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Finding Female Recognition: A Career Comparison of Female and Male Graphic Designers

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Finding Female Recognition: A Career Comparison of Female and Male Graphic Designers

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Advisor: Sheri Young
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the requirements for the University Honors Scholar designation
at Johnson & Wales University

Abstract

It is common among many career paths that men achieve higher status jobs as compared to women. However, the fight for women's rights has been effective for many years and there has been a lot of progress made. Despite this progress, this gap still exists. My real interest is in what differentiates these men from women in the same careers. Graphic design is a gender-inclusive career that is not stereotyped towards one gender or another. Although it has been around since the early 1920s, it is still a relatively modern concept due to the new technologies that have changed the industry so greatly. College classes and even those in high school see a pretty equal split between male and female students, if anything there are generally more females. Yet, when examining graphic design on a career level, post-graduation, many of the employees are male. So, the question is, why? There are plenty of, if not more, females in the graphic design industry. As I am actively pursuing a career in graphic design, I have a greater interest in this anomaly since it will personally affect my life. My own career outcomes will become part of the data for future researchers who study this topic. This thesis examines the career trajectories of male and female graphic designers by comparing their education, work experience, and other factors to see what it is that got them to where they are today. I have sorted through many of the top design conferences to determine if male speakers dominate the lineups, and they do. Using the knowledge I have gained through in-depth research of the top female and male graphic designers worldwide, I have identified factors as to if, and why male graphic designers rule the industry. I have found that the simple lack of female leaders in graphic design is the answer to its own problem: the reason why there are such few female designers holding leadership positions is also that there are few female leaders to serve as role models.

Acknowledgments

I am most grateful for my mom who encouraged me to pursue the Honors program here at Johnson & Wales University. Without her never-ending support throughout the years, I am not sure I would have made it to this point to write this thesis. She has never let me settle and has helped me push myself to always achieve more. There were many instances when I did not feel particularly motivated to complete the Honors course here or to continue to this last step of graduating with Honors status by writing this thesis. Fortunately, I had my mom reminding me every step of the way that I could do it if I just gave it the same time and dedication that I give to my work as a graphic designer.

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Introduction

As women continue to pursue the fight for equal recognition in the workplace in many fields, the common question remains, why do the women fall short? In my three years as a graphic design student, I have been exposed to the work of very few female graphic designers but have a wide knowledge of several male graphic designers. I know there are plenty of female creatives out there who are producing great designs that would serve as a great inspiration for young female creatives like myself. So it leaves me to wonder, why are females less recognized than male counterparts in the graphic design industry?

According to the 2019 AIGA Design Census conducted by AIGA and Google, almost 60% of all designers are women (AIGA, 2019). The U.S. Department of Education also shows that the same 60 percent of graduate graphic designers are women. So, if the numbers seem to check out, then what is the issue? The real issue is that of these 60 percent of female designers, only 11 percent of female designers hold leadership positions. The extent of this problem struck me after attending the AIGARI, “Know Her Summit,” in 2019. The “Know Her Summit” is a design conference and workshop that brings a strictly female panel to speak about their experiences as a female graphic designer. They hope to inspire young women by sharing their stories about how to thrive as a female designer. Their goal is to make a name for these great female designers who go unrecognized due to the overbearing presence of male designers in the field. This imbalance is one of the leading causes as to why women are unable to earn leadership positions in the design field. As noted in the research conducted by Latu et al, Schmid Mast, Lammers, and Bombari, young girls are more inspired and encouraged by having female role models (Latu, 2013). Without having a strong female representation in upper-level design positions, it is difficult for young women to picture themselves achieving that status either.

The problems identified by the AIGARI are evident at national design conferences as well. For example, the Adobe Summit is one of the largest design conferences in the nation. Out of the 147 speakers who were scheduled to present at the 2020 conference, only 63 were women. For being one of the greatest conferences to attend as a designer, this is a very poor representation of the number of female designers that could be invited to speak. This trend can be seen among several other design conferences that were scheduled to be held throughout 2020 all across America. Experience Design Week, which is for UX designers, has about the same ratio with one female speaker for every 2.1 male speakers. Developer Week has the greatest separation in the representation of female speakers with just one female speaker for every 4.6 male speakers. While these numbers have improved over time, there is still no answer as to why this is the case. So, what is it that causes female designers to be underrepresented as famous figures or at big design conferences? Women do outnumber male designers in almost every category of employment from students to full-time employees, according to the 2019 AIGA Design Census. If women dominate the field in numbers, why don't they dominate the field in the headlines?

Literature Review

After reviewing the research on the problem of women's underrepresentation in the design field, the cause has yet to be determined. It has been identified and confirmed several times that women in fact are not receiving the same opportunities and recognition as men in the design field. Several of the studies pose the same question, but none conduct an in-depth study comparing the career paths of male and female designers. Twyla Cummings reported on the demographic and employment status of women in the graphic communication industry. In her

dissertation, she surveyed two thousand females who held positions in the industry. At least half of the respondents reported that they worked for companies that employed one hundred employees or less. (Cummings, 2014) The results highlighted by this study include: women had a visible presence in the industry, particularly working in sales and for supplier/manufacturing companies; women had a minimal presence at management levels; mentoring played a major role in these women's career development and advancement; gender pay inequality was a major issue. While her research offers some important statistics, it does not offer an explanation for those numbers.

The doctoral research of Jane Connory focused specifically on the contributions of female designers to Australia's Graphic Design industry. She discovered that although, "50% of graphic design graduates since the 1970s" were women, "only one woman, Dahl Collings, was included in the AGDA Hall of Fame" (Connory, 2017). Connory looked to gain insight as to why women in graphic design have been rendered invisible for so long. She studied various women who graduated from different institutions in Australia and New Zealand between 1970 and 2012. Connory believes to have found some answers in the experiences of these women. Her studies reveal that "the numbers of female students have been consistently higher than men, maintaining a steady increase which forces questions about the social attitudes and gender expectations that saw men take leadership and women fade into the background" (Connory, 2017). What her study fails to do is examine the career paths of these women. She rather chooses to look at outside factors that she refers to as, "sociocultural factors." From this method of research, she gathers three common themes that include: women are overlooked for promotions when they have children, women are paid less as mothers, and women just aren't committed to or competent at their jobs as they were before they became a mother.

In a case study of gender in information technology and design courses Clegg, Mayfield, and Trayhurn, the three women argue that both design and IT are gendered discourses (1999). They take a unique approach by straying from the usual idea that women are the “problem.” This study does not focus on graphic design, but also on information technology (IT) as well. The study was conducted through interviews and case studies based in one higher education institution. It examines both men and women who have chosen IT and design courses at the selected school. The interviews collected qualitative data through film. Participants were randomly selected from the first-year class and were asked to construct a biography. The purpose of this study was only to identify and confirm that there is a gender gap in two similar fields. It aims to highlight that there are not equal opportunities for men and women in two fields that are related. The main idea that these women were able to conclude through their case studies was that women are aware of the constraints that limit them from excelling in their field.

The current research that exists typically examines this topic by conducting a statistical analysis through demographic studies and interviews. The issue with the current literature that is out there is that it is missing critical information that will help provide the answer to this highly studied dilemma. Interviewers are not asking the questions that need to be asked and researchers who focus on the numbers are not getting into the “why.” The literature that currently exists in regarding to this topic simply supports the fact that women are underrepresented in the graphic design industry. Furthermore, many of the studies are not focused enough to offer an explanation for why female graphic designers are part of a very small group that hold upper-level design positions.

Methodology

It has been established through several previous studies that female graphic designers are underrepresented in the industry. What has not yet been established is why they are underrepresented. I have taken a unique approach in an attempt to answer this question that stumps so many people in the design industry. To further the research on the success of women in the graphic design industry, I have conducted in-depth case studies on one male and one female graphic designer who have achieved a comparable status. I have studied several artifacts of these two designers to collect qualitative information that will further examine this research question. With this information, I have compared their career trajectories and education history along with the accomplishments and successes of each individual. Given the details I have discovered through these case studies, I have been able to identify inconsistencies and gaps that provide a chance to examine this problem in a new light.

My research will begin by setting the standards for what the steps are as a graphic designer; everything from the college courses for a graphic design major to the different positions a graphic designer can earn in a company. This will set a basic understanding of what is available to both male and female designers in terms of their education and career paths. This baseline is necessary in to find out what it is that allows for more male graphic designers to hold high-level positions. It will also define what these positions are that a graphic designer can hold.

In order to establish a solid understanding of graphic design, I will detail the necessary background information. Information, which will include the history of graphic design which will set the stage for when the gender bias truly began. It will also include a synopsis of what a graphic designer's education may look like, as well as what their career could entail. This

research will study the gender gap in the design industry at every level to determine why the gap exists.

Limitations

It is worth noting that there were a few limitations to the research conducted in this thesis. Due to the global pandemic, COVID-19, I was unable to access libraries and was limited to dissecting the literature that was available to me on the internet. While the internet is great for its ability to provide a vast amount of information, I would have been interested to see what I could find in physical books related to my research topic. Had I been able to access the libraries, I would have liked to dig through design textbooks to see if I could find more information on early female graphic designers. I would have also liked to conduct more detailed case studies on additional graphic designers, both male and female. The biographical details that I found on the internet were quite repetitive and did not provide me with all of the information that I felt was necessary in order to fairly compare various male and female graphic designers.

History of Graphic Design

The term “graphic design” was coined by William Addison Dwiggins in 1922 to describe the unique process he followed when designing books. He focused on typesetting, illustration, and design, which transformed bookmaking from a simple craft to an interpretive art. Before advanced technology, graphic design began as a handcrafted process. Process while still focusing on the same principles of design (balance, hierarchy, contrast, repetition, and layout) this style of art has greatly evolved. Today graphic design is known as a computer program-based way to create art. Graphic designers utilize various computer software programs to create digital art

graphics. The industry standard is to use the Adobe Creative Cloud which consists of a set of applications that provides users with access to a variety of tools used for graphic design, video editing, web development, photography and more.

William Dwiggins is the name attached to the term “graphic design,” but he is not the man who truly shaped the industry. That man is legendary designer Paul Rand, who is best known for transforming graphic design into its current form and who released a book containing his theories and ideologies, *Thoughts on Design*, in 1947. Rand was ahead of his time and by writing this book, he shaped the entire future of the graphic design industry. He laid the path for some of the most common practices in good design; without his work graphic design may not look the same as it does today.

From the early phases of graphic design, men controlled the industry. Looking back through the history of this method of art, plenty of male figures flood the pages of books on the subject. It took many years for a woman to make a name in the industry. One pioneering woman in graphic design is known for being the first woman to have pursued a career in graphics. After studying at the Bauhaus, a German art school, Söre Popitz began to freelance in the 1920s. At this point in time, it was almost unheard of for a woman to work in graphic design. Popitz was one of the few who managed to break into the male-dominated field after facing sexism through her education at the Bauhaus (Morley, 2019). The school was quite progressive, allowing women into the classroom, but these women were encouraged to pursue weaving rather than the male-dominated mediums of painting, architecture, and typography. Popitz decided to leave the school early which is believed to be the reason why she was able to succeed in an industry that was not very welcoming towards women.

Very few women found as much early success and acceptance as a woman in design as Popitz was able to achieve. Names like Popitz also get lost in the history of graphic design. Her name is not frequently included in the teachings of graphic design and often is left out of design books. There are a few other women who were pioneers in the early stages of graphic design, but they too are not heard of. These women are not well recognized like the early male figures, Paul Rand, Saul Bass, William Dwiggins, and more. It takes deeper, more focused research to discover these female pioneer designers.

Women did not begin to truly emerge in the design industry until the late 1970s to early 2000s era. Susan Kare is one of the forgotten names in graphic design. She is recognized for her graphical user interface elements and icons that are seen in the Macintosh computer (Isadora, 2015). Her icon designs earned her a position as the creative director for the company NeXT, formed by Steve Jobs. Even with all this success, working for one of the biggest names in the tech world, Susan Kare is a ghost in design headlines.

Creating a billion-dollar business named after yourself should make your name quite recognizable. Lynda Susan Weinman, founder of an online software training website, now owned by LinkedIn who acquired the website in 2015, is another female pioneer of design who is not celebrated for her achievements. Perhaps this is due to the fact that she built the company with her husband. Her online business, Lynda.com, is a popular source for graphic designers, but very few connect the site back to Weinman. This is a big reason why so many female designers seem to hold no credibility; their designs are well known, but their names are non-existent.

Possibly the most iconic, recognizable logo in graphic design is the Nike “swoosh.” The logo has been in existence since 1971 when Portland State University student, Carolyn Davidson, designed the Nike “swoosh” for the company previously known as Blue Ribbon

Sports, Inc. The Nike “swoosh” is no doubt the most identifiable logo in the sports world and to the general public. As for Carolyn Davidson, her name does not hold as much weight in the industry as the logo she created does. For a young woman who was still just a student when she was tasked with creating a logo for a company that was transforming the sports world, she deserves for her name to be spoken about just as much as the company itself is (Mathias, 2015).

One pioneering graphic designer who was able to leave her mark in design history is Paula Scher. She broke through the standards of the male-dominated industry and is one of the few women prior to the mid-twentieth century who was able to do so. Scher was hired in 1991 as the first female principal at Pentagram, the world’s largest independent design consultancy. To earn a position in a company with as much stature and respect as Pentagram was groundbreaking for a female designer. Scher did note that she knew she was hired because she was a better “bang for the buck” in comparison to her male co-workers, but she did not let this hold her back (Bolt, 2020). A motivating quote, as stated by Scher, for female designers that speaks on the gender problem in the design industry is, “If you stay in the game and you do the work, you’ll be recognized (Bolt, 2020).” This provides young female creatives with the hope and inspiration needed in the male-dominant graphic design world.

Female graphic designers are still working hard to earn their spot in the industry. Over time, the gender imbalance has progressed significantly. From 2008 to today, the rate of female creative directors has risen from 3% to 29% across the industry (Bolt, 2020). It took the work of several organizations started by powerful, confident women who began the conversation and introduced women into the industry.

Education

In order to compare female and male graphic designers, it is important to establish what exactly being a graphic designer entails starting with education. Graphic design majors can vary from school to school, but generally, the courses are similar. A graphic design major is described as, “A program that prepares individuals to apply artistic and computer techniques to the technical and commercial concepts (MyMajors, 2020). The typical courses that a graphic designer would take include motion graphics, web design, typography, branding, marketing, digital photography, and more. Students enrolled in graphic design degrees will learn skills in several computer programs, as well as the skills needed to become a designer. A strong skill set will help the designer prosper in the future. While in school, a graphic design student will learn how to not only build their craft but also how to build on the soft skills they will utilize in the future. It takes more than just some artistic talent to make it as a graphic designer.

The U.S. Department of Education reports that more than 60% of graduate graphic design degrees go to women but less than 50% of students working towards a master’s in design are women. The numbers of female graduates and working female designers start to diminish as you look up the ranks of workplace roles. There is no doubt that there is an equal, if not greater representation of female students enrolled in graphic design. In fact, at the top five institutions that enroll the most students into graphic design degrees, the number of women is far larger than the number of men (Data USA, 2017).

As of 2017, 61.2 percent of students enrolled in graphic design degrees were female. These top five institutes to graduate the most graphic design students include, The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, School of Visual Arts, Southern New Hampshire University, Independence University and Full Sail University. Graphic design is a major that is growing in popularity. In

the past, it was commonly found in smaller schools that focused on offering art-related degrees. It is possible that this contributed to why the female gender made up the majority of students enrolled in graphic design degrees. The arts have generally been stereotyped as a female interest. This stereotype has diminished over time and now both men and women take part in art-related activities. It is more common now to see classrooms split quite evenly between male and female students in graphic design courses, but this is still new.

In 2017, The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, which as of 2019 shut down due to financial struggles, awarded 170 graphic design degrees to female students and just eighty-five graphic design degrees to male students. This was the most significant difference of female to male students graduating a top-five graphic design program. The School of Visual Arts followed closely with a difference of ninety-one students awarding one hundred and fifty-five graphic design degrees to female students. Southern New Hampshire University had a difference of seventy-two students, again awarding more degrees to females over males, and Independence University was just ten less than that. Full Sail University, which today is known as the top university to earn a graphic design degree at had the closest split of degrees awarded in 2017. Full Sail awarded only seventeen more degrees to female students than male students (Data USA, 2017). This is not surprising as it is the top program for graphic design, so it is to be expected that they would be able to enroll an equal number of male and female students.

Today, graphic design is offered at a wider variety of schools including larger state schools, private schools and more. At some schools, graphic design majors are very focused and specialized. Students go through several in-depth courses that will make them highly prepared for the industry. Schools that provide an intense, real-world experience often have students focus on a specialty craft of design. For instance, at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode

Island, students' must choose between print and web design once they reach their sophomore year (Graphic Design (B.S.), 2020), thus allowing for the student to have a niche and gain a more in-depth understanding of a specific craft. At other schools, that offer a more loose, less structured program in design, students will take a variety of marketing, advertising, and design courses (Mosimo, 2020). The major might be called visual communications or digital media rather than graphic design. It is because of all these variations in the major that students come out with different levels of experience. Differences in education is a fair reason why some graphic designers may only be able to achieve certain levels of leadership in their career. This alone is not enough of a reason for why women are not making it to these leadership positions while men are.

Industry

In the graphic design industry, there are several positions available for designers to work towards. The entry-level position for a graphic designer is a junior designer. The junior designer is typically responsible for working closely under the senior designer who will be their supervisor and mentor. This position usually requires one to three years of experience in the field, but depending on the stature of the company, the designer may be expected to hold more years of experience. After gaining a few more years of experience, a designer could then apply to be or be promoted to the senior designer. As a senior designer, this person will take on more responsibility. They are made responsible for taking the design solutions created by the team and making sure they will achieve the marketing goals set by the client. The role of the senior designer is very important as they are the lead for producing graphics and need to oversee the other designers. Above the senior designer comes the creative director. The creative director is

the true visionary behind the projects. They make sure the project is following the branding and remaining cohesive as the scope evolves. Those are the three main roles that a graphic designer would hold within a design team. Other positions are more tailored to the types of projects that the company or agency is taking on. For instance, a graphic designer who specializes in web design could hold the title of UX designer, which is a user experience designer, or a UI designer, which is a user interface designer. There are other categories of designers as well such as animator, layout artist, book designer, web developer, multimedia designer and more. The size of the company and what its needs are will determine how many and what types of designers will be hired (11 Types of Graphic Design Jobs to Explore, 2020).

Recognition

Not only is there an imbalance of women in upper-level positions of graphic design, but there is also unequal recognition of the work produced by women who are able to achieve these positions. There are many instances where women are not given the praise for creative projects they have contributed to. Young female creative, Taryn Nuñez, took to LinkedIn to share her outrage over losing the spotlight to her husband and co-owner of their creative agency. She wrote, “Do any other women who run a company with a man/their male partner struggle to get any acknowledgment for their work? Now that we’re a few months in and are gaining traction and successful projects, I find him always getting the credit and applause” (Nuñez, 2020). Nuñez is not alone in her frustration of being dismissed credit where credit is most definitely due. Both Taryn and her husband, Ray, are graduates of Johnson & Wales University. The two majored in graphic design for the same four years and now are co-partners of their very own agency, The Nuñez Company. While they are able to share the title of creative director, the highest position

there is to hold as a graphic designer in the industry, the recognition given to successful projects is not equally split. This is an issue that is seen on several other occasions within the graphic design industry. As in many other industries as well, the entrepreneurial society has appeared to be male-dominated for many years. Women are going unnoticed for their equally successful, hard work.

Just a few short weeks after sharing this post, Taryn's husband and work partner, Ray Nuñez was interviewed for a podcast titled, "What Success Looks Like." Frequently throughout the podcast, the interviewer, who is a woman, herself dismisses the fact that Ray is only one half of his company. In the description of the episode alone, the podcaster uses phrases such as "Ray's team" and "his business" or "his customers" (McDonough, 2020). Since Ray and Taryn created this creative company together, it seems odd to leave Taryn out of the interview about their success of the company.

Several women joined the conversation in the comments of Taryn's original post sharing similar experiences and frustration as well as support and words of encouragement. In response to one of the comments Taryn stated, "My nickname growing up within my family was TJ and I have been tempted to create an email within our company with that vs. my own name to just see if the more gender neutral name helps. But it's wild that as women in 2020 we're thinking this way" (2020) Women feeling that they need to go under a male alias in order to earn some respect in the industry is not unheard of; in fact, it has been done before.

One startup company, co-founded by Kate Dwyer and Penelope Gazin, took a unique approach in order to dodge the sexism they feared would prevent their project from having the effective kickstart they were hoping to achieve. In order to do this, they created their own third cofounder, a man, named Keith Mann. This fictional person would provide them with an alias to

communicate with others via email. This alias was more than beneficial for their company, but it is just one of the many problems that females have to face in the field as a graphic designer. It is a sad truth that many female designers feel they will not be respected or taken seriously in the industry. Trying to make a name for yourself in an industry that is dominated by the other gender can be a difficult challenge. The lack of female leaders and colleagues makes it easier for the design community to believe women are not as capable as the men who run the industry (Hilder, 2020).

If you flip through a graphic design book or run a google search for graphic designers, the common names that will be seen are those of male graphic designers. This is just because there are far more to pull from. Not really because these men are more successful or notable, just simply because there are more of them in the industry. When examining the speaker lineups for design conferences big and small, one detail remains consistent: female speakers are the minority. In an investigation conducted by AIGA, conferences held in the United States averaged a breakdown of 54.6% female while in Europe the average was just 35.7% (Morley, 2019). Although females just barely dominate the U.S. design conferences, this does not mean they have better representation overall. After examining more closely, the number of speakers that spoke in groups or with partners, the women were again undermined. Only 36% of the speakers who did not share the stage and spoke individually were female. There were far more men who spoke independently. It was more common for women to speak with a partner or in groups made up of men and women.

The greatest participation gap of women and men designers can be seen at the CXI Bielefeld conference in Germany. At this conference, there was not even one female speaker present. Out of the thirty design conferences that were surveyed, only four had a perfectly even

split of male to female speakers. Six of these conferences did manage to present a speaker lineup that ranged from 54 to 87 percent female speakers. These design conferences aim to promote the leading graphic design professionals at their events. So, the statistics suggest that the conferences are either gender biased, or that the industry leaders are predominantly men.

In addition to the underrepresentation of women in design conference line-ups, those who were able to secure a spot on stage were not given fair stage time. The women who spoke at these conferences were not given the spotlight they deserve so that they too could speak their knowledge and experiences as a designer. The number of minutes spent on stage by female speakers was hardly 30% of the duration of the entire conference. There is such little recognition of women in graphic design that there have been several movements to allow for female designers to take on all the spotlight. AIGA, Eye on Design hosts an annual “Know Her Summit” that gives female graphic designers the chance to speak about their experience in the industry. They host a fully female panel and invite the public to attend workshops run by these women as well. *Women Talk Design* is another company that aims to elevate women and gender non-binary speakers to empower those who are not well represented in the design industry. Christina Wodtke is an author, professor, designer and conference speaker. She found herself too often to be the only woman on stage at several conferences. It was because of this that she created *Women Talk Design*, she hoped this organization would be a platform to highlight incredible women in design. Organizations like Wodtke’s are important in order to give women in design a voice that should be heard. The issue is that there shouldn’t be a need for strictly female design conferences just to allow for women to have a chance to have their voices heard.

Female-Led Agencies

In the graphic design industry, there is still a significant gender gap that has been accounted for by several other researchers. According to Forbes, as of 2019, the statistics are quite mind-blowing. The design world lacks female leaders who may influence young women to push further and set the example that a woman can hold an upper-level position within the industry. What is most notable is that the professional design landscape is overtly asymmetric; just .1% of creative agencies are founded by women. This makes women an extreme minority in the design world. It also contributes to why so many women feel they will be stuck in lower-level design roles. In an article for “The Guardian,” Ali Hanan shares multiple statistics about female creatives to emphasize the underrepresentation in the industry. What is most notable in her article is that 70% of young female creatives say they have never worked with a female creative female director or executive creative director (Hanan, 2016). In addition to this, the same group of women are working in a 75% male-dominated department. Not only are women outnumbered in the executive-level positions, but also in entry-level junior and senior roles as well. This mass number of males in the design industry seems to be an anomaly as females dominate the design field at the education level.

Women supporting women is a major movement to help female designers gain recognition. *Creative Lady Directory* is a massive resource that connects with creative women to interview and promote them. Their goal is to assist women to increase client outreach and help them make their name recognizable in the industry. Without companies like *Creative Lady Directory*, it is likely that many talented female designers would go unnoticed. Jess Levitz worked for many years in-house before deciding it was time to start something of her own. She began June Letters Studio to embrace her passion for empowering creative women and

dedicating her life to great design. June Letters Studio along with *Creative Lady Directory* are Jess's attempt to be a successful, independent, female designer, and successful she is. The unfortunate part is that women like Jess are almost unheard of. *Creative Lady Directory* highlights almost five hundred female creatives with many different talents. These women all identify as graphic designers but have special focuses ranging from branding, illustration, web design, pattern design, art direction, photography, and much more. From this list, not one name is recognizable or holds much fame.

Work Life

A graphic designer will spend countless hours working on their craft. It is not a simple nine to five job that ends once the building is left. On average, a graphic designer will work forty-hour weeks, but this does not include any extra hours that they put in to meet tight deadlines. This rigorous work schedule does not allow for much flexibility and time off. Milton Glaser is among the highest praised designers in the United States. He has created several notable and highly recognized. Glaser made an interesting point while contributing to a panel discussion about why there are so few female superstar graphic designers. He brought up the fact that:

“Women get pregnant, have children, go home and take care of their children. And those essential years that men are building their careers and becoming visible are basically denied to women who choose to be at home. Unless something very dramatic happens to the nature of the human experience, then it's never going to change” (Bierut, 2006).

This is a key factor and unfortunate reality that many women face in several fields, not just graphic design. The decision to choose between focusing on a career at a crucial point for growth

or to take the time to become a mother is a major life choice that women come to face. The lengthy time off that a woman needs in order to raise her family is also very important time that is given up from her career. It is extremely difficult to accommodate family life despite the fact that a graphic designer does have the ability to work from home. Design work is time-consuming and requires extreme focus and attention to detail. It is not something that can be done while attempting to raise a family. It is far more common for the mother of the family to take time off of work in order to care for the children. While this is a stereotype that has changed significantly as times have progressed, maternity leave still can affect a woman's career. Especially in the design industry, hiring someone who will require a long period of time off is an extreme risk. It is a fast-paced environment that needs multiple team members to keep up with the workload. Losing a team member is detrimental to the outcome of a project. Gender bias occurs during the hiring process more often than it should. This bias can keep many women from being offered jobs that they are very well capable of succeeding in. It is possible that this is a reason why women are unable to work their way up the ladder in the design industry.

Men dominate the design industry at all levels of the career ladder. It is more than likely that a female graphic designer will find herself surrounded by male colleagues once working in the industry. The dominance of men can cause a woman to feel as if she does not belong. Being in an environment that is already fast-paced with high stakes at hand to get the job done requires a confident, strong designer. A woman in this industry needs to be ready to compete and prove herself to the men in higher up positions.

Role Models

The importance of a role model goes beyond just having someone successful to look up to. A role model who has been in the same shoes and also shares identifiable qualities can be extremely influential on a younger person. For young women in graphic design, it can be difficult to envision themselves in upper-level creative positions due to the lack of women who hold these positions.

88% of young female creatives say they lack role models (Hanan, 2016) The importance of this statistic is because young girls look up to older women. It is easier for women to be inspired by other women since they can directly relate to their experiences. This is not to say that a female cannot find any inspiration from a male figure. Several studies have found that young women are directly impacted by the paths paved for them by women who are older and more experienced. It is the idea that there are other female designers out there who have been successful and made a living out of this career that is promoted to younger women that this can work. Indiana Lawrence states “With the design industry being so dominated by white males, it leaves a whole group of people questioning their validity and their place within the design community (Khandwala, 2019). She is not alone with this feeling. Many other women are unsure if they will be seen for their talent and creativity due to the imbalance of genders in the design industry. Kaajal Modi describes the design industry as, “a culture of pale, male, and stale” meaning white men make up the majority of design studios and it’s getting old (Khandwala, 2019). She recalls a moment during her master’s program when a white, male studio leader told her class made of mostly women that very few of them would make it as designers. While the design community is typically very supportive and accepting, there are designers out there who

exemplify this toxic masculinity, exclusion, and narrow attitude that leaves women feeling out of place.

Starting the Conversation

It has been a long journey for women in graphic design and much progress has been made towards working their way up the career ladder. This progress would not have been possible without the dedicated work of a few women who were astounded by the low representation of female creatives in the industry.

Kat Gordon has been determined to even out the numbers in terms of creative directors. As of this year, 2020, women hold 29% of creative director roles in the industry. This is a major advancement that took twelve years of hard work to build on the mere 3% that women held back in 2008. The *3% Conference* was a major activist movement that helped push the number of women in these roles to where it is today. Kat Gordon is not only credited with starting this conference, but she is largely responsible for bringing the numbers closer to an even split. Her goal is to have women make up 50% of creative directors. She is focused on bringing diversity to the design industry because “Gender doesn’t mean women and Diversity doesn’t mean African Americans. It means everyone” (The 3% Movement, 2020). Gordon was driven by firsthand experience with women being left out of concept pitches and crucial meetings within several creative agencies. She worked as a copywriter and creative director for twenty years and watched as women were consistently given less of a voice than male counterparts. After doing her own research into why women were underrepresented in the industry, she found the following trends:

- “1. Lack of motherhood support
2. Lack of female mentorship

3. Lack of awareness that being a woman is an asset to connecting consumers
4. Lack of celebration of female work due to gender bias of award juries
5. Lack of women negotiating salaries they deserve” (The 3% Movement, 2020).

These five trends are what she focused her conferences on to bring attention to the situation at hand. She continues to bring these trends into perspective today so others can see the discrimination that is hindering female creatives from earning the attention that they deserve.

A second significant movement for bringing gender diversity into the design industry was led by Jessica Walsh. She began *Ladies, Wine & Design* in 2015 after struggling internally with the lack of women in power throughout the design industry. Walsh was frustrated by how narrow the opportunities available were for women from the top down (Bolt, 2020). *Ladies, Wine & Design* is a global non-profit initiative that offers free mentorship circles, portfolio reviews, talks and creative meetups for underrepresented creatives worldwide. The work of Walsh’s organization has been instrumental in the fight for female recognition and support in the design world. Jessica Walsh has become a successful figure for young female creatives to look up to, which was a key problem that Kat Gordon had pointed out as an explanation for why women were lacking in the field.

There are several other women who are valuable advocates for getting female creatives more involved in the industry, giving them a voice, and the same recognition that men in the industry get. The gender gap is closing in and there is a future for female creatives to be recognized as celebrity designs who are making history.

Jessica Walsh

To start off my study on the discrepancy between male and female graphic designers, I selected Jessica Walsh as my first case study to break down her biography as a graphic designer. As mentioned previously, Walsh has had a major influence on the rise of female creatives in the industry. Her movement, *Ladies, Wine & Design* has been a catalyst for promoting female, non-binary, as well as persons of color in the creative world. She has had great success as an individual as well, making her one of the most well-known female designers in the industry. Walsh's achievements are impressive, so what is it that has allowed her to be one of the few women who are able to rise to the top?

Jessica Walsh was introduced to design at a young age. Both of her parents were entrepreneurs which provided Walsh with great role models to look up to. She was born in New York, the design capital of the world, and began coding and web design at the age of eleven. This is a very young age for any designer to begin serious design work, nonetheless, coding and web design which is some of the most technical and difficult niches of graphic design. Not only was Walsh a young prodigy who was fortunate enough to be born with great design flashing in her face everywhere she went in New York, but she also attended one of the top universities for graphic design. Walsh went on to study graphic design at none other than the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island. Rhode Island School of Design is a prestigious private art school and in 2011, just a few years after Walsh graduated, it was ranked the #1 school to attend for a graphic design degree (RISD, 2011).

Graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design is an extremely beneficial resumé detail to have as a graphic designer. The acceptance rate for the Rhode Island School of Design is a low 24%. To even be accepted into the graphic design program, a prospective student must

apply with a portfolio showcasing multiple samples of their design work. This level of education certainly prepared Walsh for life in the industry making her a standout candidate amongst many applicants whom she may have competed for in her early career stages. It is likely how she was able to land such an impressive internship, in addition to the creative talent that she holds.

Following her education, Jessica Walsh moved back to New York City to work as a design intern with the distinguished design firm Pentagram. At Pentagram, Walsh had the privilege of working under Paula Scher, a pioneering woman of graphic design. By accepting the chance to work with Paula Scher, Jessica Walsh had to turn down a job offer with Apple (Essmaker, 2012). At the time Apple was still up and coming, but the six-figure salary that she was offered speaks highly of how impressive of a designer Walsh was set to be. Beginning her early stages as a graphic designer learning from a highly respected mentor at the dominating design studio in the world was no small feat. It surely allowed her to develop a strong personal style and learn how the industry works early on. Continuing with her early success as a graphic designer, Walsh landed her first job as an art director for *Print Magazine*. An art director is not the typical entry-level, post-graduation job; this is already an upper-level position in the designer hierarchy.

As noted by several other researchers, one of the major reasons why females struggle to become big names in the graphic design industry is due to the fact that there are so few female creatives who have been able to serve as inspiration by making it big in the industry. For Jessica Walsh, this dilemma was not something that affected her. She was her own motivator because she found success in her very early years. As described by Walsh in an interview for “The Discontent” in 2012,

“At 11 years old, I taught myself how to code and create graphics for websites. I became really involved in the blogging world and people started asking me to create websites for them. About a year into that, I created an HTML & CSS tutorial site that also offered free website templates for many of the blogging platforms that were popular at the time. The website became really popular and I was getting about 15,000 unique visitors a day (Essmaker, 2012).”

Jessica Walsh had 15,000 people coming to her for design help at just eleven years old. At this point of a child’s adolescence, there are a very small, select few who may have a true idea of what career path they will follow in their adult years. Walsh was undoubtedly set for success as she can be labeled as a child prodigy with an extreme natural talent for design.

Continuing her path of success, Stefan Sagmeister, one of the most distinguished graphic designers, offered Walsh a job in his personal design studio. It took just five minutes for Sagmeister to gain interest in Walsh after she had reached out to him looking to receive some feedback on her portfolio. Out of all of the great mentors that Jessica Walsh was able to work under, she notes that Stefan Sagmeister had the largest influence on her. Her words specifically were, “I feel eternally grateful to him for giving me so much creative freedom and putting so much trust in me over the years. It’s definitely an honor to be his business partner now” (Essmaker, 2012). These words stand out as they show how significant the support of a male figure in the design industry can be. Sagmeister promoted her to partner of his personal company, by bringing her up to the highest rank in the company gave Walsh the extra bit of confidence she needed in the male-dominated industry. She had also mentioned that some of her first bosses Paula Scher and Kristina DiMatteo helped inspire her along the way. These women provided her with the proof that a female can make it big in the industry. Even with the

incredible natural talent that Jessica Walsh was born with, she still accredits much of her success to her role models and especially her male work partner for giving her the chance to show she can be among the best of graphic designers.

Today, Jessica Walsh has separated from *Sagmeister & Walsh* to run a design studio of her own, *& Walsh*. It is interesting that she decided to take half the name of the company she once shared with Sagmeister. She did this in order to keep her ties to the original company, the one that pushed her to take on a design studio of her own.

Stefan Sagmeister

After analyzing the career trajectory of Jessica Walsh, it is only fitting to breakdown that of her greatest influence, Stefan Sagmeister. Born in Austria, young Stefan had no engagement with the arts, rather he started off as a magazine writer at the age of fifteen. It did not take long for him to realize it was not the writing of magazine articles that he enjoyed, but rather the manipulation of the layout to design something visually pleasing (Heller, 2013). Later on, he earned a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and following that received a Fulbright scholarship to study at Pratt Institute in New York where he earned a second masters in communication design. (Cooper Hewitt, 2015). Sagmeister moved on quickly, accepting a position with the Leo Burnett Hong Kong Design Group just a few years later. His successful career journey continued on with a teaching position at Parsons School of Visual Arts in New York. The most influential position he held was working for Tibor Kalman of M&Co. As he shared in an interview conducted by Steven Heller for AIGA, “Tibor Kalman was the single most influential person in my design-y life and my one and only design hero” (Heller, 2013). It was the abrupt ending of M&Co that allowed for Sagmeister to initiate his individual craft. He

began to focus on CD cover art and which brought him the opportunity to work with Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, Lou Reed, Pat Metheny, David Byrne, Mick Jagger, and Jay-Z. His unique techniques for creating cover designs earned him two Grammy Awards with a total of four Grammy nominations. Sagmeister also holds numerous other design awards include Grand Prix Moscow, Art Directors Club (Silver), The One Show (Gold), AIGA, 100 Shows, and Type Directors Club.

All of these awards and accolades are what make designers well known and recognized throughout the design industry. For Sagmeister, he did not even need to earn these awards and titles to gain the recognition that he has. As stated by the interviewer, Steven Heller, “If Sagmeister followed he wouldn’t be ahead of the pack” (Heller 1). That is what made Stefan Sagmeister so unique. Everything he did was new and outside the box. He reinvented his practice several times because in his own words, “If it’s too new I get anxious, if it’s too familiar I get bored.” That is what guided his designs. Sagmeister did not take inspiration from others’ work; he built his own style of art that had not been seen before. He did not need someone else to help make his name known. It was his own bold creations that don’t quite appeal to everyone’s taste that got Sagmeister recognized in the design industry. The work he produced was truly different, and that is how to get noticed in an industry like graphic design.

Unconventional, progressive, and eccentric not only describe the designs of Stefan Sagmeister, but also the man himself. In 2008, he had grown bored of style and was ready to take on something new. In order to do this, he took a one-year sabbatical to Bali to step out of the commercial world. This sabbatical journey is what started some of the most well-known works by Sagmeister. It was after this retreat that his text-based art style was born. Sagmeister has a profound connection with design, so much so that he has carved design into his body for an

AIGA event poster and posed naked for a postcard photo announcing his firm Sagmeister Inc. This method of using oneself as art in the ways that Sagmeister did was far ahead of its time. It had simply never been seen or done before. His out of the ordinary concepts made him stand out and grow wildly popular (Heller, 2013).

Analyzing the Design Duo

In order to best compare female and male graphic designers, I found it best to analyze a graphic designer of each gender who has reached as close to the same level of achievements as possible. Who better to select for this studio, than the design duo and former partners of *Sagmeister & Walsh*? The two designers had very different education and career trajectories yet still reached the same level of success in the industry by sharing an accomplished design firm.

When Sagmeister invited Walsh to become partner of his company, he wanted to announce the partnership in a typical Sagmeister fashion: with a nude portrait. Now his initial concept for the shoot had Walsh fully clothed, but she insisted that to have an equal role in the studio required equality in the photoshoot as well (Alderson, 2015). There was a massive reaction in response to the nude publicity stunt of the new design studio partners which came as a surprise to Sagmeister, who was on his third nude reveal. As for Jessica Walsh who was still quite young and a fresh new face in the design industry, she was not as less taken aback making the statement, “I expected the negative reactions, no surprise there. I was surprised by how quickly the news spread and how much the nudity helped with this” (Walsh to Alderson, 2015). It is worth mentioning this incident for how it candidly reveals just how sexist the design industry is. Young Jessica Walsh, just twenty-four years old, who had already made a name for herself in the industry just by adding her name next to Sagmeister’s as partner of the studio, still

felt it was necessary to keep things as equal as possible, so she posed nude with much older Sagmeister.

Jessica Walsh is a great example of a female graphic designer who was able to rise to the top. She is a living example of the words of her mentor, Paula Scher, “If you stay in the game and you do the work, you’ll be recognized” (Bolt, 2020). Jessica Walsh had been in the game doing the work since she was eleven years old. A dedicated designer no doubt, but the question arises: could she have done it without Stefan Sagmeister? There is no taking away from the fact that Walsh had the talent, creativity, driven character, everything it took to be a notable designer. Though she too has admitted in several interviews, her true recognition in the industry came from Stefan Sagmeister himself. Her first female mentor and boss, Paula Scher, helped her in many ways but was not influential enough in the design industry to do what Stefan Sagmeister did for her. Sagmeister was already at the time a dominant figure in the design industry. His individual work as a designer along with the work of his studio had already made its mark.

Taking a look back to when these two designers began their individual creative journey to becoming a designer looks very different. For Walsh, it was practically in her blood to become a great success being born to two entrepreneurial parents. Additionally, she had a much younger start to design beginning at the age of eleven. As for Sagmeister, he was set to become an engineer but changed his mind and after a few attempts, he was accepted into the Vienna School of Applied Arts. Walsh, who had been working on her craft for many years by the time she was ready for college, had her selection of schools but her gut told her to attend the Rhode Island School of Design. Although Sagmeister graduated with a Master of Fine Arts as well as a Master of Science, Communication Design, his two higher degrees cannot compare to the curated education that Walsh received from the Rhode Island School of Design for her graphic design

degree. Studying fine arts and communication design are much more broad areas of study whereas a major in graphic design is a much more focused area of study that would prepare Walsh more for the design industry.

Additionally, Walsh stepped out of college with a much stronger experience. She had one foot in with one of the greatest design firms, working under a pioneering woman of graphic design herself. On the contrary for Sagmeister, he did not step into such a glorious position as a young designer emerging in the industry. Before even graduating, Jessica Walsh had an offer to work for Apple with a full-time salary. She could have found herself very comfortable upon graduation having a secure job, but she passed it up for a chance to work under a great mentor. For Sagmeister, it took a bit more effort; a phone call once a week to M&Co until Tibor Kalman finally agreed to meet with him. Yes, Stefan had other jobs along the way, but none as glorified as working as an intern for Pentagram while still just a student.

The real key difference between Sagmeister and Walsh is how they got to where they are today. Jessica Walsh has two major influential mentors to thank for assisting her to the renowned designer that she is known for today. Stefan Sagmeister just has himself to thank. Tibor Kalman may have been an influential figure in Sagmeister's design career, but he did not promote or shine a light on Sagmeister's name in the way that it can be said Scher and Sagmeister did for Walsh.

Suggestions for Further Research

If I were to continue with this task of conducting a career comparison of the male and female gender in the graphic design industry, there are a few methods I would like to add to further build on this case study. As an emerging graphic designer myself, nearing the completion

of my education, I have greatly expanded my connections within the industry and have gained the interest of many with my research topic. Now that I have some more resources and colleagues who are accomplished in the industry, I would like to be able to interview them to gain some insight on personal experiences they have gone through as a male or female graphic designer.

I think it would be interesting to revisit this thesis once I am a year out of college and have had my own first taste of the design industry as a young female creative. If I were to build on this thesis, I would like to interview three to five of my graphic design professors here at Johnson & Wales University as well as three to five of my peers who have graduated in recent years or will be graduating within the next few years. I think the different perspectives and experiences that this group of potential interviewees would share with me would be a great addition to my findings in this current thesis. Having the ability to speak with two different generations who have had first-hand experiences in many different areas of the design field would provide me with great insight into how the gender gap and gender bias has evolved.

While conducting my research for this thesis, there were several questions that I would have liked to be able to ask someone in the industry to help answer my overriding question: why are there such few female graphic designers in upper-level design positions? Some of the questions I would ask my participants include:

1. How many men and how many women work within the design department of your company?
2. Have you ever been led by a female creative director? If so, was she a woman of color?
3. Was the person who conducted your interview for your position a man or a woman?
4. Do you believe that mentors have an impact on a leader in graphic design's success?

5. Do you think a person's college major has an impact on their success as a leader in graphic design?
6. What position were you hired for as your first job out of college?
7. Who is your graphic design role model/greatest inspiration and why?
8. How many of your professors in college were female?
9. At what age were you introduced to graphic design?
10. Do you believe there is a gender gap in graphic design? If so, do you feel there are certain areas of graphic design that have greater gender gaps than others?

I find this set of questions would provide a transparent view into the design industry for researchers like myself to understand how much progress has truly been made towards balancing out the unequal representation of women. These are the questions that I am stuck feeling curious about after diving into this research and expanding the gap in the literature even further. I found these to be the questions that were not being asked by other researchers who were offering an answer to this same thesis question.

Conclusion

In the progressive world that we live in today, it is not uncommon to see women in the workplace, as CEOs, small business owners, police officers or doctors, and any in any other career that was typically stereotyped as a male job. It is great to see this transition towards a more gender-inclusive world, but there is still work to be done. The extensive existing research has established that women are still the slim 0.1% of creative directors and founders of creative agencies, but the supplementary research done for this thesis has provided further suggested answers as to why these are the statistics haunting women in design. My findings have shown

that the insufficient number of female leaders in graphic design is a prominent reason why females are not reaching these leadership positions. Additionally, I have discovered that having a male partner is extremely beneficial for a female earning recognition in the design industry. This can promote female designers to earn more stage time at design conferences and even enable them to become a partner of a design studio or even start their own. This research could be used to further advocate for women in graphic design. It has taken many years and countless women and advocacy organizations to get to the numbers we see today, but for non-binary and women of color, their fight for equality is still in the earlier stages. I hope this research can kickstart the movement for bringing equal representation to the design industry.

The data collected in this thesis reveals interesting trends and patterns in the history of graphic design. It would be interesting for a person to follow up on this thesis in another five years to see how much more progress has been made towards achieving gender balance in the creative world. Continued research and discussion with female creatives who can share their experiences will help bring this thesis question to a more final, resolute conclusion.

As a young female creative myself, I found the in-depth study that I conducted for this thesis to be very fascinating. In the three years that I have been studying graphic design, this study introduced me to several female graphic designers whom I had never heard of before. I was only aware of a small handful of female graphic designers whom my professors had spoken of as inspiration for great design. The male graphic designers who are so easy to discover with some quick research are the ones who I was more familiar with. For me, this research was very empowering contrary to the fact that it brought to my attention how significant the matter is of female representation in the graphic design industry. I feel I was a bit blind to the fact that female designers make up just 3% of creative directors in the industry. More specifically, I was

not familiar with the overall lack of females in the industry. There is a surplus of women graduating with design degrees, but this number dissipates as the roles are filled by male designers.

The graphic design program here at Johnson & Wales University has provided me with a well-balanced community of designers. The teaching staff here consists of a perfectly even split of male to female professors. I have had the pleasure of being a student of every professor in this program, three men and three women, whom all have accomplished professional experience in the field. In terms of the classroom as well, my peers have been a diverse mix of young men and women. I have collaborated with young men and women of color; young women who have children, men and women who are transgender, and people who identify as no single gender at all; gay men and women and much more. The diverse mix of students whom I have had the pleasure of growing with these past three years has shown me the importance of keeping the graphic design community as evenly mixed as possible.

If there is one thing that I hope this thesis will accomplish, aside from receiving the approval of the Honors Committee, it is this: I hope this thesis can add to the pre-existing conversation that has been started by organizations such as *Ladies, Wine & Design*, *The 3% Conference*, and *Creative Lady Directory*. I would love for this research to become the starting point for other young female creatives who want to be active in the field and contribute to bringing equality to not just women, but the non-binary community and women of color as well.

I would be interested to hear the thoughts and feedback from both a young female creative who is just beginning her studies in graphic design as well as those of a woman who has had a few years of experience within the industry. I think this is an important study that should be introduced to female creatives at a younger age so that they are more aware of, if they are not

already, of the future that awaits them as a female creative. I also believe that this would provide young girls with the inspiration that many of them need. It would also be a great way to introduce many of the female graphic designers' names that are being left out of the history of graphic design.

I hope that I can look back to this thesis when I am five and then ten years into the industry and be able to say that my research is significantly dated due to the amount of progress that has been made to giving female creatives the recognition they deserve. It would be a tremendous accomplishment for the graphic design community as a whole if within this next decade the gender balance dilemma can be put to an end.

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