style manifest in the three portals raises several questions, specifically: a) what advantage is gained from creating portals with the same 'look and feel'; b) whether this design process has an effect on the perception of the Internet as democratic; and c) the extent to which the Internet is a decentralised medium. In an environment that poses unknowns, portals might have begun with different content structuring models represented by different interface design. However, drawing on what *has been done/is being done*, what *has worked/is working* among competitors has meant that successful features are being repeated at the expense of elements of difference (Miller 2000). O'Leary (1998) calls such a process the 'Law of Merging Models', where with time online content and services begin to resemble each other. Moreover, as portals move away from a simple process of taking a customer from point A to point B, they focus on attracting users to online adverts, in turn gaining commodity status themselves. Such a move from anonymous searching to development of portal branding has seen portal interfaces become increasingly similar, certainly in terms of their range of functions (Miller 2000).



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Miller (2000) argues that increased commercialisation of the Internet is resulting in its content and services being held in fewer and fewer hands. Therefore, qualities of the Internet that often inspire enthusiasm – such as the potential for a democratic decentralised approach to communication – in case of commercial portals, is being eliminated. The domination of a small number of old and new media firms has resulted in online portals redesigning and restructuring to maintain high market capitalization and economic stability rather than offering opportunities for marginalised content and voices to come to the fore. This in turn has begun to manifest itself in the way the portal interfaces are becoming more and more similar in their design. With reference to women's commercial portals in particular, I would argue for the recognition of one additional ingredient influencing the homogeneity of design outcome: gender. Gender acts as a unifying and differentiating element amongst the many commercial portals attracting both male and female users online. Analysis of their visual language (Aitchison and Jordan 2001) attests strongly to a link between the visual canons of women's paper magazines and women's commercial portals and reveals different ways in which gender is built into visual language through the design process. The key to understanding this design genre is the notion of gender which, to the publisher, provides fundamental structures constituting a women's online portal. As within women's paper publishing, female users are equated with their gender. The portals do not address female users as individuals with particular interests but as a gender group with gender-determined interests. This is symptomatic of both the nature of online portals targeting a 'faceless mass' and the origins of online portals, namely in the traditions of women's paper publishing; an industry, as Ferguson (1983) argues, propagating ideologies which relies '... on the premise of biological predestination and gender determinism ...' (p. 189). By generating online outcomes that mirror their paper counterparts, online design practice disregards qualities made possible by the Internet such as interactivity and its potential to share and generate meaning with and for users.



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### ***Visual Language Games and Digital Discourse***

As a review of the literature has indicated, '... so long as women seek to acquire and perfect the skills of their gender trade, then women's magazines [or online portals] will exist to satisfy their forever feminine quest' (Ferguson 1983:193). However, to appeal to the contemporary user publishers have learned to mix the gendered stereotypes with 'feminist' ideas accepted within the social and cultural mainstream. As Gough-Yates (2003) states in her analysis, in developing an approach to reach female audiences of the late 1990s, magazine publishers have to 'remain in-tune with the middle class women' who buy their products or visit their online portals. Thus, they provide female users with an illusion of empowerment associated with female use of Internet technologies. For example, the handbag.com user is defined as a busy, professional and independent woman who cares for soft shades of blue and pink and rounded shapes. On the other hand, iCircle.com imagines its users as life loving in various shades of pinks, purples and blues. femail.co.uk is also a strong contender in this contest of contradictions. Although the femail.co.uk site is the result of a redesign, it relies on a modern online design to carry stereotypical messages. The politically savvy femail.co.uk female users seem to find pleasure in engaging in activities that are stereotypically associated with women. Such a combination of empowering ideas with notions of femininity are I would argue 'visual language games', propagated by the women's portal publishing industry and design practice. These games suggest a sense of change but actually only reinforce established canons. As Ferguson (1983) maintains '... *plus ça change* .... Everything changes and nothing changes' (p. 190).

On the other hand, these 'visual language games' constitute part of the wider context informing and constituting the Internet – what feminist scholars define as 'digital discourse'. Stewart Millar (1998) proposes that '[t]his discourse seizes upon and reflects particular relations of power through its accompanying ideology, and ... reintroduces beliefs that perpetuate inequalities of gender, race and class' (p. 24-25). In the case of women's commercial portals digital discourse becomes a play between the representations of female users through gendered images of



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femininity and 'masculine' technologies. Hence, these products are deeply rooted in gender structures just as much as they help to maintain them. Thus, these commercial portals develop into spaces where on a fundamental level, gender becomes a communication tool of attraction, familiarity and distinction. However, at no point does it allow the visual communication – embedded within the portals and constituted by the design process – to act outside this pre-defined 'digital discourse'.



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**Chapter 6**  
Female Users Experiences and Expectations of  
the Internet



## Chapter 6: Female Users Experiences and Expectations of the Internet

This chapter traces two types of experiences and expectations: the *tangible* and the *intangible* as expressed by female online users. The *tangible* type encompasses all the factors and observations participants use to describe the physical and practical attributes of the Internet and its uses. The *intangible* type represents all the abstract factors of the online technologies and their uses. Both types, in their description of female users' experiences and expectations of the Internet, expose the underlying purpose driven trend.

### Tangible Experiences and Expectations

A significant determinant of the success or failure of women's online portals is the extent to which the target audience and their needs have been understood. Chapter 4 has outlined the ways in which market research is conducted prior to portal conceptualisation and production to establish the needs and wants of audiences. However, the extrapolated assumptions that then guide the portal design are not always representative of what the female users have in mind. Overall, discourses used by participants suggest that female users rely on the Internet to further either themselves, their projects or support their daily activities.

Among the many tangible properties of the Internet, data analysis has identified three which recur as factors influencing online use. These are: the Internet's *utility*, *accessibility* and *visual appeal*. *Utility* refers to the reasons given by women for their use of the Internet – in other words, why they use the Internet; *accessibility* addresses the question of when and how; and *visual appeal* refers to overall designs of Internet pages and communication patterns evoked therein. The following paragraphs are dedicated to a detailed description of each factor supported by a selection of quotes.

#### ***Utility Factor***

The utility factor can be understood as fundamental in defining participants' interaction with the Internet. As will be shown below, in most cases the Internet's utility is qualified by positive



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descriptors, the only exceptions being specific functions of the Internet that are felt to impinge on female users' privacy. Data analysis reveals that within the broad utility factor, there are two main strands. Firstly, participants identified specific activities they use the Internet to undertake. These fall into six main categories: finding information; supporting working practices; browsing and/or shopping; banking and trading; entertainment; and keeping in touch. The second strand within the Utility factor refers to issues raised by participants regarding the function of Internet technologies and their circumstances. These are discussed separately below.

### Specific Activities

#### *Finding out Information*

Respondents agree that the Internet is a highly valuable source of information. In terms of utility, this constitutes its primary function and value. The female programmer observes, '... as a developer it has become an ideal place for finding out information' (I-TU1:12-13). In more general terms she specifies, '... I just think the Internet is good for information and that is what I would use it for, that's as far as the interaction I want' (I-TU1:317-318). The female technical consultant also considers the Internet primarily as a source of information. She states, 'I just see it as one great big catalogue, a great place for finding resources' (I-TU3:44-45). Even in cases of personal interaction with other online users, the participants consider the Internet more as an information site. The female technical consultant goes on to say, 'A place to talk to people yes, but meet them in the physical sense, not just to talk to. I see ... [the Internet] as a tool, just a reference place' (I-TU3:48-49). On the other hand, the female personal assistant perceives the Internet and the information available as a way to help her sort out her daily activities and meet her needs. She states, 'I work for a very busy man, I use the Internet, it is so helpful to me, I use it for everything from looking for a new flat mate to doing my home shopping, organising my holidays, organising meeting up with friends via e-mail' (I-TU4:29-32). When describing the times she uses the Internet to acquire information, her composure exudes a sense of pleasure, evident in her description:

*'I probably do spend a lot of time on the Internet actually, I have two screens upstairs so I always have the Internet open at some stage, well it is constantly open and I look up so*



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*many things during the day, because it ranges from completely crazy things, like I was looking up sharks yesterday on the Internet. I'm going to Costa Rica and apparently there's more sharks per mile than in any other sea. But also I use it for business purposes too, so I think I use it a lot but for very varied reasons as well, but I just can't imagine how my role would have been without the Internet really' (I-TU4:339-347).*

The female software designer also approached the Internet as a 'provider of information'.

However, her attitude is much more critical. She states 'I use it mainly for information and ideas and I take those ideas out and I customise them to what I like and what I need, but I do use it a lot for information' (I-TU2:472-474). Her criticism stems from the need to personalise her interaction with the medium. She explains:

*'I like the Internet because there is so much information there, I don't like it because sometimes there is too much information and wading through it. There is a lot of rubbish on the Internet. There's a lot of things that don't interest me and there's a lot of pages that are badly designed, and if I find something that is badly designed I don't even bother going there' (I-TU2:46-51).*

Since the Internet is primarily considered a place for acquiring information, participants tend to refer to the technology as a 'resource'. The notion of resource refers to an abundance of information in one place. As the female software designer explains, '... my colleagues are not very high tech, they are low level programmers so generally they can't help. I do have about four or five resource sites that are excellent and I generally get an answer from them within a day if I get a problem' (I-TU2:38-41).

### *Supporting Working Practices*

Considering that all participants have access to the Internet at their work place, the technology is frequently being used to support their work related activities. For example, for the female personal assistant the Internet is very helpful to her both for personal and business purposes. Her employers encourage her Internet use: '... it was definitely encouraged by the managers to start researching on the Internet for different things, it has obviously developed so much over the last couple of years, but now I feel I wonder what I would have done before, it would have really, really changed my job definitely' (I-TU4:40-45). In a work place, where the Internet supports the business, such an attitude has the potential to generate a much more integrated



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understanding of the technology. Assessments of the Internet's utility therefore make reference to how well it fits into daily routines.

### *Browsing and/or Shopping*

Shopping is another activity the interviewees refer to while describing functional aspects of the Internet. However, contrary to the view of the women's portal publishing industry, this particular activity is not considered as the most important quality of the Internet and evokes mixed reviews. Attitudes towards and/or use of the Internet for shopping depend on the particular circumstance and lifestyle of each woman. The female programmer who also has access at home to an Internet connection, expressed that she enjoys looking at merchandise via the Internet as a way to glean ideas. However, she remains sceptical about online purchase transactions, stating, 'I prefer not to shop over the Internet, but to get ideas of shopping ... the safety aspects of buying over the Internet they're not very secure at the moment, but if you want some ideas of where to shop or you want to find places to shop you can use ... shopping site[s]' (I-TU1:8-12). In the course of the interview the shopping theme arises again and her response changes. Rather than being optimistic about finding more ways to use the Internet, she becomes worried that she might develop a dependency on the Internet as a service provider. She voices her concerns in the following manner:

*'I hope I don't become dependent on the Internet, the way things are becoming it's going that way ... for modern society or what we need to do and how to cope with your busy life and you know the idea of food shopping on the Internet, I don't ever want to do that, I like the idea of going to the shop and supermarket shopping. But it does seem to be edging that way that all your shopping is going to be done on the Internet and people are going to become dependent on the Internet, I can see that happening in five years' (I-TU1:388-395.)*

Similar concerns are voiced by another participant. The female technical consultant also doubts the safety and reliability of the Internet. She states, 'I have done [shopping], but not very often ... but I'm still a bit wary of security and whatnot, putting my credit card number on the Internet, but I have registered online for games so, yes I have bought some things online' (I-TU3:290-293). The female software designer on the other hand sounds more optimistic. Her online shopping mainly focused on the purchase of CDs and books. However, she also bought a



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house via the Internet, indicating a much greater trust in the technology. Not surprisingly, the participant who most strongly relied on the use of the Internet in her daily routine was also more confident about purchasing online. Her time commitments at work meant that she saw the Internet as provision of a shortcut in terms of shopping. In her work environment she describes that many of her colleagues use Internet to purchase items. An observation she makes about the attitudes towards the Internet at her place of employment spark particular interest. 'I think actually that's quite interesting because the people that I work with are very sort of high risk people, they are traders ... well they don't really give much thought about the money they spend, it's more a thrill of buying on the Internet than the product they are going to end up with' (I-TU4:149-153). She goes on to describe how the delivery of personal Internet purchases at work becomes a status symbol. '... they enjoy receiving goods through the mail from the Internet as well, a lot of people buy books through Yahoo and I think it gives off a certain image when they are seen receiving all these packages from Yahoo' (I-TU4:155-158).

Shopping online is therefore considered something of a novel activity. It carries with it a certain level of risk due to the type of transaction and the process involved. Comparisons may be drawn between shopping online and betting, and in environments where taking risks is highly valued, it connotes social status; it provides the thrill of a game, a bet followed by the anticipation of arrival. That notwithstanding, the particular participants interviewed do not express such needs. The interviewees focus more on the mundane side of shopping, and not being certain that the purchase will be successful is exactly what puts them off from such transactions. The female personal assistant observes, '... they are actually not very good – the supermarket stuff buying. If you order something and they don't have it in stock they send you something similar quite often it's nothing similar at all. I ordered some milk on the Internet and they didn't have any skimmed milk so they gave me Soya milk, and I said that is not exactly what I wanted really' (I-TU4:182-187).

Overall, participants' use of the Internet for shopping tends to involve browsing for merchandise on the Internet followed by purchases actually being made in-store. Although each participant



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has bought an occasional item directly through the Internet, the choice has been purely based on the value for money and after weighing up the relative security of the transaction. For example the female software designer states, '[y]es, I do, do some shopping, I buy a lot of CDs on line because they are cheaper to buy from Europe or the States than they are to buy here' (I-TU2:151-152). Her most risky and complex purchase was a house. But even in this case, whilst the Internet allowed for extensive browsing and review of the merchandise, the actual transaction was not carried out on the Internet. Thus, contrary to the mainstream view of the portal publishing industry, female users are not fixated on using the Internet to make purchases, and in fact express many reservations. There is still a strong concern about the security of the transactions as well as a lack of confidence that the products received will be precisely the ones that were ordered and/or desired. That the tactile aspect of shopping does not exist online has a very strong influence on online shopping habits. Coupled with a sense of lacking control over the entire purchase process, this means that these female users tend to choose online browsing followed by in-store acquisition over undertaking the whole process online.

### *Banking and Trading*

Nonetheless, there are other types of transactions recently made available on the Internet that female users have begun to rely on. Two of my participants have referred to online financial transactions as increasingly important in their daily activities. The female programmer, whilst sceptical of online shopping has begun to use online banking on a regular basis and sporadically, participate in online trading:

*'... but the other good use I get out of it is for Internet banking, I have my current account on there and for me that's very useful, working in London and trying to pay bills and bank and do transfer monies blah, blah, it's far easier over the Internet than try and find time during office hours to get out' (I-TU1:34-38).*

In both cases, the ease of the process is crucial. As the female programmer comments, '[i]t's easy, you don't have to rely on a broker ... it's all automatic ... it's combined with my current bank account as well so I don't have to worry about funds. It's all up to date information by the second' (I-TU1: 498-501). The female software designer also relies on online banking to



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manage her finances. 'It's ... easier to look at your statement when you've got a five minute break at work rather than going to an ATM and drawing money' (I-TU2:507-508). She also believes that with continuing developments in online security systems, online banking is much more secure than in the early days of online money transactions.

Comparing the two transactions involving money, it is interesting to note the disparity of attitudes about them. The female users do not rely on online shopping because they feel insecure about the transactions and do not feel like they are in control. On the other hand, online banking is considered an advantage precisely because it offers a degree of control. Ease of access and the ability to have an overview is what attracts female users to online banking whereas with online shopping this ease combined with what might be called a tactile deficit distinguishes it from off-line shopping in a negative way, connoting unreliability and a lack of control.

### *Entertainment*

Another functional aspect of the Internet falls within the notion of entertainment. If the participants do not search for information or engage in online banking, they frequently use the Internet as a place to be entertained. The participants divide their entertainment into two types: surfing or gaming and use of the Internet as a way to alleviate monotony.

When participants surf, it is either for pleasure, to see what is out there or with something specific in mind. As the literature indicates (Azhar 1999) female online users are often presumed to surf only with specific purpose. However, as the female technical consultant observes, '... it's interesting to see what is out there, there is a lot of good stuff and a lot of bad stuff, a lot of boring stuff' (I-TU3:15-17). Such a comment indicates that female users also explore the Internet simply out of curiosity. The female personal assistant explains that the nature of her surfing activity depends upon the amount of time she has to pursue it. As her long working hours restrict the amount of time she has and so as not to waste that time, she tends to surf with a specific purpose in mind. Surfing activity is also associated with break times at work



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where it is considered as an entertaining activity to pass the free time (I-TU2). Still as a source of information, the Internet is then seen not only as relevant to work but also leisure related.

Another aspect of the Internet's capacity to entertain is the availability of gaming facilities online. It is an activity not commonly associated with female users (Martinson, Schwartz et al. 2002) and is stereotypically thought of as a male domain. Scholars such as Kiesler, Sproull et al. (1985); Pereira (1994); Cassell and Jenkins (1998) note that computer gaming tends to be dominated by adolescent males. '...compared with females, males played computer games significantly more regularly, started playing computer games at a significantly earlier age, and played significantly more sports simulations and violent games' (Griffiths 1997:223). The technical consultant who games herself, attests to this, '... I've met a few other female online gamers, few and far between and you have to be wary whether they say what they are. You still get surprises' (I-TU3:242-244). Such comments indicate that there are still areas of online interaction where female users might consider participation but can find themselves in highly gendered environments. Therefore, even if online gaming is seen as a possible source of Internet entertainment, it does not draw large crowds of female users.

In addition to specific entertainment value, use of the Internet is seen simply as a way to break up monotony. As the female programmer considers, '... if you want a five minute break to have a quick look at something and it breaks the monotony ... it is convenient and on my PC in front of me' (I-TU1:44-46). As the literature has shown, this quality could support an association made between use of the Internet and reading of traditional women's paper magazines (Hermes 1995). However, deriving entertainment in this way requires easy and instantaneous connection to the Internet. I therefore suggest that use of the Internet in a way to warrant comparison with the reading of women's paper magazines is more likely to apply to women who use computers at work *and* have it constantly in front of them. The female users who do not have such access would not consider the Internet as a tool to break the monotony. It is more likely to be treated as a purposeful means of acquiring something specific.



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### *Keeping in Touch*

When discussing the Internet from a communication perspective, the participants consider the Internet as a good tool for keeping in touch. This is an important point, as many general audience surveys often state that female users find the communication capacity of the Internet the most satisfying quality. The participants believe that the Internet allows them to keep up social relations. The female personal assistant mentions, '... that's a good way of keeping in touch with friends from all over the world obviously' (I-TU4:72-73). The female software designer reminisces, 'I first started using Internet chatting to people in other places and things like that' (I-TU2:9-10). She goes on to describe, '[m]y groups they are friends that I know in real life as well as online and that's a way for us to keep in contact during the week because we see each other at weekends generally' (I-TU2:55-57).

### **Issues Around the Utility of the Internet**

Given the participants' regular and varied use of the Internet, they are in a position to make comments on the quality of service it provides. It is not enough for them to have the ability to find information. There are issues they feel need to be addressed to improve the service, such as (a) the price of access, (b) the reliance on technical know-how and (c) commercialisation of the content. The participants have a high level of awareness and express with authority what they feel is good and what is bad about the service. The female software designer observes, '[a] lot of it is really bad, a lot of it is really slow, but you do get a few sites that are really clear cut. It tells you exactly what you need to know, shows you the information and I like that' (I-TU2:170-172). The participants' critique of the Internet's utility is presented below, in terms of five issues: the Internet's use, purpose and helpfulness; personalisation; ownership and privacy; familiarity with the medium; and last but by no means least, the possibility that the Internet may be used as a tool for empowerment.

### *Use, Purpose and Helpfulness*

The concept of usefulness seems to be important to female users. Numerous surveys indicate that female users surf the Internet with purpose. However, the interviewees refer to this



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purposefulness more in terms of usefulness. They give several examples of how the Internet does or does not fit into the concept of being useful and the notion of usefulness is unique for each participant. For example the female programmer considers, '[f]or like the programming we do, it's useful to become part of the mailing list for that, that would be the only reason it would be of any interest' (I-TU1:285-287). On the other hand, the female software designer explains, '... there are too few web sites that ... are useful and too many that aren't ... It's quite nice now there are more sites becoming more useful you can do everything you need to do, you can shop or you can do all your banking on line' (I-TU2:519-522). The concept of usefulness is strongly based on the personal circumstances of each female user. It is certainly tied in with the notion of purpose, but usefulness has a much broader meaning. It can refer to tasks that require the Internet to support work related or leisurely activities. In each case it is the female user who is in total control of constructing the notion of usefulness. In a context where portals are designed for a wide audience, the individualised notion of usefulness can create real difficulties for online designers to provide applicable solutions.

In their descriptions of the helpfulness of the Internet, the interviewees often express the role online information can play in their daily activities. They comment about the services they encounter as well as the helpfulness of communication in which they engage online. These descriptions focus on their emotional responses to the technology more than the actual activities. Throughout her interview, the female personal assistant refers frequently to the Internet as helping her carry out business tasks or fulfil personal needs. Her emotional response is positive because it is a tool that makes daily life easier. 'Definitely, it's very helpful and I use ... [the Internet] for business and for personal as well' (I-TU4:36-37).

### *Personalisation*

Together with the notion of usefulness comes the issue of personalisation. In most cases the participants rarely suggest that they would like to personalise the web sites that they view. However, once asked about it they are positively inclined. The notion of personalisation of web site has not been often supported while browsing the Internet. Therefore, the interviewees have



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mixed ideas about what it constitutes. For example, personalisation of the site could mean stopping the pop-up advert windows, or making a collection of sites that are often visited for easy access. '... it is quite time consuming clicking in and out of different sites for example and if you have all that is relevant to you on one page I think it would be a lot better actually, more easier to use so to speak' (I-TU4:293-296). However, none of the participants want to make drastic changes to the sites they visit. It is not necessarily because they find all the sites well created and pertinent but rather that they are considered by the female users as finished products. So rather than feeling the need to adjust them, female users avoid sites they do not like or find difficult to use. Only the female software designer believes she would like to be able to set preferences to the sites she visits that can be recalled the next time she will browse through them.

### *Ownership and Privacy*

Another point brought up by one of the participants is the question of hardware ownership and how this affects users' engagement with the Internet. The female software designer points out that users are more inclined to think of personalising sites if they are browsing from their own personal computers. If other people have access to this computer one might think twice about it. She states:

*'... it also depends on how many people have access to my machine, I don't have it set up at home because there are other people who have access to the machine, but at work I do. So it's also got to do with, if I set that up at home then my privacy is going to be invaded because people can look at my groups and my information, so it also depends on that sort of thing' (I-TU2:232-237).*

Analysis has revealed therefore that the notion of personalisation has to do with the issue of privacy. The literature indicates that the Internet is not considered a private place even though it might create such an illusion. Often cyberspace is likened to physical public space. When female users do not feel that their access to the Internet can be considered private, they tend not to invest in personalising the viewed content.



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Following on from the notion of private versus public, imposition of unwanted content is considered to be most annoying. One of the participants complains how often her viewing is obstructed and disturbed by unsolicited advertising pop-up windows. The female personal assistant remarks how worrisome she finds it that many people seem to have access to her email address. The fact that she is being continually bombarded with spam e-mails is a source of concern and annoyance. She also worries about how many people can fall victim to advertised schemes through responding to unwanted emails. Such public access is considered by the respondents as a downside of the Internet. Another aspect found annoying by one of the participants is the availability of somewhat questionable content. She tells me that if she misprints the web site address she might end up accessing sites that are pornographic in content. She finds this particularly annoying. However, she does not believe in censorship of Internet content. Such a mixture of opinion is quite dominant in all the participants' understanding of the Internet.

### *Familiarity with the Medium*

Throughout all the interviews the participants come across as female users who know their way around the Internet. Assessment of their Internet abilities is confident and conveys that they have a good awareness of what constitutes their online needs.

The fact that the Internet is a functional way of acquiring information by female users relies on their familiarity with the medium which increases with time and experience in using the Internet as a tool. The more integral the tool becomes in daily activities, the more likely the female users are to develop a sense of confidence in the Internet and consider it familiar and useful to them. The female personal assistant explains, '[w]ell I guess I have been working on computers for the last four years. So I'm constantly looking at the computer screen really and use it for everything, organising my day, researching all sorts of things really' (I-TU4:15-17). The ability to integrate the tools that provide the Internet connection contributes to the development of such familiarity.



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### *A Tool of Self-Expression*

One of the participants describes how she uses the Internet as a means to publish her own work. Beyond acquiring information, she has become part of the group of people who generate the resource. The initial choice to publish her poetry online was based on a desire to preserve it. However, with time she has received recognition for her work, and through this the Internet has become a platform for her voice. Documented in my literature review are feminist writers describing the value of the Internet as a communication medium that allows for marginalised voices to be heard. The case of the female software designer demonstrates just such a possibility. However, it is not an activity associated with the commercial aspects of the Internet. The commercial environment prompts consumption patterns rather than actual physical generation/production on the part of female users. Therefore, online publication by female users is more in line with the view of the Internet as an empowerment tool.

### **Access Factor**

Access is the second of the three main factors interviewees identified as important physical aspects of the Internet affecting users. This is a factor frequently cited as a reason why users consider turning to the Internet in the first place. A first step towards understanding the access factor involves recognition of the interviewees' geographical location. As all of the respondents are located in the north western hemisphere, issues surrounding access are not necessarily the same as the ones affecting female users in other parts of the world. Indeed, the interviewees represent a specific group of female users that, as well as being located in Western Europe are at a certain financial level as well as having developed professional careers. In each case, physical access to hardware providing an Internet connection does not present a problem. Therefore, access raises other concerns such as ease, convenience and comfort, time or location as well as the notion of censorship.



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### Ease, Convenience and Comfort

The access factor is important to all the participants and the qualifiers used to further define it are often interlinked. All the participants believe that the ease with which they can access the Internet is very important in enticing them to look for information on the Net in comparison to more traditional ways. If the choice is between obtaining information from a newspaper or from the Internet, the question is what is easier to get to. Part of the definition of ease also relates to the notion of speed. Easy does not mean just readily available it also means speed of access, which depends on quality of hardware and the simplicity of navigation though the information.

As one participant says:

*'... sometimes it would be easier, because if you did want to look at a magazine type site, it is almost easier to go and buy a magazine, you can flick through the pages and go back to what you liked, whereas on the Internet it can be very slow and it can take the fun and if you are at a women's site like that and you are actually looking for your enjoyment rather than researching something, it can be quite off putting and a slow process' (I-TU4:298-304).*

The female software designer points out, 'I hope it does become faster, I mean that is something that is a major hold up with the Internet at the moment. It is its speed. When something is slow people become bored and they go somewhere else' (I-TU2:528-530). On the other hand, she considers, '[w]e have become spoilt and now that you are getting broadband at home and ICL at home it's making it a lot easier and it's something I'm considering getting even though I never use the Internet but I probably would if I could get things quicker' (I-TU2:532-535).

The notion of convenience even further defines the ease of access. If female users are at work all day and have ongoing access to the computer due to nature of their work, then it becomes an issue of convenience. The Internet access is right there, making it convenient to connect and surf. In addition, the notion of convenience is associated with the idea of personalisation. If access to the information can be personalised, then it becomes convenient where female users do not need to sift through reams of information. 'If you can personalise the way you access a web site then you are more likely to visit it or revisit it' states the female technical consultant (I-



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TU3:176-177). Convenience is also associated with time. If time can be saved through the use of the Internet to carry out a mundane task, then it becomes convenient. The female programmer describing online banking states '[y]ou get lunchtime, an hour when everyone else goes to the bank and you have got to queue, so it's convenient [to use the Internet instead]' (I-TU1:507-508).

The notions of ease and convenience are also frequently accompanied by the idea of comfort. Here, comfort mainly refers to the environment in which online surfing takes place. Depending on the level of comfort and the purpose of the activity, the use of the Internet can be considered as work or as leisure. Whilst ease of access and relative comfort is a quality of the Internet that can make it into a habitual activity, Hermes (1995) in her research on women and everyday uses of media concludes that female readers buy magazines because they can be read in comfort and they are easily put down. The same cannot be stated about the Internet. The female programmer describes her idea of comfort through the following observation: 'With the Internet I tend to scan read ... sitting at a desk all day reading on a computer is not my cup of tea. It's nice to sit there with a girly magazine still or whatever and it's still nice to sit there with a newspaper ... The magazine, it's more comfortable I'm not sitting at a chair and computer' (I-TU1:211-218). The limitations of Internet technology embodied by computer hardware and dial-up connections means that web sites cannot be engaged with the same comfort. The notion of comfort becomes redefined to suit this new technology and provides a negative critique of Internet access.

### Time and Location

Another component of the Access factor is the issue of time. The female personal assistant frequently refers to time when describing her involvement with the Internet: 'I guess it's a time thing more than anything, I don't very often just surf and look for something to read, I'll often know exactly what it is I'm looking for. So it's just a time thing' (I-TU4:353-355). As with all the other descriptors there tends to be more than one understanding indicated by the interviewee.



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So time can be seen as having time to access the Internet, but more often it means the time of day when the Internet is being used. For example the female programmer associates time with purpose of the investigation she needs to perform on the Internet. Internet connection in the work place is likely to be much faster than at home, so, if available at work, this becomes the preferred time to access the Internet. Time is therefore also associated with the speed of access. If access is slow, then as the female programmer states, '... I would just find that too time consuming' (I-TU1:290-291). The female software designer refers to searches for information online as a time absorbing activity. Whilst she does turn to the Internet to obtain information, she believes it takes undue time, owing to the processes involved in accessing information. The notion of time consumption is therefore associated with the potential to waste time on the activity. The technical consultant comments on her use of the Internet that she believes she spends far too much time online. '... anywhere between 2-4 hours in the evening, during the day about an hour or two'. This seems to add up to time that an interviewee considers well spent, but can just as quickly be dismissed as a waste.

The concept of location is also an integral part of the whole notion of Internet access. It is closely linked with the idea of ease and comfort as well as time. Location refers to the environment in which the online access occurs and often refers to physical attributes. In general, market surveys referring to location associate Internet access either with work or home. However, with the growth of the Internet, there are increasing networks of public access. It is important to note that when referring to location, the participants in this research only mention office or home access. None of them ever refer to surfing the Net in a public space such as an Internet Café. The overall location of online retrieval of information indicates different conceptualisations of the need to access the Internet. For example, if Internet access was available at work, home access was considered less important

*'I wouldn't go out of my way to sit in front of a computer all day, that's my 9-5 job, the last thing I want to do when you go home is sit in front of a computer again, if literally if it's there I will use it' (I-TU1:243-246).*



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*'I get tired of looking at computers at night, but I do surf at work and I do surf during lunchtime, but it's just that by the time I get home I'm relaxed and I leave it ... switched off' (I-TU2:14-16).*

However, this attitude is not representative of all female users. The division of access between locations is very much based on personal lifestyle and life choices of each user. Therefore, the female technical consultant is happy to use the Internet in both locations. She explains, '... when at work I'm trying to actually install some web servers. At home I just surf and use news groups just to see what's going on and get some more information about stuff I do' (I-TU3:21-23). But there are other aspects of location that can define the Internet access. For example, one of the participants came from South Africa. As she explains, the fact that she accessed Internet sites while in South Africa means her exposure takes place later than in European countries and North America. In the western environment such issues might not be a consideration anymore. However, in other geographical locations, raising awareness of the technology and gaining physical access to the Internet is still very much an issue.

### Censorship

Associated with location is the notion of censorship. In two cases, participants made a distinct connection between censoring online information and the location of access. The female personal assistant refers to her work use of the Internet by pointing out sites offering hotmail email access, gambling or pornography are not available at her place of employment. During her interview, she remarks, 'Oh yes, definitely, even the National Lottery web site is banned here' (I-TU4:69). However, the notion of censorship is not a clear cut situation. In most work places there is access to the Internet, but some of its content will be barred. In other places, such censorship might not be an issue at all. On the other hand, home as a location does not seem to be linked with the notion of imposed censorship, unless there are children to consider. In this particular case the female users are themselves in charge of censoring information, as the female programmer points out:

*'... that's good for stopping kids looking at the horrible sites. But if you have to worry about that then yes I would want to filter it, but for my own use to say you are looking at a new web site and you want to see, there's another link on there for another super duper*



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*new web site I'd still want to be able to find out if there are other information things. But if there were restrictions, like porn sites or whatever, then I would want that to be filtered.'* (I-TU1:378-384)

As far as issues of censorship are concerned, levels of access depend on the location and who has the power to enforce the rules. At work, censorship is imposed by management, whereas at home it is something female users themselves can control. These aspects of location have a strong bearing on female users' approach to the Internet, the variety of uses they derive from it and whether they use it in a work orientated or leisurely way.

### **Visual Factor**

The Visual factor is the third tangible aspect of the Internet identified by the interviewees as influencing their expectations and engagement with the technology. Not as important as either utility or access, it is nevertheless an aspect that has been raised during the interviews. The features discussed focus on (a) the appearance of the sites, (b) the effort put into the sites by their publishers, (c) the use of visual elements in contrast to text only and (d) clarity of design and site architecture. Overall, the visual side of the Internet is not of major concern to the female users. As long as the functional and access requirements are met, visual aspects are taken at face value. For example the female personal assistant observes:

*'... some companies have spent a lot more money on their Internet sites developing it and it always shows quite clearly. But just some of the time you click on something there will be arrows and things and that's quite frustrating, because you can't be bothered with this now and it will put you off. But I think things like if you are looking for a home for example and they do walk round tours and things like that I think that's amazing' (I-TU4:122-128).*

Sites which manage to balance the pure functionality of the Internet and create a technological environment that provides something hitherto impossible, are appreciated. However, the main concern around visual elements seems to be the access difficulties such elements might cause. As the female software designer explains, '... images are kept to a reasonable size and it's not going to slow it down so that when you surf it's not going to take three hours for the page to



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come up, so I would say I prefer text because it's faster, but I like having some images' (I-TU2:174-177).

Visual features of the Internet are linked by the participants with the notion of personalisation. The link only becomes apparent through review of the analysis, because it is not mentioned directly in the interviews. When participants refer to personalisation of sites, they often make reference to visual aspects rather than content. As personalisation involves time (something the female users do not part with easily) the visual aspects tend to be accepted by default. The investment on their part is simply not there. Other factors are much more important, such as the purpose of going online and the ease of accessing relevant information. As it is known to the participants at the moment, the visual side of the Internet environment is taken for granted. This may also indicate an issue in design practice, insofar as facilities that allow users to make changes post-production are either not included or are only accessible to those with advanced technical know-how. The interviewees' comments suggest that at the moment, it is not particularly encouraged by current design practice.

### **Intangible Experiences and Expectations**

In contrast to the tangible aspects discussed above, the intangible aspects refer to female users' attitudes towards and feelings about the Internet. The research reveals a number of relatively abstract concerns that fall into four main categories: (a) quality, relevance and interest factors, i.e what the Internet offers to female users, (b) what would prompt the female users to develop an emotional attachment, (c) how the use of the Internet defines female users in society in general and (d) how they feel they are situated within the Internet as female users specifically.



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### *Quality, Relevance and Interest Factors*

Evaluation of the quality of the Internet is based on more or less the same criteria as any other object or service these female users would rely on. As the female technical consultant points out, '... the content ... grabs your attention and then you look deeper, but then if there's nothing there, then you won't visit ... [the site] again. But if there is something there, it is worth visiting again. It's a bit like a book, if the cover looks good then you read what's on the book, if it's interesting then you get the book, if it's not you put it back on the shelf' (I-TU3:104-110). Quality of Internet use is defined as much by the relevance of the obtained information as by the Internet's functional usefulness. Often the participant comments that if the information is not relevant, there is no point in visiting it. The female technical consultant suggests, 'I suppose it is like walking down a high street full of shops, if the retail display isn't worth looking at or doesn't appeal to you then you are not going to go in the shop' (I-TU3:133-135). She goes on to comment, 'I don't find it really relevant unless I visit the site frequently' (I-TU3:163). Therefore, the notion of relevance can be ephemeral. It may be that one site is considered attractive and relevant after one visit whereas another only becomes relevant or attractive through sustained visits.

Another aspect that draws female users to the Internet is how well the medium satisfies their interests. For example the female programmer praises the variety of online information:

*'... they have a mixture of shopping, news sports, beauty etc but that you find with sites like that ... they only do a brief thing on each. If you want news, or company news or take-overs and mergers you need to go to a more specific site, so, like the FT they are more to do with companies and mergers' (I-TU1:117-122).*

She believes that such a variety of content caters for the individual natures and interests of different Internet users. In this particular case she does not make the gender distinction so often presented by the women's online publishing industry.



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When considering all three aspects the most important point that comes across is the fact that these participants know exactly what each factor represents. Although there might be small variations in the descriptive qualifiers, all participants agree that these points are relevant and often refer to them to describe their Internet experiences. Through their familiarity with the medium and their ability to evaluate quality and relevance, they all feel that they are in control of interacting with the Internet as a technology mediating communication.

### *Emotional Factor*

Emotional aspects of the relationship between the interviewees and the Internet are rarely referred to directly by the respondents. None of them have actually used the word 'emotional' in the context of discussing the Internet. Thus, this particular factor has been identified inductively in the discourse of the interviews. The most direct emotional reaction is that of a participant who fears she might become dependant on the Internet. The female programmer explains, '[i]t's just letters and words on a computer it's not real life. Personally just me, I think there is more to do in real life than there is spending time on a PC' (I-TU1:327-329). She goes on to state, 'I hope I don't become dependent on the Internet, the way things are becoming it's going that way' (I-TU1:388-389). Another emotional response to the Internet, although not directly expressed as such by the interviewees, is the feeling of need to keep up with the progress of online technologies. The female programmer recognises this albeit with some reluctance: '[You need to engage with the Internet] ... only because you have to keep up with the times ... for your own interest as well as ... your family. If that's the way society is going then you have to move with that ... I would want to prevent it as much as I can. I won't use ... [the Internet] to rule my life at the moment' (I-TU1:403-407). The female technical consultant, on the other hand, feels that '... people are getting more and more technically orientated, more switched on' (I-TU3:61-62). However, she does not believe that keeping up with progress is just up to the individual user. 'I think ... [the Internet] has the potential to develop if you can gain peoples' trust and also if there are more and more people tempted to try it. At the moment I think it is a bit expensive' (I-TU3:337-339). The female personal assistant believes that it is important to



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keep up with the Internet and its progress because it is inevitably going to be fully integrated in our daily lives. 'I think I will become more dependent on it actually ... I can't even imagine what's going to be next really. I think it is just going to become a huge part of everyone's life, personal and in work too really' (I-TU4:382-386).

Although emotional responses do not seem to be at the forefront of interviewees' minds, they are nonetheless very important to the women's portal publishing industry, forming for example the foundation of product loyalty. If the product is an online venture, it can be difficult to develop an emotional attachment if the female users do not consider that as an important aspect. Of course, there are other qualities that can prompt customer loyalty, but the emotional attachment can significantly strengthen this bond. The female programmer comments, '[i]t's time consuming, it's too fake, it's very fake' (I-TU1:325). Such a negative emotional response indicates her fears of dependency, but also can signify her ability to claim power and control over her use of the Internet. All participants are keenly aware of the ever changing character of the Internet. Some consider it as positive progress whilst others perceive it as becoming problematic. However, whether or not they choose to keep up with progress in the Internet, none of the participants advocate complete isolation from the technology. Being able to use the Internet is important to their understanding of their position in social structures. For three of the participants, awareness of Internet developments stems partly from their professional engagement with computing and the need to stay 'on top'. At the same time, the other participant comments on how the social environment pressurises one to keep aware of the latest developments. She states, '... we were encouraged to use it a few years ago for looking for all sorts of different things really' (I-TU4:40-41).

### ***Gender Factor***

Participants approached the notion of gender in various ways, constructing this particular aspect in the most convoluted patterns. Whilst some were critical, others just noted the influence of gender within the Internet context. But overall, it is notable that gender was discussed in ways



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that displayed its complexity, contradictions and subversive potential. For example, including images online that objectify women through consumption are considered to be a norm and not necessarily offensive as suggested by the female programmer (I-TU1). On the other hand, gender anonymity during communication can lead to both a positive and negative experience. As female technical consultant explains, '... the anonymity of that means you can be talking to a rocket scientist and you understand what they are saying and they understand what you are saying and ... you are not in awe of people' (I-TU3:435-438). At the same time, '... it's a lot easier talking to someone who ... [hasn't] got a face ... to insult them or even to open up to and talk' (I-TU3:458-460). '... the Internet is very much like that, there are a lot of abusive insulting people out there, I suppose you can either walk away from it or give as good as you get' (I-TU3:465-467). The best example of such complexity laced with contradiction is a comment made by the female programmer who states, '... I would personally ... go for the best source rather than gender specific, I mean if it was beauty things then yes, I would probably go more gender. In fact I would say my main use is the best place to go rather than whether it is for men or for women' (I-TU1:139-142). In this passage, she oscillates between subscribing to a gendered identity prompting her to consume gender products and rejecting such proposition.

When the participants discuss their uses of or their attitudes towards the Internet, they focus mainly on the practical aspects. The participants are confident about understanding and maintaining their relationship towards the Internet. However, introducing gender into the discussion, as indicated in the interview protocol, has prompted responses which bear out observations made by researchers such as Lury (1996) or Skeggs (1997) on the formation of gender in Western society.

When asked about gender, the interviewees indicate that they notice differences in use between female and male online participants. However, explanations for the differences vary, depending on the interviewees' personal experiences. For example the female personal assistant explains that in her work environment male users are 'crazy' about using the Internet. As she observes:



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*'... they love it, I think it comes down to, I think women are a lot better at communicating and more likely to phone places to enquire into things, whereas a lot of guys, the ones I know, wouldn't really want to do that so the Internet is great for them. They can just look at what they want to. Definitely the guys I work with love it, they can't get enough of it' (I-TU4:399-404).*

Her comments do not necessarily indicate a discriminating use of the Internet. As she claims, whilst both parties seem to have the same type of access, reasons for using the Internet differ for men and women. On the other hand, the female software designer differentiates between female and male use of the Internet based on their abilities. She believes that information technology as a discipline is based on an intellectual ability rather than physical attributes, thus allowing both female and male users to enter the field on an equal footing. However, she herself observes, 'I find that a lot of women are scared of ... [the Internet]' (I-TU2:308). Thus, even if female and male users start on the same level, she realises that there is a difference in the approach female users have in comparison to male ones. The female technical consultant's understanding of gender and the Internet use is not as positive as that expressed by the other participants. Her experiences have led her to consider withholding her gender identity in order to avoid stressful situations. She comments, '... I always get the impression that the IT industry is quite male dominated, especially in my area and I prefer to be anonymous than up front and tell them who I am' (I-TU3:208-211). She also distinguishes between whether the user is asking for advice or offering an answer. '... if you want to offer advice then it is a different thing. It would be looked at very sceptically, that's what I get the impression of' (I-TU3:217-219). Although the participants notice differences between female and male Internet use, they do not identify gender differences in terms of purposes of using the Internet. As the female software designer observes, the purpose of going online is very personal. It is based on the individual needs of the user regardless of gender:

*'... a friend of mine, her web site is primarily set up as a link page that's all it is, it's just all her links and every now and then a thought or a picture or something like that, her site is not meant for anybody else to find interesting or vaguely useful it is for her so that she doesn't have to worry about moving house, having a different computer, all the links are on one page' (I-TU2:320-325).*



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Where the use of the Internet can be clearly identified as gendered based on the participants' observation, the purpose is justified as grounded in the individual's needs and circumstances.

Part of the purpose of BEME.com was to focus on 'women's only' issues creating a communicative space designed just for female users. The interviews prompt the participants to comment on the notion of spaces designed for 'female only' use. The responses offered by the interviewees are critical of the concept of a female niche market. The female software designer believes such spaces are useless to her if they focus only on gender as a way to define the niche market. She points out, '... I would use it for something, if I knew it was a good holiday resource or it was a good cooking uses because I enjoy cooking then I would be interested in going there' (I-TU2:276-279). As she explains, if a female focused site does not offer information of interest to her, she would not engage with it merely because it targets women. In general other participants do not consider themselves as constituents of a niche market and would not want to rely only on sites that are designed to target women. The female programmer comments, 'I don't use ... [the Internet] for shopping or like they have health and beauty and maybe on the odd occasion you might want to look for a beauty tip so I might use it for that ... I don't think it is very good at the moment for clothes shopping' (I-TU1:62-65). There is, however, a difference between the interviewees' responses to the idea of women's sites targeting a niche market and women-focused sites. The female technical consultant observes, 'I think there should be specialised areas where you say women only and also ones that are generic or not gender specific, otherwise you miss out a whole load of people, I like cars, gardening and DIY, most women would probably like cooking and shopping, mind you I do like shopping and things like that' (I-TU3:74-78). Her understanding is based not only on the commercial targeting of female users. She sees these types of sites as women focused, not as fulfilling the needs of a gender specific niche market. However, when asked if she would visit women's portals, her reply is negative supported by the following explanation, '[w]hy wouldn't I, I don't know. I'm not really into women's portals, I'm more into technical web sites or even gaming web sites' (I-TU3:202-203). Hence, as previously discussed it is not a subscription to gender that attracts female users online, but their interests. Another observation about women's only sites comes



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from the female software designer. She does not deem the female focused sites to be visually appealing. 'I do find sometimes that any of these sites that are aimed at a set of people tend to be very cluttered and have lots of advertising and lots of pictures flashing and the last thing you need on a web page is to be cluttered, it should be clean, clear and easy to follow, so I have gone to a few but not very often' (I-TU2:99-103).

In all cases when participants are asked about gender specific sites and their interest in visiting them, they respond by saying that they do not believe they are the appropriate people to ask. The female software designer just as much as the female programmer and female technical consultant state they do not fit into the category targeted by commercial women's portals. 'I don't know if I am the right person who would go to a women's only site, because there is very little I would see myself looking for other than maybe holidays and my music ... it's not general mainstream stuff that I'd be interested in' (I-TU2:267-271). Although the participants are chosen because they fit the general profile of the women's portal target audience, they do not associate themselves with such a gendered position. The female software designer goes even further by bluntly pointing out, 'it's just basically because my interests are different and generally most of the things that are on women's web sites don't interest me, they don't have information that pertains to me' (I-TU2:441-443). In discussing issues around women being the niche market for online consumption other topics are brought up by the interviewees. One such theme is the combination of gender and online identity. Again the discussion around this concept is prompted more by personal respondents' perspectives and experiences than by overarching generalisations.

Feminist scholars have written extensively on the subjects and concerns surrounding notions of gender and identity. Some authors suggest that online environments are liberating through the possibilities afforded by disembodied communication practices (Turtle 1995). Others offer a critique (Paasonen 2002). The participants in this research may not express in-depth knowledge of a feminist critique of gender, identity and the Internet but nonetheless, their views are underlined with a sense of displeasure about the ways online environments resolve issues



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around gender and identity. In her commentary, the female software designer expresses very strong views about users and gendered identity within the Internet context. She states, 'I find that a lot of people you meet [on the Internet] tend to lie about what they are and hide who they are and that's something that I don't believe in doing in real life or on the Net. I am who I am and that's it. If you don't like it tough, I don't care' (I-TU2:70-73). She feels that her life does not perhaps revolve around the Internet as much as other peoples. Her strong social context, she believes, gives her the strength and conviction in her identity. She does not feel the need to claim to be someone else. She also does not feel the need to hide the fact she is a female online user. 'I have enough friends I don't need to impress someone new and lie to them, I don't believe in lying ... if you've lied to me then you've not really said who you are and I'm not interested' (I-TU2:73-78). However, the female technical consultant expressed other concerns. Being an online gamer, she has found herself in environments where users often play with their identity and/or gender designation. She comments about her gaming experiences, '... you can choose the gender of the character, but there are quite a few blokes, boys, kids that choose a female character just to take the mickey out of them' (I-TU3:257-259). On the other hand, she supports her impression that the Internet is still a male dominated environment with the following observation: 'You do get lots of surprises, when someone turns round and says something that refers to him being a bloke and I say hang on a minute, I'm not a bloke I'm a woman and then they turn around with a reply that tells you that they are gob smacked' (I-TU3:234-237). None of the participants advocate women only Internet spaces to avoid such situations as the female technical consultant describes. However, the participants are aware that taking on a specific gender identity within the Internet positions them in the eyes of the others. Nonetheless, they also strongly believe that it is their choice and depends on their exercise of control whether to engage in such situations or not.

Whilst making observations about gender and identity, the participants also refer to the Internet as a gender neutral place. The female personal assistant observes that as online browsing experiences are often an individual activity, there is freedom to express one's own position. She comments, '... it is such a personal thing isn't it, you can look up whatever you want and it's



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something that you do on your own, so there's no feeling of being intimidated by anyone I don't think' (I-TU4:408-410). The female software designer argues that information technology, in general, is a gender neutral territory. Contrary to feminist research in the area stemming from authors like Hawthorne and Klein (1999); Pollock and Sutton (1999) et al., the female software designer believes there is no sexism in IT. Her argument is very strongly based on her own experience of becoming aware of information technology and its opportunities. 'No I have never found it an issue, but then I am in an IT industry so I've kind of studied all with men and I've learnt the Internet and how to use it, about computers everything from men so sexism has never ever been an issue' (I-TU2:329-332). She goes on to support her argument, '... I've found IT has always been a very stable medium it's never been very chauvinistic or feminist, it's always been somewhere in between, so I've never had any problems like that' (I-TU2:335-337). Such reasoning stems from the belief mentioned earlier pertaining to gender and the Internet use. She supports her position by describing the nature of the Internet as being based on intellectual ability rather than a physical one allowing her to believe it is gender neutral.

### Online Industry Professionals Commentary on the Value of the Internet to Female Users

The analysis of tangible and intangible experiences and expectations is supported by analysis of the reflections of the professionals immersed in the Internet and publishing industries other than the BEME.com production team. The participants are asked to comment on the different aspects of the Internet that in their opinion generate value for female users. Their answers can be divided into three types of reflections: *utility-based*, *emotional* and *women-focused*. The following paragraphs offer a detailed description of these types of reflections supported by a selection of appropriate quotes.



## **Utility-based Reflections**

In comparison to female users' opinions, 'utility-based' reflections are not considered by the industry professional as a key reason defining one's engagement with the Internet. These reflections feature just as prominently as all other categories. However, they come closer than the BEME.com production team to recognising the needs identified by female users. The factors that define utility-based reflections are: 'acquiring information', 'access' and 'usefulness'. All three factors focus on very practical aspects of the Internet use and are often qualities accepted as defining the Internet. However, through industry professionals' focus on the notions of added value, the descriptions offer far better critical assessment, avoiding generalisations or traditional assumptions when possible.

### **Acquiring Information**

Female users expressed that one of the main reasons they use the Internet is to acquire information. However, what generates added value for this activity is identified by industry professionals as the medium's ability to include and address groups previously marginalised. From a non-commercially driven perspective, the industry professionals see the Internet as a tool to generate networks of communication resulting in the building of online communities. The female senior associate at Ariadne Capital feels that email is one of the first positive aspects emerging out of the ability to communicate online. Although it might not be a gender specific function, it generates networks that bring the female user community together. The female director of DigitalEve identifies sites as empowering because they provide a space for female users to '... meet new friends, make contacts, numerous networking, and [look] for jobs and that sort of thing' (I-IP1:27-28). Here she points towards the difference between the 'women's sites' that are commercially focused and those that are resource focused. She believes that the sites created as a resource supporting a community are of more interest to female users than commercially driven ones. She observes:

*'It's amazing, you know, women are very reticent about going forward and asking questions of things, but in such a wonderful resource, if you are stuck at home with*



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*children and you are out of the job market, how do you connect? You connect by online communities and ... people feel they belong somewhere. A lot of women working in technology are usually one in a group of 10 men, so having this support network, a virtual support network, you can feel like you belong to a group where there are lots of other people who are like you' (I-IP1:132-140).*

The need to acquire information motivates these female users to come together and the Internet is the tool that can facilitate it. When considering the specificity of the female users' lives and their ability to access the information, the Internet develops as a public space within a private sphere where female users can obtain direct advice, develop networks of support or further their own agenda in stimulating environments. However, these environments are not commercially focused they are based on exchange. This does not mean that acquisition and consumption of products is excluded in such environments. Here consumption is based much more on notions of exchange where parties benefit equally. On the other hand, in commercial contexts, such notions are not always possible to implement.

From early military, scientific and educational applications, the Internet has quickly developed to include a variety of commercially based transactions. In their interviews, female users often refer to online shopping in association with the Internet, whether in a positive or negative way. The industry professionals also recognise that the act of acquiring of information or products online can involve financial transactions, reflecting a steady commercialisation of the Internet. The male senior production editor at Women's Own magazine points out that the key to a commercially successful site is its *ability* to sell products or services. The commercial imperative is what gives the site a strategy to survive and generate revenue whether it is targeting specifically female, male users or both. However, the female CEO at eZoka Group disputes that it is as simple as providing items or services for sale when targeting female users. She makes explicit the commercial side through her belief that requires a balance between price and content of the portal. 'If you want to make me pay for something, you have to let me know where the value composition is' (I-IP2:336-338). It is also a process of negotiation based on years of traditions in purchasing products and users' expectations of these products:



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*'It's a different medium and ... nobody just wants static content on a web site, that doesn't work and nobody wants to pay for it. Whereas static content [in] ... a magazine, people are accustomed to pay for that. So [they] are happy to fork out their £3.45 or however much it is to buy a copy of the magazine' (I-IP2:414-418).*

She goes on to describe the negotiations female users may enter in order to obtain a paper magazine. It is important to note that these negotiations can involve quite complex behavioural patterns, where there is not always a need to pay for the content:

*'... if I am standing at a magazine rack and see a copy of Women's Health and on the cover is a topic that interests me, I get to know that for free. OK it's not free to the publisher because the publisher has to put the magazine together. They have to pay their staff. They have to get it on the bookshelves and then they have to hope that you buy it, and they may have to support it through advertising on billboards or whatever. But for the customer at that point in time, it is essentially free. I've not engaged in a commercial transaction, I've just looked at the cover' (I-IP2:338-347).*

This process is an important part of generating an understanding of how female users engage with paper magazines. It puts in place qualifiers that define the relationship between the notions of acquiring content and its value and the price a user might have to pay to obtain it. On the other hand, the Internet presents a completely different set of problems in this situation. At present, the Internet as a form of communicating content is generally viewed by users as a free source of information. Just as the cover of the magazine can be viewed for free, female users can browse an entire site in the comfort of their own environment. However, the female CEO at eZoka Group astutely observes how the publishing company makes significant investment in a medium which, contrary to magazines, does not guarantee exposure:

*'Now the problem with the Internet is that it is a leaf in an enormous Amazon rain forest of leaves. If you are that one leaf, you are going to have to spend a heck of a lot of money to let somebody know that you're there. And even then there is no guarantee because you always have the probability of technical failure. You have the probability of somehow your URL is going to be printed incorrectly. It is not an easy publishing medium, it is actually very complex ... Your hit rate from a customer who walks by and can read the magazine cover is going to be virtually 100%. You know that there is no technical failure involved there. Whereas you may have the world's most beautiful web site but if the guy that you've paid ... to put your link on their kind of Women's issues links page and they've printed it incorrectly, well there goes your money. Or if the modem cuts you off while the women are actually accessing your page. So there's a lot of infrastructure that needs to be fixed before we can even get to the issue of publishing and whether or not that really adds value' (I-IP2:338-367).*



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She raises many important issues that can define how female users interact with online technologies, their expectations and what is required on the part of the publisher. These are not simple concerns that can be resolved within a few months through better design or improved technology. These issues are rooted in the ways female users acquire information from other sources and what the Internet offers that makes it a much more appealing medium. These are important elements in defining the need to access the Internet and understanding what possible value it can carry once the female users decide to immerse themselves in the content.

Information acquisition on the part of the female users functions as a process of trading between losses and gains just as much as it does for the publisher. The only difference is that, contrary to the publisher, the female user can enter into this trade on a non-committal basis.

### Access

The access factor does not focus on physical ability to connect to the Internet. As with the interviewed female users, the industry professionals are strongly rooted in the Western social, cultural, economic and political context in which physical access to the Internet is not considered a primary issue. However, the industry professionals have all stressed in various ways that the Internet has to be recognised for what it is and what it can do; there is a need to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the medium itself. For the most part, industry professionals related access of the Internet with its ability to generate interest. As the female CEO at eZoka Group points out, '... the advertising was fabulous, but we are not that dumb. People, women develop loyalties the same way anybody does, and a little slick design may capture our attention for two minutes, but it's not going to hold our attention unless there is something more substantial' (I-IP2:161-164). The female director of DigitalEve also believes that to attract female users one has to provide information that is of interest to them and is not necessarily based on gender. She adds that together with appealing to female users' interest it is important to provide easy ways of sorting through the information. Considering that the Internet offers an abundance of content, the question of how complicated is it to access this material can be the key to whether female users will deem it interesting.



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The female senior associate at Ariadne Group believes that interactivity is also an important factor defining the access of the Internet. She argues, '... I think interactivity is really important to keep something long term, obviously people go all the time for pure information ... but they want to do something with that information or buy more information or request more and of course features help a lot. I think interactivity is key, whether you are a male or female' (I-IP3:336-341). Her comments are among the few observations specifically made about the issue of interactivity. The female users interviewed do not focus on interactivity as a way to define their access to the Internet. They define the access factor through other qualifiers. When discussing interactivity, the female senior associate at Ariadne Group also refers to the design of an accessed site. She maintains that accessing information online is not just about looking at a pretty site with an appealing interface. It is also about navigating through the given information:

*'I think many of us male and female have been accustomed to certain buttons being in certain places and so on ... for me the important thing for any site is the design of moving around, not functionality, more to guide people, navigation, user navigation and obviously it has to be visually appealing ... I just like things that are easy to read. ... it's not a pain to buy anything, it's not a pain to download information and so on. So [the] usual, user friendly' (I-IP3:399-410).*

Her observation draws attention to the importance of users being able to enter a site and obtain what they are looking for without any difficulty. However, she does believe that this ease of access is not specific to the female users and can be beneficial to men and women.

### **Usefulness**

Usefulness is closely linked with the access factor. Both account for why female users would find it valuable to engage with the Internet as a medium. Qualifiers such as 'rationale', 'convenience of use', 'usability' are what industry professionals associate with the usefulness factor. As the female director of DigitalEve points out, rationale defines engagement with the Internet. '... it depends what the purpose is, is it commercial or for general things, or for women's only things ... it all depends on where you are coming from, where starting point is, who your target audience is' (I-IP1:338-341). She goes on to state that if a site is not usable



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due to technological difficulties during the download or an overcomplicated design, female users (or any users for that matter) will not engage with the site.

The male senior production editor at Women's Own Magazine argues that convenience of use is another qualifier that will generate value for female users. As a longstanding member of the production team of a women's paper magazine, he has insiders' knowledge as to the differences between engaging with online and offline magazines. Therefore, his understanding of convenience is closely related to the circumstances in which female users will consider logging online or reading a paper magazine. For the male senior production editor at Women's Own Magazine it becomes the driving element creating or hampering the added value of online information and communication. According to the female director of DigitalEve, there has to be a careful balance between interesting content that is user friendly in its access as well as communication. In her interview, she recognises the importance of design as a tool for attracting female users to the Internet. Her experiences have led her to conclude that design has a great impact on the way that sites can be perceived as useful on the part of female users. She comments:

*'Oh that's another problem, getting print designers to design on your web then all your web pages look like a magazine at the end, totally useless ... most of these companies you find are full of men doing all these techie things and that is absolutely [of] no use [when] you are designing for a women's audience, because it just doesn't get them, they think completely differently. Women are so much more practical, they are not into flashy pictures and all those other things ... quick let me get on with my stuff and get out and that's the main consideration. And in that way design is completely different, there [is] a lot of psychology behind it that needs to be dealt with' (I-IP1:472-485).*

In her comment she makes a careful distinction between the application of magazines as products and online portals and their function. Her argument is based on recognition of the difference between the two and the types of interactions users might have with them. Not disputing the high quality design output offered by the glossy women's magazines, rather she questions the appropriateness of magazine design practices within the online contexts. In her interview, she draws attention to differences in perception of design and the notion of usefulness based on the gender of both the designer and the target audience. She therefore



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advocates that women's communicative spaces online need to be considered from a female users' perspective and not based on gender assumptions.

The industry professionals describe the usefulness factor as being based on the capacity of the Internet to become part of daily routine. In many cases, as the female senior associate at Ariadne Capital mentions, the Internet is already an important aspect of everyday life. It keeps families connected, supplies information that might not be readily available or allows individuals to gather in communities regardless of geographical location. These aspects are important to female users and they participate in them just as readily as male users. But the question is whether such facilities, unique to the Internet, can become a habit like that of reading paper magazines. The male senior production editor at Women's Own magazine believes it is possible, as participating online combines purpose, convenience and capacity to be integrated into daily routines. These factors can lead to the developing of a habit that positions the Internet as part of daily routine.

The female CEO at eZoka Group observes that the usefulness factor can often be understood through the notion of universal versus personal. She points out that the Internet is a medium which can cover the whole spectrum and it is up to the individual user to define what is useful at a particular given time. Therefore, in terms of usefulness what generates *added* value for female users is derived from the flow of information between the universal and the personal. The industry professionals therefore agree that there are many aspects that make the Internet experience useful, but they all need to come together in a carefully arranged balance.

### ***Emotional Reflections***

During their interviews, the industry professionals refer to emotional qualities that could possibly generate added value to portal experience. However, they all agree that in the current circumstances this emotional response is not always easy to elicit. The interviewees identify three different factors that possibly foster empowering emotional responses towards online



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interaction by female users. These are: interaction, experience and consumption. Overall, the factors tease out what is positive about or unique to the Internet and how female users are beginning to adapt these qualities to their own needs and lifestyles. However, in their observations, the industry professionals refer to examples of already existing positive or empowering experiences offered to female users, rather than explore future scenarios.

### Interaction

The interaction factor refers to the unique ways in which female users can share with others. As the female senior associate at Ariadne Capital explains from her own personal experience, interacting over the Internet can bring people together and/or maintain closeness. She states, '[my mother] spends time uploading photos, making family albums, because for her, her family is important, so it's ... important to share those family moments, not just for immediate family, but with extended family ... with close friends who are all over the world' (I-IP3:457-461).

According to this example the Internet becomes a tool to share important family moments and sustain emotional attachment. She believes that with a busy life and family spread out all over the world, the Internet can become an extension of the home. However, not only does it connect individuals over geographical distance, but it also supports activities that can make living easier. She explains further:

*'... for [my sister] value is in being able to do all the things she has to do as a wife as a mother as a professional worker, but she gets to have a lot of fun because she is able ... to carry out her hobbies and I think that this is what adds value for people. They are able to find what they think [is] important ... because of all the different products and services there are available online. People can ... extend their home on to the Internet ... I think it's becoming more and more part of every day lives, not just a way to communicate for females, not just a place to find information ... it's not just a place to buy things, it's a place to do things'(I-IP3:466-476).*

Thus the interaction factor describes the various ways in which people connect on the Internet and extend their living/lifestyle spaces online. As the female senior associate at Ariadne Capital concludes the ability to do '... what you love to do with the help of the Internet, to be able to do it in less time, cheaper and more efficient' (I-IP3:481-483) is what generates emotional value.



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Nonetheless, the interviewee does not identify the interaction factor as being gender specific. She sees it as a personal aspect driven by personal need and circumstance.

Another qualifier framing the interaction factor is a dynamic tension between desire for complete openness and total privacy. Within the Internet context this is a hot issue in terms of technological ability to offer various levels of privacy. Hence, the specificity of the online experience is often framed by the Internet's ability to provide personal anonymity. It becomes a play between the users' definition of who they are as a person and their ability to become anonymous. The female CEO at eZoka Group explains, '... when you walk into an auto showroom and you are a woman, especially if you are a young woman, you get discriminated against in terms of price, in terms of service, whereas on the web if you are shopping for an automobile you are going to go to an automobile web site and just kind of browse, and negotiate on pricing. They don't even know who you are' (I-IP2:92-97). In a world where gender discrimination is still a part of the definition of what constitutes a 'woman', the possibility of personal anonymity provides female users with the opportunity to employ tactics of subversion. As the female CEO at eZoka Group argues, '[y]ou are just a buyer, that's a huge advantage, now am I going to get rid of that advantage by going through a women's web site who's advising me on cars to buy, No! right?' (I-IP2:99-101).

The interaction factor makes explicit positive aspects of female users' online activity through online networking allowing them to interact with people that are important to them, or engage with others in activities that they enjoy. The great advantage of such interaction is the opportunity it presents for users to negotiate disembodiment from their gender. Finally, the industry professionals agree that emotional engagement exists on this very personal and individual level. It is here where it is most effective, making it very difficult for third parties such as the publishing industry or designers to affect or control.



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### Experience

During their interviews, the industry professionals refer to experience as a strong factor in generating an emotional response to the Internet. Since the aim is to encourage engagement of female users with online technologies, the industry professionals focus on circumstances that might prompt such a reaction. The female director of DigitalEve identifies three aspects that, in her opinion, through experience can generate a positive response on the part of the female users. She refers to examples of the positive experiences of others, fostering of positive relations between online service providers and users and finally, positive personal experiences.

The female director of DigitalEve believes that the targeting of female users based generically on their gender cannot fulfil the above mentioned criteria: '[female users] ... want to read about role models and what other successful women are doing, people more like them and things that interrelate to them, so you have to target your customer carefully and deliver to that' (I-IP1:161-164). She suggests that it is through citation of examples of the achievements of 'ordinary' women that the Internet can offer alternative content to its female users. She states, '... there are lots of women up here who are amazing, who have done lots of things who run their own companies or are very successful, but there are very little media profiles ... If there were lots more of that, where women can be shown to be role models to younger women or to other women who want to change careers, that sort of thing is empowering' (I-IP1:193-199). In her opinion online spaces dedicated to female users such as BEME.com should not concentrate on perpetuating traditional gender biased ideologies. Rather, they should focus on building up female users' self-esteem and generate positive images of women as human beings.

In terms of commercially driven sites, attention should be focused on fostering positive customer relations. The industry professionals agree that women should not be targeted solely based on their sex. In today's day and age, such marketing does not inspire trust or loyalty in prospective customers. The female CEO at eZoka Group points out:

*'My view on the Internet is, stand-alone consumer propositions are very, very difficult, because consumer support has not been demonstrated for them. If they are an*



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*extension of an existing media property, whether that's a magazine or a newspaper then they should be the same brand and I think that a lot of the kind of extension properties that started up just in fact dissipated a lot of value because they tried to become a new brand when in fact what they were really trying to accomplish was additional value for the existing property' (I-IP2:37-44).*

Thus, to generate value added environments online, the companies need to be very clear about what it is that they have to offer and how it fits into the existing market. In commercial terms they need to define what customer support they can propose and how it is going to be received by the users. If the customer support is easy to access, efficient and helpful, it will generate positive response on the part of online users, both female and male. In addition, the female director of DigitalEve astutely points out that it is not just the content of the site that will provoke an emotional response, but positive personal experience:

*'What we try to do is support our community of women who all work in different aspects of the Internet industry and to bring them together so that they can share ideas, share experiences, teach each other technology or new things, or train each other in sort of programming or whatever. And just generally be a resource for any women, who are interested in anything to do with the Internet' (I-IP1:20-26).*

When discussing aspects of personal experience, the industry professionals make frequent reference to notions of personal empowerment. In their interviews, participants cite different ways in which the Internet can offer an empowering place. These descriptions are always linked to the notions of personal experience. The female senior associate at Ariadne Capital discusses her experiences in non-western countries where the Internet offers women an ability to transcend traditional restrictions imposed on women. She recalls, '... when I say liberated I really mean in terms of being able to express oneself, being able to be free to look at information and educate yourself about the world' (I-IP3:274-276). Thus, what is often considered to be added value for female users within the context of the Internet stems from the existence of the technology itself. Their experiences, providing an ability to gain a voice in circumstances that otherwise impinge on female users' communication and gaining knowledge, can generate a feeling of empowerment. Such conditions foster positive personal experience and thus prompt a positive emotional response. Particularly in environments where female users are denied contact with the external world, such opportunities presented by the Internet



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can trigger loyalty to and reliance on the medium. However, the use per se is not what is overpowering or demeaning, but rather it fosters beneficial exchange for all parties involved.

### Consumption

Even within commercially driven contexts, the Internet has the capacity to generate positive emotional response. The female director at DigitalEve believes that regardless of how good or innovative the design is, if the content it communicates is not up to scratch, it will not inspire female customers to consume. In order to generate appropriate content, the female senior associate at Ariadne Capital suggests, '... market research is done to understand what is it the users want, not what we would like to do and what generates the most money for us' (I-IP3:179-181). In her opinion it is possible to cater for female users' particular consumption patterns through Internet multi-lane channelling of information simultaneously to the individual and to a greater audience.

In the commercial world, where investment is not always easy to obtain and revenue generation is expected to be instantaneous, female users can turn out to be very difficult customers to please. As the male senior production editor at Woman's Own observes, the commercial world is very tough and it does not wait for anyone to develop an emotional response supporting consumption. He maintains, '... you would have to be prepared to take a loss for a long time on ... [the web] and build a readership. It's the same as magazines, you need to build a readership. You can't just go out and get one. All magazines start off with a readership and then it grows or they kill it. It's got to be the same with the web ...' (I-IP4:255-259) The female CEO at eZoka Group, on the other hand, points to the interactive capacities of the Internet as a new way to support positive consumption promoting strategies. She stresses that there is the capacity for the Internet to allow female users to generate their own content, but this relies on service providers to facilitate such activities:

*'... [to] create something looking slick is really expensive, whereas I think if they had focused on minimal content and then create user rooms for the women to define what it is that they want to talk about and supported that with a lot of very heavy infrastructure on the backend ... big servers, massive ability to have you know, 500 user forums at the*



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*same time, they would have done a lot better, because that's what women want to do, that's what everybody wants to do' (I-IP2:216-222).*

In cases where such services are not possible due to the nature of the merchandise, she provides examples of already existing brands and products: 'I think women have great brand affinity, but I think you have to work very, very hard to gain their loyalty, even though in a lot of the households men still make most of the money, women actually make most of the decisions about spending that money and as a result most consumer advertising is targeted at women in the home' (I-IP2:49-53). In her opinion, recognising the facts and circumstances of female users' consumption patterns is the key to generating an online experience that can prompt customer loyalty. On the other hand, she quickly adds, whilst companies tend to assume that a particular product is the female user's 'primary affinity', she believes this is not the case: '... the reality is that women make their decisions around all sorts of affinities, you know, we are stand alone individuals with loyalties with all sorts of things that are not easily dissected and they certainly [are] not easily swayed' (I-IP2:61-64). In her discussion on the this issue, she makes a poignant observation often ignored by marketing strategists targeting female users:

*'... people layer again their affinities based around their personal circumstances ... do I wake up every day and think 'Oh I'm a woman', no I wake up every day and think 'I've got a payroll to meet, I've got employees, I have a mortgage'. All of these things are things that worry me and interest me, so if I'm gonna go to a web site for a mortgage, am I going to turn to a women's web site first or am I going to turn to a mortgage web site? I am going to a mortgage web site' (I-IP2:76-82).*

This particular observation, although very straightforward and almost banal, encapsulates in a nutshell the possible ways in which female users direct their emotional response towards the Internet. They do not identify at all with their gender as a defining quality, but rather they identify with the realities and demands of their everyday lives. They therefore seek out the Internet to support them in what they need to achieve or fulfil. It is under such circumstances that the Internet can become a tool of empowerment both in a commercial and non-commercial sense.



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### ***Women-Focused Reflections***

The term 'women-focused' is used by the industry professionals as a way to address commercial online spaces focused on female users in order to avoid making gender specific references. It is not that they condemn such online spaces, rather they use the term as a form of critique of the methods used to target female users within commercial contexts. Thus, the notion of women-focused functions is an alternative, critically addressing gender assumptions. Women-focused reflections concentrate on two factors: users and resource. In both cases, the interviewees' reflections identify positive aspects of Internet use by female users.

#### **Users**

This particular factor represents the myriad characteristics that define the relationship female users have with online technologies. An important qualifier in this relationship is the notion of perception. The female director of DigitalEve maintains that other non-connected participants will be encouraged through positive publicity that shows the variety and diversity of female users and their experiences online. By changing female users' perception of the Internet from that of a threatening, gendered environment to a site of empowerment, the Internet can become an added value experience for female users. Changes in perception of the technology itself will be the driving factor. The female CEO at eZoka Group points out that recognition of female users' ability to make their own decisions about their lifestyles, environments and consumption patterns is just as important. She states, '... for smaller ticket items such as loo rolls for household users, that's entirely the women's decision and I think that the brand companies have to work very, very hard to convince a woman that she should either switch, try a new brand or you know, even try to modify her behaviour' (I-IP2:53-59). The acknowledgement of female users' position as decision makers allows for a positive change in their perception of the Internet. Hence, the commercial spaces designed for women can generate added value for female users, because they recognise them as already empowered individuals capable of taking charge. Such environments have the potential to counter what are, arguably, patronising characteristics of many traditional women's paper magazines and become an alternative space



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to acquire information. This acknowledgment of female users' positioning as decision makers is deeply rooted in recognition of their personal circumstances. Here the industry professionals agree that knowing their target users requires an understanding of their situation and cannot rely on traditional assumptions. The female CEO at eZoka Group critiques BEME.com in order to clarify this point:

*'I thought [what] was very difficult was that they somehow thought they were going to create a community around a central consumer product right, and if you look at women's web sites in the United States for example, or in other countries, they all deal with specific types of women, so there are those web sites that are only for women seeking careers, those web sites for Moms, people layer again their affinities based around their personal circumstances' (I-IP2:71-77).*

Thus, generating successful female online spaces requires a much more focused view that is rooted within recognition of the various affinities these users will bring to their online experience. At the same time, acknowledgement of users' circumstances forces the publishers and designers to recognise them as multi-dimensional, complex human beings. Under such circumstances assumptions of any kind can only lead to outcomes that do not attract female users and can result in a site that will be avoided. Acknowledgement of female user's complexity of being and lifestyle leads to an understanding based on diversity. The female senior associate at Ariadne Capital observes:

*'... within women there is so many types of women, there's the professional woman that's just doesn't have time and knows that , maybe she will look at ... quality and when can it get delivered ... And then there's my little sister who is a student ... she'll look for things; compare and so on and then find whatever it is she wants. Then my other sister who will look at the shops and can't find what she needs so she will go online ... So even just within my family there are so many different ways of shopping online, so I can imagine if you extend that to the whole world' (I-IP3:508-522).*

The industry professionals prompt the conclusion that it is the lack of acknowledgement of female users' diversity that allows gender assumptions to filter into design outcomes. When describing added value sites designed for female users, the female director of DigitalEve often refers to the importance of designing with the issue of diversity in mind and this is echoed by other female industry professionals. They believe that not only does it generate added value, but it becomes a tool to combat patronising gendered assumptions that tend to cast female



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users as one 'faceless' mass. Finally, in recognising individual users, the Internet can also bring them together and promote their visibility, an idea that goes hand in hand with philosophical ideologies prompted by a feminist thinking. The Internet can offer meeting spaces for those who otherwise would not be able to come together. Women have been in a position where they are disregarded as they are not perceived as a collective with power. As the female director of DigitalEve argues, the Internet can facilitate such collectives and give female users a voice leading to empowerment. When commenting about the sites she is involved with, she states, '... a lot [of women] are scared to do it on their own, but collectively you have a voice and that is the purpose of what we are trying to do' (I-IP1:455-457). In situations where female users might have difficulty accessing certain environments or activities due to their gendered positioning, online female spaces promoting women's visibility can become an alternative way to access what normally might not have been available. In practical terms, such an approach positions female users as valid, important and empowered members of society.

### Resource

The female industry professionals interviewed point out that the Internet can only function as a resource for female users if it offers relevant content. Since female users' daily activities tend not to leave much spare time, there is only so much they can go and see online. On the other hand, 'relevant' also means of high quality in terms of its delivery and content. The female CEO at eZoka Group argues that 'pretty' sites may capture female users' attention, but without substantial content they will not respond to their needs and hence will not hold their interest for long. However, it is not just about a straightforward ability to tap into a source of information. Pattanaik (1999) believes the Internet has the potential to offer female users' new ways to affect their everyday environments through collective action on a local and global level. It can provide opportunities for female users to change aspects of their own lives. The female senior associate at Ariadne Group observes that in countries where certain opportunities are not available to women, the Internet can transcend these barriers. For example, through online education, female users have access to knowledge and self-improvement without having to



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drastically challenge their own life circumstances or that of those around them. They can develop links with other female users in similar situations, share ideas and gain advice.

On the other hand, the female director of DigitalEve maintains that the capacity of the Internet to facilitate development of social networks can also be beneficial to female users in privileged parts of the world. 'The web ... the Internet ... [and] the creation of e-mail is an amazingly empowering tool, because it allows women with no voice to be out there communicating with the rest of the world. Women can be stuck at home for a long time, but they can communicate with the rest of the world' (I-IP1:367-370). Nonetheless, these are not the only ways in which the Internet can have an influence on the lives of female users. As the female director of DigitalEve goes on to explain, the Internet generates employment opportunities for female users that were not accessible before. 'It has liberated a lot of people and it allows for ... other careers to spring up from nowhere ... we are able to create other communities which are also very empowering, because you have other people you can connect with and who can support you in what you are doing' (I-IP1:370-376). As a consequence, the Internet is not just a resource in terms of information, but generates a means of survival for female users who might previously have been marginalised. She insists:

*'This is the perfect opportunity, perfect industry for women to be involved in because it is versatile, you can work from home, you can work part-time, it doesn't matter where you are, which is why it is so perfectly suited to women. And also the new industries which are spawned from the Internet industry are very flat, the managements are very flat and women are the best suited people compared to men to run organisations which are flat, because they are more responsive to people and they are less of the top down I'm the boss attitude and women are sort of talk to every level of staff and include everybody. So the Internet is the perfect space for women to excel because it's a faceless environment, you do not have to be male or female' (I-IP1:77-86).*

Thus, commercially driven sites can become spaces where female users find employment that will suit their lifestyle and professional career. As such, women's online portals have the potential to shift from purely commercial enterprises to becoming online resource communities – a quality inherent to the Internet. Tapping into such online resource communities for information, advice or support and to be able to contribute can be empowering for female users. Thus, the ability of the Internet to generate virtual communities as spaces that are not based on



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gendered assumptions but are 'women-focused', can offer added value experiences to its users. In specifying the women-focused factor, industry professionals argue for an expansion of the meaning of 'user' and 'resource' in the context of portal publishing. Such a broadening of these two concepts allows the publishing industry to explore other aspects of female users' relationship with the Internet. The industry professionals maintain that there is much more to this relationship than simple classification of users and their participation based on gender. That is why they point towards a much more inclusive understanding made possible by the classification, 'women-focused'.

### **Findings**

#### ***The Assumed Value of Female Users Engagement with the Internet***

The literature has shown that it is imperative for women to engage with the Internet. Authors such as Pattanaik (1999), Rakow (1988) and Hawthorne and Klein (1999) emphasise how important it is for female users to participate in service development as well as regulation of Internet technologies. Therefore, feminist inclined critics value female users' online participation as a way of combating information and technology discrimination. On the other hand, commercial motivation for increased female involvement is based on ideas of consumption and spending as van der Harst and Zanetti Polzi (2000) and Reitsma, Reeve and de Regt (2000) argue. The commercially inclined beliefs voiced by online industry supporters see female users' involvement solely in terms of economic imperatives. However, my research has revealed female users' motivation for engaging with the Internet to be far more complex.

A feminist critique of the Internet and publishing industry provides examples of the added value that can be generated for female users. Various feminist scholars describe how female users can subvert gender structures through online disembodiment (Turkle 1995). Women can engage in political agendas simultaneously on local and global levels through organising into online communities (Pattanaik 1999). They can also access information that has been



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previously denied to them by simply becoming connected (Regan Shade 1997). However it is not only within academia that this added value is perceived in female users' engagement with the Internet. The industry professionals interviewed during my research expand on the issues identified by feminist critics by acknowledging the defining commercial context in which added value for female users could be generated. They acknowledge the utility-based issues surrounding the Internet as well as the emotional ones. They suggest ways to redefine female users by departing from a heavy emphasis on gender to looking at concepts representing 'women's focus'. Such a shift in thinking offers a tool to address gender assumptions through a descriptor that is much more inclusive and fluid in its definition. Within their descriptions and reflections – in opposition to feminist scholars who discuss over arching ideologies – the industry professionals tend to focus on small or mundane aspects, frequently dismissed as 'insignificant' details, but in many cases making a real difference in traditional and inflexible commercial environments. Thus, the industry professionals offer a guide to the development of alternatives at a very practical level through focus on the details that gain personal attention. However, these guiding points are not just limited to female users; frequently the industry professionals discuss the value of the Internet in terms that would benefit both male and female users. Hence, their approach attends to the criticism that suggests feminist scholars lack recognition of diversity and the personal complexity of individuals.

### ***The Complexity of Female Users' Online Experiences and Expectations***

Analysis of the interviews with female users reveals a far more complex picture of their interaction with the Internet than the publishing houses would like to believe. I agree with Tran's (2001) assertion that female online participation is purpose-driven rather than a random expression of need to engage with the latest technology. However, I expand on this notion of purposefulness by discussing findings derived from my own interviews with female users. Findings of market surveys such as which?online (2002) indicate that users see the Internet primarily as a resource supporting their e-mail, education, research and information seeking. However, there is a discrepancy between the emphasis on and assumptions made by market



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research – assumptions regarding female users' focus on shopping – and the comments offered by research participants themselves. My analysis indicates that female users are mainly concerned with practical aspects when it comes to the Internet; they see the Internet as a tool to achieve something, putting forth this practical aspect as its most significant quality. Such a focus coincides with the participants' perceptions of themselves as Internet users. These two concepts are quite central to female engagement with the Internet. What does not seem to be a high priority is the notion of how others position them as female online users; 'utility' and 'access' are the dominant discourses that guide their understanding of the Internet. The 'visual' factor, whilst certainly evident, does not hold great value for female users and it is the extent to which visual aspects affect the 'time' qualifier that are of greater importance. They express no great interest to change the design of online content, unless it infringes on their access. In particular, they see BEME.com as a finished design outcome without possibility of adjustment very like a printed magazine.

How female participants see themselves as online users is associated with an 'emotional' factor. It is based on the types of experiences the individual users have had and the construction of their own identities. In contemporary society, being knowledgeable about new technologies and their progress is just as important as other aspects of identity construction: '... the [Internet] is now seen more than ever as a fundamental part of 21st century living' (which?online 2002). Therefore, 'keeping up with progress' was another factor constructing the female participants' view of themselves as online users. It is this belief that links the female users' purposeful employment of the Internet with their understanding of themselves as online users. As hitherto mentioned, an interesting aspect is female users' apparent indifference as to how they might be perceived by others as consumers of the Internet. The analysis suggests that female users see themselves as part of a social collective offline and online, but this does not infringe on their strong notion of individuality. Although BEME.com claimed to promote individual experience, it did classify users as belonging to one group defined by 'gender'. Feminist scholars have problematised commercial application of the Internet, where female users are seen as a gendered niche market addressed in one voice (Crow 1997; Paasonen 2002). This critique is



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echoed by the female users interviewed, who focus on their interests and needs before, during and after browsing the Internet and do not see themselves as one 'body' defined by gender.

The one-on-one computer facilitation of online experience further encourages them to see themselves as individual users unconstrained by gender. Supported by a Western philosophy of individualism, female users feel they have a good knowledge of what they want from the Internet and believe that others either share those notions or are aware of them.

The gender factor also reveals the elaborate nature of the female users' relationship with the Internet. The research points to a diversity rather than homogeneity of understanding when it comes to female users, especially where gender is concerned. Often participants describe almost contradictory ideas that they appear to readily accept when encountered online. Such beliefs are quite symptomatic of the general attitude to the medium. There seems to be no need to favour one concept over the other, since both can exist online simultaneously.

Combined with a lack of interest in changing the online content design, the female users feel no special need to protest against gendered content as long as it does not infringe on their own access and interests. They feel they have a strong grasp of what they want from the Internet and they believe that others either share those notions or are aware of them. Such a position does not align itself with a 'women-focused' understanding as an alternative design to gender stereotypes. Rather the interviewed female users seem to endorse the idea of recognising women as individuals with a strong sense of self and consumer choice.

As Weale (2000) astutely observes, '[w]e're all going to need the Internet, whether it's to get the latest global news as it breaks or to email friends across the room. What women don't need is just another excuse to target our credit cards'. As my research suggests, female users share this opinion and in their own ways develop and participate in online technologies. The women interviewed want to be in control of their interaction with the Internet. They see themselves as individuals who are in charge of decision-making and do not believe they should be perceived as one group characterised solely by their gender. Fundamentally they perceive themselves as



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intelligent beings who have developed a relationship with this new technology in a multifaceted fashion supported by the interactive qualities of the medium.

In review, the online portals targeting female users generate a set of social interactions embedded within the site layouts where both systems of power and resistance are negotiated. Here the designers are in position of power through their selective provision of design implementation tools. However, they do not pro-actively question 'historical continuities' in the form of gender structures, suggesting an inability to grasp the opportunity to resist dominant gendered discourse. Such conflict has been described by Foucault as 'force relations', where 'power relations have become so entrenched that they can seem entirely one-sided and unchangeable' (in Gauntlett 2002:118). In the context of women's online portals power relations are located within the commercial traditions of the women's magazine publishing that has always relied on gender to generate profit. Throughout my research, I argue that there is more to female users' engagement with commercial online spaces than their gender. The female users operate within a highly complex and active world that includes the Internet as part of that complexity. Therefore, the use of the Internet as part of female users' daily activities becomes one more strategy in Foucault's technologies of the self. As the analysis of interviews conducted with female users illustrates, creating 'gendered one mould fits all' online experiences can be just as [un]successful as highly individualistic web design. The question arises as to whether 'giving customers what they want' through tailored web sites is the right way forward for online design practice.



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## **Chapter 7**

BEME.com Women's Portal – A Case Study



### Portal Details

To gain an in-depth understanding of BEME.com as a product, it is important to consider the context in which it emerged. An historical review of BEME.com must therefore begin with looking at IPC Media (IPC), the mother company to the BEME.com portal, in order to faithfully represent the circumstances of its development between 1999 and 2001.

**Figure 9: The BEME.com logo designed to support the BEME brand and acting as the masthead of the web site.**



### *IPC Media*

With over a century of publishing enterprise experience, IPC is one of the leading consumer publishing houses in Britain today. Its magazine titles of long and established standing include *Country Life*, *Horse & Hound* and *The Field* (D-CP2c), all of which are well-known and widely circulated. Notwithstanding its secure place in the publishing world, in June 2001 IPC implements strategic change to respond to an ever developing market. Changing its name from IPC Magazines to IPC Media, the company embraces a brand-centred strategy which focuses on three areas:

- *'A refocus of the business into the management of brands across all media platforms;*
- *A clear focus on five core markets: Women; TV; Home & Garden; leisure; and Men's Lifestyle & Entertainment;*
- *A dramatic acceleration of new initiatives across the entire business' (D-CP1b).*

Focus on the women's market is a cornerstone of this brand-centric approach and central to IPC's success. Within the company structure IPC Connect houses '... key women's weeklies



## Chapter 7: BEME.com Women's Portal – A Case Study

portfolio and ... women's network website'. As such, they are considered '... the lifeblood of the magazine industry with over seven million copies sold a week, the sector accounts for a third of the entire magazine market' (D-CP2a). As the IPC vision states '[t]oday's women have grown up with our brands. Tomorrow's woman will be no exception. Whatever the platform.' (D-CP3). With its long-standing tradition, IPC has become the market leader in publishing women's magazines '... with well-known and trusted brands (these are the magazines that women have grown up with) Woman, Woman's Own, Woman's Weekly and Woman's Realm' (D-CP2a).

In the summer of 2001 IPC consolidates with AOL Time Warner Europe, a European wing of the global enterprise, AOL Time Warner. This merger means that IPC has become part of '... the world's leading media and entertainment company, whose businesses include interactive services, cable systems, filmed entertainment, television networks, music and publishing' (D-CP2b). The relationship between AOL Time Warner Europe and IPC can be considered symbiotic in nature. In the market place where it is global players that seem to control media resources, this partnership elevates IPC status to that of a global contender. At the same time, in establishing itself as a European enterprise, AOL Time Warner benefits from the long-standing tradition of IPC's publishing expertise. As the *Commitment to Europe* statement from AOL Time Warner explains '[w]e are committed to building on this tradition – providing the highest-quality journalism, information and entertainment to the countries, communities and people of Europe' (D-CP2d). However, whilst part of an enormous global enterprise, IPC continues to rely on its own long-standing reputation to maintain customer loyalty.

With a formidable and trusted presence in the women's publishing sector, IPC continues to look to find new ways to expand their market. As the corporate statement asserts, '[w]e're using our powerful relationships with readers to stretch our brands across different media – including specials, masthead TV and events – and to grow share of spend' (D-CP2a). Such relationships provide a strong base for IPC to confidently spread out into new markets and experiment with new technologies. The corporate statement reasons, '... we're not just focused on print-led brands. It's well documented that women are currently the fastest growing community online,

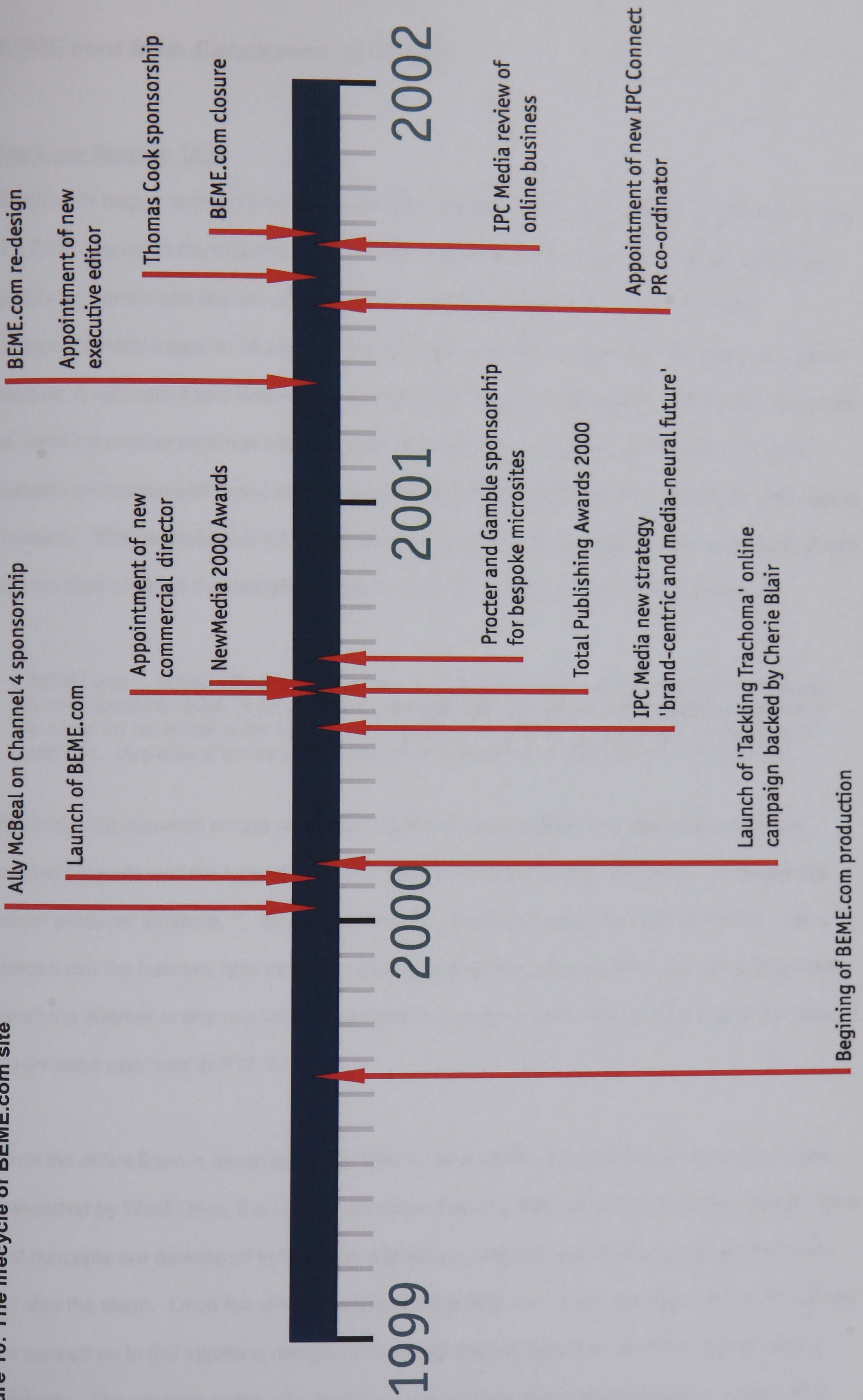


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and we've leveraged IPC's commanding number one position within the Women's market to launch BEME.COM' (D-CP2a). In 1999 IPC embarks on what in retrospect was referred to as an 'experiment' or 'adventure' (I-PT4; I-PT2). The publishing company engages in the creation, production and maintenance of a women's online site – BEME.com. BEME.com is launched on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2000 following a six month period of research, organisation, design and testing, only to close on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2001. The following section traces the history of the creation and production of BEME.com during its 18-months online existence. Figure 11 p. 197 presents a timeline of BEME.com from the moment of its creation to the time of its closure, including events within the lifecycle of the site.



Figure 10: The lifecycle of BEME.com site





## ***BEME.com from Conception to Closure***

### **The Early Stage in 1999**

BEME.com begins to take concrete shape sometime in the summer of 1999. At the time there is a lot of interest in the creation of online sites for female users and in the Fall of 1999 three portals for female use are launched by other publishing houses. However, 'IPC [are] characteristically happy to sit back and watch others make the mistakes. "Contrary to internet wisdom, it will benefit and inform us to launch later," says IPC with quiet confidence. There will be room for smaller communities, however, with stronger identities' (D-PREA2a). Prior to concept generation and brand design, the BEME.com production team conducts its own market research. This particular period serves two purposes. The editorial/creative director and others join the team; indeed the design process is delayed until this director's instatement:

*'BEME was ... talked about with IPC for long, long time before it was ever commissioned, or ever went into built. A lot of reasons for that was waiting for [editorial/creative director] to come on board because she was the creative director who was going to, kind of lead with this. Because she has a lot of experience in women's magazines' (I-PT5:17-22).*

Secondly, the research period provides time for strategic enquiry into the market of online women's portals and the type of audience that might be inclined to visit them. As the female senior producer explains, '... kind of just looking at who the target audience would be ... how women use the Internet, how long they spend, where they access it from, how long they would be on the Internet in any one time. You know, so we do some kind of profile of what we thought the average user was' (I-PT5:24-31).

Once the entire team is assembled, it is time to work on the concept and design of the brand. Conducted by Wolff Olins, it is the first concrete step in getting BEME.com off the ground. Ideas and concepts are developed in branding workshops and include not only the brand designers, but also the client. Once the driving concept and BEME.com brand are approved by IPC, these are passed on to the interface designers to create the site templates and the overall visual language. The creation of the site itself is a long process that requires ongoing collaboration



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between IPC as a client, the interface designers and the programmers. According to the female senior producer, the entire process including product testing stretches over a six month period.

### BEME.com Launch and the Early Days between February and May 2000

Initially planned for January 2000, the BEME.com launch is delayed due to the enormity of the design task. Prior to the launch there is a billboard and poster campaign running in London to promote the new site. However, the campaign is not restricted to the print media. The popular Channel 4 TV show 'Ally McBeal', is co-opted into the promotional sponsorship deal. The executive and marketing members of the team believe the association with Ally McBeal is a perfect fit for promoting BEME.com where Ally's character indicates the type of female user that the site is intended to engage. As an IPC press release states:

*'Ally McBeal offers us a unique association with an award winning series. Sponsoring this fantastic media property will distinguish BEME.COM from our competitors, making a clear and distinct statement regarding its position within the marketplace. By appealing to those who watch Ally McBeal, we will be communicating with a very relevant and targeted audience' (D-CP1c:14-19).*

As the history of women's magazine publishing has revealed time and time again, association with a celebrity attracts audiences (Aitchison and Jordan 2001). It presents 'an ideal' female which online users should find appealing and is intended to encourage interest in and loyalty to, BEME.com as a product. Such a lucrative sponsorship deal between IPC and Channel 4, means that BEME.com receives a wide exposure and identifies itself as a trendy new product. IPC sees it as a way to establish their '... credentials as a major player in this market' (D-CP1c:27). On a more sombre note, it is the first of a number of financial investments on the part of IPC which do not bring returns.

The site is launched by IPC Electric, the newly established Internet business within IPC. At the time of the launch, the site is seen as an important component of IPC in '... creating significant new media brands and building the definitive digital business' (D-CP1a:17-19). As the chief executive at IPC comments, 'BEME.com is the third pillar brand for our developing on-line business, after the well-established nme.com and unmissable. We will build on this progress



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with further launches in the coming months' (D-CP1a:19-21). After the launch, BEME.com relies on a team of journalists and in-house designers to keep its content up-to-date. To present itself as a brand that responds to women's concerns, BEME.com launches its first online campaign in conjunction with Sight Savers International. Through features, interviews and events, the site is used as a platform to address trachoma, a disease causing blindness in women. The campaign is considered a success as a promotional move by IPC, due to immediate backing from well known personalities. For example, the site is praised by Cherie Blair, wife of the current British Prime Minister. Sight Saver's endorsement not only lends BEME.com credibility as an arena addressing real women's problems. Through acknowledgement of the site by a high profile person, BEME.com gains further support and public exposure. Combined with the Ally McBeal advertising campaign, the site quickly narrows down its audience niche drawing on popular culture and its trends. Nonetheless, such a recipe – at least initially – seems to bring swift and positive returns.

### **BEME.com on the Top of the World between June and December 2000**

Following its launch, BEME.com swiftly appears to gain ground and by June 2000 it is flourishing. Simultaneously, IPC changes its focus from being a magazine publisher to becoming 'a management of brands across many platforms' (D-CP1b). This change in strategy on the part of the parent company strengthens the positioning of BEME.com. Developed from the onset as an online branded environment, BEME.com can only benefit from such an investment in brand-led business. The success of the site is coupled with the appointment of a new commercial director. For BEME.com, this appointment means an expansion and strategic investment into '... commercial exploitation of the increasing numbers of women on the web' (D-CP1f:18-19). A month later, BEME.com wins one of its first awards. In the category for Best General News Presentation, BEME.com receives the *NetMedia European Online Journalism Award*. The prestige of BEME.com is boosted by this recognition. Further success follows with another award nomination for the *Best Design Magazine on the Web*, part of the Magazine Design Awards presented by Total Publishing. This recognition from its own peer group gives BEME.com credibility as a design outcome.



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As the web based magazine for women published by IPC, BEME.com begins to attract the attention of other companies interested in investing in the Internet market. In August 2000 a sponsorship deal is secured between IPC and Procter & Gamble. It involves two sites positioned within the BEME.com community that promote Procter & Gamble femcare brands. Such an investment in BEME.com represents a huge vote of confidence in the portal in that the support for the site does not only stem from IPC itself, but also from the wider business community.

### IPC Loosing Faith in Women's Portals between January and June 2001

2001 starts, as Vickers (2000) writes, '... amid a tumultuous time for the online women's market.' BEME.com re-evaluation occurs amongst drastic changes to other women's sites, like the abandoned plans for uk.women.com or closure of CharlotteStreet.com in favour of femail.co.uk (D-PREA2k). With Internet business plummeting, IPC quickly chooses to review its online portfolio. In an interview with MediaGuardian.co.uk, the IPC communications director admits that IPC '... no longer believes in the broad portal model for the women's market' (D-PREA2k). Such diminishing support prompts changes not only in the design of the site, but also in terms of integration of the paper based women's magazine portfolio. Re-assessment of the target audience results in the targeting of a much smaller bracket of users '... aged 20-35 ABC1 women, with a high disposable income' (D-CP1i:7-9). The site is refocused to include '... channels which mirror [users] lifestyles and interests (D-CP1i:7-9). The review of the site's performance has other repercussions in terms of restructuring the production team. Appointment of a new executive director reflects the need to find a new approach to a business in a failing Internet economy and IPC strengthens its communication team with the appointment of a new PR co-ordinator for IPC Connect which handles the women's magazine portfolio.

However, not everything is doom and gloom. Soon after, a number of IPC magazines and portals become part of what IPC refers to as 'the biggest sponsorship campaign ever created in print media' (D-CP1d). The agreement is for long term sponsorship from the Thomas Cook Group of the travel editorials in a variety of print media and the Internet including BEME.com.



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The Thomas Cook Group sponsorship is the last investment in BEME.com and a final attempt to bring advertising revenue to a site that has not been able to generate any substantial income (D-PREA2I).

### BEME.com Closure in August 2001

In the middle of August of 2001 IPC announces its review of their online business and resulting cut-backs. With its consolidation with AOL Time Warner and plummeting business in women's online sites, BEME.com is one of the casualties of the brutal reality of e-commerce. As the chief executive of IPC comments, '[t]his review has clearly identified where the commercial and strategic opportunities lie for our business, and IPC is now moving forward with a smaller, yet stronger and robust portfolio of digital brands on which we can drive future profit growth' (D-CP1j:17-20). The IPC Group strategy director in an interview with GuardianUnlimited admits that launching BEME.com as a new brand was a mistake (D-PREA2m). Furthermore, the article states, 'BEME and Uploaded.com, which both launched three year ago, enjoyed relatively healthy traffic figures but were understood to be struggling to compete for ad revenue. "Despite some fantastic editorial and commercial innovations, both sites suffered from not having a clear focus." ' (D-PREA2m). However, IPC denies that any of the closures had any connections with the AOL Time Warner consolidation. The IPC Group strategy director argues that '... the cuts were made to ensure commercial viability, protect key brands and maintain a presence in the market' (D-PREA2m). Nonetheless, experts in the field observe that the fate of BEME.com is related to poor timing and failure to generate advertisement revenue. 'Both IPC and Emap caught the back end of the dot.com boom. They then took a load of money and chucked it at the web. They put far too much money in and, arguably, pulled the plug too early' (D-PREA2I). After BEME.com closure, The Guardian writes, '[i]ndeed, while relatively successful commercially and popular with its user base, BEME.com was never going to draw the kind of traffic it needed to pay for itself' (D-PREA2I). After its success in 2000, BEME.com comes to an unfortunate end.



### Portal Design Process

As a commercial design enterprise, IPC draws on a number of different processes and experts to create the BEME.com portal. IPC commissions three agencies at various stages of BEME.com development, limiting its own role to that of overseeing the process and approving design choices. It is only once the portal is live online that IPC uses their in-house team to provide its content and general maintenance. During the first stage of development, Wolff Olins, a branding agency, is commissioned to develop BEME.com into a digital Internet based brand. As soon as the brand is approved by IPC, two further agencies are commissioned: Pres.co to design and develop the BEME.com interface and Aspect to do the back-end programming. The lengthy process, from conceptualisation to launch is composed of many stages. The key design phases are: research into the women's portals and market positioning, concept development and brand design, interface design including back-end database programming, testing and launch and redesign based on performance review. The agencies support these phases based on their respective expertise. However, for the successful design and production of what is a very complex project, the process requires a high level of cross-collaboration.

#### Research

Generally, designers tend to begin a project with a period of 'mapping of the territory', in-depth investigation and research. This fulfils the need to acquaint oneself with the context of the proposed product, in particular informing designers of what is already out there in order that new projects build on, deviate from, and improve on already existing artefacts. In addition, such research fulfils marketing requirements of the new design outcome. Generating knowledge of the market and appropriate audiences is a widely accepted practice prior to launching a new product. It is supposed to minimize the number of mistakes when generating new ideas and physical outcomes. At the same time, it serves to validate generated concepts for prospective investors. In terms of research, IPC is therefore no exception.



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With the delayed arrival of the editorial/creative director, Wolff Olins and Pres.co commit considerable time to research in order to establish the approach best suited to the design of BEME.com. For example, during her interview, the female senior producer explains the types of things the research is meant to identify. 'So ... huge amounts of research were done. Masses and masses and masses of sort of strategic. Looking at ... other women's portals, at that stage it was like women.com, and what Oprah was doing with the new site in States. And looking at a lot of American women's portals and sites' (I-PT5:23-27). Thus, she states, the research locates the portal within a larger context and identifies examples of already existing women's portals. At a later date, these examples can be used to identify opportunities and weaknesses, which in turn inform BEME.com as a product. Pres.co also identifies the potential audience of the site and investigates what the proposed female user might find interesting and attractive in online activities. The senior female producer makes quite extensive reference to the types of information that are obtained throughout the research process.

During the interviews conducted with production team, it becomes apparent, however, that research is not seen as a crucial undertaking in formulating an understanding of women's portals. The female marketing consultant – who joined the team at a later date – describes it in passing: 'As I understand extensive consumer research was undertaken prior to development of the site' (I-PT1:40-41). She makes no further reference to any of the results. It is surprising for a marketing consultant, whose expertise often relies on extensive knowledge of the initial research. Similarly, the male brand designer does not seem to give the research stage much credence:

*'Yeah, we did research but we kind of like had the whole thing in mind that it was specifically gonna be designed for the web. But we also wanted to try and design something that, that felt kind of a bit more intuitive than most of what you see on line ... from the research that we got just sort of general feed back' (I-PT4:98-102).*

He seems to acknowledge its presence as part of the overall design process, but does not assign this stage any great value. His reference to the production of 'general feedback' goes hand in hand with his subsequent statement reiterating women's stereotypical relationship with technology. 'I think men were a bit more sort of like probably ... a bit more keen just to get



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stuck in and pretend that they new everything even if they didn't. But women were just a bit more wary of the medium' (I-PT4:104-107). In the end this research is only partially used, since many decisions are based on the professional expertise of the BEME.com creators and their tacit knowledge of what a women's portal *is* versus what it *should be*. As the senior producer observes:

*'And the funny thing was ... a lot of research was done and reams and reams of reports ... statistics about how women were using the Net and all that kind of stuff. Very little of it was ever referred to ... [Editorial/creative director], I don't think, had ever referred to it. She just knew what her project was, and that was going to be that' (I-PT5:507-512).*

That the production team and IPC do not use the research as a backbone for generating ideas leaves BEME.com open to the introduction of many gendered assumptions. These assumptions are evident in the description of the concepts behind the BEME.com brand. They surface in the site's visual language and inform the mid-point redesign. Neglect of the research in the later activities informing the design process results in the portal losing credibility on two levels. First of all, the site is being developed based largely on the personal experiences and understandings of the production team. This results in an outcome based on a narrowed down and highly partial view that is supposed to satisfy a multitude of individuals in various circumstances. On the other hand, marketing credibility is also taken away. In an environment where a project like BEME.com is testing out new waters, the lack of research back-up creates doubts. And at a time when the market seems to look unfavourably on women's portals, the research offers a credible justification for the initial choices. But as there is no great reliance on the research in the first place this possible safety net does not exist.

### **Concept Development and Brand Design**

Once the editorial/creative director joins the team, the branding agency (Wolff Olins) is given the go-ahead to create and develop the BEME.com brand. Wolff Olins are responsible for creating the BEME.com name, its visual representation and the array of meanings that would be associated with the brand. Once the conceptual stage is approved by IPC, the visual elements are generated to represent the look and feel of BEME.com based on its brand. The male brand



designer describes his experience of developing certain aspects of the visual language in the following manner:

*'... [we] took two sets [of colours] to research, one quite bright, quite young feeling ones. Another set, which was the set we worked with ... quite nice subtle sort of pastel hues. They weren't necessarily girly colours or anything but just, but they were quite calming and they were quite ... nice shades, sort of pastel shades. ... they reached ... sort of all women focus group and ... I think they felt right as well. [It was] quite calming experience going there. It didn't feel like you were looking at too much data because the colours were quite sort of like soothing in a way and they worked quite well on the web, which was good' (I-PT4:142-154).*

His description reveals clear links between the actual development of BEME.com brand and gendered assumptions about the likes and dislikes of female users. As the initial research does not form a strong part of the conceptual design development either, there is no real force to counteract such assumptions. Thus in the final outcome these conjectures are not challenged, but become an integral part of the understanding of the brand targeting female users.

### **Interface Design and Back-end Programming**

With final approval of the brand strategy and its marketing, Pres.co and Aspect are contacted to implement the visual language into a design of the portal. The respective web pages are designed and presented to the editorial/creative director for approval on daily basis. The entire process is supported by daily discussions of what should follow and how the brand strategy should be implemented in the visual layouts of the portal:

*'... we just basically broke it down into batches of pages. ... They all had slightly different look about them to reflect channels but they had the same structure. So we'd start by doing all of the top level pages that look the same ... Go through that process of designing them sign off by [editorial/creative director] so we'd ... talk about what was right what was wrong. Go back make amendments. And then basically from there once they'd been totally signed off by [editorial/creative director] it's a case of ... coding them into html ... And then that was all supplied to Aspect ... to bring the whole thing together with the back end of the database driving it ... It's a long, sort of drawn out process' (I-PT5:218-234).*

The three phases of designing the necessary portal pages, signing them off with the client followed by back-end programming progress in a circular pattern. This cycle within the design process takes place until the entire portal is designed and constructed into web-ready documents.



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### Testing

The testing phase begins once all the pages are designed and programming has been executed. In theory at least, this phase is most crucial to any Internet site and should be given a lot of time and attention to yield useful results. The success of this stage affects the whole project. '... it's like from an agency point of view once we build the site also there is massive amount of testing that you had to go through. Testing phases, which we did with Aspect' (I-PT5:139-142). In the case of BEME.com, time is running out due to quickly approaching launch deadlines, resulting in the site going live before the end of the testing. Reflecting on this stage, the female senior producer points out that the portal is launched before all technical problems are sorted out. But as the project is taking too long, the testing phase is regarded by IPC as a safe stage to cut short and launch the site.

### Launch

The final stage of creation and production is the launch. According to its corporate publicity, once the site is launched it is well received by its audience and promises a rich market niche for online advertisers. An extensive poster advertising campaign featuring around London supports the launch. In addition, through its sponsorship deal with Allie McBeal, IPC promotes the portal on television and with the site live and running, IPC takes over the content production and site maintenance, as originally agreed with the contracted agencies. However, information about the success of the site is not always passed on to the people who designed it, as the female senior producer comments:

*'[Once the site was launched] ... IPC became very protective about it. They didn't want to give us, like the people who've been involved ... you give up sort of 6 months of your life to working on something ... no kind of feedback on statistics ... How many people go in there. They kept it all very closed to their chest, which is their total right 'cause they were the buyer and they were paying us' (I-PT5:144-149).*

As is often the case in design practice, once the requested outcome is considered finalised, the client takes over with no intrinsic need to give feedback to the agency. However, in the case of Internet technologies, designers place enormous value on learning from previous experiences



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and the feedback users provide. By withholding such information, IPC is not seen favourably by the design agencies, as is manifest in the interviews.

### Performance Review and Redesign

It is unfortunate that when BEME.com arrives on the scene, the dot.com boom is starting to deflate, as one of the pioneering Internet investors in UK observes, '... it was late to the market first of all ... it was not a first mover and I think that that was a disadvantage' (I-IP2:122-124). By February 2001 there are already warning signs of a possible closure. It is becoming obvious to IPC that a broad editorially driven portal is not necessarily the best way to attract female customers (D-PREA2k). At this point, BEME.com implements a change in strategy and a redesign strengthening the connection between the portal and traditional women's paper magazines. However, the change of focus and redesign do not make for drastic improvement. BEME.com – along with other IPC online ventures – is closed down in order to recover profits. According to a senior production staff member employed by IPC the financial gains obtained by portals like BEME.com are very limited, providing no incentive for further investment:

*'... Loaded site kept going because they basically sold stuff, they sold Loaded merchandising. Anything that didn't make any money got the chop. ... It's because they've actually got items to sell and I think that's why they still exist because they can generate their own money. They say we have sold X number of units this month that is this much profit against the cost of running this web site' (I-IP4:92-107).*

The reason for such a discrepancy between the need to generate money and the BEME.com mission can be found fundamentally in the vision supporting the portal. BEME.com is not product centred, but a branded digital environment. The underlying ideas centre on creating an online community and establishing online customer loyalty. BEME.com offers news, advice and entertainment and not an opportunity to buy the latest gadget or consumable product. It is a content/editorial driven site putting e-commerce strategy, common to online businesses, on the back burner. Thus, the advertising revenue the site can generate in the conventional publishing industry fashion is not there to provide necessary financing. BEME.com as a financially viable online venture requires a new approach to commercial strategy to sustain its unique profile.



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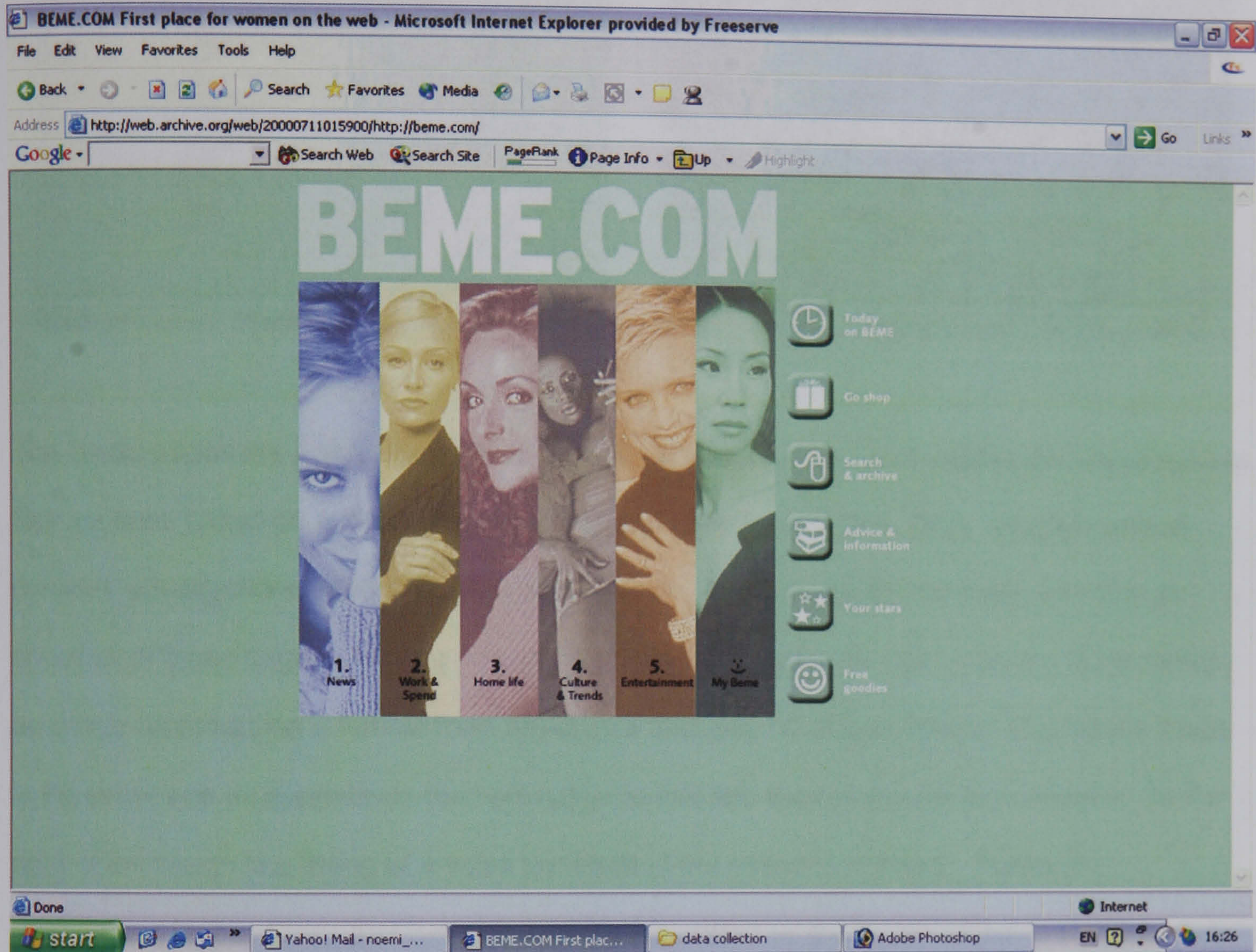
### Portal as a Visual Outcome

BEME.com is a site which, in the design processes, makes manifest the materialisation of consumption, ideologies, discourses, history and tradition. The visual outcome is a bridge between all these factors. BEME.com's mission is to offer the best content on the web that mirror its female users' interests and lifestyle needs. IPC describes the users as a heterogeneous set of women at various stages of life, (D-CP2a) where the geographical focus or limit is the Western hemisphere. The BEME.com female users are in a privileged position. However, as is often noted by feminist research, this understanding represents a particular, homogenized and stereotypical view of women strongly rooted within patriarchal social structures. Thus, BEME.com female users are positioned within a Western social, cultural and political milieu with strong ties to the practice and tradition of reading women's weekly or monthly paper published magazines. These magazines instruct female users in the consumption of femininity, as Gough-Yates (2003) and McRobbie (1999) argue, in forms which reflect multiplicity, fragmentation and contradiction. However, Ballaster, Beetham et al. (1991) propose that female users become accustomed to being addressed as consumers '... of the message of the text and of the commodities ...' that these magazines [or portals] present as crucial in constructing female identity (p. 12). In addition, they claim, these conceptualisations of femininity are reiterated across the communication medium at any point in its history, providing an overall unifying message. Such positioning of BEME.com, backed up by decades of publishing tradition, results in a communication pattern transcending the design output from paper into portal publishing. Consequently, the BEME.com female users have an insider's knowledge of the communication codes and design tools that they have learned and absorbed from the paper magazine industry.



### Portal Design

Figure 11: The BEME.com homepage from 11 June 2000 inviting female users to browse the site by promoting something for everyone.

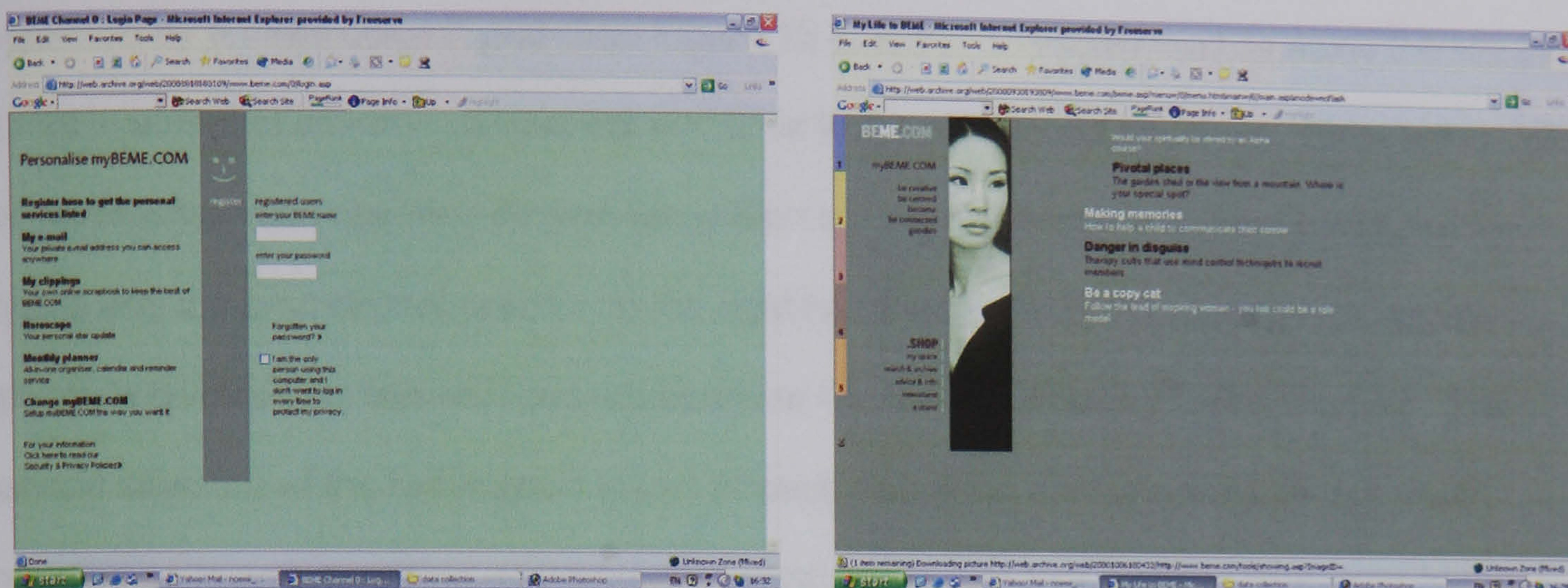


The original BEME.com design invites the viewer to enter the site through a slick simple homepage. The page contains the site title located at the top of the page supported by six images representing diversity amongst female users. The images function as content indicators and entry links to further pages of the site structure. They represent six different channels contained in the portal. These are: news; work and spend; home life; culture and trends; entertainment, my BEME. On the right hand side of the images a selection of buttons are displayed for further information links. The homepage does not contain any other elements or advertising (See Figure 11 p. 224).



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Figure 12: An example of the log-in page (on the left) and content page (on the right) from the My BEME channel supporting the user personalised section of BEME.com accessed on 11 June 2000.



The inside pages are just as carefully designed. The overall template divides the web page into four sections based on a distinctive vertical layout (See Figure 12 p. 225). The first section contains a navigational menu allowing access to the other channels and links pertaining to specifics of those pages. Moving horizontally from left to right, the menu column is followed by an image representing a female form offset by a text-only medallion image. The female image is the same one as appears on the homepage to indicate the chosen content channel. To the right of the image is a listing of articles pertinent to the selected channel. These are represented by headlines that function as links supported by brief introductions. One has only to click on the link to read the full story. On the right of the article section is a space dedicated to promotional advertising. The adverts are designed in vertical format rather than horizontal as it is commonly done, to accentuate the overall vertical design. Whereas the homepage is centred on the web page, the inside pages flow from the top left hand corner. The overall layout is uncluttered, supporting quick page loading and scanning. Each channel has its own colour scheme for easier navigation.

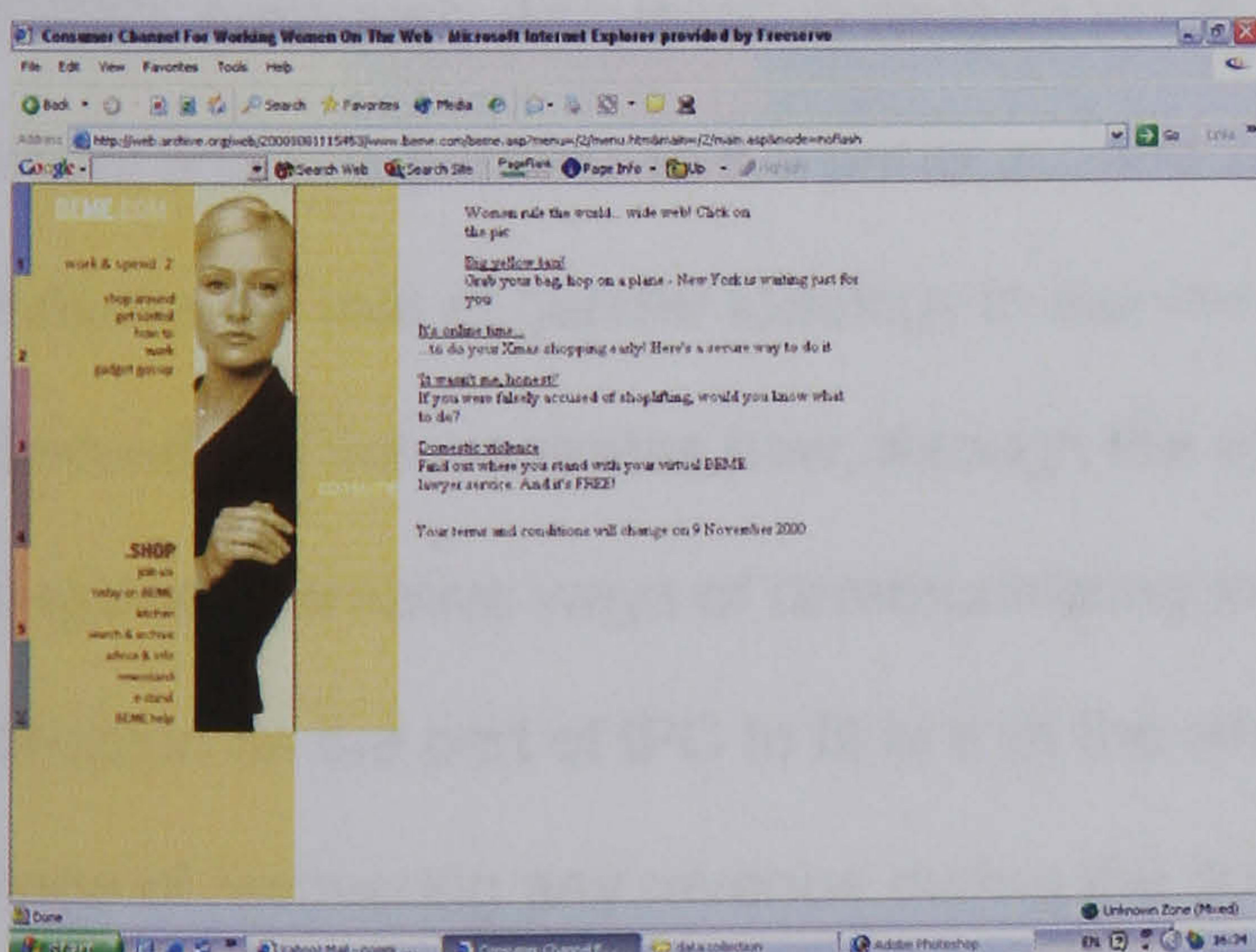
Visually the site distinguishes itself from other women's portals through this carefully constructed web page layout and the confident and well thought out design is inviting to the viewer. However, with the dot.com market dwindling in the winter of 2001, the site undergoes drastic restructuring and redesign. From an online portal that exhibits high quality design,



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BEME.com loses its distinctiveness. The clean and spacey design is replaced by a generally available and often used online template based on the conventional structure of a masthead supported by a three column grid (See Figure 13 p. 226). The masthead contains the site logo buried in amongst advertising banners and links to the six interest channels. From left to right, the three supporting columns contain navigation links and adverts, a content column in the middle and the promotional column on the right hand side. On the homepage, the content column is divided into sub sections representing the feature articles of each channel. The general structure of the redesigned layout of each web page contains a significant article including an image, headline and thematic introduction. Content deemed less important is represented only by a headline and a key phrase. To access the complete article, its associated images and related links one has to click on the headline. The general tone of the site is more straightforward and factual in its approach to communication, characteristic of many Internet publications. The visual language is considerably more austere than the paper editions, however, through its design, it clearly and effortlessly communicates to the target audience.

Figure 13: Examples of BEME.com original design from 11 June 2000 (on the left) and the changes from 9 April 2001 (on the right) brought on by the mid-point redesign.



In its final run, an edition of BEME.com is comprised of six interest channels: entertainment; love, sex and friendship; fashion and beauty; health, body and soul; travel; and news. Whilst corresponding in general theme to the original channels, these headings have been altered to reflect what other portals are publishing during the winter and spring of 2001. Each of the six channels offers simultaneous access alongside a menu bar that provides thematic shortcuts to



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the more interesting features. The pages remain colour coded to allow for ease of navigation; however the colours are adjusted to the new layout.

In the original layout the images representing women stress diversity in culture but not necessarily in body shape. They still aspire to a specific fashion ideal. Images on the redesigned portal predominantly portray women with beautiful, toned bodies or photographs of the latest celebrities; women that are approved of and acceptable within the assumed social context. Although often quite polysemic in nature, the photographs' aim is to provide a model for female users' comparison. Before its closure and following the 'best' traditions of women's periodicals BEME.com positions itself as a perfect example of a guidebook on how to become that 'ultimate feminine norm'. In this case it is the design of the visual language that communicates femininity.

### ***Analysing Visual Communication of Gender***

In support of my argument I again draw on categories generated by Aitchison and Jordan (2000), previously discussed in relation to other women's online portals (See Chapter 5). The visual analysis pertains to the portal in June 2001. The primary purpose of this analysis is to indicate the role of gender ideology in the visual communication language of BEME.com. Secondly, it demonstrates how, through the conscious process of redesign, the portal has negated alternative ways of communicating to female users. This is a result of a deliberate decision on the part of IPC to fit in with the other women's portals and gendered norms in the hope of recovering any revenue during the dot.com fall out.

In its final design, BEME.com includes various articles supported by homogenous images of the female body as if ready, prepared and possibly available for sexual encounter. This is achieved by the photographed pose, the facial expression of the photographed subject or the setting stereotypically associated with the sexual connotations. Some images are more explicit than others but the accompanying headlines frequently support the designed meaning. The use of



such designs is very strongly embedded in the paper magazine tradition which manifests what Buckley (1989) defines as patriarchal understanding of women's social position. By assuming a role of guide for female users as to their social understanding and positioning, BEME.com effects a pattern of teaching women how to become socially accepted gendered individuals. Such effect is very skilfully achieved through the design of the visual language. Hence, it includes several articles that focus on control of the users' body through professionalised strategies of personal discipline. The channels dedicated to fashion, beauty or health contain titles such as: 'Get expert diet advice' or 'Personal trainer: when toning turns to moaning' (D-VR1). Here the supporting images portray the disciplining experts, who voice their tips and encouragements on how to achieve socially accepted norms. Such articles are accompanied by images of bodies that have already achieved their goal, as testimonials to the experts' advice. The images of 'beautifully toned bodies' and clever catchy headlines make the social beauty norms appear achievable. Through its very careful and conscious design, the visual language becomes the justification for as well as proof of, the deliberate meaning.

The atmosphere implied by the tone of the whole portal, with numerous opportunities for the users to voice their opinion means that BEME.com presents itself as a best friend and confidante. BEME.com almost takes on an identity of its own as an individual who has important contacts in a larger social circle. Through the use of articles portraying – at times – the most intimate details of celebrities' lives, BEME.com brings the 'extraordinary' into the realm of the 'ordinary', inviting female users to believe that these 'extraordinary' lives are just as easy to obtain in the context of their 'ordinary' lives. This strategy grounds the various socially defined norms within an everyday reality, giving them a visual, 'solidified' representation. At the same time, it positions the celebrities represented as role models, locating both these women and the female users under the scrutiny of others. Images of Emma Bunton (Baby Spice of the UK's Spice Girls) accompany the article entitled 'Celebrity fashion blunder: Emma Bunton' (D-VR1) followed by a survey on the prettiness or ugliness of Angelina Jolie (a Hollywood actress). In both cases, appropriate photographs accompany the text to add credibility to the textual narrative. The almost documentary-like feel of the images and 'honest' tone of the text makes



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the visual language a powerful carrier of social meanings. The 'reality' element functions as an authoritative force in creating interest and maintaining the loyalty of female users, inviting them to extract the pertinent meanings.

The ideals, values or body shapes that exist outside this norm are conspicuous in their absence following the BEME.com redesign. Through the use of carefully selected images and headlines leaving out reference to age, body shape or ethnic background that do not fit a Western norm, the 'other' is rendered invisible. Whilst the brand profile claims to reflect multiplicity of age, lifestyle, ethnicity and socio-economic status (D-CP2a), a quick browse makes it apparent that focus is placed on stereotypical norms of the 'Western women'. In this context the previously described visual language is used to filter out the 'other' bodies. In addition, the use of design tools to alter the digital images themselves with sophisticated imaging software, remove even further the reality of the 'other' from the portrayed ideal. Moreover, this ideal, hailed as a norm by the women's publishing industry, becomes totally disembodied as a result of female users' mediated experience of it via the virtual qualities of the Internet context.

When BEME.com is taken off line by IPC, it is due to many factors. On the surface, the site seems to lack the ability to generate enough revenue to sustain itself. This is a consequence of many internal and external, political and economic factors, recorded in documents detailing BEME.com's history. Nonetheless, the fact remains that BEME.com does not manage to create an experience that invites female users' long-term engagement. The original design, although innovative in its alternative approach to female users, is not given a long enough period in which to gain audience loyalty. The redesign abandons progressive ideals only to become one amongst other UK portals targeting female users. Gough-Yates (2003) and McRobbie (1999) argue that women's magazines have undergone significant changes over the decades of their existence. However, these changes – mostly in terms of content – have '... done nothing to challenge the hegemonic power of middle-class values and white femininity in the main stream magazines' (Ballaster, Beetham et al. 1991:172) I propose that this is also symptomatic of women's online portals. The technological and economic changes influencing BEME.com have



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not resulted in any alteration to the driving ideologies. The combination of content, design and technological innovations possible with the Internet does not constitute a powerful enough mixture to push through an alternative experience and interpretation of gender to that available in any other women's magazine. The design strategies serve to constitute a dictatorship of meanings, creating an environment where female users do not necessarily explore their full potential as self-aware individuals but rather are seen as 'unadulterated shopaholics' (D-PREA2b).

### Portal Intended Experience

The composition of the intended experience is a blend of various ideas and practices brought together through the design process. The research analysis identifies the BEME.com intended experience as an online content driven community, offering something unique to each equally unique, user. Such a mission for a portal located within the traditional publishing industry presents a possible path to countenance alternative paradigms informing online spaces intended for female use. The intended experience can be divided into five driving intentions accompanied by a limitations factor influencing the final experience. The five driving intentions are: corporate, visual, emotional, generating purpose and women-focused.

#### ***Corporate Intentions***

The corporate intentions are translated into an online outcome through the use of brand as a tool of communication. As previously mentioned, in June 2000 IPC changed its focus from being a magazine publisher to a brand-centric business. The female chief executive marks the day with the following observation:

*'Today we are redefining our business for a brand-centric and media-neutral future. Our heritage as the UK's leading magazine publisher, with an unrivalled depth of consumer understanding, perfectly positions us for this transition to a brand-led business. Our strategy is designed to expand our horizons and unlock value within our brands, capturing a greater share of consumer spend in our designated markets' (D-CP1b:40-46).*



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### Brand

The original portal is supported by an innovative approach to generating ideas with which to develop the brand. The male brand designer expresses that the best way to respond to today's female users is to acknowledge their multi-faceted characters and lifestyles with freedom to be anything they chose to be:

*'... the whole idea of ... not being labelled something. It's not about ... you know ... me – the career girl or me – the grandmother or me – the mother ... end up just be me. And it is just a simple name that just, just works really. I don't think that there is anything ... necessarily clever about it ... it just summed up what the whole thing was about really' (I-PT4:206-214).*

The idea that drove BEME.com was the notion of an experience as 'AND' or 'BOTH'. It is a new way to characterise the magazine target audience, compared to the traditional approach, where readers subscribe to 'ONE' ideal such as the 'Cosmo girl' or the 'ELLE woman'. The BEME.com approach encourages female users' identification with a mother role 'AND' engagement with fashion; these women can be career-minded professionals 'AND' be looking to redesign their home interior or throw a spring party for friends. The intended focus of the brand is to acknowledge the many sides and uniqueness of subscribing female users. The 'AND' or 'BOTH' notion opens up the definition of the target audience by creating an infinite number of combinations. No longer is there 'ONLY' one option.

The brand profile stipulates that BEME.com is the first destination web site for female online users. Expanding IPC's solid positioning within the women's publishing market, BEME.com aims to provide informative content that appeals to users '... across a broad range of life stages' (D-CP4). The original corporate understanding of BEME.com experience focuses on creating an online community and experimenting with new, innovative design. The interactive nature of the portal is similar to television, navigated by clicking through various channels. Each channel is mood-based and colour coded, thereby facilitating a passage or a journey (I-PT2). The content is meant neither to be 'fluffy' nor totally serious, offering an experience that is amusing, but with a serious centre. Its role is to entertain, inform and connect female users; its purpose is to offer women a communicative space online (I-PT5). There is a feeling of pride in the



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uniqueness of the original site, as the newly appointed female commercial director comments, 'I am particularly excited about joining the BEME team and being part of developing a successful commercial proposition for such an innovative and unique website' (D-CP1f:12-15). After the portal is redesigned the new female executive editor describes BEME.com: [t]he new design will help us to showcase the best content for women on the net, updated at a pace that keeps up with women's lives. It's a focused, quality offering [portal] that's funny, opinionated, stylish and direct' (D-CP1i:30-33). It is based on what is already 'out there' for women in the form of other portals, taking into consideration female users' online consumption patterns. The female editorial/creative director points out, '[BEME.com] was launched as a portal for women, so [it] aimed at women who were currently using the web in 2000 i.e. professional women, students, but broadening out to a more general audience to reflect the trend in usage' (I-PT2:27-29).

### Sales Pitch

Within the corporate intentions the brand is closely associated to the sales pitch. Where the brand generates and communicates ideas that would be appealing to BEME.com users, the sales pitch allows IPC to turn the brand into a revenue generating concept. The sales pitch turns ideas that might be considered alternative into consumer norms. For example the editorial/creative director, in her interview, states:

*'...[the] personality of the brand [is] based on a non-stereotypical representation of women. (Having had a background in women's magazines, I felt liberated by the opportunity the web has given women to escape the shackles of advertising and fashion driven imagery of women in magazines and the media in general' (I-PT2:12-16).*

Her comments attest to the alternative approach propagated in the BEME.com mission.

Nevertheless, in a press release she states, 'BEME is born of the women's market. We are an editorially led site from a 100-year-old women's magazine publisher at the forefront of new media. We know women. We can be trusted. And trusting the on-line editorial voice is crucial to trusting the online shopping experience' (D-CP1a:11-15). Comparing these comments it is obvious that a corporate set of intentions is invoked every time BEME.com is being scrutinised or presented to the public. Depending on who is asking the questions the sales pitch is used to



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either promote the portal in an acceptable manner or act as justification for the corporate/editorial decisions. For most part the sales pitch features in the press released documentation of the portal. In each case, various elements of the site or its production team are drawn out to generate a corporate view of BEME.com. Since the aim is to generate interest and positive response, the sales pitch is an accepted method, creating a BEME.com façade promising instant advice and satisfaction to female users and business revenue for IPC.

### Gender

Another aspect of corporate intentions manifests itself through notions of gender. In most cases this is evident in the press releases describing possible female users of BEME.com. These descriptions are based on stereotypical gendered notions of what constitutes a traditional magazine reader. This conclusion is based on a prevalent argument emanating from scholars such as Winship (1987, 2002), Ferguson (1983) or Beetham (1996) who have critiqued the gender stereotyping of female magazine readers. This argument clearly applies to the BEME.com context. For example, comments such as '... BEME.COM is able to connect women everywhere, appealing to those in different stages of their lives and reflecting their diversity in age, lifestyle, socio-economic and ethnic groups' (D-CP4:13-16) are juxtaposed with statements like, '[i]nfluence, affluence, big spending, lovers, mothers, peer group leaders, avid readers. We're talking women!' (D-CP3:3-4) or '[i]ts about having the power to communicate, entertain, and advise. It's about freedom. Women don't want to be dictated to, and neither do our brands' (D-CP3:14-16). The press releases presenting corporate intentions address female users in a confident voice supported by years of experience in publishing for women. Here, IPC assumes that such confidence will evoke trust in female users and attract them to engage with BEME.com. However, these juxtapositions of belief in an alternative on the one hand to the safety of a long-tradition on the other, send a mixed and irreconcilable message and serve to undermine the sincerity of BEME.com's mission. Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron (1991) propose that such conflicts are common place within the women's paper magazines. They are used to generate a fragmented representation of femininity, read and understood in separate segments at different moments in time. As my analysis suggests, this practice is also present



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within online women's publishing. An example is presented by the female editorial/creative director in her press release observation about the Ally McBeal sponsorship: 'Ally McBeal is a perfect fit for BEME which is all about appealing to the universal modern woman. And Ally is just that – pathetic and clever, funny and serious, gorgeous and beastly, silly and thoughtful, glamorous and insecure' (D-CP1c:18-24). On the other hand, in her interview she insists that BEME.com's design is based on non-stereotypical representations of female users. Here, I would also point out that reading these messages as only conflicting does not reveal the depth of their significance. I argue that the editorial/creative director sees the stereotype as only one side of the opposites pathetic, funny, gorgeous or silly etc. and that she sees listing both sides as anti-stereotypical interpretation. Whilst one could argue that her mention of 'pathetic and clever, funny and serious ...' is anti-stereotypical. A radical feminist analysis also criticises the notion of 'and' or 'both', insofar as women are not only allowed but are expected to be both: pathetic and clever, assertive and submissive, women, mothers, wives and lovers; in other words, whatever patriarchy demands. Therefore, an attempt to absorb a feminist critique of gender often results in its dilution. (Winship 2002:37), insofar it becomes typical of gendered corporate intentions. Any alternative ways of approaching the audience are quickly invalidated by patronising notions. Therefore, it is no wonder that the final letter announcing BEME.com closure states, 'It's been a real pleasure delivering an honest, funny, sexy website for you lot – the most stylish and passionate women on the web ... Final words? Live fast, die young, stay pretty but above all, be you' (D-CP5:7-16).

The corporate intentions presenting the investment opportunities and positive qualities of BEME.com are informed by a gendered understanding of what constitutes the portal's female audience. These intentions present BEME.com from a single, corporate perspective, where the aim is to increase BEME.com market value. Moreover, they are enforced by IPC in its portrayal of BEME.com to the public as well as directly building them into the design strategy.



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### **Visual Intentions**

For BEME.com to generate female user interest prompting more than one visit, the site needs to bring together interesting and relevant content. In design terms, this means a complex multi-level portal. As the male brand designer observes, '... we started to think about this whole ... complex way of dealing with information but making it ... very intuitive and very simple' (I-PT4:165-167). He believes that the visual experience has to be enjoyable, but also has to make sense to its female users by focusing on their daily lives. He observes:

*'But I think there are lots of features on there that really built the experience and turned it into something much more enjoyable to use and much easier to use as well. And in that respect ... the whole ease of use and making it much more of an intuitive experience, I think, it fulfilled a lot of those criteria' (I-PT4:234-238).*

Therefore, the visual language is meant to offer an experience that is new, snappy and easy to dip into with content that has depth and capacity to expand. Implementing technological innovations of the Internet in its design, BEME.com needs to be experienced in terms of active participation rather than just observation. The created web page layouts are based on the idea of doors that one goes through to discover the content. Therefore, the visual intents can be defined by two qualifiers: personal and gender.

#### **Personal**

The male design manager/designer's response to the brand guidelines is based on in-depth knowledge of the communication medium and female users' experience of computerised technological environments. This interpretation teases out the personal side of the BEME.com experience. It offers BEME.com brand as an alternative to other women's portals on the Internet. The aim is to create a visually driven Internet communicative space that is personal. The notion of one-to-one direct communication facilitated by the design makes the experience unique to each female user, emphasising her individuality. The male design manager/designer observes, 'I think for me it was more of a personal experience to the user' (I-PT3:81). Initially BEME.com offers a personal area specific to each user. However, in the course of production



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this area gets buried in the structure of the portal and completely dismantled during the redesign. As the male design manager/designer comments, 'I thought that was a big shame, I thought the BEME experience was somewhat diluted. Because you can go and get a woman's magazine and the Internet is far more a one-on-one experience, so I think they missed out an opportunity to have something far more personal' (I-PT3:92-95).

### Gender

Since, BEME.com corporate intentions were deeply rooted in a gendered understanding of female users, the visual intentions also reflect these beliefs. It is in the interviews that the nature of this gendering become clear. In their descriptions of the portal design, they often refer to stereotypical graphic norms associated with women to justify their choices. For example, the male brand designer observes, '[t]hat's the thing with ... [BEME.com logo] type that we used is what they use for motorway signs in the United States. So it's kind of like quite bold and in your face ... which you wouldn't normally associate with like women's ... sort of like stuff' (I-PT4:191-195). He goes on to state, '... [the letters used for the logo] really work and they don't look hard and they don't look sort of aggressive ... it just really works because it's bold and it's confident' (I-PT4:198-200). In his explanation he relies on his design experience confirming that female users respond positively to soft, non-aggressive outcomes. As a feminist critique of design practice reveals (Oudshoorn, Rommes et al. 2004) these assumptions are deeply ingrained in the design discipline conceptualisation of women as an audience.

On the other hand, this underlying gendered approach to the design of women's online communicative spaces is criticised by the female senior producer. She observes, 'they were both men the designers ... They're in tune with what they are supposed to be doing. But once you've got brand guidelines that have been set ... by boys, men, yeah; 'cause if you look at the Wolff Olins group they're all boys too' (I-PT5:276-282). She goes on to comment that the only women who are involved in the hands on design process are the editorial/creative director and herself in the role of senior producer. Consequently, she believes that '... the actual conceptualising and design was not female at all. So and as far as the process goes, it's the same' (I-PT5:285-



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287). Whilst having decision-making power, the female senior producer does not feel she has the necessary standing to impose alternative outcomes. She accepts this situation as a status quo in the design industry.

Interviews with the production team reveal that, as with the corporate intentions, visual intentions are imbued with gendered notions. The overwhelming presence of stereotypical assumptions about female users does not allow the site to fulfil its potential as an alternative space to resist and combat the gendered status quo. It is dwarfed by the commercial imperative to attract female users to consume. This imperative is deeply rooted in well established traditional view of what constitutes a female user, in both publishing and design disciplines.

### ***Emotional Intentions***

Emotional intentions are closely associated with the corporate intention to develop brand loyalty. The production team refers to these with descriptors such as: personal, entertaining, amusing, enjoyable, or making sense. The male design manager/designer believes that it is personalised experience that prompts an emotional response to BEME.com. For him, it fulfils the expectations raised by the mission and very name of the brand, 'BEME'. He states, '... within the smiley area you could choose what content you wanted on your home page to be highlighted, whether you wanted it to be news or sport, whether you wanted it to be financial news or current affairs, you could choose your own content to be on your home page' (I-PT3:232-236). However, this personal side of BEME.com, as I have already mentioned, gets buried within the site due to the decisions of content editors. Nonetheless, there are other aspects which still offer this personal experience. For example the male brand designer argues that the site '... could be funny ... or it could be sexy, but it was most important ... sort of like relevant to women' (I-PT4:181-182). In his interview, he often refers to design of BEME.com as 'making sense' to its target audience. He does not believe in generating something that will be of no use to female users or will be considered an odd online experience. His most poignant



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comment questions the reasons behind creating a women's online portal that 'does not make sense' to its users:

*'It makes sense that [BEME.com] it's living there, because you wouldn't be able to do that anywhere else ... If it's not more engaging than TV or more interesting than reading a book or more sort of like live and ... instant than the radio, then why do it online ... It's got t'be its own thing ... It's got t'be using all the advantages of being there, rather than just like having a magazine online, which is what a lot of people do' (I-PT4:468-475).*

As the corporate brand dictates, the site needs to offer content that is light hearted but has certain seriousness about it. Both qualities have potential to engage female users by creating a unique space which gathers people together in a community. As the female senior producer explains, the notion of a community is one of the best ways to generate customer loyalty in a new environment such as the Internet.

Whether the BEME.com experience is commercially driven and/or represents an online community, the male brand designer argues that it has to be enjoyable. Only then will female users continue to visit the site. He observes, '... what, I think was demonstrated is that people could work with huge amounts of content, and turn them into quite enjoyable experiences' (I-PT4:256-257). Therefore, the emotional intentions for BEME.com bank on generating a positive feeling towards the portal. The production team was keenly aware that only through developing a design that evokes positive affect will the female users endorse the site.

### **Generating Purpose Intentions**

The 'generating purpose' intentions are not explored in depth by the production team. They see the functional purpose aspect of the site as related to the programming of the portal. These concerns are associated with the performance of BEME.com as a piece of online software. Only once does the male brand designer refer to the functional purpose of the portal. He observes, '... [to] create content that would fulfil their [female users'] need or desires. The weird thing about an online magazine, or what ever you want to call it, is that it tends to [be] much more of a resource rather than a sort of glossy magazine' (I-PT4:49-51). His comment can be



attributed to the general understanding of the Internet as an information resource. However, BEME.com is not seen as a direct source of information. Although the portal offers practical information supplied by experts in various fields, it is not strictly intended as a functional space with sole purpose to provide information. It is meant to entertain and bring people together. This coincides with the already mentioned long-standing tradition of women's paper magazines, which are not associated with the notion of serious purpose. Therefore, when creating BEME.com, the production team is unlikely to consider the site as having a strong purposeful side; an aspect that in fact links directly with female users' reasons to engage and participate online.

### ***Women-Focused Intentions***

Since the target audience of BEME.com is female users, the production team has to generate women-focused aspects of the portal. The women-focused intentions work on a number of levels. They inform the corporate and usability aspects as well as driving idea of the portal. The key to generating and fulfilling women-focused intentions is recognition of the diversity of the female audience. The marketing consultant observes:

*'The idea was to offer a site, which caters for all facets of women's lives. It recognised that women were not just mothers, lovers or had careers but were all of these things at one time. Therefore the structure of the site with channel ranging from ships to entertainment and news was designed to cater for all their needs' (I-PT1:19-23).*

The idea driving the brand is also based on this notion of diversity. The recognition of female users as being multifaceted individuals through the notion of 'AND' and 'OR' accommodates this within the design. On the other hand, following in the tradition of women's paper magazines, the site is meant to offer advice to its female users. The given information is specifically women focused to attract the target audience. The female senior producers describes, '[portal offered] advice and help [providing facilities] to be able to ... ask question and get answers. And, that was an area that was chucked, talked about and it wasn't as developed as far I think, they wanted to. ... And so, I think there's ... a lot of ambitions, like major ambition. But [they] just



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ran out of money and time' (I-PT5:174-182). Provision of such a service has not been implemented in BEME.com due to limited resources. What small part has been generated, it has to be relevant to female users, hence women focused. Unfortunately, women-focused in the case of BEME.com often means gendered. The design manager/designer remarks, '... it has to ... do with content as well. At the end of the day the user is going to the web site for content, content is King ... but I think idea of having a women's site is a great one, every traditional media suggests there is a market because Cosmopolitan has been going for years, look at Vogue' (I-PT3:350-356). Hence, women-focused intentions are often based on the traditional notions carried over from traditional women's magazines.

In a more progressive vein, the female senior producer associates women-focused intentions with a notion of an Internet female community supported by appropriate content. Such thinking although breaking away with gender norms of the women's magazine publishing, represents general trend in conceptualising the Internet as evidenced by cyberculture studies. As she describes:

*'... if you want to focus on a particular group ... something that's going to interest a certain amount of people and they'll go there because they want to talk to each other and they almost create their own community in their own site and ... then you add content and build around information about your users as they sort of come on board' (I-PT5:348-349).*

The female senior producer is the only member of the team that questions female online users' association with stereotypical assumptions. Throughout the entire interview she maintains her critique of BEME.com. At the same time, the ideas she puts forward as relevant to women's sites online indicate a pursuit of anti-stereotypical interpretations, usually absent among the notions informing traditional women's magazines. For the female senior producer, women-focused intentions mean recognising the value of the target audience as intelligent, comprehensive individuals engaging with worthwhile content. When referring to BEME.com experience she comments:



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*'And that what ... [female users] want to be using it for was more, we thought, tools and communication. So rather than using it as an offline as a paper magazine would be used it is just to read articles or what ever. It would be the whole kind of email to a friend, the chat, the forums all of those things' (I-PT5:164-168).*

She conceived of the women-focused intentions as a strategy '... to get women talking about BEME and talking to each other ... It was to communicate ... to keep them there and to keep them in the community aspects' (I-PT5:346-349). Her view of women-focused intentions, contrary to other members of the team, is not based on an exploitative commercial imperative. Her observations and reflections indicate that the site has far more potential as a women's online communicative space than a shopping experience.

### ***Limitations Factor***

During their interviews the production team comment not only on what they believe BEME.com can achieve, but also in a more measured way, on the site's limitations. References to limitations tend to be based on the area of expertise of the respective member of the team. However, in general, the limitations factor is characterised by three main themes: limitations in terms of the Internet's function as communication medium, corporate limitations and limitations relating to issues of gender.

### **Function as Communication Medium**

As with every project, there are problems that emerge during the production period that do not allow for a smooth run. In the case of BEME.com such aspects focus on difficulties the use of the site can create. The male design manager/designer believes that the technical limitations of the Internet mean that it does not have the capacity to fulfil the potential of the BEME.com brand and embedded ideas. He observes that the brand itself is not always easily transferable to the technological environment of a communication medium such as the Internet. A brand relying on conceptual navigation requires visual design that is not always easily comprehended in an online environment. The female senior producer explains that a lot of ideas and concepts do not get incorporated because of their unusability and the time it takes to get these



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implemented: '... there was a lot of functionality that didn't really make it into the site, purely because of the time restrictions ... It's a huge investment to get that kind of information together' (I-PT5:108-110; 199-200).

Alongside the notion of use is the understanding of the medium. Even between 2000 and 2001 the Internet is still considered a relatively new technology that requires a fair amount of insiders' knowledge on the part of both the publishers and female users. As the male brand designer observes succinctly:

*'[It was a] learning experience for everybody ... few years of complete madness but people suddenly thought that they were gonna be able to sort of like take existing business models as they were and turn them on their head, and that's obviously bullshit. ... you never gonna be able to do that' (I-PT4:250-254).*

He explains that the online publishers could not match the users' expectation of the Internet. In many ways it is characteristic of a very young market in which as the male brand designer explains, no one really knows what is right and what is wrong. The learning curve is based on experiential hands-on learning, where the users do not have the resources to wait for improvements: '... there're so many examples of where you could actually build, probably the Internet was trying to do everything at once ... And in doing and trying to do everything they invariably ended up doing nothing at all. It's just like people couldn't really fathom what it was meant to do' (I-PT4:499-504). In retrospect, the male brand designer feels that the problems with the Internet as a medium have a major influence on the understanding of BEME.com. As he remarks, '... it was a victim of the time, and ... people's overexcitement really' (I-PT4:573-574). To build on this point, the female senior producer suggests that IPC made a promise to its female clients that they could deliver a portal that is always up-to-date and offering particular information to each user. It was natural to have made such a promise based on what, with retrospect, can be regarded as over inflated excitement about the potential of the Internet as a commercial communication technology. However, as female senior producer states, '... if you make a promise to someone that ... tell us what you think about our site and ... we are listening to you. That's a huge promise to make to ... an awful lot of people' (I-PT5:529-532). Thus, the



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Internet as a communication medium triggers users' expectations that can not always be met. Reflecting back on the whole BEME.com creation experience, the female senior producer remarks:

*'... it's hugely expensive process to create a site to host it, to get it out there, to make sure it is functioning really well, to make it fresh put new content on there, to reply to everyone's e-mails. It's huge undertaking. And quite often by the time you've got around to researching it, designing it, building it ... [you feel] like you're changing your mind or you feel like your target market it's changed already ... between the time the original idea and going live. 'cause it's all changing so quickly. So, I think that's what people have learned' (I-PT5:550-560),*

In addition, the use of the portal and medium of communication imposed limits on the quality of experience available to BEME.com. The question of maintaining high quality becomes particularly important when one is attempting to persuade users of the added value of a portal compared with glossy paper magazines. As the male brand designer so astutely explains:

*'... it doesn't have the same sort of like sexiness that a normal magazine has ... [a] normal magazine you can pick it up, it's shiny, it's got nice big picture in there. All the pictures are taken by like really great photographers. There is no way we're going to be able to do something like that with an online experience because it's just not that sort of funds available and also people expect a much higher turn over ... you really need something new there all the time' (I-PT4:58-65).*

In a context in which women's online portals are in direct competition with glossy magazines, low quality of online information can present real limitations in engaging female users. The male design manager/designer suspects that the quality of content is often hampered by the lack of online experience on the part of journalists creating the content. As it is his understanding that the content is what attracts female users and generates loyalty, low quality may act as a deterrent. He states, '... certainly implementation and quality control of it [BEME.com] was awful' (I-PT3:148). When commenting about the mid-point redesign he chuckles, '[w]e couldn't believe it, we were laughing, we saw it and we just absolutely cracked up, it was just a joke, we thought that home page was just an absolute joke' (I-PT3:150-152). Following his train of thought, the site closure suggests that quality of information and methods of delivery play quite an important role in attracting female users. This fact becomes even more crucial when considering the direct competition from the women's paper magazines and their



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well established customer base. As the female senior producer critically assesses, BEME.com promises to be an amazing and exciting portal for female users. However, the experience offered to users once online does not measure up. She reasons, '...its' a big chancy thing to take, to spend an awful lot of money to build a massive site hoping that say ... 20% of people who actually make it there to visit will stick around because you appeal to them personally' (I-PT5:502-506).

### Corporate Limitations

The corporate limitations stem mainly from a clash between the vision IPC has for the site and the practicalities of implementation that the production team faces everyday. As the production team is required to work in close proximity to the IPC corporation, based as it is in the IPC headquarters, this places a lot of stress on daily human interaction. In some cases, this can cause aggravated situations that might have an effect on the creation and production of the site. As the male design manager/designer recollects about his working relationship with the editorial/creative director, '[s]he was a very, very difficult client and ... she didn't take advice from people who had been designing web sites for many, many years, and just wanted to do it her own particular way' (I-PT3:73-76). On the other hand, there are other limitations stemming from the corporate arrangements of IPC itself. As the editorial/creative director recalls:

*'It was disappointing to see it close so soon, but I wasn't surprised. IPC didn't ever fully understand the potential of the web as their core business was magazine based, and editors saw the website as competition rather than an opportunity to address their readers in a new and added value way. They didn't also understand how to commercialize the site and so without revenue coming in, the business was doomed to fail' (I-PT2:56-61).*

She believes that the changes in management implemented by IPC, namely from having a managing director inspired by the Internet to one who is heavily rooted in the paper magazine publications do not help BEME.com. As she explains, the project needs 'visionary' people offering full support on the part of parent company (IPC). Unfortunately, with the changes occurring within the Internet industries that backing never materialises. Even though the site is



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gaining prizes for its design, this success is not capitalised on, leading to closure within a year and a half of its launch.

### Gender

The final qualifier identified by the production team as contributing to the site's limitations, is gender. This particular notion is often part of a discourse used to describe the portal rather than an aspect directly pointed out by the interviewee. In the latter part of this chapter I discuss the types of discourse informing the production team in their generation of the portal. Gender as a limitation is very much part of these discourses. It has much to do with how the production team perceives female users as a target audience relying on gendered assumptions to create BEME.com designs.

The female senior producer frames notions of gender as a limitation based on her belief that gender driven sites actually do not attract users. She states:

*'... well around about the whole time the people were building women's site left right and centre and they were like really hot topic in the press ... like Guardian Media on a Monday was always covering ... articles about women's portals and stuff 'cause like I say, there was handbag, and BEME and various other women's dot.com and for me I don't think sort of gender driven sites really work' (I-PT5:462-467).*

Even though there is a lot of attention paid to women's portals, the press treats their presence as a passing phenomenon generating news. Nonetheless, as their history has shown, female users are not attracted by online portals per se, no matter how much they are publicised, if they do not offer anything beyond a glossy magazine they purchased on their way home. In this context, using gender as a tool to create spaces specifically defined for female users imposes both a limit on the potential and additional demands on of the Internet as a tool of communication.

In review, the BEME.com experience is, as discussed above, composed of a number of visions that in different ways found their outlet in its design. Each solution not only acknowledges and supports the others, but also contrasts with and contradicts them. The publisher sees



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BEME.com as a first place for women on-line; the producer as a digital meeting space; and designer as an excellent new technology experiment; whilst female users will consider it to be something else based on their own personal interpretations. Therefore, the BEME.com product reflects a continuous negotiation of a variety of intended meanings within the commercial, digital Internet space thought to be suitable for female users.

### Limitations of the Internet – Online Industry Professionals'

#### Critique

Building on the already discussed limitations presented by the BEME.com production team, the limitations-based reflections voiced by the industry professionals' present reasons why, at present, the Internet does not offer added value experiences. Often these reasons are intertwined with positive aspects or suggestions as to how one might generate added value female spaces. Thus, the reasons function as a 'reality' check, with suggestions and recognised limitations being weighed against each other until they are settled in a way that represents the current juncture. During their interviews the participants refer to what I have identified as four main factors: economic, corporate, medium, and gender.

#### *Economic Factor*

In discussing the economic factor participants often refer to strategies driving the Western, capitalist market place. These are guided by long-standing business policies and values. Although there have been some new developments and changes in strategy to adapt to the online context, business is a conservative discipline and it does not let go of its traditions easily. (See Kay, 1993; Seybold, 1999; Afluah and Tucci, 2000 for further discussion of Internet business models). Hence, the industry professionals' descriptions are framed by established business tactics they have learned over the years. For example, the male senior production editor at Woman's Own often refers to the ways in which investment is allocated to online



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enterprises. In explaining the financial workings of an online portal published by a global company like IPC, he describes the need on the part of the publishing house to provide the initial investment:

*'You would have to have all the initial costs set up for a real magazine apart from the printing ... and publishing ... so you have all the on-costs of setting up journalists, wages, expense accounts, offices, hardware, software, software engineers, support all that and then you would produce a web magazine ... if you had deep pockets you could do it and eventually I think you would get some kind of financial return back, but it would take a long time and it won't be like inventing the car' (I-IP4:518-524).*

Hence, operating within a market place that requires almost instantaneous returns can pose real limitations on the creation and development of products that rely on investment in new technologies. He stresses that the market climate has a profound impact on the types of investment publishing houses choose to support. For example a publisher such as IPC looks for investments based on a short term strategy offering quick high returns. In the case of global companies, it is the yearly turnover that impresses investors and keeps the company afloat. The male senior production editor at Woman's Own maintains, '... it still impresses people, you say this company makes X-billion a year as cash, never mind what they spend to produce it, we say we get cash money £40/50million coming in the door ... that is disposable, we have money, hard currency we can go and buy things with it' (I-IP4:551-554). He explains that the thinking behind generating any online commercial outcome is very straightforward. If the idea cannot be transferred into profit it does not last for long. As he stresses, it is about convincing those with appropriate funds, who are often part of a larger bureaucratic system that the idea is worth investing in. In addition, he observes that the profits offered by one product will be compared with the profits from another one. In such a contest the paper publications, at present, clearly offer much higher returns than the still developing medium of the Internet. 'As for women's magazines, or any magazine, a portal is really an adjunct to the main game which is the magazine because that's where the profits are made and it is all about profit' (I-IP4:73-76).

Most of the initial investment in Internet enterprises is based on speculation rather than well developed business strategies. As the male senior production editor at Woman's Own reflects,



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'[t]hey [IPC] were obviously fully taken in by the dot.com move. They saw it as free money and then they, like all things when it started to go wrong, started to spend more money on things. Maybe if we spend this, put this in, do this, buy more broadband' (I-IP4:494-497). Thus, the need to make profit within the context of the Internet requires a different way of conceptualising business strategies. However, global publishers do not always perceive the need to find new ways of conducting business. What they concentrate on are short-term goals and their ability to yield money. The female CEO at eZoka Group argues that the ability to gain funding for such enterprises only exist if the economic climate is supportive. She astutely points out:

*'... right now any new technology, the capital market just turns off, there is no financial support out there for anybody who wants to be an innovator. Now that will change because obviously we can't live without innovation for ever but it is very difficult right now to be any sort of entrepreneur or to be ... designer thinking about the future industry and I think all of these things will have an impact on what we see in the future, whether it's for portals or for women or for whoever it is, because if there's no money out there to build this stuff, people will never know it exists' (I-IP2:315-323).*

It is a very bleak view of the potential of the Internet. However, it reflects the newly acquired understanding on the part of investors that the Internet is not any more a place to make a 'quick buck'. Such a view of the Internet results from the recent crash of the dot.com businesses and the subsequent shake out of the Internet industries. Nonetheless, together with a more realistic view of developing products for the online market place, comes the need to plan for the future. The female CEO at eZoka Group argues that the question of the Internet's future is '... very hard to answer because the determination of what's ahead in the future is not just about how cute is it [or] how does it work. It's a function of price, a function of whether or not capital markets are able to support it' (I-IP2:312-315). However, even in an economic climate that lacks vision to invest in innovative long-term projects, there is certain optimism about the Internet as still offering potential for expansion and innovation. She explains the situation:

*'... well yes obviously I do think there is an opportunity in the future, I think that the short-term is not going to happen ... the reality is right now. The markets say, we don't like media, we don't like technology, we don't care what it is that you are doing. So big corporations who would have been the investors in this type of innovation are doing so, either secretly and with very little cash or they are not doing it at all' (I-IP2:431-440).*



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As all the participants agree, there is future in the Internet as a potential for business opportunities targeting all kinds of users. However, the key to understanding this future is to recognise the level of profit such enterprises will yield. The male senior production editor at Woman's Own humorously observes:

*'... it's like the whole of Western Europe, North America, it's been taken over by accountants, the entire world is run by people who's only life is they can add up. That's it, what do you do, I add up, but what else, No I add things up, it's profit and loss, loss is bad, profit is good. Anything in between - oh no' (I-IP4:585-589).*

It is not enough to recognise that in recent decades, female users have gained financial independence and offer a new, under-explored (or under-exploited) market. The key stipulation, refined over decades of conducting business in any commercial environment, is that the products and services offered yield high returns. However, it is a very thin line which divides real opportunities for targeting female users as the new market niche, from the limitations imposed by conservative business strategies.

### **Corporate Factor**

There are often aspects of corporate structures themselves that impose limitations on the Internet becoming an added value experience for female users. For example, the model of using already existing core businesses where the Internet is just an extension or an adjunct is one of them. Of course it is much more difficult to generate something entirely new and instantaneously achieve customer loyalty, but having the Internet as a corporate add-on does not function successfully either. As the female CEO at eZoka Group points out:

*'... it's always a trade off, how far do you [diversify] the business before you lose sight of who you are. And then how much do you actually protect yourself against one of your revenue streams failing. I think those web sites that were purely based on advertising, for example, were the ones that are dead. It's very, very, very hard, because they were trying to take market share from very well established relationships, ie the magazines or the newspapers, other traditional media. I think the ones that sold stuff, possible had a better chance because you know, the magazines are not going to start selling stuff, at least not directly' (I-IP2:375-384).*



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Mistaken positioning of the Internet as a business opportunity is often the result of misunderstandings of a niche market. The different corporations see other businesses profiting from online ventures and they want to join in the rush (See Chapter 4 for supporting discussion.). However, it is often the case that the delineated niche markets are not responsive to corporate and commercial strategies. The female CEO at eZoka Group explains, '... there are all these kind of leaps of faith that happen around me and I think ... that's where the Internet broke down as people assumed that women or whoever, whether it was ethnic groups etc, would in fact jump on the bandwagon and modify their behaviour' (I-IP2:297-301). Moreover, misunderstanding of the niche market can turn out to be fatal, especially if the nature of the business combines new technologies and female audiences, both underwritten by patriarchal systems. However, there is another side to the corporate factor. In this chapter I have presented a critique voiced by the BEME.com production team of the often negative effects of the hierarchical organisation of IPC and mercenary-like relationship between client and designer. Similarly, the industry professionals refer to the structures within publishing houses themselves that can pose limitations on developing online portals for female users. The female director of DigitalEve argues that the management and people employed at decision-making levels in such publishing houses can generate problems. She states, '... partly because they didn't pay attention to their audience and partly because ... everyone had ... one or two years in the industry so really the depth is not there, there is no history of experiences' (I-IP1:508-516). The male senior production editor at Woman's Own also identifies such Internet business inexperience along with general lack of vision on the part the management, asserting:

*'... I think the whole concept of the web and everything once it stopped making a profit ... they couldn't think their way out of the box. The people on the ground could, the higher ups couldn't. They couldn't think far enough ... Stop, we can't go on we can't make a profit, yes but you will make one in two years and then have a market. No we have to have a profit now, fold it up ... It's what happens in big companies, not just IPC, but every big company worldwide. I think you get the same feeling that you have got to succeed. And that stifles creativity in a lot of experiences' (I-IP4:279-289).*

He goes on to criticise and parody, '... this recession that is going on. It's terrible. We've got to lay everybody off. On the airlines we only made £8billion last year ... rather than £22billion, that's not a failure that's just slightly less of a massive income, but that's corporate thinking.



Corporate thinking and new technology only [become] bedfellows when there is money to be made, other than that its no-go' (I-IP4:293-300). Hence, developing new ideas or alternative paths of generating investment in women's online portals will continue to be guided by corporate thinking on how to secure profit. The fact that such an idea might be of long-term potential benefit to all parties – the company, the production team and the female audiences – does not even enter the equation, since there is no sustaining vision or commitment. An insiders' view of IPC on the part of the male senior production editor at Woman's Own includes a perception that IPC lacks incentive to progress. He often comments on how bureaucratic systems within such a global publishing company stifle any innovation or search for alternatives. His comments reveal the still deeply entrenched traditional understandings of the publishing trade, where there is a disinterest in if not antipathy of trying something new like the Internet. In addition, the male senior production editor at Woman's Own remarks on how personal agendas can impose limitations on developing such risky enterprises as women's online portals. He describes the different tensions between editors, artistic directors and advertising directors in their efforts to gain power and control over decision-making processes. Often different members of the team begin to believe that they are the vital link in the production of the publication, creating disharmony and diluting the guiding vision. '... with mass market and even niche market, publications ... it's always a fight between editorial and ads' (I-IP4:128-130).

The corporate factor hand-in-hand with the economic factor constitute a powerful influence on the way the Internet can create commercially positioned spaces for female users. In both cases, if the conditions are just right the factors can become the driving force for the development of such Internet enterprises. However, more often than not these factors impose limitations inhibiting women's online portal designs from ever achieving their full potential or becoming sites of resistance. As such the corporate and economic factors do not take on this particular agenda but rather are in place to keep it in check.



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### **Medium Factor**

The Internet, just like any product that is subject to a design process is evaluated on its ability to fit in with or adapt to already existing human conditions. Of course, as a novelty it generates interest and curiosity, however, this does not mean it will be accepted regardless of its limitations. The industry professionals focus on how the medium itself can become a limiting factor in generating empowering environments for female users. Therefore, the medium factor presents various aspects of the Internet that, as a medium of communication, can pose a set of limitations on those who choose to use it.

The most basic problem comes from the technology itself and in particular, issues of access.

The male senior production editor at Women's Own refers to the specific conditions that need to be satisfied before one can begin using the Internet, including access to a computer with a monitor and a network connection. At present, it is the rate of technological development and design of computers that defines and/or limits the ability of the users to connect online.

Although wireless networks have become more popular in recent years, most of the users are still accessing the Internet through stationary equipment fixed in a particular location. The male senior production editor at Women's Own argues:

*'... until you can take a computer on a train. You can take a computer into the toilet, where people read ... people read everywhere. They read in pubs, they read on buses, they read on planes. Until you've got something that is cheap enough and sophisticated enough to carry around with you all the time and light enough, I don't think you will see that revolution' (I-IP4:65-70).*

The female director of DigitalEve draws attention to the fact that it is not just the equipment that defines the boundaries of online interaction and engagement. It is also the usability of the interface and content that can attract first-time users and maintain their interest:

*'Oh yeah, usability is such a major thing ... a lot of the UK web sites are done by ex-magazines people, who have no idea about web usability ... So they are not customer focused and they don't really understand usability because they employ these Flash companies who will do them really nice web sites which are not usable by your average*



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*man on the street kind of surfer ... although it is very nice it is totally useless' (I-IP1:240-256).*

Thus, new ways of communication need to be developed that, when judged against already established practices, will generate valuable experience particular to the online environment. The female senior associate at Ariadne Capital highlights this issue with regard to commercially driven enterprises. In such cases, users are required to be open-minded and ready to take on new environments that can present challenges not encountered before (I-IP3). Of course this aspect is a limitation as long as communication online is a novelty. For generations that are now growing up with online access and ability to use the Internet on a daily basis, it will not be a major factor.

Industry professionals also draw attention to design aspects of the Internet that might pose limitations especially when considering female users. Here, the critique stems from a lack of understanding of the female user and their motivation to engage with the Internet. However, the interviewees do not necessarily point out specifics about sites targeting female users. Their comments are much more general and highlight a problem in design rather than the specifics of one particular case. Together with issues of design are issues of interactivity. The male senior production editor at Woman's Own questions why female users would interact with the Internet in the first place:

*'Why would women want to use the web? ... [if] you have to get up, go into a room, boot up, get into web site, download it, using the normal 56K modem which will take a month of Sundays if its got any graphics in it. It's much simpler to go to the supermarket, put Women's Own in the basket and off we go' (I-IP4:233-243).*

Looking at the situation from a publishing perspective, he believes that at present the Internet does not offer anything above or beyond paper magazines. He argues that unless there is investment in interactivity – which is lacking at the moment – publishing houses will not be able to convince female users to obtain their products solely online. The design and interactivity of the Internet as a medium is closely linked with production and infrastructure. In both cases, the Internet offers new challenges and opportunities. Some previous limitations have recently been



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overcome, but there are still aspects such as those identified by the interviewees, that remain stumbling blocks. For example, the ability to implement accessible design layouts online is just as important as generating original concepts supported by interesting content. The female senior associate at Ariadne Capital remembers Boo.com – one of the first online fashion and shopping sites. 'So the concept is great, but actually getting it to work is a different thing' (I-IP3:208-209). The female CEO at eZoka Group explains in more depth: 'The people who were on the publishing side who set up women's portals, they found their stable appointments [in] magazines. [They] also had ... different skills and those don't necessarily translate very well to the net. So you have all of these bits and pieces that didn't converge to be the right one' (I-IP2:419-422). But the biggest influence on production and infrastructure is exerted by the availability of money. If Internet ventures are backed up by substantial financial investment, the effect of many limitations can be alleviated at the onset of the project. As the female CEO at eZoka Group astutely points out, '... if you go back to what the market does or does not support, there is no support for e-commerce because the cost of actually building that infrastructure has not justified itself' (I-IP2:388-390).

The interviewees do not just discuss the practical limitations of the Internet as a medium. They also point out the Internet's positioning within the mass media and possible limitations resulting from perceptions of the Internet as a medium. For example, perception of the Internet as merely and yet another medium of mass media can stifle its development potential. The female director of DigitalEve argues that the Internet needs to be seen as a valuable independent form of communication that might be used in conjunction with other media, but actually exists on its own. While in some environments the Internet is recognised for its own value, in the publishing industry it is very often still seen as just an adjunct to paper publications. The female director of DigitalEve comments:

*'Don't think of it as a revolutionary replacement for other sources of communication because other sources of communication are well proven and people still use them much more because they are more familiar with them. The Internet, the penetration rate in the UK is still so low, until that changes you are not going to be able to do a lot of things you are doing now with traditional media' (I-IP1:355-361).*



## Chapter 7: BEME.com Women's Portal – *f*

The way the Internet is situated and understood as a communication medium in its own right, is strongly influenced by different perceptions of its capabilities and uses. As the female senior associate at Ariadne Capital points out, the Internet is often perceived in the context of its own technological development. The perception is based on the first impressions users gain when coming in contact with the medium. Although, users will learn with time that there are other opportunities and activities, there always exists a chance that if the first experience is unsatisfactory and they will not return for more.

On the other hand, positive perception of the Internet by its users may be frustrated or limited by lack of motivation on the part of the publishing houses to improve the medium. As the male senior production editor at Woman's Own comments, '... maybe once a year you will do a redesign which makes it look totally the same, which is what publishers want. They say, think radical, think outside the box, but then if you do that you get nailed, but if you make it look exactly the same, but slightly different, they go 'Oh what innovation, logo is 2mm bigger, brilliant'' (I-IP4:445-449). He argues that people do not want to be bothered with the responsibility of improving things, preferring to ignore the situation. In the case of the publishing industry, once a publication finds a formula that works economically, there is very little incentive to change it. If it does not work then it will most likely be abandoned. In an industry that is deeply attached to its traditions, such rules also apply to the Internet. If there is an opportunity to change things and generate alternatives by 'thinking outside of the box', the Industry does not appear to be genuine in their support of it.

### ***Gender Factor***

The final factor to be considered is gender. In this case the interviewees identify aspects of the Internet that become limiting to female users based on their gender definition. The industry professionals describe a variety of issues around the notions of gender, some well known and some more implicit. This factor is characterised by the following themes: misunderstanding of women, practice that is demeaning to women, lack of intelligent variety, gender discrimination,



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and a lack of care. These, as with other factors discussed, are interlinked and can be unique to the publications created for female users. As literature has shown, within publishing male audiences are targeted based on their interests or needs, whereas female audiences are seen as axiomatic with their gender and thus targeted on the basis of this signifier (McCracken 1993; Skeggs 1997).

When discussing Internet spaces specifically designed for female users, the female director of DigitalEve argues that businesses still misunderstand women as a target audience. '... all the women's sites are not targeted towards selling to women, because they don't believe women have buying power. Whereas I think the statistics were that more than 50% of women are the decision makers on buying big things from the Internet. But marketing people still don't see that, they still don't know how to market to women' (I-IP1:143-148). Thus, ideas and the production of such online spaces is not even based on verifiable up to date statistics but rather on the basis of 'what's been done before, works', an approach that is not weakened by the publishing industry's attachment to tradition. Hence, gender assumptions are both perpetuated and brought in place to fill in the gaps. Such practice only creates greater misunderstanding, generating outcomes that either become demeaning to female audiences (and) or do not generate revenue due to lack of interest. As the female CEO at eZoka Group observes, '[t]he idea that somehow you are going to ply a little bit of money into a web site and they are going to capture all of those women doesn't happen. Women are not cheaply acquired as customers' (I-IP2:139-142). As female users do not give away their consumer loyalties very easily, sites that are demeaning to women limit their scope for market expansion. As the female director of DigitalEve critiques, '... all the women's web sites I've seen are very demeaning to women because all they talk about is shopping and make-up, there is nothing intellectual ... there is no intellectual content and there is no attempt to even introduce anything even vaguely ... anything else' (I-IP1:148-152). The portals that are commercially driven often reduce female users into 'fluff bunnies' without deep concerns. She further observes, '... there are so many magazine sites up there, after a while it is all the same, people don't want to read about make-up and shopping all the time. They want to read about role models' (I-IP1:159-161). Therefore, just as



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in the women's traditional paper magazines, the gender factor defines the ways in which commercial enterprises target their audiences by obliterating genuine distinctiveness that could lead to commercial advantage. In an environment like the Internet that offers multi-lane access to information from the most trivial to the highly intellectual, promotion of gendered content does not seem to be the best strategy with which to retain users.

However, the gender factor does not only manifest itself at content and production levels of women's online portals. It is also evident in discriminatory practices. The female CEO at eZoka Group observes, '... women just get less funding in the whole venture capital' (I-IP2:106).

Although, she does not make explicit that the lack of investment is due to gender discrimination, this is documented within feminist literature (Borsook 1996). However, she points out that under such circumstances it becomes almost impossible to generate a successful enterprise. '... when you are talking about an undercapitalised business fighting against a niche and trying to change peoples behaviour you are really trying to push water up hill' (I-IP2:109-112) .

Limitations imposed by the gender factor lead to what the female CEO at eZoka Group identifies as lack of care on the part of the female users. 'Women don't even want to know ... it's not that they don't know how, it's just that they don't care' (I-IP2:273-274). Often the gender factor is just very implicit, well hidden within the years of publishing traditions. However, it does not mean that it carries no influence. In the case of the Internet, the gender factor trivialises the medium's ability to generate possibilities that can help female users to question and resist oppressive regimes. By generating perceptions that are associated with gendered assumptions about female users, the gender factor situates the Internet as yet another space that promotes patriarchal social values.

### Findings

The particular circumstances of BEME.com reveal a highly complex multi-level project environment. The time of its conception and production positions BEME.com as a testament to



the post-modern information age. It represents a part of the living history and commercial development of the early online investments targeting female users. Being a very new technology in the business setting, the Internet does not inspire high levels of confidence. It is risky and requires time for development. However the women's magazine publishing industry does not appear able to 'afford' the necessary time. In the case of BEME.com and its target audience, IPC believes it is doing a reasonable thing by closing down a business that seems to fail financially. Due to its complexity and the blurred or limited vision on the part of investors, what is launched with initiative and explicit recognition of the opportunity to innovate, is then dismissed as an experiment and a perceived waste of financial resources.

Not only is the history behind the conception, production and maintenance of the site quite convoluted, but the wider economic and technological context makes the decision making process that much more difficult. As the stages of BEME.com design reveals, the process involves many different participants with their own agendas and levels of power to execute them. Along with recognition of the economic and design opportunities, BEME.com exposes a variety of limitations affecting such online ventures.

### ***Complexity***

The case of BEME.com suggests that the women's portal publishing is a highly complex network. It is an arena where the forces of economics, social and cultural beliefs, marketing strategies – not forgetting to mention individuals – intersect. Needless to say, these forces are not necessarily mutually supportive but rather diverge, creating tension and a specific dynamic. This is evident in situations such as the ongoing misunderstanding of the market due to IPC's reliance on traditional values known to paper publishing. Another example is IPC's apparent lack of trust in the professionals hired to design and execute the BEME.com online outcome.

The complexity of the publishing industry is not something that has been widely addressed in the academy. Although Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron (1991) identify the women's



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publishing industry as made up of a multi-million pound business competing on a global scale, these authors do not expand on the possible complexity such conditions generate (p. 169). It seems to be a *de facto* feature of a multi-million pound industry with a global span. However my analysis suggests that it is a crucial factor exerting influence on the creation and production of outcomes like BEME.com. Due to its complexity, BEME.com falls back on a system made up of participants' tacit knowledge and a traditional view of the target audience. In addition, opportunity for further exploration is stifled by a world in which internal politics make or break a project. Thus, BEME.com is not only influenced by the process of experimentation with this new technology, but also by the personal agendas of those who have the power to make it happen. As a result, BEME.com is re-directed from pursuing an alternative means of addressing its female users – manifest in its initial brand profile and vision – to a norm-fitting, safer option.

### ***New Technology***

The literature review focuses on notions of interactivity as one of the key features of the Internet as an up-and-coming technology. It offers definitions of interactivity generated by academic research in the field of media and communications. However, the BEME.com case reveals that rigorously researched and proposed models like the one suggested by Kiousis (2002) are useful to academia but do not necessarily translate into practice. In these circumstances, BEME.com is subject to a domino effect, whereby the proposed design depends from its outset on information and expertise which does not incorporate or embrace Internet technologies in its understanding. The research suggests that Internet technologies are still under- or mis-understood by both the design discipline and the publishing industry. It is not necessarily formal knowledge that enlightens the BEME.com production team as to the application of online technologies. It is personal and individual experience and expertise. Whenever the team comes upon unknown aspects of this ever changing environment, they respond by drawing on earlier experiences to generate new answers. Such circumstances are peculiarly characteristic of both design and publishing, which do not allow for alternative understandings to infiltrate, but heavily rely on the past and on the familiar. Thus BEME.com becomes a classic example of



what Schön (1983) refers to as 'reflective practice'. Here, the practitioners bring 'artistic, intuitive processes ... to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict' (Schön in Cross 2001:53). However, in this context, as 'reflective practitioners', they reintegrate already used concepts back into the system and do not break any of the prescribed boundaries.

## **Gender**

Gender, a concept which functions on both implicit and explicit levels, affects understanding of the general context as well as the design of visual outcomes. Gendered notions of femininity and masculinity are deeply rooted within the design discipline and women's magazine publishing industry and it is their self-evident-ness, simultaneously unquestioned and exploited for profit that makes the effect of these notions so insidious.

The feminist critique has often focused on the women's magazine publishing industry in terms of investigating how gender influences consumption-enticing communication strategies. For example, Skeggs (1997) argues that femininity is transformed through culturally and socially embedded signs that depend on industries such publishing to offer interpretations at a local level. The women's magazine publishing turns femininity into a consumable commodity through the materiality of designed outcomes. The BEME.com case becomes yet another example of such conversion, demonstrating how the flow of time and changes in technology can have limited impact on altering gendered practices. On the other hand, Buckley (1989) refers to codes and signs as part of her discussion on gender and design epistemology. Her firm recognition of designers' encoding and decoding of gendered meanings based on their social, cultural, political, and economic understanding can be compared with Skegg's (1997) process of 'femininity conversion'. Due to the nature of design practice and the types of services it supports, it becomes a mediator generating 'cultural products' (Wolff 1981) that are gendered. Thus as a 'cultural product', BEME.com is gendered as a result of a combination of the ideologies and practices of, the design discipline and the women's magazine publishing industry. Intended to be part of the everyday lives of its female users, BEME.com as an



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interactive and participatory design outcome transfers the notions of gender from that of ideological stance into a material-virtual daily reality. It is the everyday practice of becoming feminine that BEME.com as a design outcome helps its users to achieve. A product of the traditional women's publishing industry, it defines its audience by gender, entices gender consumption and it provides help on how to become a gendered member of society. Thus BEME.com represents what Smith (1988) refers to as 'textually mediated' gender, deeply embedded in the actual practices performed by its female users. In economic terms BEME.com survival relies on this concept, since it provides what Smith calls a 'motivational' structure sparking a process by which female users return again and again to the source of information. Through this process BEME.com is transformed from being merely a design outcome with embedded meanings into a 'symbolic artefact' (Smith 1988). Smith's argument greatly clarifies the gendered role of BEME.com in its production of 'symbolic artefacts' through the use of design. However, the fact that BEME.com is also an outcome of Internet communication and information technologies alters this scenario. Where Smith refers to well established practices of engaging with cosmetics, fashion or magazines, her argument does not take into account new and emerging technologies. As the closure of BEME.com bluntly reflects, the Internet as a medium of consumption has not yet become part of the 'motivational' structure of 'textually mediated' gender. In this ever changing medium, hope remains that such traditional practices will not simply be transferred to develop to their full blown damaging extent.

### ***Underlying Factors Influencing Designers' Approach to their Practice***

Finally the BEME.com experience is revealed as constructed from a variety of negotiated meanings which play a major part in the conceptualisation of BEME.com within an online design context. Hence, the BEME.com experience draws upon five underlying factors that influence the production team's approach to their practice. These are: tacit knowledge, power structures, marketing strategies, historical perspectives and gender systems. The first three are directly involved in forming conceptual understanding of the BEME.com design and the intended



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experience. The latter two are indirectly used to locate the portal's existence in a larger social, cultural and political context.

### Tacit Knowledge

Examination of the interview data and IPC press releases reveals the BEME.com experience as deeply informed by 'tacit knowledge'. Participants use this factor to varying degrees depending on their respective role in relation to the experience. Some aspects are shared, for example, tacit knowledge of what constitutes the category of a women's Internet portal, or the notion of a branded product. These two particular aspects allow each participant to create a common shared knowledge base to which they can add their own personal capabilities. Other aspects include participants' professional expertise, their reflective commentaries/observations and personal histories. For example, IPC relies on its timely expertise in the field of women's publishing, design and branding, supported by belief in their '... unique position within the Women's market' (D-CP4). The design team draws upon their design expertise and reflective observation in conjunction with their own previous, personal or design experiences. A design technique that Oudshoorn, Rommes et al. (2004) define as I-methodology.

### Power Structures

Another underlying factor which had an influence on perceptions of the BEME.com experience is rooted within 'power structures'. These are strongly dependant on each participant's position and relationship to the whole project. The interviews reveal that a number of power struggles occur at a point where participants feel they need to preserve their own individual standpoint. Through observations like '... she would have a tantrum actually ... she was in control and had to be ... in control' (I-PT5:311-313) the female senior producer makes reference to the difficulties arising from power hierarchies affecting team work. However, these do not only depend on the individual characters of the co-workers. In the obtained data, there is evidence of quite strong institutional power structures based on the hierarchies within IPC itself. Comments like '[w]hen the Managing Director of IPC Electric (the digital division of IPC) resigned just before the launch of BEME due to a change in the board of IPC, and his role was



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taken over by a magazine publisher who didn't understand the web and hadn't been involved in BEME's launch. In short, politics at the top of a big company started the writing on the wall' (I-PT2:63-67) highlight the problem. Unfortunately, the power structures do not end at this level. There are also power struggles exemplified by the question of BEME.com ownership. The design team is considered in an inferior position because they are merely creators, not owners. The reality of everyday design activities identified in the female senior producer's reflection on BEME.com illustrates quite clearly the importance of the relationship between having the actual power to act and being in position of power, to the conceptualisation of BEME.com as a design. Furthermore, I would argue that this particular factor plays a crucial role for BEME.com in terms of the layout and experience it offers. It formats its launch and existence and seems to be one of the main forces behind BEME.com's final closure.

### Marketing Strategies

The 'marketing strategies' factor yet again directly informs the BEME.com experience. The available data prompts the observation that this particular factor is primarily constructed by IPC corporation in support of the launch of its product. Through a carefully conceptualised and designed sales pitch, it promotes the site and its high quality. In numerous press releases, BEME.com is described as '... the most comprehensive Internet destination for women' (D-CP1i). Through precise consideration of economics and branding, a marketing underlying factor is designed to define BEME.com experience as a so-called 'added value' endeavour. Hence, it concentrates on the sales pitch, description of BEME.com marketable qualities and economic factors. As official owner of the portal, IPC was in a position of power, not only in terms of the design but also in seeking to control how the design was publicly interpreted.

### Historical Perspective

The underlying factor focusing on 'historical perspective' explores technological relationships locating BEME.com within a time spectrum vis-à-vis other sites and the success/failure of the Internet itself. By making explicit the development of technological and design innovation, this factor allows the production team to boast of commercial uniqueness in their use of vertical



advertises. The female senior producer observes '...this new idea of ... being able to put vertical ads ... [was at the time] cutting edge design in new media' (I-PT5:65-77). The 'historical perspective' provides a common point of reference for the BEME.com production team. It allows all participants to define what could constitute a unique Internet experience – an aspect quite crucial to online design practice and offers a frame of reference for understanding BEME.com and the type of experience it offers to female users.

### Gender Systems

The 'historical perspective' functions in conjunction with gender notions encapsulated by the 'gender systems' underlying factor. It has powerful influence on the construction of the BEME.com experience. It is driven by the participants understanding of gender combined with their understanding of the category 'women'. Considering that the BEME.com experience is intended for female users, this factor becomes crucial in socially defining what constitutes BEME.com as 'female' experience. Unfortunately, BEME.com is created by a traditional women's publishing house, already trading in and profiting from, stereotypical notions of gender and women. The 'gender systems' are also responsible for participants' approach to women related issues. They define understanding of how to deal with a women's portal design and the ways in which to communicate ideas to female users. Thus, the whole notion of BEME.com is deeply rooted in a gendered understanding of female Internet users, as the male brand designer explains '... I think that the thought was that ... women's portals is a good idea, because women at that time ... were a bit less ... willing to scoot around ... on line. That's changed now' (I-PT4:540-543). Unfortunately locating the site within the 'successful' women's publishing tradition provides little incentive to support alternative empowering interpretations.

Growing awareness of the interactivity of the Internet suggests the development of yet another underlying factor. Burnett and Marshall (2003) argue that online interactivity encourages users to engage in a different kind of literacy encompassing simultaneous reception and production. Such an understanding I argue, will have a profound impact on the role online designers will play in constructing Internet experiences in the future.



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In summary, the BEME.com case highlights the ways in which social and cultural values and practices are subtly embedded into new and up-and-coming technologies. It points to the different ways design practice takes on responsibility for this process. Surprisingly, the analysis also reveals that there is genuine interest on the part of individuals within the commercial design and publishing industry to create outcomes that are empowering to female users. However, such individuals are few and far between. Thus, BEME.com can also expose the tactics used by the female users themselves to subvert its gendered meanings. The experience and analysis of BEME.com, although a unique case, has the power to inform the well established practices designed to instruct female users to become feminine. It is clear that the continual development of new technologies needs to be accompanied by an attentive and critical analysis of what *genuinely* 'new opportunities' are being created for female users through design.



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## **Chapter 8**

Discussion and Conclusions



## Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusions

### Discussion

In this thesis, I have presented my investigation of women's commercial Internet portals as an example of design practice targeting female users. The research was driven by my argument that there is a need for designers to be aware of gender representation and that they have both the capability and responsibility to follow through this awareness in their design practice. In particular, I searched for an opportunity within the Internet – as a new form of presentation and communication – that might demonstrate design experimentation with alternative depictions of gender. In my attempt to respond to the research question as to how online portal design potentially offers alternative ways of communicating to female users in such a way as to resist and combat the gendered status quo, I have documented the nature of two key components. Firstly the complexity of design practice involved in development of women's portals and secondly, the multifaceted world of commercial publishing for female audiences at a crucial moment of change between traditional technologies of paper magazines and new technologies of digital publishing. Preceding and during the course of my research, other scholars studying issues of gender and the targeting of female audiences through women's magazines or the Internet have called for investigation into the people and processes involved in production of these artefacts (McRobbie 1997; Wakeford 2000). In particular, McRobbie (1997) in her discussion of feminist scholarship and women's magazines raised the issues of design and content. She argues that nobody has studied '... the people who put these pages together... [and] it would also be necessary to ask the writers and designers what it is they think they are doing. What is their relationship to feminism? How aware are they of its influence?' (p.206). Whilst not asking precisely the same questions, the thesis has investigated Internet portals for female users from the perspective of designers: their intentions; their understanding of the audience they are designing for; and the factors influencing the design process when it comes to addressing gender issues.



### ***Engaging the Female User***

This research was conducted at a time when there was much enthusiastic attention paid to the Internet. This enthusiasm has also fuelled my own work, especially in terms of the opportunities that a combination of new communication technologies like the Internet and design practice can offer. However, the thesis has illuminated very clearly how such belief in the ability of technology to improve everyday life when motivating design practice, does not necessarily lead to successful design outcomes, BEME.com being a case in point. The circumstances of its closure demonstrate that appeal to the novelty of the Internet alone is not sufficient to generate and sustain interest and product loyalty amongst female users. Moreover, drawing on well established design practices does not always respond to the needs of the female target audience. Therefore, the basic motivation of design practice, to attempt to resolve problems and promote betterment through understanding of the parameters within which the problem exists, is no longer sufficient. In creating online portals for female users the task is not only to comprehend the technology in order to generate a visually interesting and meaningful interface. Alongside understanding female users' needs and consumption patterns, the key in this situation is how this information might be interpreted and transformed through a design process.

Being aware of this transformation in the Internet context vis-à-vis the content of the design outcome as represented by the portal, is a key finding of this research. In day-to-day design practice, designers are rarely if ever given the time to ponder the effects of translation of the information they acquire to create a design outcome. There is a tendency to view the process of interpretation through design as an unquestionable path to betterment. However, my in-depth study of a commercial online portal publishing environment targeting female audiences has revealed that this is an unsuccessful approach with female users.

In the case of traditional media like women's magazines, Radner (1995) has argued that there is a lack of coherent narrative within these products, which in turn inspires readers with a sense of autonomy to generate their own meanings. Or in other words, such organisation of magazine



content provides female readers, as Radner maintains, with an impression of freedom. Recent cultural studies of women's magazines do recognise the involvement of readers in making these artefacts meaningful. However, BEME.com's approach to its female audience does not engage with the question of female users' ability to generate meaning whilst browsing the portal. Both the design production team and the publishing house seem to interpret the profile of targeted audience only as passive viewers, whereas Oudshoorn, Rommes et al. (2004) point out that '[u]sers may slightly modify the scripts, they may drastically transform them, or they may even completely reject them and create new meanings and uses of the objects or become non-users' (p. 55). Therefore, my research together with the already existing literature illuminates how female users can move from being sporadic users of female commercial portals to non-users. The combination of the intended meanings and identities and designed representation of them, are not necessarily meaningful to female users. This is due, I would argue, to a mismatch between the nature of the site and its gendered interpretation through the design process and the way female users themselves engage with such commercial portals. The BEME.com case study clearly highlights female users' tendency to distance themselves from identities constructed in gendered niche marketing.

Furthermore, at no point were the implications of interactivity for production and consumption explored in the design of the BEME.com portal. This is omitted in spite of many Internet scholars of the time specifically focusing on interactivity and the new forms of literacy this form of communication offers. As Burnett and Marshall (2003) say: '... the Web pushes analysis beyond the active audience thesis of past cultural studies to focus on the ability to manipulate the cultural form for clearly new kinds of production' (p.73-74). Rather, IPC re-defines the concept of interactivity to suit their imperatives, requesting a design with few interactive options and those used mainly to instil insecurities based on continuous comparison and scrutiny. Therefore, no matter what meanings the female audience derive, IPC's strategy is to re-centre it back to the portal's focus on the female body and its definition through product consumption (Radner 1995). Even the hypertext navigation through the portal does not inspire new



meanings, but rather female users are confronted with homogenous role models defined by gender and inspired by millennia of social and cultural assumptions.

However, McRobbie (1999) and Gough-Yates (2003) have both suggested that new readings of women's magazines within cultural studies point towards alternative approaches to women's representation on the part of the industry. In particular McRobbie (1999) observes a change within women's magazines in the way female readers are targeted that could be interpreted as acknowledging a feminist agenda. Such an approach is also evident within women's online portals released on the UK market. The case of BEME.com demonstrates how the feminist agenda of women's empowerment might be interpreted by design process to fit within a commercial context. The most visible action is the heavily broadcast re-defined profile of the female user. Through supposed acknowledgement of diversity, individuality and strong sense of choice, a supposedly 'new millennium' female user emerges that is in no way released from the classification as a woman and all its gendered interpretations. To appeal to this 'new and informed' user in an ever expanding Internet environment, the women's publishing industry re-focuses its visual communication language. In the commercial environment, where the competition is fierce for the attention of the often casual female user, designers are asked to find 'new' ways to communicate old norms. Therefore, designers are expected to create online portals that through their association with 'empowerment ideologies', attract users to consume traditionally defined products. However, these 'new' practices are still based on a gendered understanding of online female audiences, shared by both the design practitioners and the women's magazine publishing industry. Nonetheless, Ballaster, Beetham et al. (1991) argue that it is within the women's magazine publishing industry's nature to play with various contradictions or to generate tension with representation of forced opposites (see pages 172-173). Therefore, the combination of empowerment and established stereotypes results in a visual language that is complex and often contradictory, paralleling the women's' magazine publishing industry that has produced it.



Nonetheless, while publishers and designers of women's portals still believe that a mixture of new values and old gendered notions is the most successful way to attract female users to visit commercial sites, female users themselves search for alternatives. Fundamentally, they see themselves first and foremost as individuals with their own needs and interests that may not be shared by others. Furthermore they see Internet technology as having a very practical application. Such practical use defines their own understanding of how they perceive themselves as Internet participants within private or commercial online spaces. Therefore, they can explore their practical or pleasurable needs and interests simultaneously as a group or as single individuals due to the nature of the technology and the types of interaction it affords. It is for this reason that so many scholars have argued for the Internet as a tool of empowerment allowing the diversity of its users to come to the fore.

### ***Negotiating Online Design Environments within Existing Gender Structures***

Female users' disassociation with the design outcomes provides an eye opening insight as to the power of design practice to create new or alternative solutions to existing problems within long established social paradigms. At the beginning of this research I set out to investigate whether it is possible to look to design practice to change the status quo through various material outcomes. The task seemed simple enough, since the driving motivation of design is to derive better solutions through assessment of the existing situation and in-depth understanding of its ramifications. By means of the BEME.com case study I wanted to see whether there was room within design practice to create alternative design outcomes that do not focus on offering gendered online portals to female users. However, the research and supporting literature attests to the ideological inertia and design process upheaval that would need to be overcome in order to create such alternative outcomes that question the gendered approach to targeting female users. BEME.com has been constructed within a generally positive atmosphere towards the Internet as the technology of the future. At the same time, the Internet was seen to exist as independent of the society and gender neutral, which remained unquestioned. Everyone



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involved in the production of BEME.com, from the publishing house to the design production team focused on the novelty of the Internet and the potential of the technology to solve the problem of a stereotypical approach to female audiences. Nevertheless, this positive approach to the Internet did not equate with instantaneous knowledge of the best or most responsible design practice. Rather, the design production team struggled with the challenges that the technology itself posed, resigning them to a 'catch-up' role. To fit into this new production system, design processes have to attend to: (a) globally driven economic forces; (b) global social and cultural beliefs; (c) existing marketing and branding strategies; (d) ever-changing online technologies of communication; and (e) the product users and the people within the organisation. To compensate for the unknown or uncontrollable factors design teams rely on individual expertise, previous experience and tacit knowledge. Within the particular context of women's magazine publishing, such reliance on previous experience reintegrates traditional values into new outcomes.

The BEME.com case study illuminates how design practitioners do not consider gender as a problem, but rather within the commercial world of business and profit making, it is seen as a useful guide to understanding users. Embedding notions of gender within design processes evokes particular visual outcomes. These designs have a proven record of success within the women's magazine publishing industry evidenced by its longevity. In the tough daily routine of design up against tight deadlines, reliance on 'safe solutions' in practiced interpretations of gender seems like a sensible approach. It does not mean however, that it reflects responsible design practice. Whilst there are voices within the design discipline that call for reassessment of such an approach, the commercial world positions design expertise in a very particular instrumental way, limiting its ability to lead on change. Even with the end of the 1990s witnessing changes in design approach and targeting of female readers of women's magazines, none of these changes break with the gendered modus operandi in terms of design. This means that no matter how many and how much individual designers might support alternative approaches to the targeting of female users and believe that the Internet is a vehicle to promote such change, the overall relationship between the client and the designer remains conservative.



Such conservatism also manifests itself in the design process, almost seen as an afterthought, as described by design production team interviewees. The design processes are considered, but they are not seen as playing a dominant role. Although design practitioners have a chance to be involved in many aspects of the project, their role is limited to just that of an 'acted out' process. Their value is as providers of visual and experiential interpretations of already pre-determined content and intentions. Such an externally assigned role again is associated with historical understandings of design evidenced by terms like the German phrase *formgebung* (giving form to something, a term that has been often used in philosophical discussion around the issue of design practice and design knowledge). As the BEME.com case study describes, whilst the involvement of designers in the creation and production of an outcome might be crucial, it is not perceived as such by the women's magazine publishing industry. They are seen as creating aesthetically pleasing outcomes through a process that is seen as existing almost apart from the environment within which it takes place. Therefore, the ability of designers to offer strategically valuable solutions embedded within the context in which they are meant to be meaningful does not seem to take place. Although seen as very meaningful to design practitioners involved in creation of BEME.com portal, their expertise in the larger commercial/business world does not appear to carry much weight.

Furthermore, as Oudshoorn, Rommes et al. (2004) have commented, the reliance on I-methodology prevents design practitioners from understanding their target audience in any other way but through their own assumptions. BEME.com is a classic example of that process; from a visually interesting yet meaningless site for 'all women' its re-design renders it a portal addressing a white middle class female audience aged 20-35 which, in the context of the Internet is seen to constitute a homogenous group of simply 'young, preferably white middle-class women'. The predominance of males within the BEME.com design team also suggests that the interpretation of its target audience in both cases seems to be mostly built on assumptions of what these female users want since the design practitioners position themselves as the ones who 'always know better'. Through exploration of the case study, it becomes apparent that design practitioners themselves do not question the gender assumptions they are



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asked to interpret. Even when the two members of the team in creative decision-making positions (the editorial/creative director and the senior producer) are both female, their working context does not encourage their active questioning of gender assumptions (See Rommes (2002) for further discussion of similar examples). Rather, in the case of BEME.com, the male designers are the ones in positions of power to integrate their personal assumptions. At no point is this perspective questioned by any member of the team, since it offers a perfect fit with the traditional values propagated by the women's magazines publishing context. Although the design practitioners are given an opportunity to challenge gender structures when executing the BEME.com portal, they choose to follow the established canons and not search for alternatives. Thus, design practice through its practitioners limits its own capabilities to instil change by. By transforming the ideological stances underlying these gendered structures into everyday products, they validate and reaffirm these structures.

### Conclusions

In his work entitled *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault argues '... it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together' (in McNay 1994:108). Following Foucault's argument, the discourses revealed by the BEME.com case study bring together knowledge of online design with systems of power, inscribing knowledge of design practices as well as gender and consumption within the Internet design context. As McNay (1994) asserts 'discourse, or a particular discursive formation, is to be understood as an amalgam of material practices and forms of knowledge linked together in a non-contingent relation' (p. 108). The discourses operating within the BEME.com case study offer important insight as to how designers interpreted the tasks at hand in relation to the audience and the client. Considering that BEME.com is created at the beginning of the Internet commercial boom, these discourses function as primary sources of understanding of the unknown and newly developed online technologies. In this case the motivation of IPC to rely on design expertise is derived from a need to maintain their position of power within a specific market place. This need becomes the driving force in implementing such design expertise. However, it is also a tool that limits the



knowledge of those involved in the production process. Moreover, this need also becomes the framework in which users are being interpreted by both IPC and the design production team. In the case of BEME.com this interpretation is based on gendered understandings grounded in historical continuities derived from both the design industry and women's magazine publishing.

Although the nature of online designers' knowledge changes throughout the design process, it does not mean that through expanding their knowledge they gain more power to affect online design processes and their outcomes. On the contrary, the traditional context of women's magazines from which BEME.com originates only further perpetuates the historically established hierarchies between users, designers and clients. Therefore, the discourses offer ways of understanding how design knowledge could be understood as both promoting and limiting innovation. In the case of BEME.com, knowledge serves to maintain the gendered status quo. Hence, this thesis reveals the relationship between notions of gender and the world of commercial design practice. It offers insight into the general lack of interest on the part of designers working within industry that trades heavily in gender stereotypes, to problematise this process and their role within it. Design scholars argue that the designer's role is to mediate between the process of production and consumption of its outcomes. However, within a gendered context such as a women's online portal, designers do not achieve what Julier (2000) calls 'de-alienating of the commodity (p. 49). Rather, as feminist critiques of design practice reveal, design practitioners maintain gender values by constructing consumer profiles by means of gendered assumptions.

### ***Future Research***

Design knowledge and experience is based on evaluation of existing and conceivable outcomes, just as consumer surveys are based on reactions to current rather than future designs. This poses a significant tension vis-a-vis the Internet where, within a short period of time, things can drastically change. Time has great impact on the Internet itself by relentlessly rendering it out of date and fostering human need to produce new ways to improve it. Hence, to



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understand the Internet requires an understanding of the desire for and need to change.

Holding on to tradition and history does not work in this context. That is also why aspects of existing gender structures can be challenged and/or resisted by female online users. However, it is the women's publishing industry that needs to finally accept the need for change.

Otherwise, the multi-billion business will be surpassed by technological progress and will find itself struggling to secure any profits. As is already happening, the Internet has advanced, leaving industries like publishing, music or telephony scrambling to catch up. It has shifted its path from following to leading current trends and responding to present-future social, cultural, political and economic conditions. In addition, there is an ever-growing trend amongst gender and Internet scholars to call for strategies of inclusion as a possible way to address online inequality and discrimination. However, recent studies of inclusion strategies (Faulkner et al. 2004; Rommes 2002; Spilker & Sørensen 2000) are incomplete without conceiving of design processes as material outcomes of a social, cultural, political and economic milieu. Faulker (2004) argues, '[t]he market has not generally proved a very innovative mechanism for improving gender inclusion in the information society ...' (p. 3). The BEME.com case clearly demonstrates ways in which the commercial world of women's magazine publishing appropriated this new technology, not to follow through its inspiration to change but rather to exploit its capabilities within the existing status quo. The failure of a number of commercially focused women's portals, including BEME.com, therefore expose various limitations exacted by the women's magazine publishing on the capacity of the Internet to effect change. The complexity and rigid, hierarchical structures of publishing organisations, the lack of understanding of the medium itself and the reliance on gender to define and target audiences are turning out to be the greatest breaks on the opportunities that the Internet as a communication medium has to offer.

However it is important not to ignore the positive aspects that the combination of design practice and the Internet have to offer. As Cameron (1998) aptly points out, interactivity within the context of the Internet offers experiences 'in potentia' (in Julier 2000:179) which are replacing a sequential narrative offered by other types of communication media. Online designers have to



## Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

focus on consciously generating 'what-if' experiences allowing online users to formulate their own outcomes. Under such circumstances, historical and traditional assumptions will not necessarily be in a position of power to dominate or wholly determine the interactive process. The combination of simultaneous reception and production with 'what-if' types of experiences will carry the authority to encourage more pronounced dialogue. In practical terms, such a shift in the conceptualisation of web design has the potential to generate a scenario in which future outcomes will be based on a much more informed processes on the part of users, designers and clients; processes which might include among other things, dialogue between often very complex and conflicting agendas. This suggests that online designers may no longer be able to use the commercial context and its imperatives as an alibi or justification for lack of innovation in addressing gender issues. More than ever they need to ask themselves whether BEME.com has become an example of the need for far more radical design in this commercial sector.

Further cross-disciplinary research into the relationship between design, gender and the Internet is needed to address disparity between the gendered production of online design outcomes and what female users perceive as useful. Building on this thesis, of particular interest would be an investigation into ways in which design practitioners construct what Tham (2004) calls 'professional uniforms' – forms of identity that allow practitioners to disengage their own personal values and beliefs from those they express as professionals (in Sadowska and Tham 2004). Research into the process whereby design practitioners who, on personal level, support a feminist agenda continue working within industries that trade heavily on gendered notions could reveal whether such conflicts are partially responsible for the apparent lack of interest on the part of design practitioners to reflect on and question gender values embedded within their practice.

### ***Last Words***

An investigation of commercial sites like BEME.com provides important insight into the ways design practice attempts to reconcile a critical agenda with gender structures. It also illuminates



female users' tendency to disassociate with identities constructed in gendered niche marketing. However, the media landscape is changing, where '... the popular ... media now promote ... a new rhetoric of freedom and independence for young women ...' (McRobbie 1999:11).

Therefore, a question arises as to how radical the design agenda can become whilst continuing to operate within a commercial context. Has BEME.com become an example of the need for far more radical design in this commercial sector? Whether BEME.com's closure is attributed to either a strategy of 'silence' (Baudrillard 1985) or merely a lack of interest, it is clear from my research that current commercial imperatives are deeply implicated in gendered structures. BEME.com's original design does not meet these commercial demands and yet neither does its redesign which, one could argue, 'sold out' to commercial priorities. Therefore, three key indications for better design for a female niche market emerge from the BEME.com case study. They are (a) centre all aspects of the design process on the actual end-user; (b) consciously recognise the folly of using gender alone as an appropriate description of female audiences; (c) be aware of social, cultural and political factors that exert influence over the design process.

Lack of understanding of the user can be detrimental to the design outcome. Although the audience is defined through the process of designing for a female niche market, these definitions cannot be based solely on designers' implicit knowledge. They need to reflect real people who will interact with these design outcomes. There is also additional value in recognising the significance of the users' participation within the design process. The ever growing focus on online interactivity brings into spotlight the role users play in co-designing of the WWW sites. This is a crucial factor and can no longer be omitted from design process. With specific reference to female users, reliance on gender as the defining factor on the part of web designers only perpetuates stereotypes and does not respond to real needs. Reliance on gender as a guiding tool in designing for female online users in the UK market has proven to be misguided. Female audiences have already demonstrated active participation in forms of online cultural production. Therefore, targeting female users does not need to rely on gender for its appeal and success. Design outcomes which focus on particular needs of female users rather than their gender, in combination with innovative e-commerce strategies promise greater



potential for success than current solutions. Finally, in creating design outcomes for the WWW, today's web designers cannot ignore the growing influence of information and communication technology as tool of cultural production. Understanding of the design process as an exclusive interaction between user, designer and client around a potential design solution is far too simplistic and does not acknowledge other factors that can make or break a design outcome. In particular, when designing for female audiences, awareness of social, cultural and political factors can reveal implicit reliance on gender. If acknowledged early on within the design process, such awareness can lead to far more informed design outcomes based on strategies of inclusion.

This thesis and the research on which it is based bears witness to only a moment of Internet development which is dynamic and its artefacts at times ephemeral and fleeting. It is also possible that while its effects are as yet not sufficiently understood, the increasing provision and popularity of the Internet renders it a potentially powerful vehicle of change both within online design and in terms of gender structures more widely. Female audiences have already demonstrated active participation in forms of online cultural production. Therefore, targeting female users does not need to rely on gender for its appeal and success. Rather it opens up an opportunity for online designers to engage with the social and cultural implications of women's current use of the Internet. In light of this, design practice for the Internet can be conceived as having an open invitation to individually and collectively reflect, and effect design outcomes that are not simply based on gendered understandings of everyday life.



.....  
**Appendix**



## A.1 Data Sources Tables

### Documents

**Table 9: A listing of all the gathered documents with the respective code**

Code	Description	Source
D-CP1a	(2000). IPC launches BEME.com.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1b	(2000). IPC unveils new name to spearhead brand-centric strategy.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1c	(2000). BEME.com to sponsor Ally McBeal on Channel 4.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1d	(2001). BLM AND IPC agree Thomas Cook sponsorship agreement.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1e	(2000). Cherie Blair voices support for BEME.com charity campaign.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1f	(2000). Fitzgerald joins IPC Electric.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1g	(2000). IPC Media and Procter & Gamble Develop First Bespoke Microsites.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1h	(2001). IPC Media strengthens its corporate communications team.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1i	(2001). New strategy, new look and new structure for BEME.com	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP1j	(2001). IPC reviews online business.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP2a	(2000). IPC Connect.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 15.11.2000
D-CP2b	(2003). Corporate Information - Overview and Key Facts of AOL Time Warner	<a href="http://www.aoltime Warner.com/corporate_information/index.adp">http://www.aoltime Warner.com/corporate_information/index.adp</a> Retrieved: 30.07.2003
D-CP2c	(2003). Company: Time Inc. - Key Company Facts	<a href="http://www.aoltime Warnereurope.com/en/companies/time_inc.html">http://www.aoltime Warnereurope.com/en/companies/time_inc.html</a> Retrieved: 30.07.2003
D-CP2d	(2003). Corporate Information - Overview of AOL Time Warner Europe	<a href="http://www.aoltime Warnereurope.com/en/corporate_information.html">http://www.aoltime Warnereurope.com/en/corporate_information.html</a> Retrieved: 30.07.2003
D-CP3	(2000). Women.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 15.11.2000



D-CP4	(2001). BEME.com.	<a href="http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html">http://www.ipcmedia.com/frameset.html</a> Retrieved: 15.11.2000
D-CP5	(2001). the BEME.com team closing letter.	<a href="http://www.beme.com">http://www.beme.com</a> Retrieved: 17.09.2001
D-CP6a	(2003). Handbag.com - About Us.	<a href="http://www.handbag.com/aboutus/">http://www.handbag.com/aboutus/</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-CP6b	(2002). Handbag.com - About Us.	<a href="http://www.handbag.com/aboutus/">http://www.handbag.com/aboutus/</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP6c	(2003). Hollinger Telegraph New Media - Company Background.	<a href="http://www.htnm.com/">http://www.htnm.com/</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP6d	(2003). Telegraph Group Limited - Welcome to the Press Office.	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/pressoffice/main.jhtml?view=DISPLAYCONTENT&amp;grid=P8&amp;menuId=-1&amp;menuItem=-1&amp;_requestid=367459">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/pressoffice/main.jhtml?view=DISPLAYCONTENT&amp;grid=P8&amp;menuId=-1&amp;menuItem=-1&amp;_requestid=367459</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP6e	(2003). Boots Company plc - About Our Business.	<a href="http://www.boots-plc.com//information/info.asp?Level1ID=4">http://www.boots-plc.com//information/info.asp?Level1ID=4</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP7a	(2002). ICircle.com - About Us.	<a href="http://www.icircle.com/html/ICIRCLE/Community_and_information_pages/HOMEPAGE/220.html">http://www.icircle.com/html/ICIRCLE/Community_and_information_pages/HOMEPAGE/220.html</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-CP7b	(1999). Quarter Two Results Announcements.	<a href="http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/investor/presentations/powerpoint/investorsQ24.ppt">http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/investor/presentations/powerpoint/investorsQ24.ppt</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP7c	(1999). Freeserve - Investor Presentation.	<a href="http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/investor/presentations/powerpoint/q1investors.ppt">http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/investor/presentations/powerpoint/q1investors.ppt</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP7d	(2003). About Freeserve - Freeserve Business.	<a href="http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/insidefreeserve/thefsbusiness.html?redirect=int">http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/insidefreeserve/thefsbusiness.html?redirect=int</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP7e	(2003). About Freeserve - Press FAQs.	<a href="http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/newsroom/pressfaqs.html">http://www.aboutfreeserve.com/newsroom/pressfaqs.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-CP8a	(2002). Femail.co.uk - Background Information.	<a href="http://www.anm.co.uk/femailS.html">http://www.anm.co.uk/femailS.html</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-CP8b	(2002). About Associated New Media.	<a href="http://www.anm.co.uk/about.html">http://www.anm.co.uk/about.html</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-CP8c	(2002). Femail.co.uk - Testimonials.	<a href="http://www.anm.co.uk/femailSTestimonials.html">http://www.anm.co.uk/femailSTestimonials.html</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-CP8d	(2002). Femail.co.uk - Audience.	<a href="http://www.anm.co.uk/femailD.html">http://www.anm.co.uk/femailD.html</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-CP8e	(2002). Femail.co.uk - Advertising.	<a href="http://www.anm.co.uk/femailDCreativeOps.html">http://www.anm.co.uk/femailDCreativeOps.html</a> Retrieved: 08.10.2002
D-PREA1a	(2000). Women on the Web. J. Matthews, BBC.	<a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/626947.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/626947.stm</a> Retrieved: 02.04.2000



D-PREA1b	(2001). Women catch up on net use, BBC.	<a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1717424.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1717424.stm</a> Retrieved: 18.08.2003
D-PREA1c	(1999). Feminising the Web. L. Doig, BBC.	<a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/399876.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/399876.stm</a> Retrieved: 18.08.2003
D-PREA1d	(2001). Women lead UK online growth.	<a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1704063.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/1704063.stm</a> Retrieved: 18.08.2003
D-PREA1e	(1998). A hard sell - bringing women to the Web, BBC.	<a href="http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/70629.stm">http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/70629.stm</a> Retrieved: 18.08.2003
D-PREA2a	(1999). C-cups Through E-tailing. I. O'Rorke, The Guardian.	<a href="http://shopping.guardian.co.uk/newsandviews/story/0,5804,101074,00.html">http://shopping.guardian.co.uk/newsandviews/story/0,5804,101074,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA2b	(2000). Women of the World Click Here! S. Weale, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3952603,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3952603,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2c	(2001). The Missing Millions... or How to Win Women to the Web. A. Azhar, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3854366,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3854366,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2d	(2000). 'Fluff' Mars Rise of Cyberwoman. B. Summerskill, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4055780,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4055780,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2e	(1999). Handbag.com Hopes for Women's £70m. L. Buckingham, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3904442,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3904442,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2f	(2000). Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown. I. O'Rorke, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4059051,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4059051,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2g	(1999). The Twilight Zone. E. Brokes, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3943827,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3943827,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2h	(2001). ANM Launches femail.co.uk Portal. J. Hodgson, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4112338,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4112338,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2i	(2000). Enough of Boys' Toys, Women Say. G. Moss, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4099323,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4099323,00.html</a> Retrieved: 07.04.2001
D-PREA2j	(2001). Wound up, not Wired up. D. Bee.	The Guardian. London. 2-3 Retrieved: 19.04.2001
D-PREA2k	(2001). IPC Media Loses Faith in Women's Portals. A. Vickers, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4142374,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4142374,00.html</a> Retrieved: 26.11.2001
D-PREA2l	(2001). Growing Pains. O. Gibson, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4249304,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4249304,00.html</a> Retrieved: 26.11.2001



D-PREA2m	(2001). IPC Axes Loaded Website. O. Gibson, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4244453,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4244453,00.html</a> Retrieved: 26.11.2001
D-PREA2n	(1999). Different for Girls: Three of the Women's Sites. C. Ellis, The Guardian.	<a href="http://shopping.guardian.co.uk/newsandviews/story/0,5804,101074,00.html">http://shopping.guardian.co.uk/newsandviews/story/0,5804,101074,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA2o	(2002). Women Caught up in the Web. O. Gibson, The Guardian.	<a href="http://media.guardian.co.uk/newmedia/comment/0,7496,707290,00.html">http://media.guardian.co.uk/newmedia/comment/0,7496,707290,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA2p	(2000). CharlotteStreet to Relaunch Targeting Femail Readers. I. O'Rorke, The Guardian.	<a href="http://media.guardian.co.uk/newmedia/story/0,7496,374404,00.html">http://media.guardian.co.uk/newmedia/story/0,7496,374404,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA2q	(2000). Fashion Magazines Agree to Ban Use of Unhealthily Thin Models. L. Ward, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,335037,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,335037,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA2r	(2001). Tessa Jowell online, The Guardian.	<a href="http://media.guardian.co.uk/generalelection/story/0,7521,505128,00.html">http://media.guardian.co.uk/generalelection/story/0,7521,505128,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA2s	(2002). Bite by bite to success, The Guardian.	<a href="http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,627072,00.html">http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,627072,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA3a	(2000). A thin argument for blaming broadcasters. S. Barnett, The Observer.	<a href="http://observer.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,6903,338708,00.html">http://observer.guardian.co.uk/business/story/0,6903,338708,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA3b	(2001). Give us back our bodies. S. Orbach, The Observer.	<a href="http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,6903,511730,00.html">http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,6903,511730,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA3c	(2000). Now bigger is the ideal figure. J. Arlidge, The Observer.	<a href="http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,6903,336042,00.html">http://observer.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,6903,336042,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA3d	(2000). Let's take a wider look at the thin issue. N. Lawson, The Observer.	<a href="http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,6903,194067,00.html">http://observer.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,6903,194067,00.html</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA4	(2002). Body Image and the Media Influence on Eating Disorders.	<a href="http://www.edauk.com/default.htm">http://www.edauk.com/default.htm</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA5	(2000). Ban Skinny Models? Fat Chance, Say Magazines. T. Womersley, telegraph.co.uk.	<a href="http://www.telegraph.co.uk/">http://www.telegraph.co.uk/</a> Retrieved: 31.07.2003
D-PREA6	(2000). The Body Image Summit.	21.06.2000
D-PREA7	(2000). Women in Journalism Seminar.	Researcher's participation in the event 10.12.2000
D-SR1	(2000). IPC Media Women and Internet.	IPC Media Retrieved: 18.02.2002



D-SR2	(2000). Europe's women Catch-up Online.	Forrester Research, Inc. Retrieved: 16.07.2002
D-SR3	(2001). Who is Bringing Women Online.	Forrester Research, Inc. Retrieved: 16.07.2002
D-SR4	(2000). Women Reshape Online Shopping.	Forrester Research, Inc. Retrieved: 16.07.2002
D-SR5	(2001 and 2002). Which?online Annual Survey.	<a href="http://www.which.net">http://www.which.net</a> Retrieved: 06.02.2002 and 02.06.2003
D-VR1	(2000). BEME.com portal.	<a href="http://www.beme.com">http://www.beme.com</a> Retrieved: various dates in November 2000 and June – August 2001
D-VR2	(2002). handbag.com portal.	<a href="http://www.handbag.com">http://www.handbag.com</a> Retrieved: various dates in October 2002
D-VR3	(2002). femail.co.uk portal.	<a href="http://www.femail.co.uk">http://www.femail.co.uk</a> Retrieved: various dates in October 2002
D-VR4	(2002). iCircle.com portal.	<a href="http://www.iCircle.co.uk">http://www.iCircle.co.uk</a> Retrieved: various dates in October 2002

## Interviews

**Table 10: A listing of all the interview participants with the respective code**

Code	Gender	Description
I-IP1	Female	(2002). Director, DigitalEve. Interview: 31.07.2002
I-IP2	Female	(2002). CEO and co-founder, eZoka Group. Interview: 21.08.2002
I-IP3	Female	(2002). Senior Associate, Ariadne Capital. Interview: 20.09.2002
I-IP4	Male	(2002). Senior Production Editor, Women's Own Magazine. Interview: 05.09.2002
I-PT1	Female	(2002). Marketing Consultant. Interview: 29.04.2002
I-PT2	Female	(2002). Editorial/Creative Director. Interview: 20.03.2002
I-PT3	Male	(2001). Design Manager/Designer. Interview: 11.12.2001
I-PT4	Male	(2001). Brand Designer. Interview: 30.11.2001
I-PT5	Female	(2001). Senior Producer. Interview: 28.11.2001
I-TU1	Female	(2002). Programmer, Reuters Treasury Solutions. Interview: 07.02.2002



I-TU2	Female	(2002). Software Designer, Trace Group, Plc. Interview: 04.03.2002
I-TU3	Female	(2002). Technical Consultant, Reuters Treasury Solutions. Interview: 01.03.2002
I-TU4	Female	(2002). Personal Assistant to the Head of Europe on the trading floor, City Group. Interview: 11.04.2002

## A.2 Visual Evidence of Recorded Homepages of Women's Web Sites in the UK

October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 14: Homepage: handbag.com

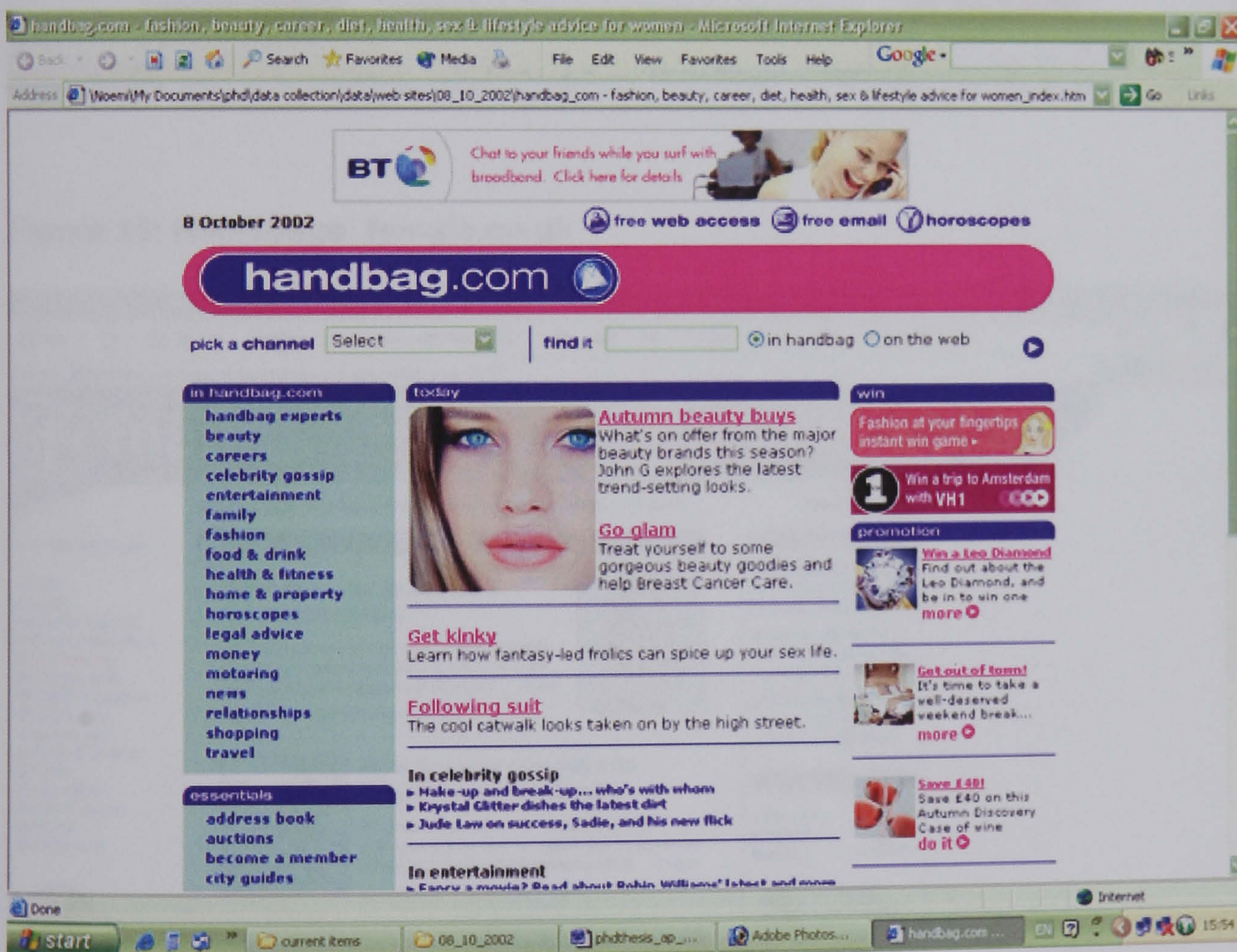




Figure 15: Homepage: icircle.com

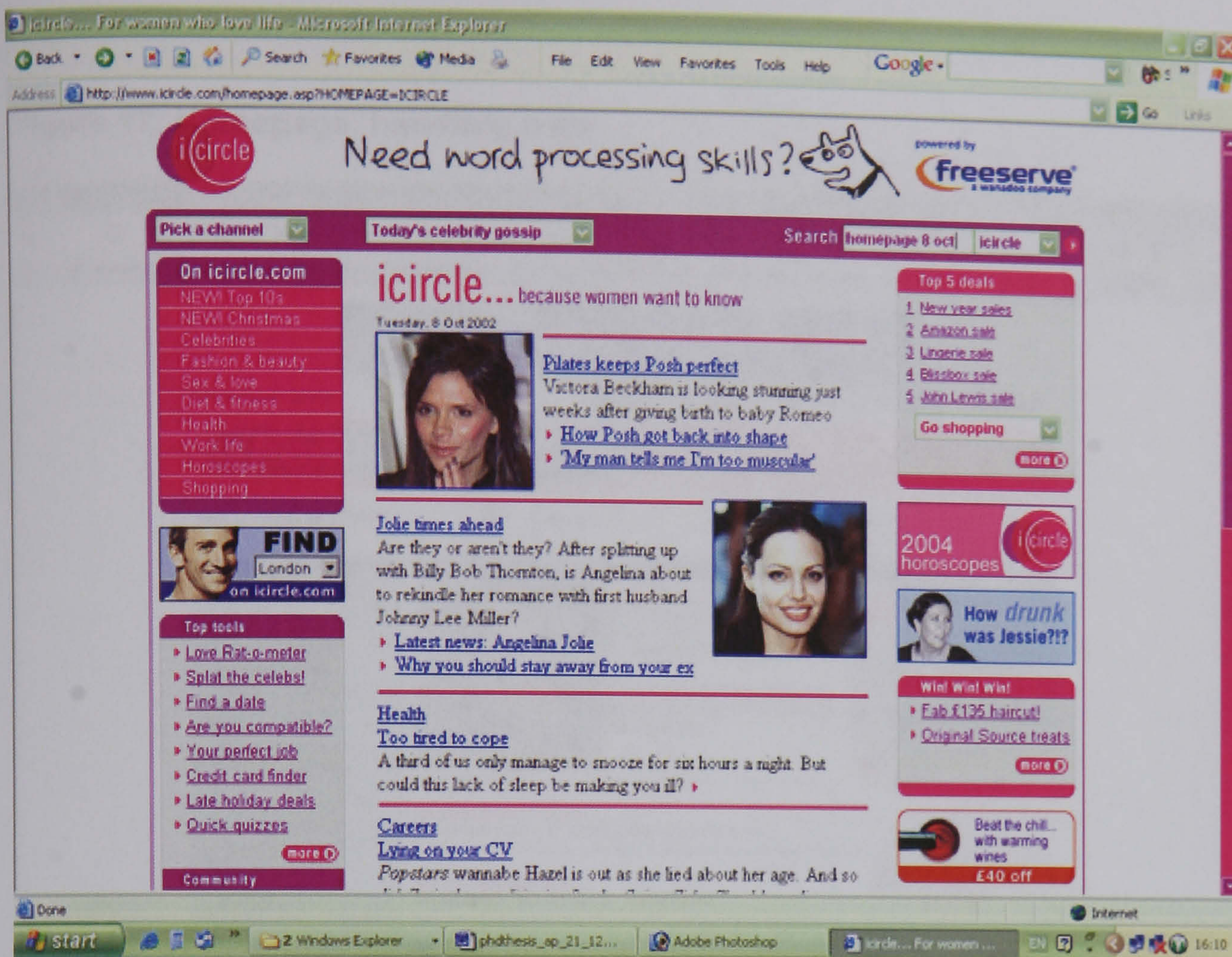
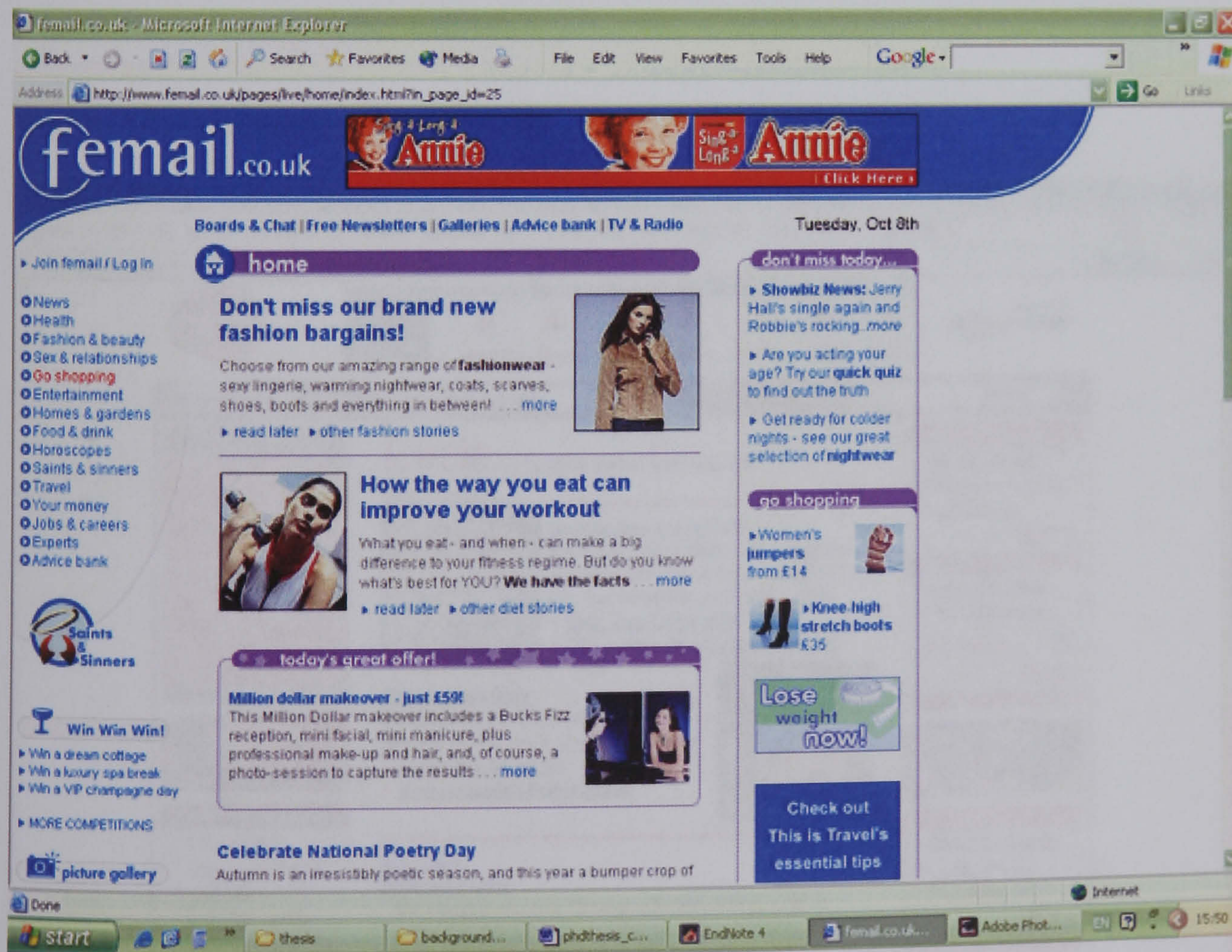


Figure 16: Homepage: female.co.uk





October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 17: Homepage: handbag.com

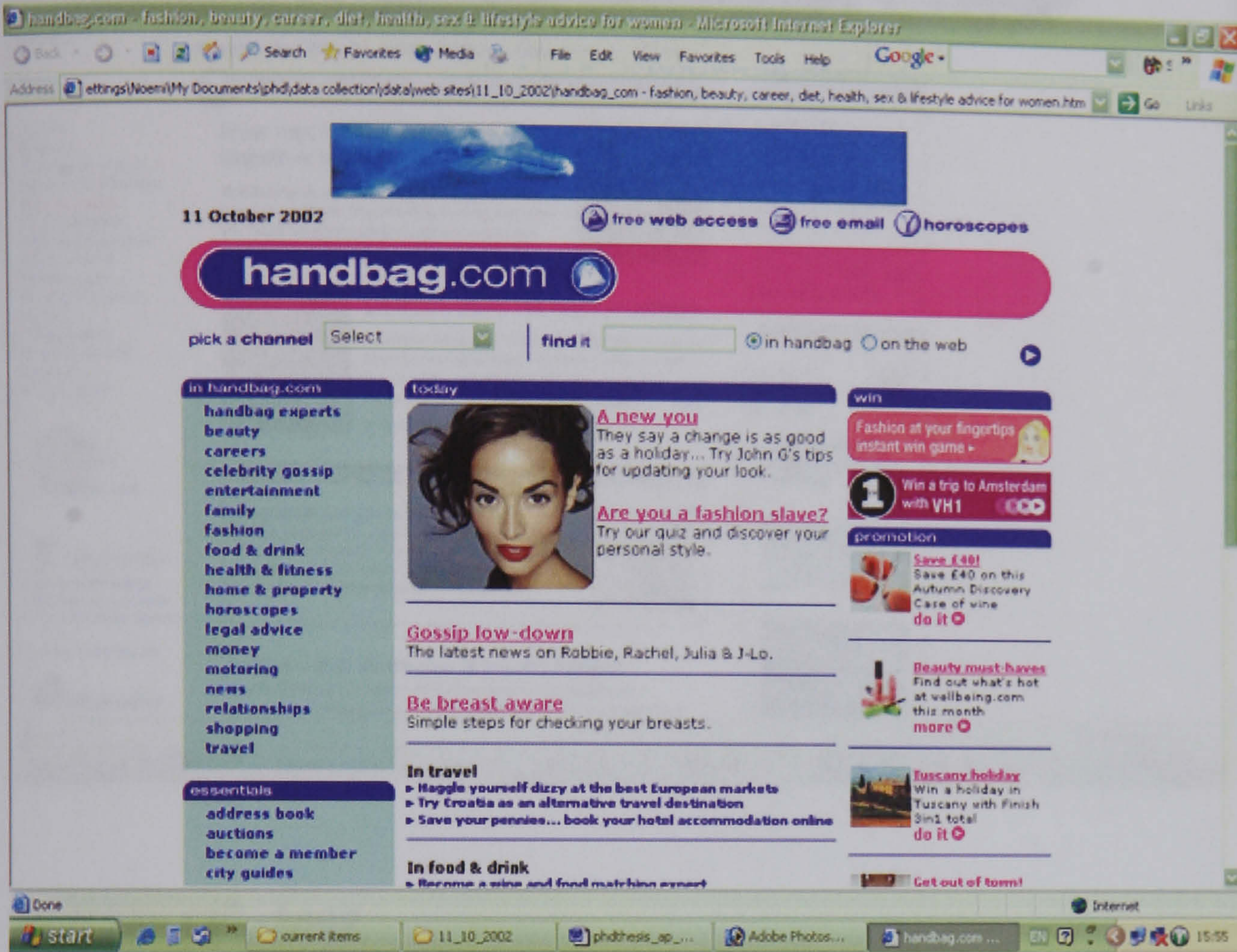
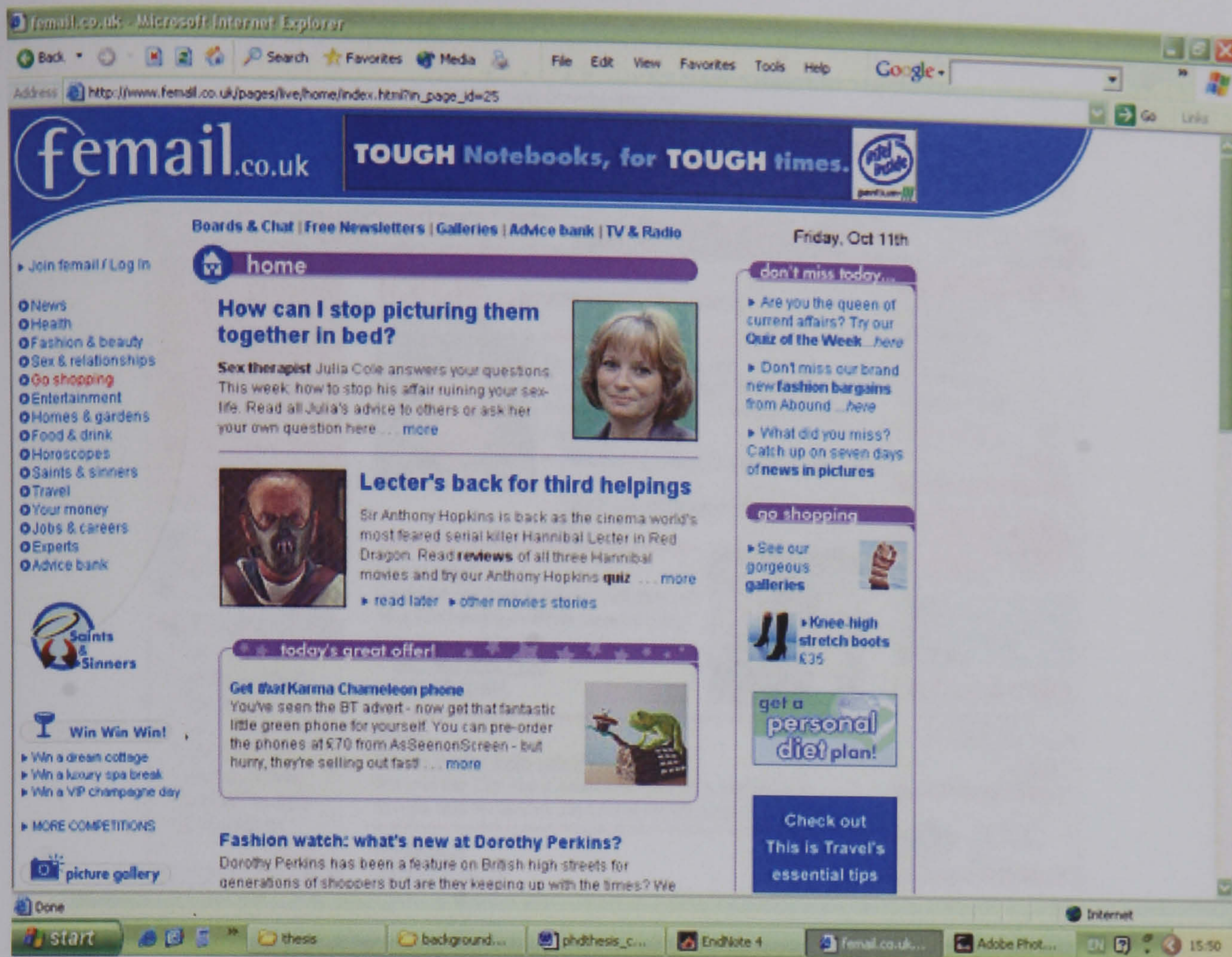


Figure 18: Homepage: icircle.com





Figure 19: Homepage: female.co.uk



October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 20: Homepage: handbag.com

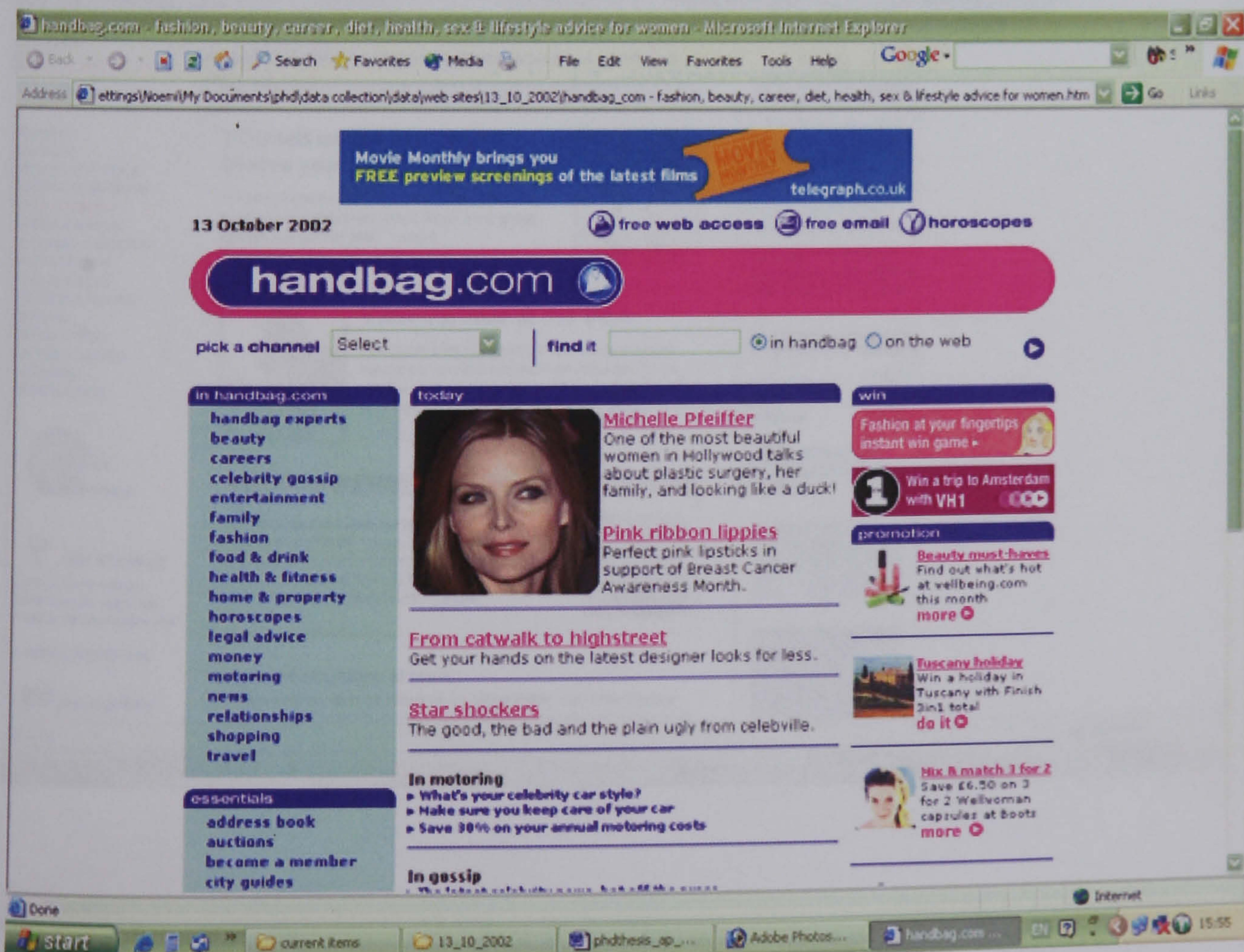




Figure 21: Homepage: icircle.com



Figure 22: Homepage: female.co.uk





October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 23: Homepage: handbag.com

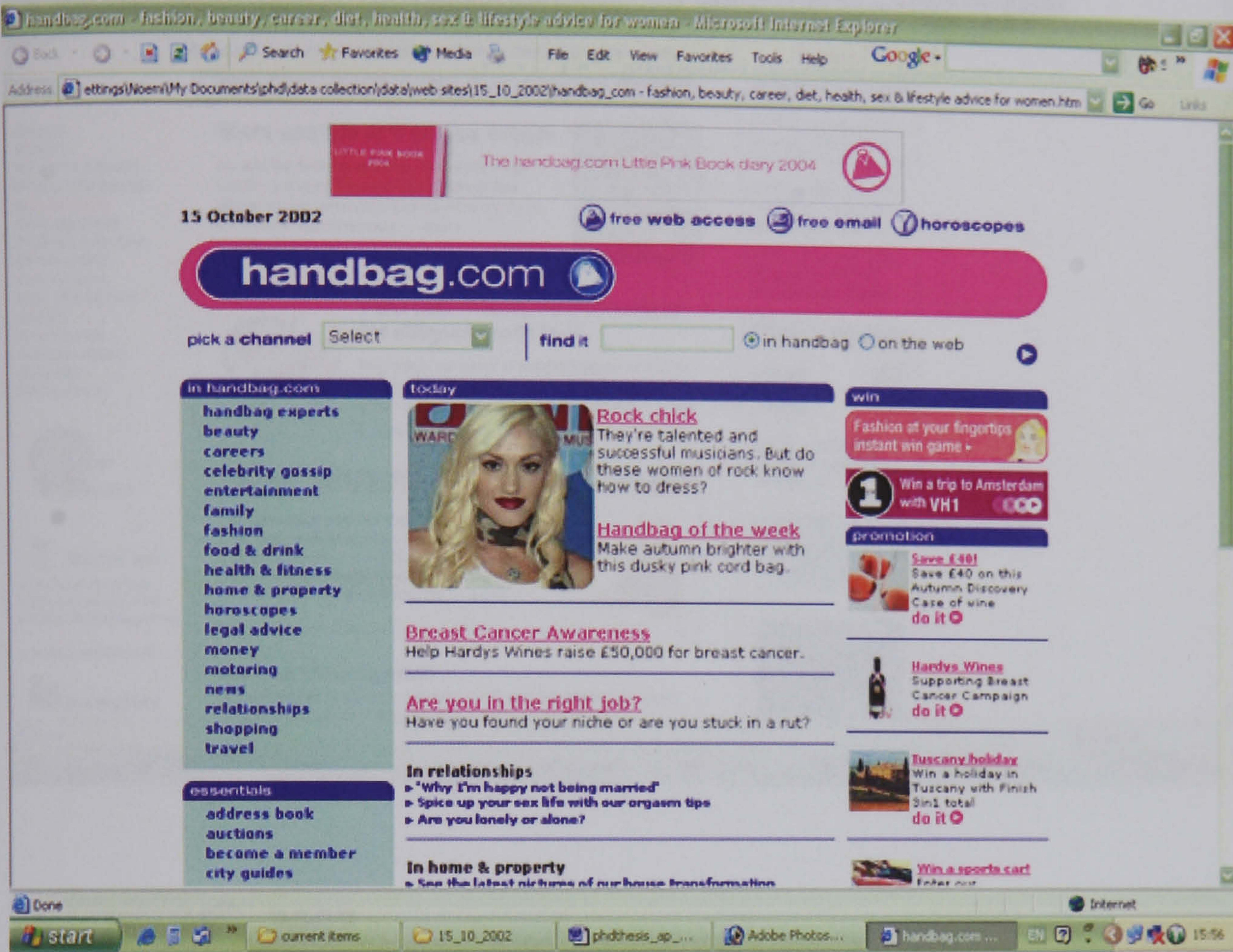
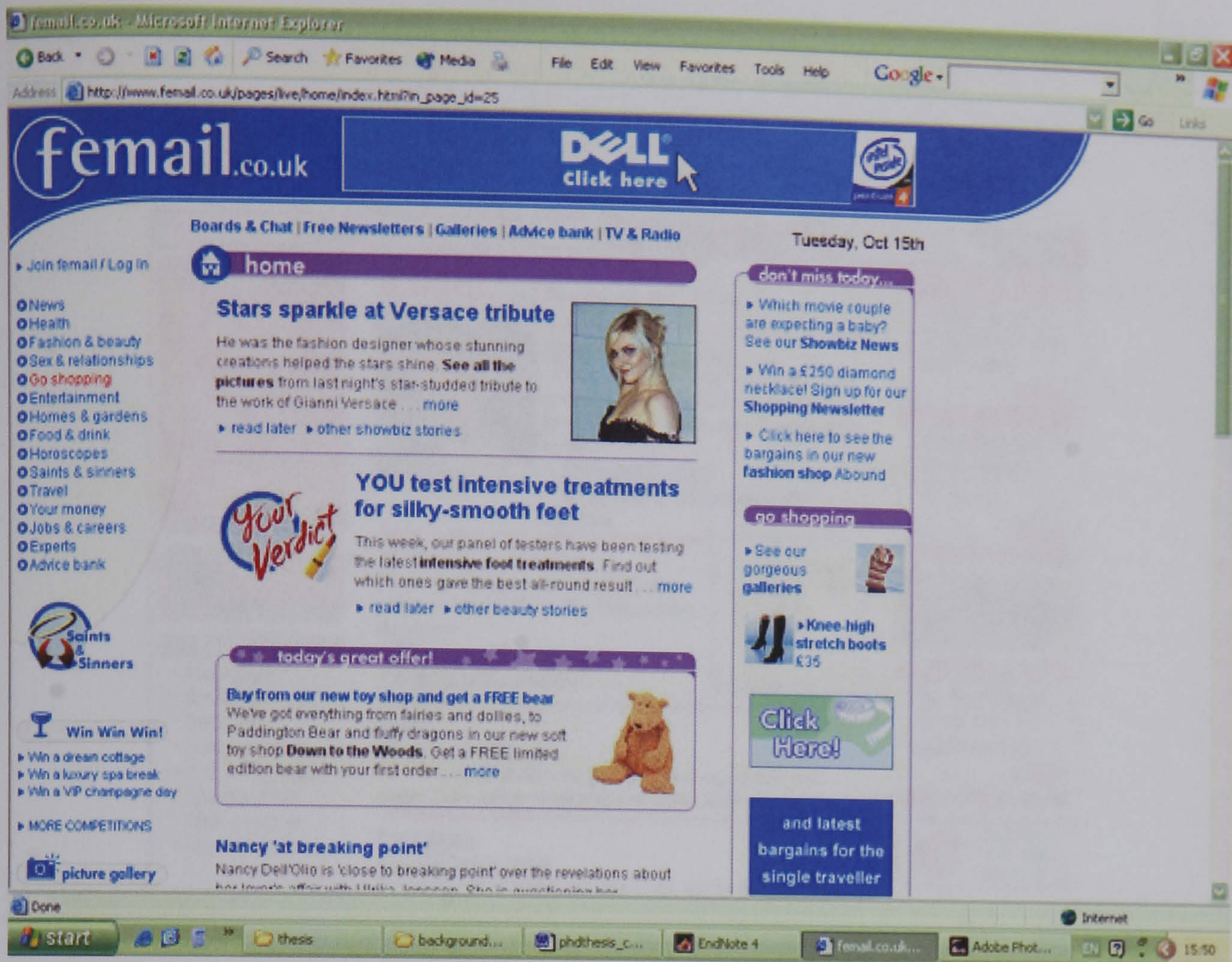


Figure 24: Homepage: icircle.com





Figure 25: Homepage: female.co.uk



October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 26: Homepage: handbag.com

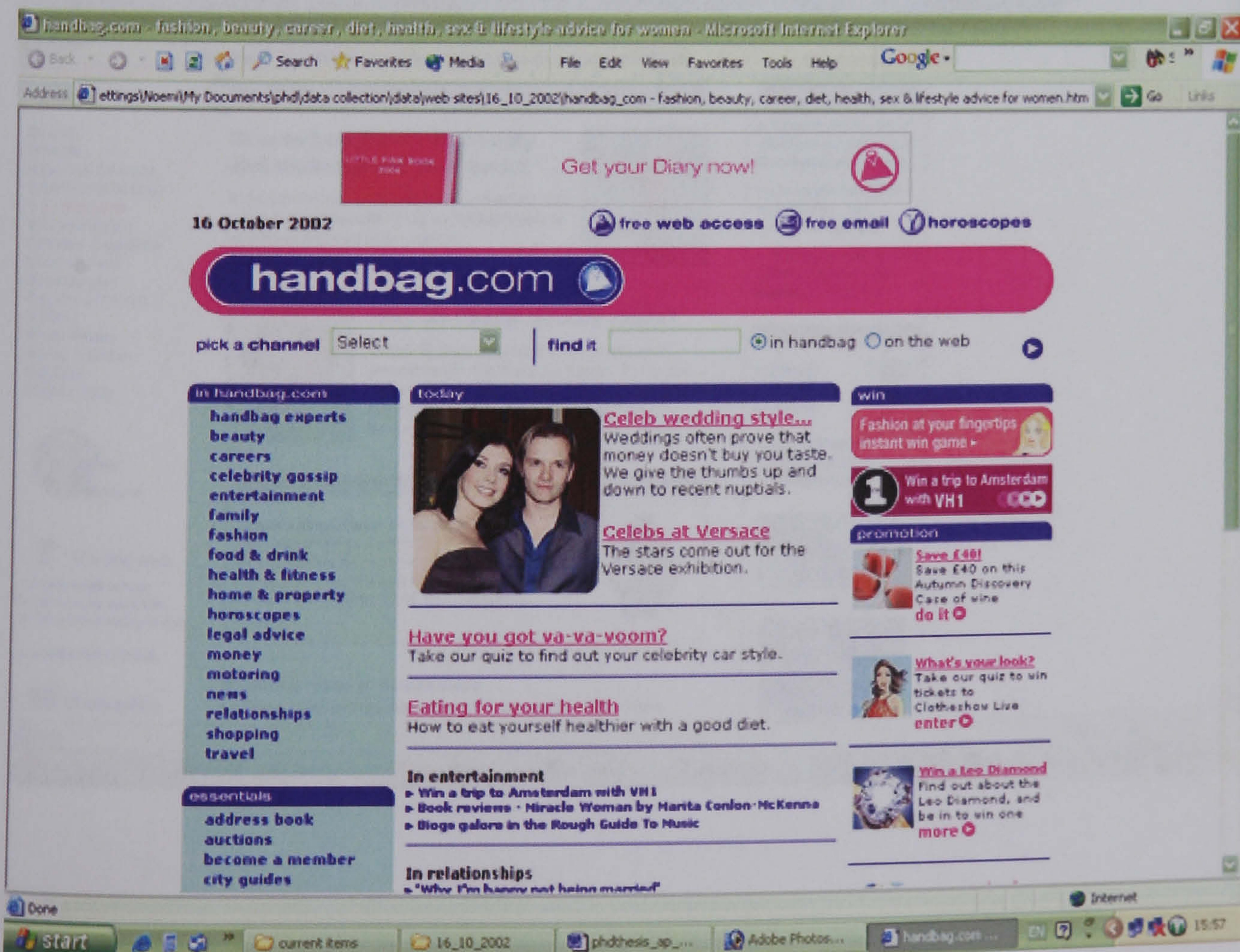




Figure 27: Homepage: icircle.com

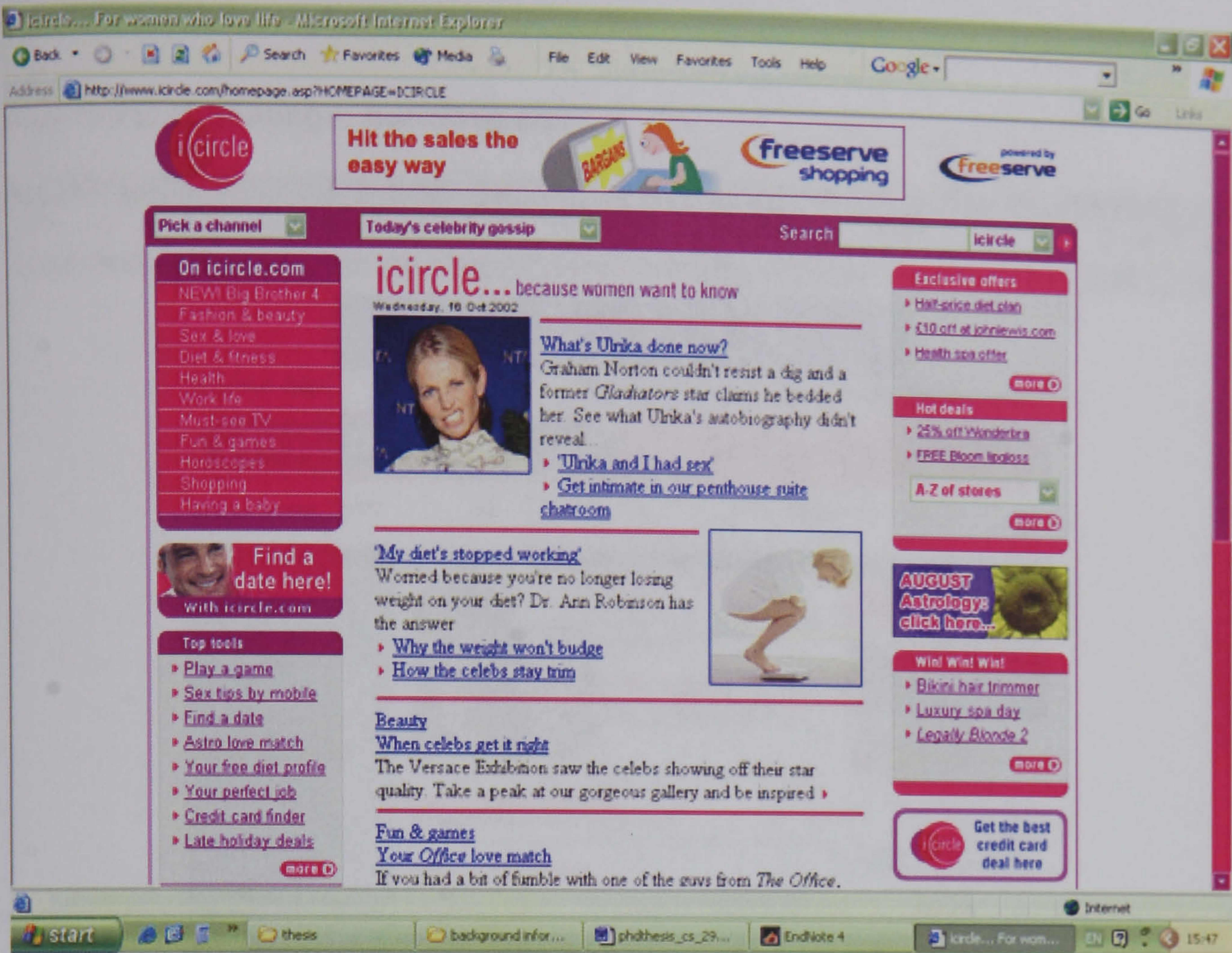
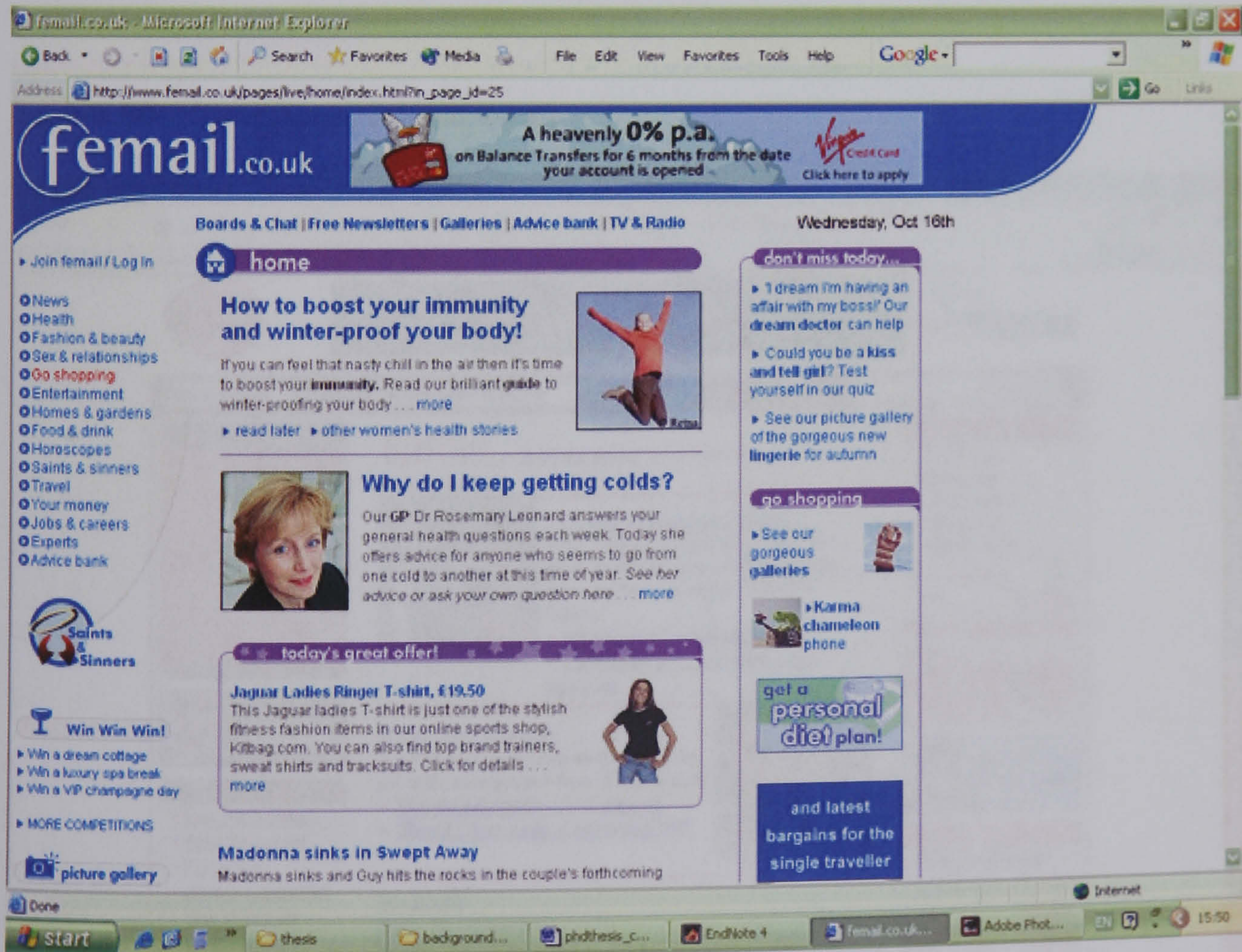


Figure 28: Homepage: female.co.uk





October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 29: Homepage: handbag.com

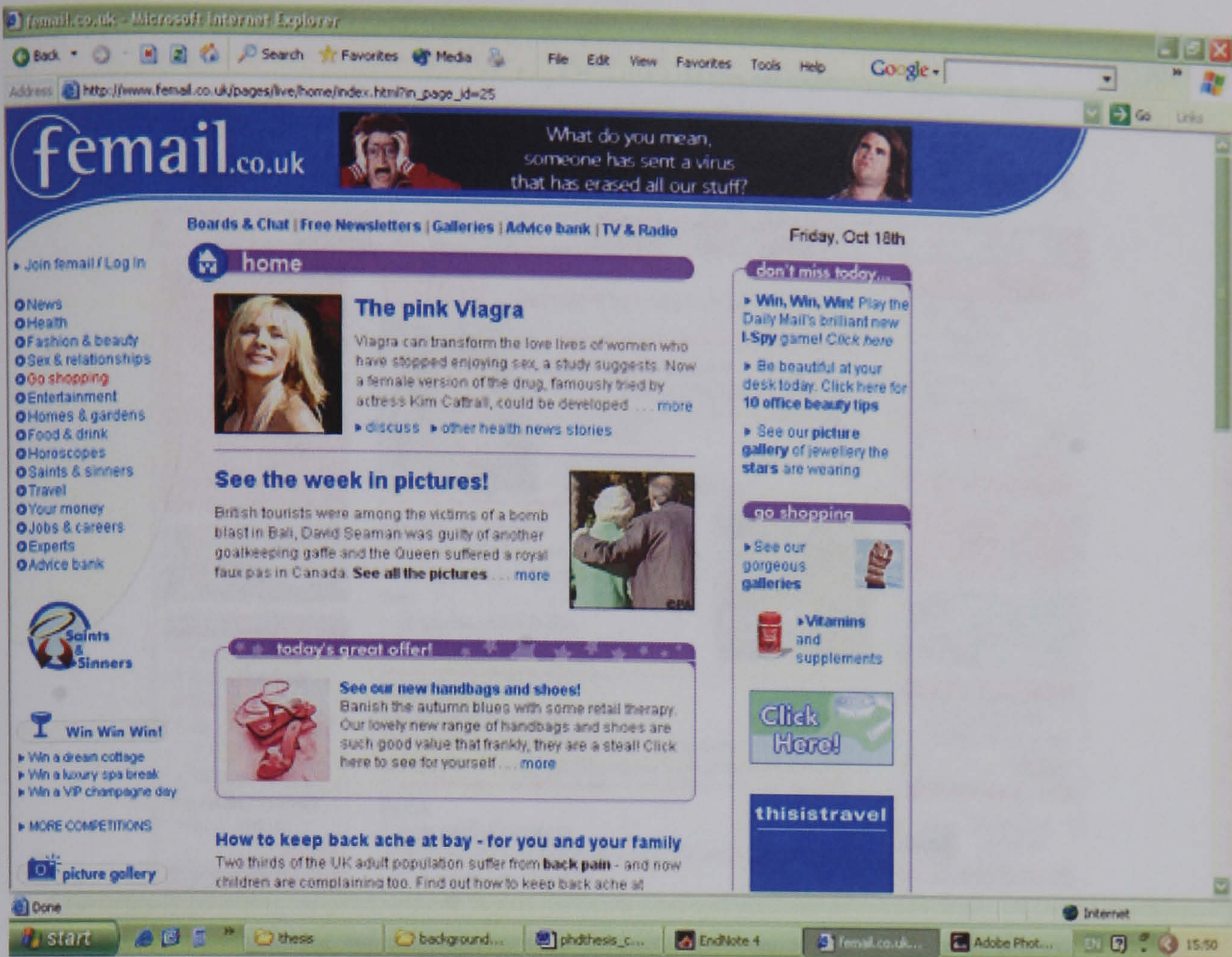


Figure 30: Homepage: icircle.com





Figure 31: Homepage: female.co.uk



October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 32: Homepage: handbag.com

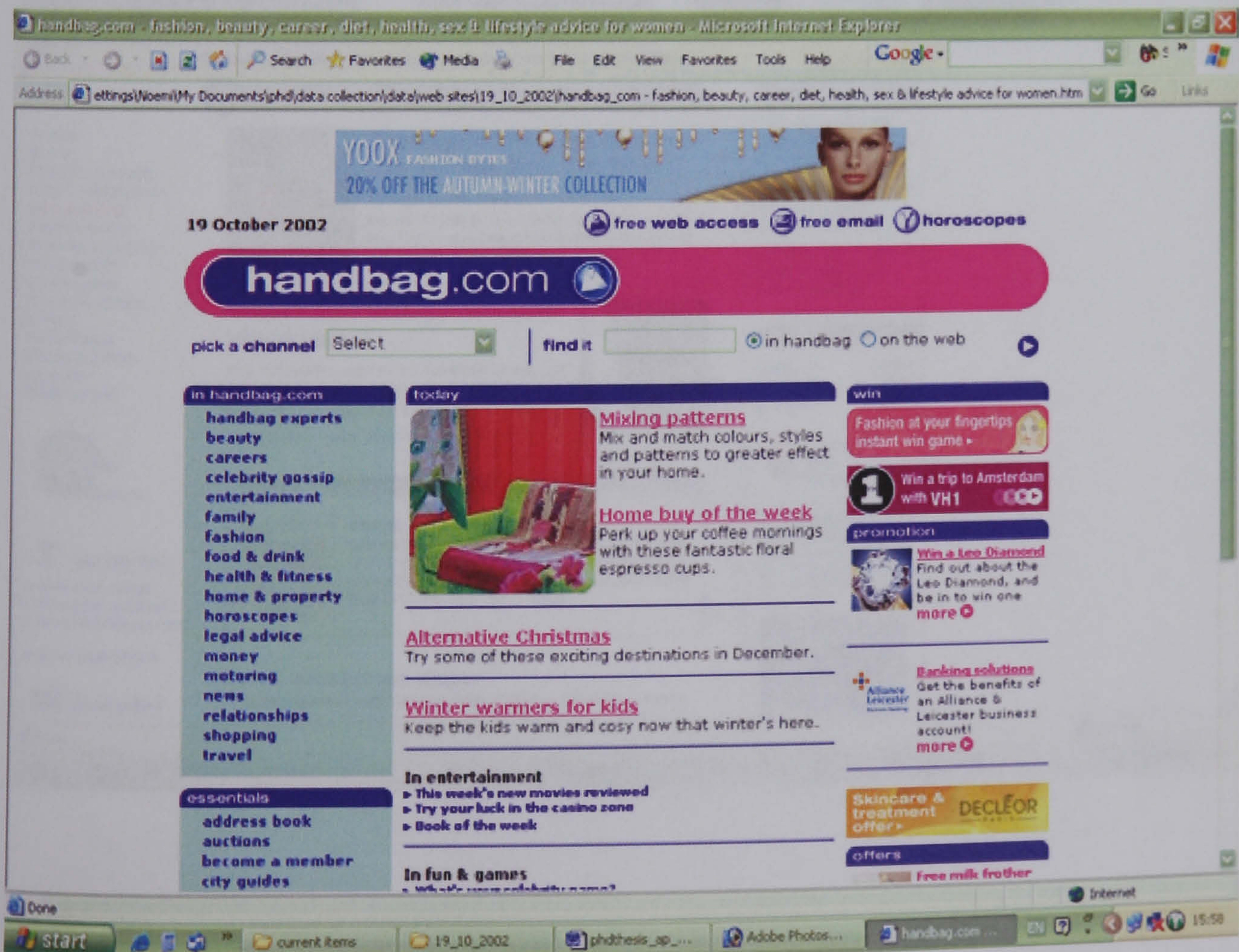
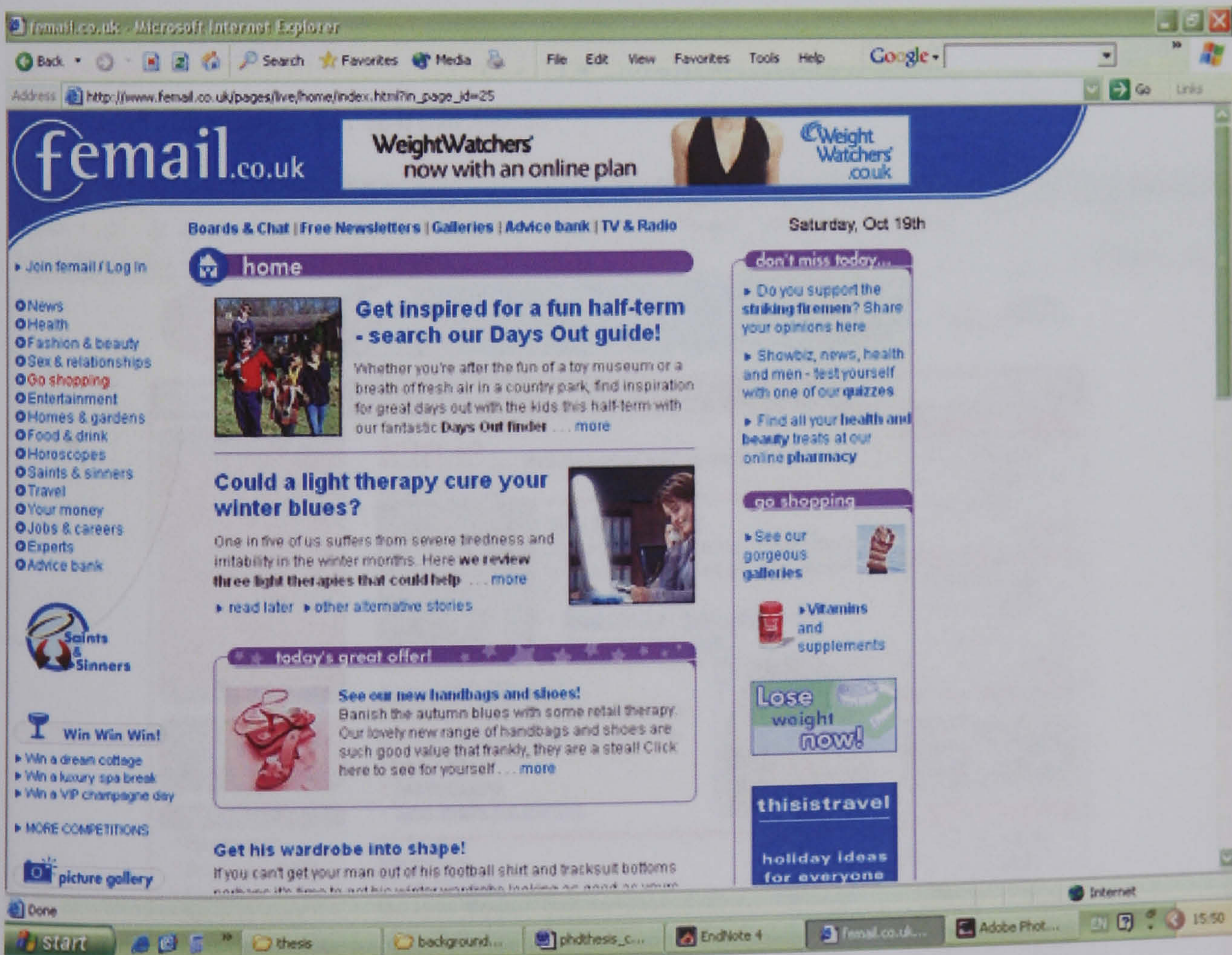




Figure 33: Homepage: icircle.com



Figure 34: Homepage: female.co.uk





October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Figure 35: Homepage: handbag.com

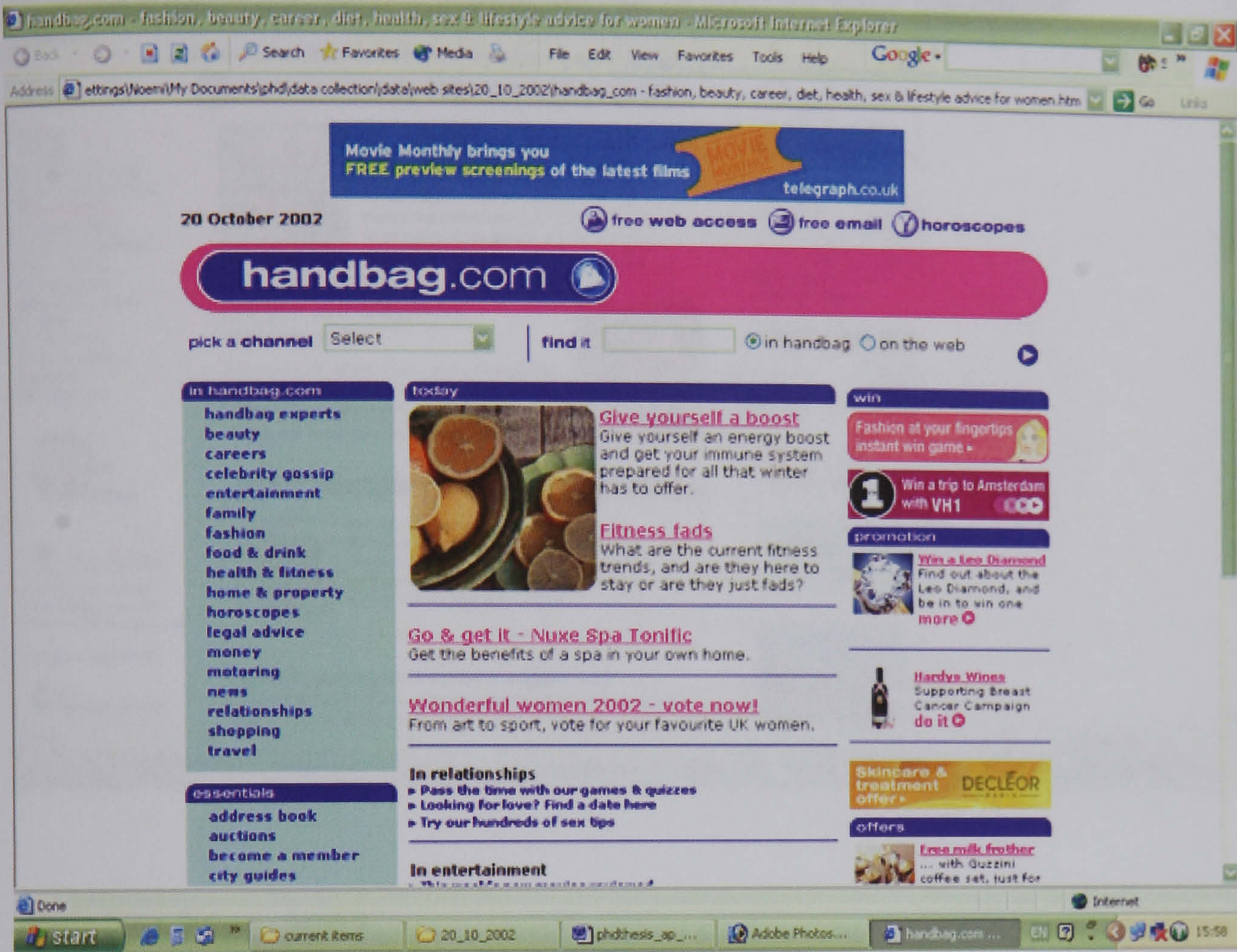


Figure 36: Homepage: icircle.com





Figure 37: Homepage: female.co.uk



October 21st, 2002

Figure 38: Homepage: handbag.com

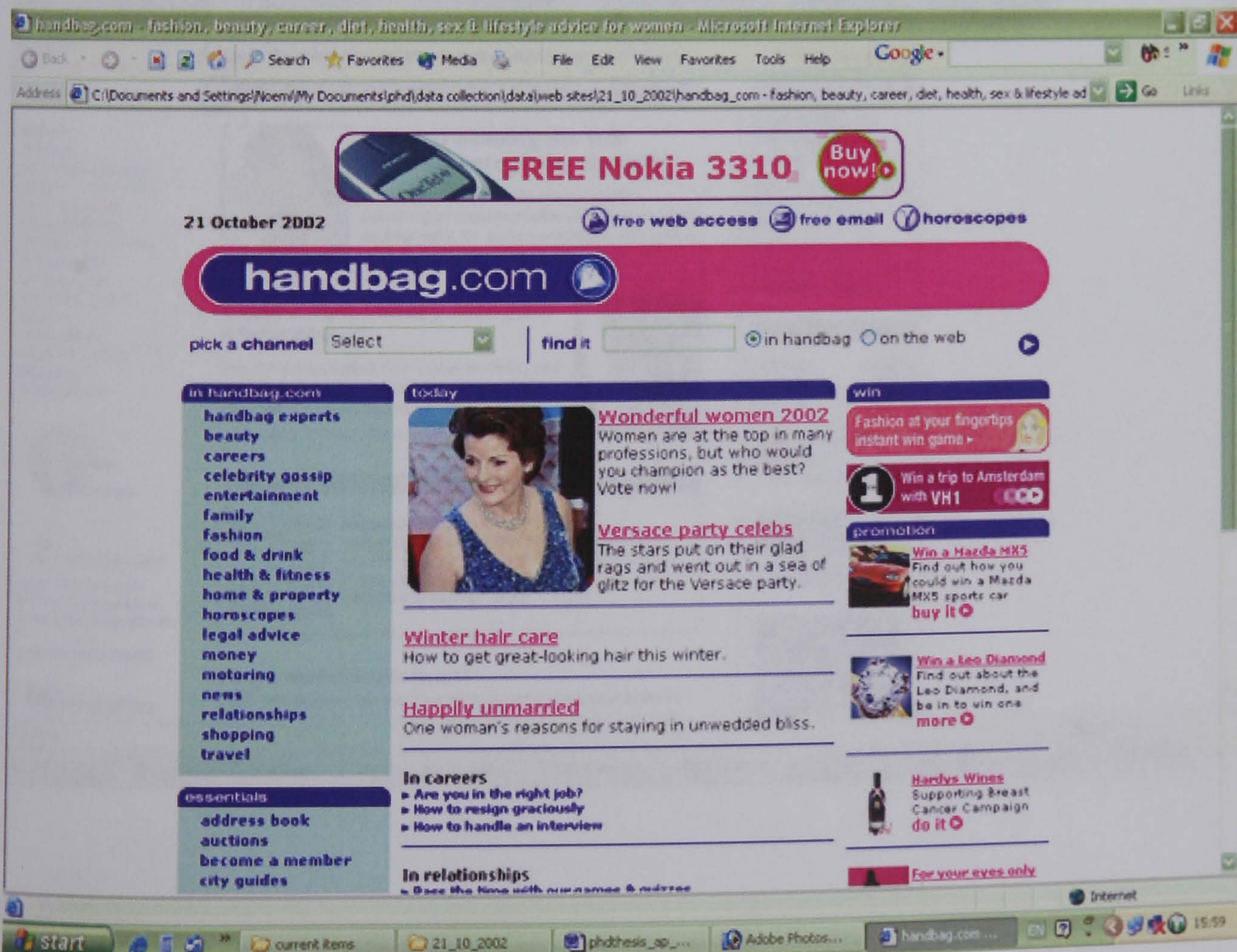




Figure 39: Homepage: icircle.com

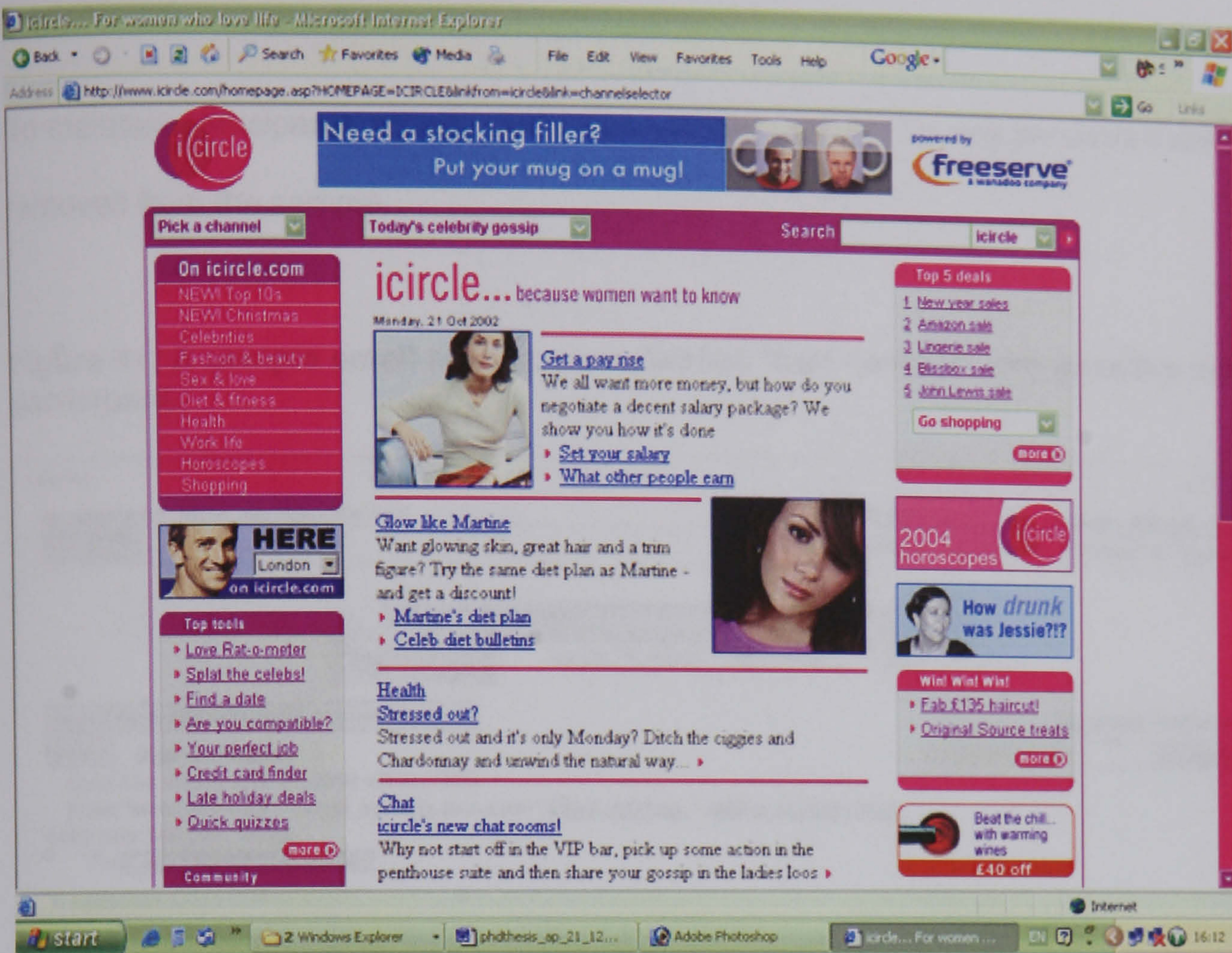


Figure 40: Homepage: female.co.uk





## A.3 Sample Correspondence

To maintain participants' privacy and personal data confidential, any personal details have been removed from the sample.

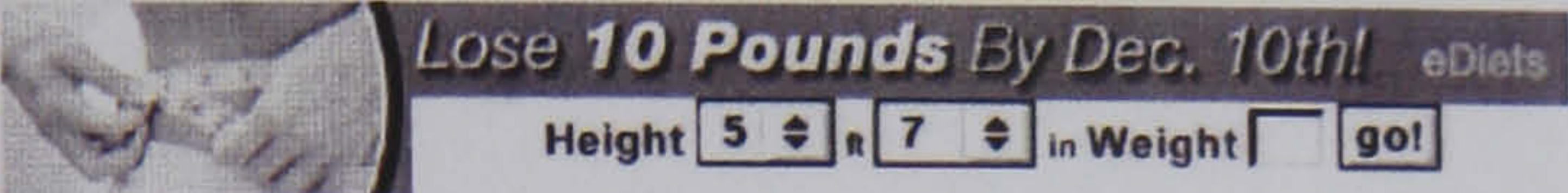
Figure 41: A sample email sent out to establish 'first contact' with possible interview participant.

Yahoo! Mail 12/11/01 13:52

[for printing](#) for noemi\_maria@yahoo.com Yahoo! - My Yahoo! Options - Sign Out - Help

Powered by **COMPAQ** Mail Addresses Calendar Notepad

---



**Reply** **Reply All** **Forward** **as attachment** **Download Attachments**

**Delete** **Next** | **for printing** **- Choose Folder -** **Move**

**Date:** Thu, 20 Sep 2001 02:48:01 -0700 (PDT)  
**From:** "noemi sadowska" <noemi\_maria@yahoo.com> | [Block Address](#) | [Add to Address Book](#)  
**Subject:** re: beme.com design  
**To:** [REDACTED]

to whom it may concern,

i would like to take this opportunity to establish contact with designers that have worked on the web site for ipc media - beme.com

my name is noemi sadowska and i am design researcher at goldsmiths college, university of london. since a year i have been indirectly investigating beme.com as part of my phd research project. beme.com is part of my case study as a representation of a women's magazine portal uniquely positioned on the web in terms of design and its content. i do realise that beme.com has unfortunately been taken off-line, but i was hoping that i still would be able to established contact with people who have worked closely with the site. therefore i would appreciate any contact with the designers or programmers involved with beme.com




i would greatly appreciate any help or information concerning my case.

noemi sadowska  
department of design  
goldsmiths college, university of london

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Terrorist Attacks on U.S. - How can you help?  
Donate cash, emergency relief information  
[http://dailynews.yahoo.com/fc/US/Emergency\\_Information/](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/fc/US/Emergency_Information/)

---

Click a  to send an instant message to an online friend  = Online,  = Offline

**Delete** **Next** | **for printing** **- Choose Folder -** **Move**

**Reply** **Reply All** **Forward** **as attachment** **Download Attachments**

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[Address Book](#) · [Alerts](#) · [Auctions](#) · [Bill Pay](#) · [Bookmarks](#) · [Briefcase](#) · [Broadcast](#) · [Calendar](#) · [Chat](#) · [Classifieds](#) · [Clubs](#) · [Companion](#) · [Domains](#) · [Experts Games](#) · [Greetings](#) · [Home Pages](#) · [Invites](#) · [Mail](#) · [Maps](#) · [Member Directory](#) · [Messenger](#) · [My Yahoo!](#) · [News](#) · [PayDirect](#) · [People Search](#) · [Personals](#) · [Photos](#) · [Shopping](#) · [Sports](#) · [Stock Quotes](#) · [TV](#) · [Travel](#) · [Weather](#) · [Yahoo!igans](#) · [Yellow Pages](#) · [more...](#)

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Page 1 of 1

<http://us.f95.mail.yahoo.com/ym/ShowLetter?YY=63878&order=down&sort=date&pos=0>



Figure 42: A sample response to a 'first contact email'.

Yahoo! Mail 26/11/01 13:47

**Inbox for noemi\_maria@yahoo.com** Yahoo! - My Yahoo! Options - Sign Out - Help

powered by **COMPAQ** Mail Addresses Calendar Notepad

---

FREE Profile: Height  ft  in Weight

**From:** [REDACTED]

**To:** "noemi\_maria@yahoo.com" <noemi\_maria@yahoo.com>

**CC:** [REDACTED]

**Subject:** FW: beme.com design

**Date:** Mon, 26 Nov 2001 13:14:11 -0000

Hi Noemi,

[REDACTED] asked me to put you in touch with someone that worked on the BEME site. I contacted [REDACTED] the Producer in charge of it's development within Wheel and she is happy to work out where she can assist you. She no longer works at Wheel but can be contacted below.

[REDACTED]  
Producer  
Direct Line : [REDACTED]

Kind regards

[REDACTED]

-----Original Message-----  
From: noemi sadowska [mailto:noemi\_maria@yahoo.com]  
Sent: Monday, November 26, 2001 11:03  
To: [REDACTED]  
Subject: Re: beme.com design

dear [REDACTED],

following my previous e-mail i was wondering if you could help me in order to establish contact with any designers that have worked on the design and development of beme.com

my name is noemi sadowska and i am a phd researcher at goldsmiths college, department of design. as part of my phd research i am looking at beme.com as an example of design in the context of women's internet portals.

i would greatly appreciate any help in assisting me to contact anyone that was involved with the design

http://us.f95.mail.yahoo.com/ym/ShowLetter?MsgId=4886\_1445383\_4277\_1234\_862\_0\_831&YY=64392&inc=50&order=down&sort=date&pos=0&box=Inbox Page 1 of 2



Figure 43: A sample interview acknowledgement letter, posted after the interview took place.



DEPARTMENT of DESIGN  
*Head of Department* **Professor Martin Woolley**  
Technology Education Research Unit  
*Director* **Professor Richard Kimbell**

Postgraduate enquiries 020 7919 7788  
Undergraduate enquiries 020 7919 7777  
Fax 020 7919 7797/7783  
Email internet:design@gold.ac.uk

September 23, 2002

Re: Interview with Ms Noemi Sadowska

Dear [REDACTED],

I would like once again to thank you for your participation in my research project. You have been asked to be a volunteer research participant because your professional expertise is appropriate to this research topic. The information you have provided in the interview is very useful and will be a great asset to the final research findings. As I have already mentioned prior to the interview, I will abide by the following ethical procedures:

- i. Any information you provide will be held in strict confidence and used for academic purposes only.
- ii. Data obtained by the interview will be treated as 'absolutely confidential', in the sense that no response or finding will ever be published that could be traced back to you, the participant.

Thank you once again, I really appreciated your help.

Best regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "N. Sadowska".

Noemi Sadowska  
PhD Researcher  
Department of Design  
Goldsmiths College

Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW  
Main Telephone Number: 020 7919 7171 Web site: [www.goldsmiths.ac.uk](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk)

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE SPECIALISES IN THE STUDY OF CREATIVE, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL PROCESSES AND IS COMMITTED TO LIFE-LONG LEARNING



## A.4 Interview Protocols

### *Production Team Interview Protocol*

The aim is to explore in more detail the BEME.com key design solutions, design decision-making process and overall discourses informing the site. The discussed points are focused on the personal experiences each participant goes through or observes while creating the BEME.com site. It prompts each participant to express their own view and understanding of BEME.com. Taking into account the different roles played by various members of the BEME.com production team and the time factor, the aim of the interviews is to target the key participants. Tables 11-13 p. 307-308 present the prompts used during the interview.

**Table 11: Interview prompts for BEME.com production team (IP-PT)**

Code	Descriptor	Prompt
IP-PT 1	Participant	Define your role in the process of BEME.com production.
IP-PT 2	BEME.com portal	In your opinion what constitutes BEME.com experience? How were the designed outcomes arrived at (ie, visual aspects of site layout, choice of images etc.)? What were the design process factors to consider? In your opinion what were the reason for its final closure?
IP-PT 3	BEME.com user	What was the role of interactivity within BEME.com?

**Table 12: Interview prompts for BEME.com member of production team conducted via email (IP-IPT1)**

Code	Descriptor	Prompt
IP-IPT1 1	Participant	Describe the role you played in the creation and production of BEME.com? What were your main responsibilities?
IP-IPT1 2	BEME.com portal	What was BEME.com's underlying mission? Who were the intended users of BEME.com? If BEME.com as an online women's portal can be seen as a specific type of women's Internet experience: what type of (unique) experience does it offer? How does that experience fit into the ever-changing Internet market place? How are the mission and the intended on-line experience of



		<p>BEME.com reflected in its visual design (ie, visual aspects of site layout, choice of images etc.)?</p> <p>From the marketing point of view, what factors were considered during design and production process of BEME.com?</p> <p>Were you conscious of any personal agendas that might have influenced design processes and the visual outcome of BEME.com?</p> <p>Were you surprised at the closure of BEME.com?</p> <p>When did the initial difficulties started to surface?</p> <p>What do you believe were the major reasons for BEME.com closure?</p>
IP-IPT1 3	BEME.com user	<p>From the marketing point of view, what was the perceived benefit of including interactivity as part of visual design of BEME.com?</p> <p>What structures were put in place to include the users perspectives: as part of design process, in general and design of interactivity, in particular?</p>

**Table 13: Interview prompts for BEME.com member of production team conducted via email (IP-IPT2)**

Code	Descriptor	Prompt
IP-IPT2 1	Participant	<p>Describe the role you played in the creation and production of BEME.com?</p> <p>What were your main responsibilities?</p>
IP-IPT2 2	BEME.com portal	<p>What was BEME.com's underlying mission?</p> <p>Who were the intended users of BEME.com?</p> <p>If BEME.com as an online women's portal can be seen as a specific type of women's Internet experience: what type of (unique) experience does it offer?</p> <p>How are the mission and the intended on-line experience of BEME.com reflected in its visual design (ie, visual aspects of site layout, choice of images etc.)?</p> <p>What prompted the visual design choices to create the final BEME.com outcome?</p> <p>What were the factors considered during design and production process of BEME.com?</p> <p>Were you conscious of any personal agendas that might have influenced design processes and the visual outcome of BEME.com?</p> <p>Were you surprised at the closure of BEME.com?</p> <p>When did the initial difficulties started to surface?</p> <p>What do you believe were the major reasons for BEME.com closure?</p>



IP-IPT2 3	BEME.com user	<p>What was the perceived benefit of including interactivity as part of visual design of BEME.com?</p> <p>What structures were put in place to include the users perspectives:</p> <p>as part of design process, in general?</p> <p>and design of interactivity, in particular?</p>
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### ***BEME.com Female Target Users Interview Protocol***

The aim of the interview is to obtain an insight into female 'users' idea of Internet participation. The participants are asked to describe their personal experiences with the Internet, its uses and in particular use of women's sites. The reason for obtaining the data from the target users is based on their particular relationship with the industry. Table 14 p. 309 presents the prompts used during the interview.

**Table 14: Interview prompts for BEME.com target users (IP-TU)**

Code	Descriptor	Prompt
IP-TU1	Participant	Define your role in relation to the Internet.
IP-TU2	BEME.com / women Internet portals	<p>In your opinion what constitutes women's portal (BEME.com) experience?</p> <p>How do you find the design of women's portals (BEMe.com) (ie, visual aspects of site layout, choice of images etc.)?</p>
IP-TU3	BEME.com / Women Internet portal user	<p>What was the role of interactivity in your Internet (BEME.com) experience?</p> <p>Why you do or do not engage with women's portals (BEME.com)?</p>

### ***Industry Professionals Interview Protocol***

The interviews aim to obtain data on women's portals as meaningful empowering environments. The interviewees are asked to express their expert opinion about what generates value within/about women's portals for the female users. Table 15 p. 310 presents the prompts used during the interview. One of the participants in this set of data comes from women's paper publishing industry. Since the interviews are semi-structured in nature, the prompts for the



interview are redirected to cover areas that might be more suitable to his expertise. (See Table 16 p. 310)

**Table 15: Interview prompts for industry professionals (IP-IP)**

Code	Descriptor	Prompt
IP-IP 1	Participant	Define your role in relation to the Internet.
IP-IP 2	Women Internet portals	In your opinion, what are the shortcomings of the existing commercial web sites for women? In your opinion, what types of web sites in the commercial realm are 'good and empowering experiences' for women on the Internet? In your opinion, how can web design become a tool for creating these 'empowering experience' sites?
IP-IP 3	Women Internet portal user	What should be the role of interactivity within these 'empowering experience' sites? In your opinion, what creates value for women about/within women's Internet sites?

**Table 16: Interview prompts for industry professional in paper publications (IP-IP4)**

Code	Descriptor	Prompt
IP-IP4 1	Participant	Define your role in relation to women's publishing industry.
IP-IP4 2	BEME.com / Women Internet portals	In your opinion, is there a transition between 'paper' to 'online' within the women's publishing industry and what are its advantages and limitations? In your opinion, what are the shortcomings of the existing commercial web sites for women? In your opinion, what are the shortcomings of BEME.com?
IP-IP4 3	Women Internet portal user	In your opinion, what creates value for women about/within women's paper publishing industry? How does that compare to online women's portals?



## A.5 Additional Material

**Table 17: Comparison of the dominant features of women's online portals versus women's traditional paper magazines**

Women's Online Portals	Description	Women's Traditional Paper Magazines	Description
Access	Requires a computer and an Internet connection. Provided these are available, the access can vary from the comfort of ones home to Internet cafes or other public places offering Internet connection. Often viewing of the site itself does not require any prior payment.	Access	Available at newsstands, corners shops, supermarkets, petrol stations, etc. It requires the reader to make a conscious trip to any of the possible locations that sells such magazines. The reader can quickly browse the magazine for free, but needs to purchase it to be able to take it away.
Physical attributes	Are defined by the quality and speed of the computer used to access the site. Also the speed of the Internet connection is a factor. There are no restrictions on the size of the content.	Physical attributes	Consist of width, height and depth and weight, made out of paper that is often glossy in texture. The quality of the materials often depends on the value and market positioning of the magazine. It can contain from 20 pages to 360 pages depending on the theme of the magazine.
Visual Language	Is a combination of text and images, however due to the original technological limitations there is still a trend to rely on text for faster download time and greater accessibility. The use of images is sparse and of low quality again due to technical limitations. There is no sense of visual richness, but rather a feeling of clarity and organisation of reams and reams of information.	Visual Language	Is a combination of text and image, where the use of photography is often more dominant to generate a feeling of lushness and visual vibrancy. There is a need to inspire a very tactile visual experience that combined with glossy good quality paper can be quite seductive to the reader.
Structure	Is not linear at all, but based on the concept of hyper-text, where any possible link can lead to any part of the site via 'conceptual' connection. The structure is based on a	Structure	It is linear in structure beginning at the front cover through to the back cover. The format allows for linear browsing from front to back as well as 'quick flip through' or reverse browsing.



networked system that links within itself as well as with other sites.

Organisation

The editorial as well as the promotional content is clearly organised into specific channels that seem to be consistent across different women's online portals. Often this strong structural organisation provides the map for navigation of the site.

Organisation

Depending on the theme of the magazine and its tradition, the different sections of the editorial content are categorised by specific headings. Some of the headings might be common to different women's magazines, but more often a creative licence is used to create these headings and make each magazine stand out from the others, hence the section themes become implied.

Home page

Often, but not always the first point of contact on the site, it contains the portal's logo positioned at the top of the page. The other prominent features are the navigational menus that allow the users to access the site. These are either also located at the top of the home page after the logo or in the left hand column of each page. There is always an introduction to the feature story followed by a selection of easily accessible top stories. Finally the home page contains a variety of banners and promotions to entice the user.

Cover

The first point of contact for the readers, it contains the masthead with the magazine title positioned at the very top of the page for quick recognition amongst many other magazines aligned on the news stand rack. There is a full cover image to quickly draw readers' attention. On top of the image, there is a selection of short snippets of the magazine content to entice the readers' to purchase the product.

Banners

Are usually strips of animated information, acting in the form of adverts that allow users to click and access the sites dedicated to the advertised products or services. They are often located either at the very top of the page next to the site's logo or at the bottom of the page.

Adverts

Are positioned throughout the whole magazine. Often they are the first content the readers' see after opening the front cover. The advert sizes vary from double spreads, to single pages to smaller ads positioned amongst feature articles.



Promotions	Located often in the right hand column on any page, these are small self-contained snippets of information that promote various products or services. Their design is much more in keeping with the whole design of the portal to make them appear as part of the editorial content.	List of contents	Contains a hierarchical description of the content
Additional promotional pop-up windows	Are often prompted by users' interaction with the site and allow for more advertising space on the site. They are perceived as independent of the portal and can be closed down without affecting the site.	Editor's letter	Is often included in women's magazines to generate a feeling of intimacy and closeness between the product and the readers.
Site map	Acts as the list of contents of the site. It enables users to quickly find areas of the site that might be of interest to them.	Contributors	Listing provides reference to authors that contributed to the particular issue as well as listing of the editorial and production teams.
Channels menu	Is the primary tool used to navigate the site, reflecting the main areas covered by the portal and often is the content indicator as to the nature of the site and its target audience.	Letters from the readers	Offers readers a chance to be heard. It is one of the editorial features that plays a major part in the construction of cultural meanings carried by the traditional women's magazines.
Topical browse menu	Is often an additional menu used for more detailed navigation of the site offering specific links to sub categories of the content.	Short reviews and news	Is a collection of short articles focusing on themes from latest celebrity gossip, to fashion, soap opera watch, or product reviews.
Search capability	Is a must on any portal, due to the inherent hyper textual nature of the Internet. It also allows for access to the archived information that is no longer directly available on the site. The search option is present on all the pages of the site for easy access.	Feature stories	Represent the main stories of the magazine, often taking up one or two double spreads and often referenced on the cover.
Feature story	Usually is introduced on the home page with an easy link to the full story on a separate	Fashion features	Are dedicated solely to fashion. Depending on the theme of the magazine, this section might not



	<p>page. Since it is the main feature it is often accompanied by images. The story changes on daily basis and due to the nature of the Internet can also be updated throughout the day.</p>		<p>be included or only briefly mentioned. If it is a fashion magazine, then there is a selection of double spreads dedicated to full page photographs promoting latest trends.</p>
<p>Top stories and other articles</p>	<p>Are also introduced on the home page with links to further reading. Other articles are presented as heading links and they are scattered across all the pages according to their fit with the theme channel. These change daily.</p>	<p>Short topical articles</p>	<p>Constitute a selection of short articles that support the theme of the main feature or act as alternative read.</p>
<p>Direct access to experts advice</p>	<p>Allows users to contact various experts supporting the themes of the portal channels and personally ask for advice.</p>	<p>Food section</p>	<p>Is dedicated to latest food trends, including recipes and dietary advice. Depending on the theme of the magazine this section can be quite substantial or quite small.</p>
<p>Subscribers section</p>	<p>Encourages users to become members of the portal. It often offers extra features like free email, special product offers or access to areas of the portal that are designed for members only. In some cases the subscriber can alter parts of the portal design to generate their own personal look and feel.</p>	<p>Travel section</p>	<p>Is dedicated to review of holiday spots focused on providing travel tips and advice. Again depending on the theme of the magazine, this section varies in size.</p>
<p>Discussion groups</p>	<p>Reflect the communal nature of the portals. Seen as a gateway to a lot of information, portals are believed to attracting large audiences that can become communities sharing similar interests. Discussion lists allow such communities to interact with themselves generating user interest that potentially will develop into customer loyalty.</p>	<p>Horoscope</p>	<p>Can be found in every woman's magazine or newspaper section and is traditionally associated with female readers.</p>



Interactive Features	Are often used to generate additional interest for the users. They vary from quizzes, competitions or voting and rely on users' pro-active engagement.	Product directories	Have been introduced by some magazines to allow their readers a quick and easy access to featured products. This allows for increase in revenue through further product advertisement.
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**Table 18: National Readership Survey social grade definitions (UK)**

Social Grade	Social Status	Occupation
A	upper middle class	higher managerial, administrative or professional
B	middle class	intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1	lower middle class	supervisory or clerical, junior managerial, administrative or professional
C2	skilled working class	skilled manual workers
D	working class	semi and unskilled manual workers
E	those at lowest level of subsistence	state pensioners or widows (no other earner), casual or lowest grade workers

Source: (NRS: National Readership Survey 2001)

## **Courses**

The following is a list of lectures and seminars attended to support the PhD research.

### **Autumn 2001**

*New Media and Society*, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College

### **Spring 2001**

*Theorising Gender*, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College

### **Autumn 2000**

*Gender and Anthropology*, Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths College



### **Spring 2000**

*Gendering the Self: Image, Memory and Narrative*, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College

### **Spring 2000**

*Gender Methodology and Research Practice*, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College

### **Spring 2000**

*Cultural Practice as Method*, Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths College

### **Spring 2000**

*Quantitative Methods*, Research Office, Goldsmiths College

### **Autumn 1999**

*Qualitative Methods*, Research Office, Goldsmiths College

## ***Publications, Conferences and Lectures***

The following list contains publications, conferences and lectures prompted by or resulting from the PhD research.

### **2006**

Book chapter in Trauth, E. M. (ed) *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology*.

Information Science Publishing (an imprint of Idea Group Inc.) (to be published)

*Sadowska, N. (2006) Design and Women's Expectations of WWW Experience*

### **Autumn 2005**

Book chapter in Grillner, K., Glembrandt P. & Wallenstein, S. O. (eds) *01.AKAD: Experimental*

*Research in Architecture and Design - Beginnings*. AKAD/axl books. Stockholm

*Sadowska, N. & Tham, M. (2005) Minding the Gap: Using Artefacts to Navigate Private,*

*Professional and Academic Selves in Design*



## **Autumn 2004**

Online journal paper: Working Papers in Art and Design: the Role of the Artefact in Art and Design Research Vol. 3

*Sadowska, N. & Tham, M. (2004): The Stored Wisdom: Artefacts as Gap Minders between the 'Professional Self', the 'Personal Self' and between Professionals of Different Disciplines*

## **Summer 2004**

A paper given at Research into Practice 2004 Conference: What is the Role of the Artefact in Art and Design Research, July 2, Hatfield, UK

*Sadowska, N. & Tham, M. (2004): The Stored Wisdom: Artefacts as Gap Minders between the 'Professional Self', the 'Personal Self' and between Professionals of Different Disciplines*

## **Spring 2004**

A seminar given to the research community at Department of Design; Goldsmiths College, University of London

*Tham, M. & Sadowska, N. (2004) The Stored Wisdom: Artefacts as Gap Minders between the 'Professional Self', the 'Personal Self' and Other Individuals*

## **Spring 2004**

A seminar given on the MA Design Futures programme at Department of Design; Goldsmiths College, University of London

*Tham, M. & Sadowska, N. (2004) The Stored Wisdom: Artefacts as Gap Minders between the 'Professional Self', the 'Personal Self' and Other Individuals*

## **Winter 2004**

Online publication of conference proceedings of 5<sup>th</sup> European Academy of Design Conference: TECHNÉ Design Wisdom, February 2004 (URL: <http://www.ub.edu/5ead/princip5.htm>)

*Sadowska, N. (2004): WWW or What Women Want? Negotiating Online Design Practice within Existing Gender Structures*



### **Spring 2003**

A paper given at 5<sup>th</sup> European Academy of Design Conference: TECHNÉ Design Wisdom, April 28-30, Barcelona, Spain

*Sadowska, N. (2003): WWW or What Women Want? Negotiating Online Design Practice within Existing Gender Structures*

### **January 2003**

A paper given at Symposium Gender and ICT: Where Are We At? January 17, Amsterdam, Netherlands

*Sadowska, N. (2003): Mystery and Magic behind BEME.com: An Internet Environment where Female Users Negotiate Gender through Design*

### **Autumn 2002**

Book chapter in Consalvo, M. & Paasonen, S. (eds) Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity; Peter Lang Publishing, New York.

*Sadowska, N. (2002): Women's Internet Sites: A Search for Design Strategies to Engage the Female Viewer*

### **June 2002**

A paper given at XXIX Symposium of the International Committee for the History of Technology; ICOHTEC 2002, June 24-29, Granada, Spain

*Sadowska, N. (2002): The BEME.com Internet Experience: Negotiating Design and Gender within the Historical Context of the Women's Publishing Industry*

### **January 2002**

A seminar given on the MA Design Futures programme at Department of Design; Goldsmiths College, University of London

*Sadowska, N. (2002): Sociology of Translating Gender Through Design: BEME.com – A First Destination for women on the Web*



## **November 2001**

A paper given at Working Conference: A New Girl Order? Young Women and the Future of Feminist Inquiry; King's College, University of London, November 12-14, London, UK

*Sadowska, N. (2001): At a Touch of Your Finger, Only a Mouse Click Away ...: Women's Internet Sites: A Negotiated Relationship between Design, Gender, Images of Femininity and Women Viewers.*

## **July 2001**

A paper given at Women's Studies Network (UK) Association 14th Annual Conference: Gender and Culture: Leisure, Consumption and Women's Everyday Lives, Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education, July 12-14, Cheltenham & Gloucester, UK

*Sadowska, N. (2001): Women's Internet Sites: a Negotiated Relationship between Design, Gender, Images of Femininity and Women Viewers.*

## **March 2000**

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