Women are people too: The problem of designing for gender

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Abstract

Cultural theory breaks with Modern analysis by rejecting traditional notions of race, gender, class and sexuality. In doing so, alternative frameworks such as Post-Feminism emerge which are useful for thinking about culture, technology and what our interactions with it mean. From a Post-Feminist perspective it can be seen how in our multi-cultural, post-industrial, digitized world, there is space to move beyond traditional ways of dividing up society such as 'male' and 'female'. We are then free to re-construct our identity in light of a rich diversity of individually relevant experiences. Therefore, in order to get a better understanding of the highly nuanced cultural interactions that characterize our use of technology, this paper argues against using the inherently stereotyped lens of gender and allowing a new set of user needs to emerge.

Keywords

Cultural theory, Feminism, gender, Post-Feminism.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI).

Introduction

Cultural theory treats all phenomena as 'texts' and deconstructs them by looking beyond what is immediately evident in order to uncover the complex meanings that lie beneath the surface. As Derrida stipulates, we must not just take a specific action at face value, we must explore the meaning of the action [7]. When used as a lens to analyze our attempts to produce designed experiences, cultural theory perspectives provide a critical lens to help us understand what is being produced, for whom, under what circumstances and for what purpose [3][10]. With this in mind, the research presented here draws on cultural theory concepts such as 'Post-Feminism' and 'free floating signifiers' to argue that the integration of gender specific concerns within HCI should not go un-problemitized.

To date, there has been scant attention to gender in HCI. Furthermore, the occasional attempts to get designers to acknowledge gender difference often produces an outcome that does potentially more harm than good. This is because the process of drawing on the binary dichotomies of 'male' and 'female' as a lens to understand use, too often result in research outcomes that construct the female participants as technically impotent and the male participants as inherently savvy [6]. The experiences of the users in the studies are then uncritically universalized as representing women in general, which further enforces negative stereotypes.

It is important to note that this paper is not arguing that gender never matters; rather, it is arguing that cultural theory's progressive approach to understanding cultural constructs is important to consider when bringing gender into HCI. In 21st Century Western Society, where many woman enjoy the same technological competency as their male counterparts, it would seem that as culture evolves, so too must the lenses we use to analyze it.

Post-feminism

Traditional feminism is concerned with how women are repressed by patriarchal societies [11]. While a post-feminist belief is that in this increasingly fragmented world marked by diversity and multiplicity of experiences, examining one's identity in light of being male or female is not only of very little relevance, it is detrimental. The post-feminist approach has been described by Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [3], and in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* [5].

In these two seminal texts, Butler proposes that feminism did itself a disservice by arguing that all 'women' could be classified by one label – female. For Butler, this approach reinforces a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear-cut groups, women and men, leaving little room for autonomy or self-determination.

When applied to design, traditional sociological analysis often draws on feminism and the result is that women are cast as being repressed. This has underpinned many user studies that set out to discover if women are disadvantaged by using technologies made by men. For example, MacKenzie and Wajcman [8] draw on the work of Cowan (1979) to argue, "The appropriation of technology by men, and the exclusion of women from many of the domains deemed technical, are processes that leave their mark in the very design of tasks ...".

They argue that technology has resulted in "the construction of men as strong, manually able and technologically endowed, and women as physically and technically impotent" [8](p.25).

In the age of uber gender-neutral technologies such as the iPhone and the Nintendo Wii, we must ask how much of this construction of women as technologically incompetent is still relevant?

Free floating signifiers

A central theme of cultural theory is that individuals will create meaning according to their own experiences which makes embedding prescribed meaning or purpose difficult. This concept was developed by Barthes, who, in his later work, *Image-Music-Text* [2], examines the process through which signifiers produce multiple representations. For Barthes, this brings about a culture so saturated by multiple meanings that the signifier floats free from the signified and shared understandings are pushed away as interpretation becomes the domain of the individual. The result is the 'death of the author' and the awakening of the 'pleasure of the reader' who seeks to contextualize the text in light of their own experiences.

When used as a framework for thinking about attempts to design for women, Barthes concept of free-floating signifiers is helpful in illustrating how the universalizing of the female experience goes against the grain of individual interpretation. This problemitizes the design of future systems that are aiming for gender specification.

Conclusion

A re-occurring theme for cultural theorists is that 'technology' itself is one of the defining discourses of our time and as HCI practitioners we have a responsibility to contribute to the design of technologies that reflect our cultural conditions. Post-feminism argues that "women are people too" and draws our attention to the way in which views that separate the sexes rather than unite them are potentially sexist [9].

In terms of HCI, the universalizing and/or homogenization of the female experience [9] has the potential to result in a designed experience that embraces only traditional domains such as domestic environments. Not only does this ignore the way in which women are embracing traditionally male orientated domains such as gaming and as Strossen notes, pornography [9] it is disadvantageous to men who become excluded from the gaze of the domestic design space despite their increasing involvement in traditionally female roles such as childcare.

Again, this paper is not arguing that gender never matters, rather it is drawing attention to the need for more nuanced ways of thinking about traditionally 'female' and traditionally 'male' roles in society. The upcoming call for papers for a special issue of *Interacting with Computers* focusing on Feminism and HCI [1] indicates that this understanding is getting closer.

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