

Key Website Research Highlights Gender Bias

August 11 2005

A first-of-its-kind study conducted by experts at the University of Glamorgan has proved that men and women really are poles apart when it comes to what catches their eye on the internet.

The piece of research, into what aesthetically appeals to males and females when surfing the web, has found that websites which might appeal greatly to one sex are a total no-no with the other.

With the internet doubling its size every two to three months, it is now more important than ever for websites to catch the eye of their target market.

Gloria Moss, Research fellow at the University of Glamorgan Business School teamed up with statistician Rod Gunn to conduct the research to discover if businesses and organisations are making the most of their web presence to help them reach their particular target audiences.

"We started off by looking at the personal websites created by 60 university students, 30 male and 30 female, to discover whether there were any major design differences. We looked at factors such as language, visuals, and navigation - the differences were immediately apparent," explained Gloria Moss. "We compared the sites on 23 factors and differences emerged on just over half of these. This is a massive number".

Where visuals are concerned, males favour the use of straight lines (as

opposed to rounded forms), few colours in the typeface and background, and formal typography. As for language, they favour the use of formal or expert language with few abbreviations and are more likely to promote themselves and their abilities heavily.

A selection of the University websites was then shown to a group of individuals of both sexes who had to rate their appeal on a scale. In almost every case women preferred those sites designed by women and men showed a preference for those created by men.

"The statistics are complicated, but there is no doubt about the strength of men and women's preference for sites produced by people of their own sex," said statistician and co-researcher Dr Rod Gunn.

The research team applied these findings to measure the aesthetic values in the websites of 32 Higher Education Institutions.

"We were particularly interested in the education sector because its target audience is almost equally balanced between the sexes. In fact the proportion of females in the student body has settled at slightly more than half in recent years," said Gloria.

Despite the parity of target audience, the results found that 94% of the sites displayed a masculine orientation with just 2% displaying a typically female bias.

Interestingly the University of Glamorgan's own website, which was not included in the study, was found to be one of the most equally balanced in terms of visual design.

Further research found that the majority of sites, 74%, were produced by a man or a predominantly male team while just 7% were designed by a female or female team.

"What we have found is that organisations are not considering how they can tailor their websites to appeal to their entire target audience. If this is true for education institutions, then it is also very likely to be true for businesses who are not attaining their potential because their website isn't meeting the visual needs of their audience.

"If website flow is to be maximised, greater attention needs to be given to the production aesthetic used and the consequent appeal websites will have to their target markets. Given the strong tendency for each sex to prefer the output of its own sex, it does not make sense to attempt to appeal to women using an aesthetic which is largely male."

To throw more light on the study in a business context, the study moved on to a random selection of student websites from France and Poland. Differences between the male and female websites emerged that were similar to those emerging in the UK.

"This is an exciting finding," said Rod Gunn. "It shows that these differences cross national boundaries, and have implications for websites globally. Businesses definitely need to sit up and take notice."

A separate study on the beauty and angling websites was presented at the 'UK and US Academy of Marketing Conference', the world's most prestigious marketing conference.

Explained Gloria, "The beauty and angling industries have very polarised markets. You might expect the differing natures of these markets to produce different kinds of websites, but in fact our study shows that they are remarkably similar. They are both modelled on the male aesthetic."

While expectedly 77% of angling websites are designed by men, more surprisingly 78% of the female orientated beauty websites were also drawn up by men.

Continued Gloria, "The absence of a female web aesthetic in the beauty websites would make these sites less optimally effective than they could be. This is the first study to really tackle this issue in any depth and its findings could have a big influence on how businesses and organisations utilise their web space. It is no longer satisfactory to assume that an 'effective website' is perceived in the same way by all visitors."

Source: University of Glamorgan

Citation: Key Website Research Highlights Gender Bias (2005, August 11) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-08-key-website-highlights-gender-bias.html>

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