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Designing Gender in Social Media: Unpacking Interaction Design as a Carrier of Social Norms

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we focus on interaction design as the practice of designing interactive and digital products, services, systems and/or environments. Of interest in the area of interaction design is people's use of designed things, which also makes it relevant to relate interaction design to the social norms present in society, such as gendered norms. We present three different cases in which we have analyzed different aspects of interface design and put a specific focus on interaction design as a carrier of social and gendered norms. The first case concerns a qualitative study of how young girls interact with and present themselves in a photo blog website. The second case is a study of the way that young women entrepreneurs use the functionality of social media to mold an attractive online persona (an invented, or adjusted, character that one wants to put forward). The third case is based on a study of the development of the national youth counseling site in Sweden. By using the concepts of interference and social norms as analytic tools, we exemplify various ways in which social norms, such as gender norms, diversity, power relations, equality, marginalization, etc. are part of interaction design and how the interface design reinforces norms and provides a far from neutral arena. In this paper, gender is highlighted in relation to social norms and values in society and social expectations and hierarchies. On the basis of our findings from the three different cases, we argue that there is a need to unpack how digital design embeds gender norms and to demonstrate how the relationship between norms and design can be critically examined.

KEYWORDS

interaction design; norm-critical design; gender; social norms; social media; web design

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine three different cases from the perspective of social and gendered norms. In doing this, our aim is to provide examples of how interaction design, namely the practice of designing interactive digital products, services, etc., is a carrier of normative power and sanctions of specific actions. We want to place specific emphasis on the interaction design, i.e. the form and behaviour of a social media site, and by doing this we hope to focus on the normative structures that functionality and interface interaction may constitute. When analyzing social norms in interaction design, we use norm-critical perspectives that focus on social norms, or unspoken conventions, which give people who belong to the norm privileges and higher standing, and vice versa. We argue that the norm-critical perspective provides us with an important lens through which to explore the way that interaction design reproduces hierarchies and norms. It is especially important to shed light on the way that interaction design empowers or subordinates various user perspectives, since it is being increasingly used by authorities as an arena for interaction and communication.

We focus on two issues: firstly, how interaction design puts certain perspectives, qualities or groups inside or outside of the norm and, second, how people adapt their behaviour online in order to adjust to norms. The three cases we present come from our work over the last couple of years and all focus on youths. They exemplify in three different ways how functionality and form together may create, uphold, and communicate normative values of who the user is and what s/he should want. The first case comes from a qualitative study of how young girls interact with, and present themselves in, the photo blog site bilddagboken.se¹. The second case concerns a qualitative interview study of the way that young women entrepreneurs use social media functionality to intentionally mold an attractive persona online. The third example comes from an ethnographic study of the development of the national youth counseling site in Sweden, UMO.se. The three cases exemplify the following:

1. Promoting certain user behavior with the purpose of selling higher standing in a community (based on social norms such as gender)
2. User approaches to adapting interaction design to gain higher standing in a community
3. Strategic work to avoid embedding higher standing for certain groups in the interaction design (with specific focus on gender, intersectionality, and marginalization aspects).

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Our perspective resonates with work in the research area of human-computer interaction (HCI) as well as with research within science and technology studies (STS). We are interested in the design of social norms that exclude certain

perspectives, opinions, and values and the way that the design makes the norms invisible. We argue that interface design creates normative understandings that go beyond the more common analysis in the HCI field of usability or aesthetics or efficiency. Our interest in the issue of norms was, however, sparked by an altogether different research area, architecture:

Even though built space shapes the experiences of people's daily lives and the cultural assumptions in which they are immersed, it is easy to accept the physical landscape unthinkingly as a neutral background. But the spatial arrangements of buildings and communities are neither value-free nor neutral; they reflect and reinforce the nature of each society's gender, race, and class relations. (Kanes Weisman, 2000, p. 86)

This perspective could arguably be applied to the digital landscape as well, and perhaps especially in social media, in which the users provide the content. Taking Kanes Weisman's (2000) perspective a step further, we argue that we need to complement detailed content analysis with a critical investigation of how the interaction design contributes to manifest values and norms. An ordinary example of how interaction design and functionality promote normative understandings is the "Like"-function that often is used in social media to provide feedback on other users' contributions. The Like-function is used in practice to appreciate (value) other users' actions, but it also implies more general values such as accepting that social behavior requires an evaluation. The Like-function is applied to signify approval of certain expressions and disapproval of others (shown by a lack of "Likes", for example) (Lundmark & Normark, 2012). The normative aspect of the Like-function therefore occurs both in use ("I like this") and as a manifestly implicit idea of what we want out of social interaction ("it is reasonable to be able to evaluate others' actions online").

Katarina Bonnevier takes the perspective presented by Kanes Weisman in another direction:

In any building activity ideologies and norms are reiterated. What I want to bring into play is that this also works the other way around – subject positions are partly construed through building activities.

(Bonnevier, 2007, p. 16)

Bonnevier shows in her thesis that the structural organization and floor plan of most private houses in the West resonate with ideas on the kinds of activities and social patterns that are expected to be performed within the walls. Most Western private houses have e.g. a master bedroom, which makes a number of assumptions about the relationships, family structure and patterns of use of their intended inhabitants. But the quote from Bonnevier above also points to the argument that not only do we build houses that manifest normative ideas about family life but the house is also a carrier and reinforcer of those ideas; in other words, we are built by our houses. We argue that this line of thinking is highly relevant for interaction design as well: what structural patterns are reiterated in the digital arenas? How does that affect our thinking about, for example, social activities?

Another important point of departure is the book *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequence* (Bowker & Star, 2000). It discusses the way that classification schemes are organized and embedded into objects that give shape to category systems. One example showed the separation of races during the apartheid era in South Africa. A number of physical objects were developed to perform these classifications of races, e.g. to measure the curliness of hair and nuances of skin tone. By embedding the classification in objects, the classification became invisible, or taken for granted, through the arrangements made for upholding this classification. The physical manifestation also gave legitimacy to the ideology. We argue that this resonates with how social and gendered norms are embedded in interaction design; its physical form tends to make norms self-evident.

Within the HCI field, the tradition of exploring design critically is quite recent. One perspective is value-sensitive design (Friedman et al., 2006; Nathan et al., 2008; Le Dantec et al., 2009), interaction criticism framework (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2010; 2013), Feminist HCI (Bardzell, 2010; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011), and reflective and critical HCI and design (Blythe.,2007) ; Dourish, 2007; Sengers et al., 2005). This research has argued for an expert perspective that critically examines the qualities of the interaction design and the way that design is modeled to fit its context. The purpose of these approaches is to contribute to a corpus of knowledge on what is good interaction design and also to consider human values in the design process (Pommeranz et al., 2011). Our contribution to the field of critical design involves combining norm-critical perspectives with interaction design elements to illustrate how norms and design emerge and how different actors are involved in such processes. We align mainly with a perspective in HCI that draws on STS, e.g. Suchman's (2007) work on agency and the perspective that any artifact in any situation may perform an active role that makes it possible to explore action as subordinated by technology. This is particularly relevant when analyzing interaction design; applications and systems manifest knowledge and values, but the physical form tends to make it more difficult to question these underlying ideas.

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

In our analysis we use the concept of "social norms" to explain how groups or people are included or excluded in various ways in interaction design. An important quality in our view of social norms and their materialization through interaction design is that this is an ongoing phenomenon; normative practices are constantly made or unmade through interaction with the artifact. We also use interference, a concept that pinpoints the seamless ongoing enhancement of various aspects of the identity in response to the context.

Social norms and interaction design in artifacts

Social norms refer to the normal; conventions; what the majority of people in a given group consider "the done thing". Norms are expressed through embedded implicit social sanctions (negative or positive) of how one should act in, or experience, a certain situation. Since norms often are expressed implicitly, it may be difficult to both recognize and challenge them, compared with more explicit agreements such as laws. Norms tend to be invisible until someone breaks them.

Importantly, norms in general are not problematic, but necessary for people to live together as a community in everyday life. By using a norm-critical perspective we want to investigate the norms and normative assumptions that a certain object generates and/or embeds. Much research has been done on norms in many areas, such as philosophy, law, anthropology, and so on. In order to define norm-criticalness, we present a short overview of how "social norms" can be understood.

We focus on norms that give the people that adhere to them power and higher social standing. Common among such norms are, for example, race, gender or religious belief. But there are others, which change and adapt to contemporary trends. At present, health and weight is a highly normative issue in Western societies. Being obese tends to be valued negatively by the majority of people. Acting within or belonging to norms (in this case staying thin or losing weight) grants certain privileges, which means it is beneficial for the people inside the norm to uphold it.

Norm-critical perspectives are used to question, challenge, transform and/or create new social norms and standards, but also to shed light on groups that benefit from reproducing norms (Martinsson & Reimers, 2008). Exposing social norms and the privileges that come with them is a step towards questioning their validity. To do this also requires introspection and an exploration of one's own position in the normative system (Bromseth & Darj, 2010). By asking questions such as "Who benefits from this social order?" it is possible to discover how norms are reflected in different activities, actions, and situations. Obviously, the context matters fundamentally in interpreting normative expressions. When trying to analyze social norms in relation to interaction design, it is relevant to study both how norms become embedded in design through the design process and the experience of the interaction design. In this paper we give examples of both kinds.

Interference and the relation to artifacts

Haraway's (1991) and later Moser's (2006) concept of interference is used to describe the way that identity structures and roles are made and unmade through contexts and artifacts. Just as the interference concept suggests that artifacts help to generate, enact, stabilize, destabilize and materialize identity differences (Moser, 2006), we want to expose how different aspects of norms are enacted through the design process as well as through interaction design. The notion of interference is a tool for understanding the way that differences between people are made possible; are interacted and how they come to matter in people's lives, and how digital design is involved in such processes. Interference is described as

the ways in which the different processes that construct gender, class and dis/ability not only mechanically sustain and reinforce each other /.../, but may also clash, come into conflict and neutralize each other.

(Lykke, 2010, p. 84)

The experienced world is created through material practices that interfere and may be seen as reflexive, critical, and enacted versions of the reality. They are in flux,

or “in action” in the “belly of the beast” (Moser, 2006), which means that artifacts may allow, or restrict, the possibility of enacting an aspect of one’s identity. A typical example is the wheelchair, which on account of its often bulky design tends to draw attention towards the handicap rather than the individual. This way of exploring materials, practices, technology and artifacts is an example of a perspective that goes beyond the studies of traditional texts and discourses. The focus is instead on how objects, interpretations and social orders are made, emerged and sustained in relation to their materialities and how these come to matter (Moser, 2006). Thus the concept of interference expresses interest not only in the intersection between different actors but also in the processes.

HOW INTERACTION DESIGN AND SOCIAL NORMS ARE INTERTWINED: THREE CASES

In the following sections, we will present three cases that will shed some light on how interaction design is a carrier of social norms. Case 1 is from a photo blog site in which interaction design is used to suggest what the users want in order to sell privileges. Case 2 is from an interview study and presents how young creative entrepreneurs use various social media functions in a deliberate way to promote their careers. Case 3 is from a study of the national youth counseling site in Sweden, a site that has the expressed goal of being as norm-neutral in its design as possible.

Case 1: Applying interaction design to provide/sell higher standing

This case shows how interaction design deliberately co-constructs the user’s needs by using highly normative interaction design. Bilddagboken.se (now dayview.com) was a Swedish SNS with more than 1.4 million registered users, according to the SNS’s own information (February 2011). Today there are many SNS available for young people in Western society and the number of users of SNS has been growing rapidly. Users can publish almost any picture or image that they want, but an SNS has moderators that can take down a profile that contains images that might be viewed as pornography, inappropriate nudity, promotion of drugs or re-publication of copyrighted material (according to the site’s particular policy).

When examining norms in interface design, we have both interviewed the users and made a systematic analysis of the functions the site supports and what expectations the design implies. The material collected for this case is part of a larger study that consisted of focus group interviews, self-presentation images and a systematic analysis of the site. Although not particularly discussed here, self-presentation images were collected of boys and girls in the 10–14-year age group for one year. In the fall of 2009 we conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with children in the same age group. We also conducted an expert analysis in which we carefully went through the interaction design of the site with two questions as the focal point of the discussion: *What is communicated about the users’ needs?* And *who would the ideal user be?* What we present in this case is mainly material and assessments based on the expert analysis of the design, form and content. Based on the questions for analysis we discuss three different themes of importance: capturing interest, sharing, and the development of an online persona.

1. Capturing the interest of others

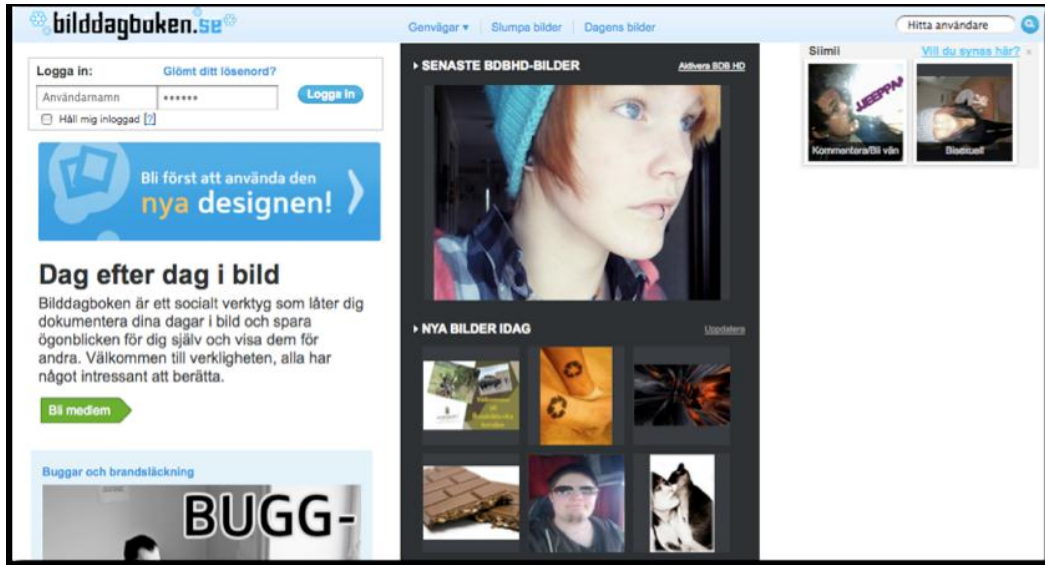


Figure 1. bilddagboken.se main site, showing latest images and login-function

One of the central aspects of this website is its declared intention of sharing something interesting with other users. As stated on the site:

Bilddagboken is a social tool that allows you to document your everyday moments in images for yourself and to share with others. Welcome to the reality; everybody has something interesting to tell. (Own translation)
(Bilddagboken.se, 2011-02-01)

This direct message about having something interesting to share differs a little from other image-uploading sites such as Flickr² and Picasa³, where the service is aimed at storing, manipulating and sharing. Even though these services also focus on sharing images with others, the message about creating interest for others is not as visible or highlighted.

The expressed purpose of image sharing on bilddagboken.se is not only to upload images and share them with other users; the purpose is also *to have a story to tell about your everyday life and about yourself*. This can also be seen in relation to social norms of acting in order to be of interest to others. During focus group interviews with girls of the age of 14, they mentioned that they would not post any images or other material that wasn't of interest to their friends. The users aim to be interesting and make themselves relevant not only to their friends but also to a broader public.

2. Sharing with as many as possible

The interface design indicated that photos are supposed to be the main focus of attention on the site, and our studies show that this is the case. It seems that on bilddagboken.se the photos that users post are mostly published for peers (other

young people) and their closest friends and family, although the images are often available to all users. Goffman (1964) described how people's image of the "self" not only gets positioned in the most advantageous way when interacting with others, but also gets positioned to blend in with others. At bilddagboken.se the images of the "self" are also positioned according to the norms that are created in the digital arena. An important aspect of the self-representations that young people create is the images that represent their identities. Self-representation online is in many aspects a reflection of existing values and norms, constructed in the intersections between popular culture and the children's own cultures, public and private, individual and collective. They can also be created in the intersection between a normative culture in which children are positioned and a digital culture where the subject is challenged to create him-/herself. According to Livingstone (2008), young people see social networks such as bilddagboken.se as their space, that is, free from the panoptic view of adults and visible only to the peers.

The user can get an overview of which and how many users/non-registered users have seen the photos posted on the site, which is noted on each image's specific page. The space that Livingstone addresses may be seen as free in some aspects, but the design of the space is not free from panoptic views and, in accordance with the producers of bilddagboken.se, the panoptic view of other users may be an important incentive to share with others. From the interviews we learned that the users mostly state that they post for their closest friends and peers.

The design of the site provides and promotes various ways of sharing with as many users as possible. Examples of this are the fact that the producers offer a photo-school, where you can learn how to create the best photos, that the newest image of the day is provided and shown on the main site (see Image 1), and that you can pay to get the opportunity to be seen on the main menu of the site. Here the interface design shows the opportunities for the users to expand their range of viewers and their possibilities of sharing with others.

3. Developing an online personality

Bilddagboken.se is an easy-to-access platform, where the users create the content. However, there's not much scope for influencing and changing the design of the site; you as a user are supposed to create your own arena or space. Users are mostly expected to know how to create content and how to access the site, as not many instructions are offered by the producers. The self-positioning can be illustrated by the manipulation of images and by playful experiments with various forms of expression. Here, technology and the digital environment have clear consequences. There are possibilities for exploring the physical format and measuring this experiment against the culture created online. Through various post-production techniques, technology also offers the possibility to try out the technological opportunities in relation to the self-reflection that these arenas offer. The need for an online persona can be seen as an obvious wish constructed by the user, but is also created as a response to the interaction design. Through different inputs on how to create one's own brand on the site, the design provides conditions for the user wanting to create their own voice. Examples of this are the desire for a nickname, the Siimi-function, posting questions such as "Do you want to be seen

here?” and explaining how to get paid through allowing advertisements to be included in your photo diary. One central aspect is that both content and structure are governed at the same time by the materiality, technology and user-generated material: the user is a producer of content. The self-presentations online also offer affordances for composing identities. Some see this presentation of the self as self-reinvention and some as having your identity entwined with the identities of others. Both these views on the identities composed in self-presentations can be combined to make the view that our individual identities are merged with social identities. We also depend on the norms and the design that these arenas offer.

This case showed three normative values presented in the design: the ideal user should try to capture people’s interest, be interested in sharing with as many as possible, and develop a specific persona. This is materialized through a number of functions such as showing examples of popular photos and giving instructions on how to take successful photos. A specific aspect of the way that users can gain higher standing in the system is the possibility to buy a spot on the first page of the site. The gender implications of the self-presentations are normative regarding gender representation and the values connected with it. The images represented on the first page of the website are mainly traditional and normative gender representations. The way that interaction design is applied to provide or, in this case, sell a higher standing reflects what is valued in contemporary society. Understanding the role of technology in the reinforcement of these values is necessary to critically examine them.

Case 2: Making use of interaction design to gain higher status

In a recent study of how freelancers choose to advertise themselves and their careers with the help of social networking, two Bachelor’s students did in-depth interviews with various young entrepreneurs on how they intentionally shaped their online personas in social media to increase their reputation and gain others’ attention (Birgisdóttir & Smittberg Rosvall, 2012). The social media that the informants used were Twitter, Facebook and personal, mainly text-based, blogs, none of which at the time of the study sold any functionality⁴

Typical of the informants in this study is that they try to refine their online persona; they wanted to present themselves as clearly as possible, as well as using social media as a marketing opportunity. The informants had varying occupations (make-up artist, DJ, actor, etc.) and used different types of functionality to present themselves. The informants all talked about the importance of the practices surrounding associating values to their name.

1. Refining an online persona

The informants described how they apply a specific persona depending on the particular social medium and how they want to be perceived through that medium. These personas are adjusted to suit not only the media but also the groups they want to target. One informant, Ulrika, an actress, explained how she wants to be more personal in her blog, where she has the opportunity to develop her standpoints further than she can on Facebook. She also explained that her feminist

standpoints are partly her own but also partly a way of profiling herself. Her opinion is also that:

Social media means a lot to me because I use Facebook a lot, I tweet a bit, I blog and mail people and am available; I'm pretty sure that I create myself in these rooms and that I can choose how to appear.
(Ulrika, 2012, our translation)

Having an online persona is thus considered a platform that is highly attached to values. To Sofia, a make-up artist, it was important to have a professional approach online, and when her blog got picked up by an internet magazine, her friends commented on the formality of her language:

My friends commented to me that it sounds like I think before I speak. Of course when I post something I think about the fact that if I am recommended and people go to my page and check me out and see bad work they probably will skip contacting me. And if they see that I have done good stuff and worked with famous people they probably will.
(Sofia, 2012, our translation)

These quotes suggest that the informants use various social media to intentionally create an image of themselves. Having an intention with an online persona makes it easier to see how certain functionality is adapted to reach the goal. Drawing on this, the practices of intentionally shaping a persona become valuable in various ways, not only through one medium, and not only through one modality but in various ways.

2. Maintaining a name

All the informants in the study talked about their experience of what they gain from being visible and from the exposure of their work. To them, it is important to be seen and to promote their messages. But an important adjustment when using social media is that it is not just a product or a service that is marketed but also a personality. Ulrika talked about the balance of being visible and being interesting:

Rather fewer posts but sharp. I don't think that people are that interested in me having a cup of coffee, but I definitely believe that my thoughts are interesting. They just need the right package so that people get the energy to read.
(Ulrika, 2012, our translation)

These quotes suggest that the informants are applying a performative approach online and in relation to technology. They seem to have an ideal of how a "successful" person in their line of work would appear online and to adjust their actions accordingly, but they also reflect on how making use of social media in a successful way should be done.

3. Lending influence

Social action forms part of participating in social media; one way of gaining attention is by giving attention to others. To tag others and have others tag one's work is considered an important part of presenting oneself; it is very important to the informants to be linked to people that strengthen the value of their persona:

I've got friends who run the "X&Y Stuff"; I push them, as I love their hats and stuff; I try to praise them whenever and I help them to sell their stuff because I use them myself. Our DJ crew is sponsored with their balaclavas and we post cool pics of us when we wear them, which makes people take notice and get interested. I tag myself and their page on Facebook, which leads to more sales for them.

(Fredrika, 2012, our translation)

This quote gives an example of how the interaction design is used to enhance belonging to a group and to enhance certain values in relation to self-presentation. Another way to get attention via others is to act in order to get attention. One practice is to ask others for attention:

Right now I write a blog post with a lot of thought behind it and if I nail it, I'll ask my friends that tweet and have a lot of followers to post it too. I want to see what happens and if the post can be spread that way. I noticed that when XXX wrote about me in her blog, a bunch of people checked my blog out. It's really smart to use that kind of media traffic as much as possible.

(Ulrika, 2012, our translation)

The social networks surrounding the establishment of the persona are considered very important. But there is also a concern about being good enough to step out into the social limelight. This might suggest that the privileges that the social network confers can be taken away.

This case gave concrete examples of the way in which young women entrepreneurs sense that they have to act in order to be valued. They had developed a number of practices that according to their experience showed the online persona they wanted to present, and they constantly attended to this persona in various ways by considering e.g. frequency of posts, context of appearance and language. The examples also show how the women users make use of interaction design to gain a higher standing and act accordingly in their interactions with the systems and other users. Social privileges are a commodity that can be exchanged in order to achieve personal goals.

Case 3: Applying interaction design to avoid giving higher standing to specific groups

The youth counseling site that we have studied, UMO.se, is based on UNICEF's (the United Nations Children's Fund) "Convention on the Rights of the Child", which focuses on equal rights for children of different gender, gender identity/expression or sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion or other belief, age, and those with

disabilities. Here we examined how quality in design is discussed and constructed with a norm-critical agenda. An early assumption was e.g. that trustworthiness was a quality that had to be dealt with. During our project we had the opportunity to follow a journalist/multimedia student who worked as an intern in the editorial office at UMO.se. Her task was to redesign and reformulate an interactive animation about what happens in the body when people fall in love. A previously developed version had been discarded by the expert advisors that UMO.se use because of its normative content. We followed the intern using an ethnographic approach and gathered data material of different kinds during the process. The examples that we discuss in this case and the images shown here have been presented in more detail in previous publications (Lundmark et al., 2011; Lundmark & Normark, 2011; 2012). In this paper we use three of the examples from the UMO.se study to show how norms might be present, reproduced and sometimes conflicting in the experienced interaction with the design as well as in the design process of this kind of online service.

1. Avoid reproducing norms

The animation about what happens when people fall in love did not make it through the review process at UMO.se. The old version of the animation was problematic in the sense that using one person to represent all the different bodily reactions made it seem as if the person was in a very vulnerable position. Another problem was that using one person as a representative of love made it difficult to show more than one kind of love interest. Our interviews with the programmers showed how technological possibilities and constraints clashed with the message, and the original idea of having one person was that his body should act as a map of different feelings and reactions. But it became problematic to design it that way since there is no direct mapping between body parts and some of the feelings involved, such as sadness and bravery.

We meant to reuse a design that we used earlier; it was supposed to be a roll-over function. But for creative reasons it didn't work out; the clickable areas got weird and we didn't have time to work on it. (Quote from the programmer in the project, 2010, our translation)

The navigation was therefore represented as a timeline (a line with dots on it; see Fig 2), a compromise also affected by economic constraints in the project. This timeline was one of the problems with the design; it was experienced as normative with its chronological and linked structure. It suggested that feelings associated with love should be experienced in a specific order and that all experiences were related and expected. In the final version, eight people who represented different bodily experiences of being in love were adjusted to match a strong figure with weaker feelings and vice versa.

2. Show people both inside and outside of the norms

One example of how design decisions are made in relation to showing people and groups of people that can be placed within and outside the norms is the placement of illustrations of people in the design interface. The placement of people in a group was built on the idea that people illustrating the different experiences of love should

be standing together in the illustration. This is a particular example of how interaction design can convey meaning and values. The interface design was not part of the discussion about social norms, but this is also a matter of interference (Moser, 2006). Design decisions in a more technological sense weren't in the "belly of the beast" in the above discussion but were enacted in the discussion about issues of what is excluded and what is not in a broader societal context.

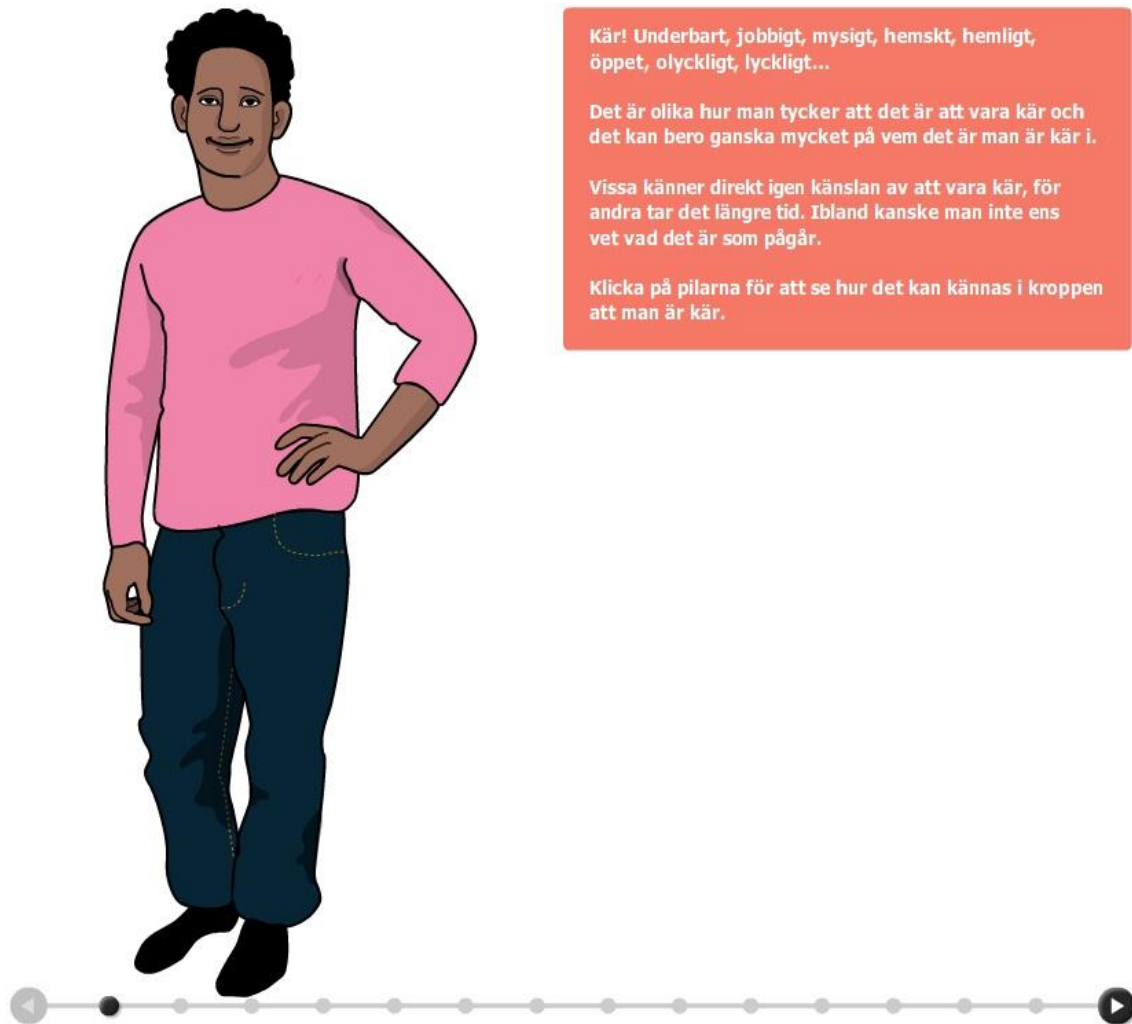


Figure 2. The old love animation

3. Address conflicting conditions

Empowering young people to develop their own individual identity was a primary objective in the UMO project. This was clear from their image policy: the images should empower youth and in particular not show people with several (double) possible vulnerabilities. Double vulnerabilities could, for example, mean an image of a person with a disability and the sadness of a broken heart. This is not as easy as it seems at first sight:

Think about empowerment for the perspective of the one that is exposed: how do you do that in the best possible way? Is it to show him

or her in anger, or would that be ridiculing them? We don't want to show people in exposed situations, regardless of how angry one can become. (Quote from the editorial board meeting in May 2010, our translation)

It was considered difficult to have an empowering perspective and at the same time (from a normative point of view) try to address less superior feelings or actions. This is an important lesson when viewing design from a norm-critical perspective: how should aspects outside of the norms be presented? By showing people or contexts as exposed or vulnerable, the norm is arguably reinforced, but hiding them does the same thing. UMO's solution was to expose one kind of vulnerability at a time, which from an interference point of view is reducing identities.



Figure 3. The new love animation.

This case gave examples of the difficulties of trying to design in a more norm-neutral sense. The interaction design demands came into conflict with narrative structures that unintentionally reproduced norms. The solution was to try to show people both inside and outside the norm. This, on the other hand, led to difficulties in how to attach multiple experiences to vulnerable representations of identities.

SOCIAL NORMS IN INTERACTION DESIGN

We have discussed three examples of the way that interaction design, i.e. the form and behavior of an interactive system, materializes an arena for normative practices. In order to understand the arenas, we adopt a performative perspective and argue that playing along and acting within the norms of the sites is necessary

to fulfill the roles that “users” are handed. It becomes quite clear how (parts of) identities are supposed to be performed in various sites. Suchman (2007) argued that understanding the relationship between humans and computer requires an analysis of the constant negotiation of the boundary created in situated action. Our data also points to the shift between various arenas online and offline and how they overlap and are made and unmade through a series of actions.

The possibilities and limitations that digital environments provide for the affordance, expression and creation of self-reflection/-presentation are linked to the social and gendered norms of the use and the creation of an online personality. It seems to be of importance for the user to provide an “own voice” or position, to express him-/herself in the project of composing the “self”. This is, for example, done through self-positioning, experimentation with poses and positions that either produces a normalization of gender constructions, or opposes them. By their affordances the different sites and technologies influence the self-presentations in various ways. This might be by connecting to other users, privileging digital competence in web design, offering apparel and accessories to compose identities, and/or contributing to the possibilities of exploring and communicating an own voice or expression.

Creating norms

Social media, like many other forms of digital media/arenas, try to create for the user an experience of being able to act in accordance with his/her own intentions and interests. Technology and computer-based artifacts, though, impose both restrictions and opportunities for these actions. As the first case shows, the interface design conveys how the user is supposed to act within the community/site. Viewed from a perspective whereby the user and design interface interact, the system and the design suggest that the user wants specific things (such as you as the user wanting to create interest and share with as many as possible, and feeling the need for an online persona) and doesn’t question or invite the experience to take another direction. This also means that designers of these kinds of arena, as well as users, more or less actively create, reproduce, reinforce and/or challenge cultural values when designing for experiences. The assumptions about the user and the use of the artifact and/or arenas are embedded in the design. So, when discussing normative practices and social norms in design, not only does the norm-critical perspective have something to bring to critical perspectives for HCI, but designers also have something to gain from those perspectives.

Upholding norms

Data suggests that there may be an expectation of being genuine online and reflecting yourself, and that social media use in general is not adjusted to various roles – what Moser (2006) and Haraway (1991) termed “interference”. These two aspects to some extent repel each other, by shifting focus in the identity from young female to professional in front of a public audience consisting of varied kinds of relationships (friends, family, professional). Goffman’s (1964) term “audience segregation” and the way that people adjust to the audience do to some extent explain this tension. Adjusting to an audience consisting of various relationships is a

seamless process in face-to-face situations but on social media it requires practical actions.

Assuming that interaction design is not neutral, Facebook, Twitter and blog providers are imbued with a normative assumption that it should be important for the users to draw attention to themselves. Our view is that the way that identities and interactions are played out in these arenas is dependent on what the arena offers.

Challenging norms

The case from UMO.se that exemplifies how design decisions made in the project are handled to be in line with their norm-critical agenda illustrates an reoccurring practice. For example, the goal of the project is to show people (and groups of people) who are both outside and inside the social norms present in society and also not to present different social norms in any hierarchical order in the produced content. The examples show how the designers work with interaction and animation to strengthen the values they want to communicate. As in interaction criticism, interaction design is modeled to fit this specific context (see Bardzell & Bardzell, 2010; 2013). Norm-criticalness is also visible in a number of ways in the design.

One conclusion from the study is that the representations on UMO.se are in many aspects reflections on existing values and norms, but also show how the producers of content try to represent the "other" (identities outside the norm) in a norm-critical way. In that sense they try to construct an equality between normative identities and those outside the norms, and consequently to contribute with a critical perspective to present identity norms. In many ways the editors and designers at UMO.se are practicing value-sensitive design. An important aspect of the work at UMO.se is avoiding taking a specific gender, race, sexuality, etc. for granted. As we have shown, this work covers not only texts and images but interaction design and technological choices as well.

FINAL REMARKS

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how social media (though many of the examples given are applicable to other technologies as well) and interaction design may create normative structures. The social norms highlighted in this paper are mainly diversity and gender values. Interaction design refers to form and function (not only texts and images) used to create an understanding of the activity and an apprehension of what is "normal" in the context. Importantly, exploring the field of norm-critical design requires a focus on the conditions of production and on the producers, i.e. the designers. By understanding the normative logic of the design process and the context in which the design is produced, it is possible to trace how a design decision is made and what possibilities and constraints guided it. The material result of a development process cannot be separated from its surrounding society; it is clearly linked to a number of discourses in technology and culture that provide structural patterns of design. We argue that by critically examining the outcome of the design, however, we can start to unpack the way that digital structures embed norms of different kinds. The interaction design is where this work has to start.

The studies presented show problematic consequences of describing different experiences in a chronological, linear progression rather than in a manner that allows for a more flexible way of navigating between different experiences. The three cases presented – the study of how young girls interact with and present themselves on bilddagboken.se, the study of the way that young women entrepreneurs use social media and the study of the design case at UMO.se – give different examples of how functionality and form might create, uphold and communicate norms and values of who the user is and what s/he should want. Examples of applying interaction design to provide/sell higher standing, making use of interaction design to gain higher standing, and applying interaction design to avoid granting higher standing to certain groups contribute to the understanding of how norms and normative structures can be present in design. The role of gender in technology and design has been addressed before and this paper contributes to this research by highlighting how interaction design can be a carrier of norms such as gender norms, and also of other social norms and values that can be connected to gender, diversity and identity. The example shows that design is not a neutral platform, but contributes to creating conceptions about the world, how we interact with each other and who we are. The three cases presented in this paper also point to an overarching question that is seldom asked: is it possible that a specific design contributes to its (mis-)use, and that it might actually lead to reinforcing normative assumptions that we do not want?

ENDNOTES

- 1) Since the study, this site has changed name to dayviews.com
- 2) www.flickr.com
- 3) picasa.google.com
- 4) It is possible to pay for “promoting” your status updates in Facebook, i.e. putting them at the top in your friends’ status feeds

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