Not a Dirty Word: Encouraging Feminist Activism through Design and Social Practices

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Recommended Citation

10.15760/honors.387
Not a Dirty Word:
Encouraging Feminist Activism through Design and Social Practices

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

&

Graphic Design

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2017
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Many young people identify with the statement “I’m not a feminist, but...” (Buschman, Lenart, 2003). According to a survey of college-aged individuals, many of them identified with a feminist viewpoint; however, these individuals reject the label of feminist as well as the group mentality within feminist activism (Buschman, Lenart, 2003). How does one encourage young people that “feminist” isn’t a negative label and that feminism is worthwhile? In my thesis I will attempt to answer this question and start to solve this problem through the use of design principles, printed matter, and factual information on feminism and young people. In this paper I will look into why young people disassociate themselves from feminism, give case study examples on successful design campaigns (involved in activism and otherwise), discuss methods for my thesis, address possible faults in this approach, present a strategy deck with an accompanying moodboard outlining tonal and visual approaches, images of my final project, and a rationale explaining decisions made during this process.

Background

When it comes to the feminist movement, young people feel disconnected for multiple reasons: they feel as if the work has already been done by generations past, the label of “feminist” has been molded to mean something negative or radical, or that nothing bad regarding gender equality has ever happened to them: therefore, it must not exist. Post feminists — or those who believe that “the war has already been won” — don’t identify as feminists and have a weak desire to join a group collective which fights for women’s equality (Buschman, Lenart, 2003). According to Rebecca Walker,

“Young women are struggling with the feminist label, not only, as some prominent Second Wavers have asserted, because we lack a knowledge of women’s history and have been alienated by the media’s generally horrific characterization of feminists. . . . Young women coming of age today wrestle with the term because we have a very different vantage point on the world than that of our foremothers.

Although Walker specifically mentions women here, not only are young people unaware of previous struggles or fights for equality, but many young people don’t feel unequal or witness inequality in today’s society. (Guy Sheftall, 2002). However, just because an individual isn’t personally affected doesn’t mean that inequality
isn’t happening; in Bushman and Lenart’s 2003 survey, they found that women who had gone through negative experiences such as sexual assault, harassment, discrimination, verbal abuse, physical abuse, or had ever been made to feel stupid, inferior, or as less-than based on their gender were more likely to label themselves as a “feminist”. This is where the disconnect lies, between those who have been through negative experiences and those who haven’t. I will attempt to convince those who are unaware of negative experiences regarding gender equality that it does exist, that those who came before us fought so that we could have lives without discrimination, and that there is still work to be done through encouraging self-branding and conversation amongst peers.

Case Studies

As seen in Jen Ambrust’s series “Card Carrying Feminist,” a piece of cool and well designed printed matter can act as a social media campaign that relies on its participants as the method of travel fig. 1, 2, 3. This series is an important reference point because it is a simple piece of design that has connected to so many. It was successful for two reasons. First being that it is a tangible and a heavy weighted piece of ephemeral paper that one can save and collect; the feeling of receiving a card like this in the mail and then displaying it on your desk, in your wallet, or adding it to your wall, is a feeling of excitement and preciousness. The second successful component of this piece is that it had a social campaign attached to it. Involving the audience directly and adding a hashtag let the audience brand themselves and present themselves as part of this group.

In Civilization’s “Death over Dinner” campaign, they created a website to encourage families and loved ones to talk about how they wanted to die either in old age or due to illness or accident. This project serves as a toolkit to encourage change in individuals lives through talking as well as encouraging change in the United States’ hospital system. They encouraged this discussion by creating a website that acts as a blueprint, guiding the conversation through questionnaires, beautifully shot tablescapes, and an uplifting tone despite the heavy topic fig. 4, 5, 6. A look into Civilization’s choices will inform my thesis by providing examples on how to brand a system that is focusing on a heavy topic while still remaining light and beautiful as well as sensitive to a difficult subject matter.

Methods

My thesis takes the shape of a branded box. It contains small self-branding memorabilia included along the likes of stickers, a feminist identification card, pins, prints, a feminist manifesto, feminist patches, a notebook, and a book on feminist changemakers that challenges my reader to go make their own change. This ensemble of material will act as a kit for a “new” feminist to be able to brand themselves to their friends, family, social media following, peers, as well as to help them inform themselves about the history of feminism and their next steps as a proud feminist.

I want this series of pieces to appear official in tone but still remain fun. To accomplish this I will reference mid century forms and office stationary. To make it appeal to my audience I will
be modernizing these ideas by using juxtaposing informal language, type that references this time period while still feeling modern mixed with some loose hand lettering, and by using a bold color palette fig. 7-21.

**Possible Faults**

A possible area where my thesis may fall short is within intersectionality and race. I am a 21 year old white female with quite a privileged upbringing, connecting with an audience who I am not may prove to be difficult or read as false.

The audience that I am attempting to appeal to are college aged individuals, primarily female. A constant struggle within design is toeing the edge between something that is “trendy” and current, and something that is “white 20-something hipster” in aesthetic. To attempt to combat this I will try to keep my official tone strong without feeling expensive, rather being well made and high craft but not excessive. Another area that will go unresolved is that this kit will not be able to live in the real world, I will only be making copies for me and for the honors college, not making it at a mass produced level. For this reason I will not be able to see if it is ultimately successful in achieving my goals. Despite these possible holes in my thesis, it will attempt to solve the problem of young people not being interested in feminism through a design campaign which hints that gender inequality does exist and try to inform my audience so that they no longer align with post-feminist thought.

I will try to convince them that those who came before us fought so that we could have lives without discrimination by implementing historic cases and stories. I will attempt to get across that there is still work to be done by inciting action, inspiration, and need for an active feminist young person.
NOT A DIRTY WORD

MOODBOARD One: Case Studies

Card Carrying Feminist
Jen Ambrust

Death Over Dinner
Civilization
Empowerment

I want the tone to be unapologetically female and feminine without going completely girlish or total pink. I want it to feel like my audience owns this, that it is strong and expressive and legitimate. This concept mixes solid compositions with more expressive textures. It is monochromatic, bold, and a little bit precious in its touch-feel (heavy paper weight, feelable marks). Color I’m leaning towards is a bright orange-red.
**Mid Century Legitimacy**

Here are some examples of branding sets. Fig. 19 especially reminds me of mid century packaging, simplistic and modern but it still has some complicated touches that feel handmade. For my thesis I want to reference stationary and really dig into details for every piece.
NOT A DIRTY WORD

Strategy Deck

fig. 2

Names + Theme /Programming

NOT A DIRTY WORD
On owning the label.

F#@$!*!

Organization /Audience

Ages 16-25. Young adults, students, women. Those who wish to make a life change in encouraging activism, becoming a feminist, or in expressing their support. Also for individuals who already identify as feminist and believe that their friend could receive this guide to help make a change.

Insights

Many young people do not identify with feminism for the following reasons:
- don’t want to accept the label because it has become something negative/extremist
- think that the “war has already been won”
- have not experienced negative experiences, therefore it must not happen to others/really be that big of an issue.

Big Idea/Concepts

Creating a system so that individuals can brand themselves, figure out where they fall within feminism, and plan where they are going to go next with their new ideas.

Verbal Voice

Unapologetic, casual, empowering, friendly.

Visual Voice

Strong, striving, professional, fun.
Sketches
Final Images

Packaged Box
Final Images

Opening the Kit
Final Images

Revealing Uncensored Label
Final Images

Manifesto First Look
Final Images

Manifesto and Carrying Card
Final Images

Manifesto Detail

"Gender is not an easy conversation to have."

(Franklin 2002)

Some people ask, “Why are you talking about gender so much?” The same question could just as well be asked about race or class or other topics that involve complex systems of power and privilege. It would be easier to just stay silent. But we don’t think this is an option. We’re not talking about gender to be provocative or to start arguments, but because it’s a fundamental issue that affects all of us, whether we know it or not. By talking about gender, we’re acknowledging that it exists and that it has real consequences for people’s lives. We’re also inviting others to join us in this conversation, because we believe that understanding gender is essential to understanding ourselves and the world around us.

— overlap (photo by laura kyrar)
Final Images

History Book (left) and Notebook (right)
Final Images

Print One: “Be You Not Them”
Final Images

Pins
Final Images

Stickers: "Spit Fire", "Throw Shade", "Carry Mace"
Final Images

Print Two: “What Glass Ceiling”
Final Images

Temporary Tattoos
Final Images

Print Three: Notorious RBG
Final Images

Patches: Lucky
Final Images

Patches: Patriarchy Eater
Final Images

Patches: Sparkles
Final Images

Patches: Dagger
Print Three: Only 5/100 CEOs are Female
Final Images

Assembled Kit
Final Images
Final Images
Final Images
Final Images

Carrying Card Detail
Final Images

Carrying Card Back
Final Images

Can't stop, won't stop
Final Images

History Book Interior Spread

NASTY

a

book

of

badasses

and

change

makers

1820  Susan
        B. Anthony

1820  Florence
        Nightingale

1858  Emmeline
        Pankhurst

1921  Elizabeth
        Blackwell

1925  Margaret
        Thatcher

1934  Gloria Steinem

1943  Billie Jean King

1947  Hilary Clinton

1953  Benazir
        Bhutto

1956  Madonna

1973  Tegla Laroupe

1987  Kirthi Jayakumar
Final Images

History Book Interior Spread

1759–1797
Writer, Philosopher, and Women's Rights Pioneer

Mary Wollstonecraft was an early supporter of women's rights. In her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argued that women only appeared intellectually inferior to men at that time because they lacked education. This view suggests that both men and women should be treated equally.

However, with the turn of the twentieth century, women's equality became increasingly recognized and advocated for in the face of conventional norms and societal expectations. This paved the way for future generations to push for greater equality and recognition of women's rights.
make your own impact on history
Final Images
Final Images

Notebook Interior Detail
I pledge to support equality for all, no matter gender, race, age, or socio-economic status.

I pledge to do good in this world.

I pledge to raise women up without putting men down.

I pledge to be inclusive, supportive, and do my part as best as I can.

I pledge to own the word feminism and stand united with my sisters, brothers, and allies of all kinds.
Final Images

Be You Not Them Detail
Final Images

Instagram Account
Rationale

I wanted to create a self-branding campaign that encourages young people to become self-aware of the label of “feminist” and embrace its true intersectional definition, the striving for equality of all genders and people.

This branding experience was aimed at a primarily young audience of identifying females from ages 16 to 25. Although aimed at these individuals, this branding kit is not exclusionary to other genders or age groups and doesn’t use gender-specific language. I could see this kit thriving at a retailer such as Tender Loving Empire, Urban Outfitters, or Papersource.

This kit takes the shape of a box with external packaging. It includes 3 stickers, 5 pins, 5 patches, 4 art prints, a notebook, a history zine, a membership card, and a manifesto to hang in your space. These printed and tangible pieces are to be used to adorn one’s life and space, be it dorm room, bag, denim jacket, work space, or grocery list. It also takes up space online with the hashtag #NotANastyWord and the Instagram account @notanastyword, where inspirational images are shared from feminist artists, photos of the products in action, and topical stories. With both of these platforms working together, the goal of this product is to encourage conversations in young people about feminism and its goals, as well as bringing feminism to individuals who would otherwise not identify. Success would be difficult to measure, but if this product did live in the real world success might be in monetary sales as well as a large and active viewership and following of the social media account.

My color palette is based on a bright red-orange. This color is passionate and fiery but also mutes down to different shades of peach that are nice tonally but aren’t quite a girlish pink. This red strays from the feminist cliche of using pink everywhere, it also attempts to not alienate those who have a visceral reaction to the color pink being for girls. The other colors used are white for some cleanliness and a dark grey which feels a little lighter and more textured than a dark black. The type used is Sofia Pro in the weight Black in all caps, it is rounded and kind of fun, but in the heavy weight is is punchy and present. It is accompanied by lighter weights of the typeface and in body copy it is used in varying capitals.

Moving forward I would like to explore making more products such as tarot cards, coloring books, and Virgin Mary Candles with other feminist icons, as well as looking into ways to expand this system beyond the box format.
Works Cited


