

**COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES REGARDING GENDER EQUALITY. A CASE STUDY
IN CUBA****Claudia Correa GARCÍA¹, Bianca TESCAȘIU²**¹ Transilvania University of Brașov, 0000-0001-6049-3765² Transilvania University of Brașov, 0000-0003-2865-0040**Abstract:**

The objectives of this article are to describe the communication strategies developed on the subject of gender equality and to analyze the results of their implementation within the student community at the institutional level in Cuban higher education; specifically, the case of the Faculty of Design (Higher Institute of Design) of the University of Havana, Cuba, is analyzed. The methodology used for this research is the case study, and the techniques of document analysis and expert interview have been applied. The results display that students were sensitized to the issue of gender equality. Debate workshops were held on the topic, as well as activities inside and outside the institute in order to generate products of design to promote the topic of gender equality. The different manifestations of gender violence and how to confront them were made visible. The potential of visual communication as a strategy to promote gender equality was recognized, as a wide range of design results addressing the topic were achieved, which were socialized by the students with the rest of their colleagues through workshops created for this purpose. The designs generated became the coursework for several of the subjects included in the students' curriculum. From this point on, the students' participation became much more feasible, as their design and photography work for the project also contributed to their coursework. In addition, the optional subject Gender and Design was organized, where students were able to acquire the essential theoretical elements on the relationship between gender theory and industrial design, in order to develop the necessary skills to unlearn gender stereotypes that influence the creation of their products and incorporate new creative visions in the professional activity of design as an important element of communication.

Keywords: Communication, Communication Strategies, Gender Equality, Higher Education, Cuba

JEL classification: D63, I24

1. Introduction

Gender equality, understood as “the concept that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development” (Nomoto, 2017), is an issue addressed globally to the point of being one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG #5) in the 2030 Agenda and a concern for almost every country around the globe.

Institutions of all kinds have settled various measures according to their roles in society, with the purpose of tackling these issues and helping to create a more inclusive and sustainable world for everybody. Special attention has been given to higher education (Mott, 2022) as it has a major impact on contributing to the settlement of new ways to develop theory and practice on the matter; to achieve innovative solutions from each field of study; and involving gender equality in all three higher education missions: teaching and learning, research and public outreach. (THE, 2022a; THE, 2022b).

Cuba as a developing country has been following this trend considering recommendations from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2014), the Cuban Development Plan for 2030 and the recently established constitutional reform, which begin to mark a turning point in the conception of gender perspectives in the design, implementation and assessment of public policies for development. However, despite these efforts and the will to achieve equality between women and men, the deep-rooted

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patriarchal imaginary hinders the achievement of this goal in the island, all of which reinforces the importance of the work to be carried out by higher education institutions in this regard. The tertiary educational system in Cuba has been taking steps since the second half of the 1980s that contribute to the insertion of gender equality in university life, such as incorporating the topic in graduate and postgraduate courses, theses, faculty conferences and the creation of cathedras for gender research (Vasallo, 2004; Jiménez, n.d.; López et. al, 2019).

However, the implementation of gender equality in Cuban higher education has been considered by some research to still be poorly treated (López et. al, 2019), in spite of the recognition it has been broadly given. There is no evidence displaying the existence in the Ministry of Higher Education of the Republic of Cuba of a well-established strategy to approach gender equality from the top level, which can serve as a guide for the universities in this country. Instead, the latter have been implementing their own initiatives throughout the years.

After twelve editions of the International Congress on Higher Education held in Havana, Cuba, the one in 2020 had for the first time a workshop dedicated to gender equality, entitled *Gender Equality: Progress and Projections*. In this event, some papers were presented by both national and international participants. The activity served as a way to promote gender equality and make visible the efforts of universities in order to implement ideas towards this purpose (International Congress on Higher Education, 2020). Workshops, events, courses and the like are considered fruitful ideas that contribute to the promotion of any topic in universities, taking into account the marketing communication mix applied to institutions of higher education (Smedescu et. al, 2017).

According to the previous situation regarding the insertion and promotion of gender equality topic in Cuban higher education, the analysis of the Faculty of Design (Higher Institute of Design) from the University of Havana in this regard is of particular interest as its initiatives involve the whole student community -and beyond- and are intertwined with the first and third higher education missions in both of its careers: Visual Communication and Industrial Design.

Design and photography can be used as ways of structuring messages to raise people's awareness. Visual communication is presented as a valuable tool that if placed at the service of current needs can promote gender equality and contribute to the education of society at large in order to eradicate gender violence. Nobody is exempt from being a victim of this kind of violence at some point in their lives; for this reason it is necessary to educate young people about its real existence, the different manifestations it embodies and that it can be prevented and eradicated as long as there is a solid theoretical and practical basis.

Design can give an intelligible form to ideas and communicate information: through signs and visual messages, on the one hand, and through the form of constructions and objects, on the other. The graphic message is the place where form and information meet. Its specific function is to convey information and meanings.

Messages in themselves are not natural things but human constructs derived from cognitive processes, in which language plays a preponderant role. The factor of being graphic and being communication, is what conceptualizes graphic design as a specific language for the transmission of information, being for that reason a sociocultural fact. Messages can also be conceptualized using digital media to achieve their main objectives. Such is the case of the use of photography as a way of expressing ideas in graphic design. Photography emerges as one of the most recurrent tools for designers to solve the problems they face.

All things said, the research question of the present study can be established as: how does the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana contribute to promote gender equality?

In order to answer the research question, the following objectives have been set:

General objective: to analyze the development of communication strategies that promote gender equality in the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, Cuba.

Specific objectives:

- 1- To describe the communication strategies developed on the subject of gender equality in the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, Cuba.
- 2- To analyze the results of the communication strategies implementation within the student community in the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, Cuba.

2. Materials and methods

The present study is qualitative research with a descriptive approach. In order to accomplish the research objectives, the methodology used was the case study, focusing on the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, Cuba, as it is to present day the only faculty of Design in the whole country.

The techniques of document analysis and interviews were applied. In the first case, 5 internal reports, files and documents were selected as their content was directly associated with the objectives of this research and explain in detail the ways by which the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana implemented initiatives to promote gender equality within the university community.

Furthermore, 35 final projects created by the students for the mentioned initiatives were analyzed as the messages developed through the semiotics of the image are in line with the objectives of this research and complement the information provided by the documents.

Moreover, 5 experts and 5 professors from the faculty were interviewed in order to obtain complementary information to conduct the methodological triangulation.

3. Results

After consulting internal documents, files and reports from the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, the following results can be presented:

3.1 0 Violence. The third mission project

In the academic year 2015/2016 a professor and her students coordinated a project associated with the third mission of higher education, carried out to focus on the promotion of gender equality as a culture among the students of the Faculty of Design, given the need to systematically make visible the confrontation of gender violence as a very important problem for society in general, and at the same time the issue had been addressed very poorly by students in their design and photography productions; it was considered interesting and necessary the creation of the third mission project entitled *0 Violence*, aimed at promoting gender equality as a culture among students and the confrontation of gender violence.

This project lasted for two years and was carried out by students in Visual Communication Design career who made use of their skills in the implementation of image semiotics to generate photographs and designs they were able to socialize, afterwards, with other students of the career through various activities that took place. The systematization of the experience favored the reconstruction of the lived process and the reflection about their potential as actors of the higher education third mission process (Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2015).

On the other hand, there is no evidence that a project of this type had existed previously in the faculty. The aim of this project was to achieve greater involvement of students in the promotion of gender equality through communication activities and media, and thus contribute from the graphic perspective to better visibility, education and training in values. The students made the works and socialized them in their classrooms and with their classmates of the institution, as well as with the rest of the people who were linked to their productions.

Throughout the time it functioned, the third mission project entitled *0 Violence* conducted the following main activities: workshops based on the needs identified; stimulation and awareness of students on the importance of promoting gender equality in the university community; socialization of the advertising media with other students of the institution; organization and development of the preparation program for the workshops; development of training workshops for student leaders and project managers; development of participatory discussions among students; information to all those

involved about the content and schedule of the workshops; carrying out activities outside the faculty to devise and generate the media for the workshops; evaluation of the communication materials with other students and professors (Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2015; Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2018a).

The project was divided into three stages (Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2016; Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2017; Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2018a):

First stage: September 2015 - December 2015: In this stage, the essential ideas of the project and its importance for students were presented, encouraging participation through the expression of ideas regarding the topic to be addressed. Some posters and a spot were generated on the topic of early sexualization of young girls. In these visual communication products, the students portrayed a 9-year-old girl being dressed as an adult, wearing makeup and accessories such as sunglasses, nail polish and necklaces; in the posters she was posing as a model and trying to reach out to a teddy bear which is away, while a pair of female hands were putting more makeup on her face. In the promotional spot, the sequence displays the mentioned girl dressed up and posing while this concept started to be dismantled by a slow return to the image of the young girl without makeup and accessories. At the end of the spot, the following phrase could be read: *let her be a child, don't steal her innocence*.

Second stage: January 2016 - December 2016: In this stage, the workshop activities continued with the students and since it was the longest stage of the project, more participatory activities were carried out among them, as well as a greater number of design and photography productions. During this period, they created a photography series also containing children but this time three 10-year-old girls and one 9-year-old boy. In these sequences, the girls were portrayed in two different ways: one, as trying to follow the beauty standards imposed by society to women and how they could fit into them; and two, rejecting the traditional role associated with girls and not willing to play with dolls or wear a dress, instead, they preferred to play football and wear a T-shirt, a pair of shorts and a cap. In another image, one girl's eyes were being covered by a parental figure (a mother) as two women holding hands pass by in front of her.

In the case of the boy, he was portrayed as being threatened by a parental figure (a father) holding a belt in his hand as a warning because of the boy's election to play with a doll; instead, this parental figure was giving him a baseball bat as the proper choice for a boy. Another image displayed the boy being scared as the father was violent to his mother. A final image showed the boy using the baseball bat to crush the doll with which he initially played.

Furthermore, after the photography series was finished, the students created a promotional campaign entitled *Let's protect their innocence*, where each of the images was turned into a poster with several messages, such as: *don't judge me for being different; I would like you to stop fighting; I decide what to play with; should I pretend to be what I am not?; don't impose your prejudices on me*.

Moreover, during this period the logotype and imagotype of the project was created. It was a purple circle containing a white equal symbol in the middle, the upper part of this equal symbol had an arrow displaying the masculinity, and the lower part of the equal symbol had a cross which displayed the femininity (these are the symbols traditionally associated with planets Mars and Venus, which represent masculine and feminine, respectively).

Third stage: January 2017 - July 2017: This stage was characterized by the generation of advertising media from the final solutions previously generated by the students (the mentioned photographs and posters) which were virtually displayed as how they would look like in T-shirts, bags, caps, street banners, wallpapers, cards, among others. Furthermore, different activities were carried out to socialize them with other students from the faculty.

The interviews with experts from the institution revealed that before its existence, there were no third mission projects in the institution dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and to confront gender violence. There were other projects associated with the work of students with children suffering from cancer, projects linked to didactic games, as well as humorous projects. Students have worked on gender equality in their coursework, either in final projects or diploma theses. However, third mission

projects focused on promoting gender equality and confronting gender violence had not been devised before. Unfortunately, after this initiative finished in 2018 there has been no other which intends to educate the student community on the topic of gender equality and, at the same time, involves them into being an active part of the whole process.

The experts stated that at this time society urgently needs more and better efforts to eradicate gender violence, and it is precisely at this point where designers play a fundamental role, since they can collaborate effectively based on the knowledge they acquire, as during the course of their student life they appropriate elements of the semiotics of the image, the effects that chromatic variations have on the perception of a product. They also acquire the skills to create public interest campaigns, all of which they can transform into products or communicational media that range from the identity of a product, the logo, to posters, audiovisuals, photographs, billboards, T-shirts, caps, and other products, which constitutes an essential tool in the promotion of gender equality as well as the confrontation of gender violence.

In the interviews with professors, they emphasized how important it is for all students to know more about gender equality, since the topic had been addressed relatively little before the *0 Violence* project started and the productions by then were generally a continuity of the same topic without a high level of originality in its approach. After the project was created, students gained much more knowledge not only on the topic, but also regarding their own potential as content creators. Furthermore, their creations for the project served as well for their final examinations in different subjects which constitute part of the curriculum.

They also considered that at the Faculty of Design there was not a solid base to provide students with sufficient knowledge to promote gender equality and that perhaps for this reason the students' productions were sporadic and repetitive, especially in dealing with gender violence.

In addition, the professors mentioned that at the end of a semester, they did not necessarily compile coursework in all cases, nor had a repository been set up with the students' final solutions (final projects). Therefore, the idea of creating a project and keeping a record of its development throughout the years had been an enormous effort which in the end helped everyone in the faculty, and therefore in the whole university.

3.2. Gender and Design. The optional subject

After the third mission project had come to an end, in the academic year 2017/2018 an optional subject entitled *Gender and Design* was created, this time for students of Industrial Design. Following the same principle as the third mission project, in this case the initiative was framed into the first mission of higher education: teaching and learning.

The main objective of this subject was to ensure that students acquire the essential theoretical elements on the relationship between gender theory and design, so that they could develop the necessary skills to unlearn gender stereotypes which influence the creation of their products and incorporate new creative visions in the professional activity of design (Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2018b).

During this optional subject which lasted for three academic years, some ideas related to gender and the challenges that exist for Industrial Design were outlined, introducing students to the history of feminist thought and gender studies and their relationship with design. Activities such as screening of short films and analysis of product images were developed. Students were provided with tools on feminist theory and gender studies to reflect on the processes of production, circulation and consumption of design. The reproduction of gender stereotypes and heterosexual normative violence in contemporary design productions was analyzed, as well as the construction and deconstruction of historical representations and cultural patterns of historical narrative. The de-naturalization of certain categories, roles, identities or values of the conditions that exist between women and men, situations that design can contribute to change. In addition, design as gender technology and the change in toy trends were analyzed, specifically *Toys have no gender*, the campaign against *kitchens for girls and cars for boys* was shown. There was a screening of short films and discussion on the different issues addressed by

audiovisual productions. Furthermore, one task for the students was to make an observation of gender stereotypes in people on the streets of Havana, based on an observation sheet provided by the professor of this subject (Instituto Superior de Diseño, 2018b).

At the end of the semester, the final evaluation of this subject was the presentation of a design proposal of a game or toy for children, which reflected a rupture with gender stereotypes.

Proposals created by the students included paper dolls displaying male and female characters who were associated with professions typically assumed with the opposite sex, such as firefighter and cook. Other design proposals included cards with examples of celebrities who broke traditional gender roles by dedicating their lives to a certain activity, e. g. Amelia Earhart as the first woman who flew solo and crossed the Atlantic Ocean in an aircraft. In other proposals, students created a human figure with no male or female features, accompanied by a wide range of selections in hair length and color, accessories, face shapes, clothes, etc., in order for the kids to create their own characters to play with, and let their imagination fly without imposing any specific gender expression.

The interviews with experts and professors from the institution revealed that this was also another initiative that took place for the first time in the faculty, in which students were taught the main concepts and theoretical elements regarding gender equality and, in the end, they could provide innovative solutions from their own professional domain and socialize them with their peers. In addition, these experts mentioned that once the students had passed the academic year, they could participate in the next edition of the optional subject as evaluators of the final projects developed by the next generation of students who were taking this class and, furthermore, they could participate during the class sessions as moderators and, sometimes, as *translators* of certain concepts and how to associate them with the field of design, in case any student could not understand any specific content.

On the other hand, the experts and professors explained that as its predecessor initiative at present this optional subject is no longer being taught, which happens to be a step backwards regarding the development of the faculty in terms of the efforts taken to ensure the promotion of gender equality within the students as well as the positioning of the institution regarding measures applied towards the SDGs, specifically the number 5.

3.3. A third mission project and an optional subject: what they brought about. A reflexive analysis

During the time in which the two initiatives took place at the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, their implementation had a relevant impact in various ways.

Firstly, students, professors and everyone related to these two programs were sensitized to the issue of gender equality and its importance gained awareness.

Secondly, debate workshops were held on the topic, as well as activities both inside and outside the faculty in order to generate products of design that would help to promote the topic of gender equality.

Thirdly, different manifestations of gender violence and how to confront them were made visible.

Additionally, the potential of visual communication and products of industrial design as strategies to promote gender equality was recognized, as a wide range of design results addressing the topic were achieved, which were socialized by the students with the rest of their colleagues either through workshops created for this purpose or in class.

In the case of the third mission project, the designs generated became the coursework for several of the subjects included in the students' curriculum. From this point on, the students' participation became much more feasible, as their design and photography work for the project also contributed to their coursework.

On the other hand, in the optional subject *Gender and Design* the students were able to reinforce their main goal as problem-solving professionals living in a constantly evolving society.

Consequently, the students developed leadership skills in promoting gender equality and confronting gender violence, being able to organize the work and all this contributed to a reinforcement

of their professional knowledge, as well as the acquisition of new information related to the topic of gender equality and gender violence. It is a qualitatively superior development that occurs when knowledge is re-elaborated and new practices are created.

In addition, by being able to work with children from their own communities, the students could understand the value that the community treasures in terms of the knowledge it possess and how to enhance this knowledge in order to re-elaborate it, thus being actors in the process itself not only within their institution but also being able to encourage the promotion of gender equality and its development in children with whom they live in their residential areas.

All in all, they consolidated in their personality a series of values such as respect, solidarity, cooperation and responsibility towards a sensitive and current issue in which all human beings must get involved, since they are all equally responsible for achieving an equal world for everybody.

4. Discussion

In the 21st century, communications are highly mediated by the visual information that professionals can achieve. It is not surprising that nowadays industrial design and visual communication have acquired a preponderant role in the approach to any subject. There are more and more designers in training, because the demands of institutions and the population in general that seek to solve problems from this perspective are increasing. Society develops by the day and, therefore, the work of designers must go in line with the new and ever-changing demands from people. Designers are not artists even if the creation process is similar for both specialties; designers are professionals who solve problems for others. According to this principle, they must adapt to the requirements to which they are exposed in their everyday lives.

The project *0 Violence* and the optional subject *Gender and Design* were innovative for the institution, considering the way in which they were structured and worked throughout the process, because the students not only generated advertising media and products to promote gender equality among themselves, but also the results of their work were intertwined with their curricular activities, which is why the curricularization of these projects was manifested in the academic process of the students. It is also considered that a transformation was achieved in the students, since they went from being objects to being active subjects in their own practices.

These two initiatives are relevant not only for the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana but also for all universities in the country and in others where gender inequalities are still present, due to the real need that exists in these contexts to promote gender equality and make visible the immense range of manifestations of gender violence, of which many are still hidden, underhanded, accepted unconsciously and permeated by the sexism that prevails in society.

At the same time, both programs represented examples of how higher education can tackle the sustainable development goals through its missions (in this case, teaching and learning and also public outreach). Furthermore, they are proof of how students can apply their evolving knowledge towards the solution of major problems in society at large; how they can be more than only passive receivers of content and, instead, take a step up and become more conscious actors in their community and their own lives.

The results presented in this research go in line and validate the ideas of implementing gender equality in the higher education sector in Cuba (Ordoñez & López, 2022; Vasallo, 2004) and around the globe (Mott, 2022; THE, 2022a; THE, 2022b).

However, the results of the present study display that until the time both initiatives started to take place in the Faculty of Design of the University of Havana, there had been none like these before, meaning that the topic of gender equality was not approached from the designer's perspective, taking into account how important visual communication and product design can be for this purpose.

Moreover, in relation to the idea that gender equality has been treated poorly in Cuban higher education (López et. al, 2019) the authors of this study consider that even though the materials analyzed

display a different scenario (Jiménez, n.d., Ordoñez & López, 2022; Vasallo, 2004) in which this topic is indeed approached by a variety of researchers, educators and through a diversity of efforts, it is also a reality that if there is no consistency in time and permanence of the initiatives developed by the universities throughout the years, as it is the case of the Faculty of Design analyzed in this research, once the generations of students who took part in these programs are graduated, the newcomers will not have the opportunity to experience the same possibilities and enhance their potential, hence the importance of developing and maintaining a staff that can support such issues and, in the best scenarios, the universities should go beyond the cathedras for gender studies and create faculties entirely dedicated to assessing this topic through the three higher education missions.

5. Conclusions

The study has analyzed the actions that can be developed in order to transit from a lower to a higher stage in the improvement of knowledge on gender issues, and the creation of communication strategies to promote gender equality as part of a process of integrating the theory of marketing communication mix to higher education institutions.

Consequently, the creation and execution of these communication strategies allowed the identification and recognition of greater potentialities in the students of design regarding the use of their knowledge about image semiotics in the conceptualization of graphic messages and industrial design products, together with a strategy outlined in the university community that contributed to the acquisition and promotion of new knowledge related to gender equality and the confrontation of gender violence, leading to the transformation of the community reality.

In addition, its existence allowed theorizing from practice about student leadership in the promotion of gender equality, which placed students as the main actors of the process through the design and execution of communication activities that materialized in the university community and went beyond institutional limits.

Lastly, the results created by the students in terms of graphic and industrial design material were part of their curriculum, and specifically in the case of the public outreach project they constituted the students' coursework in several subjects, which ascribes to the current trend of the third mission.

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