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Creative Women on the WWW: Visual Analysis of Representation, Symbolism and Ideology

This paper reports the results of quantitative and qualitative content analysis of images from five Websites which aim to support women's creativity. Visual analysis methods were applied to images of women sampled from the sites in order to analyze denotative aspects and connotative levels of meaning. Denotative variables included representation, collectiveness, categorization, social distance and modality; the examined connotative layer of meaning encompassed both symbolism and ideology.

In terms of denotation, it was expected that social distance would be more intimate or close since the Websites presumably are attempting to appeal to a common community. It was also hypothesized that there would be a high occurrence of group images for this same reason. Regarding connotation, it was expected that the cultural symbolism and ideologies exuded by the Websites would vary significantly and be dissimilar across sites. That is, that there would be distinct creative woman themes attached to one site or another and that there would be little overlap between themes across sites.

Two denotation variables - representation and modality - were found to have significant differences in means across groups. Figurative representations, rather than abstract, were typically the norm, and across sites, modality tended to be less high than typical Website imagery. Also, contrary to hypotheses, results indicated that women were overwhelmingly depicted individually rather than in groups and further, that social distance tended to be social more often than personal or intimate.

In terms of connotation, results suggested that the WWW encompasses a wide spectrum of cultural, symbolic and ideological beliefs about creative women, and that there exists homogeneity of themes across sites which appear at first glance to have strikingly different ideologies. Seventeen symbolic themes were discerned from examination of the images and found to overlap somewhat across sites. Three major symbolic categories were extracted from these themes: Creative Self, Traditional Values and Higher Order. The ideology of each site was then determined by categorizing prevalence of the themes within each site. In general, the ideologies seem to promote traditional notions of femininity, depicting women in traditional roles such as mother and connecting with nature, although less traditional representations do appear, such as sexuality and anonymity.

These results have wide-ranging implications for future Web medium research, including areas such as personal identification on the WWW vs. offline, voicing strategies for underrepresented groups, and community-building as a WWW construct. In addition, the methodology used can be modified to better fit content analysis on the Web medium. Future analysis with regard to these particular sites and women's creativity in general should encompass analysis of non-women images to see if the same themes occur, and also additional women's creativity sites.