

Executive Summary

Brave New Normal: Intergenerational Mentoring + Women in Graphic Design

Project Team

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Our Project

How might intergenerational mentoring inform how women navigate graphic design careers in a post-Covid-19 world?

This report presents the outcomes of *Brave New Normal* – a research project which looks at intergenerational mentoring for women in graphic design.

Our Aims

Brave New Normal emerged from a context of uncertainty about the future of work in the UK, and especially how this related to gender. The radical disruption caused by COVID-19 is only part of this story. Shifting paradigms in the UK's political, social, cultural, and economic environments were already identified prior to the start of the 2020 pandemic, raising questions around equitable working practices, skills development in relation to new technologies, and new models for sustainable labour markets. The broader aim of *Brave New Normal* was to question received narratives about career lifecycles while exploring how different kinds of knowledge are valued to inform future working practices in the post-pandemic landscape. For the project, intergenerational mentoring was defined as an exchange operating dialogically across career stages, where both participants stand to benefit equally.

The project had two main aims. The first aim was to focus on and capture a broad range of women's experiences of working in the UK's graphic design profession. And the second aim was to explore the role of intergenerational mentoring within the field of graphic design.

Our Process

We began with a key question: How might intergenerational mentoring inform how women navigate graphic design careers in a post-Covid-19 world?

Three subsequent questions emerged via the research process:

1. In what ways might intergenerational support networks aid in mitigating biases (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, class) in the workplace?
2. How do women in graphic design experience relationships as important to their professional lives?
3. How might the personal histories of women working in graphic design throughout the crisis give insights into the possible futures of work?

We had previously identified a set of shared concerns about changes in the longevity of design careers for women with an increasingly youth-focused job market. By early 2020, these conversations intensified in response to the rise of Covid-19 throughout a two-year period ending in March 2022. *Brave New Normal* is the outcome of these conversations formalised as a research project. Through a series of workshops, interviews, and a questionnaire, we explored these questions in more depth with a cross-section of women working in the industry and education who, as co-researchers, have all helped shape and inform the report.

Phase 1

Literature
Review

Workshop 01
(13)

Workbook
Development

Phase 2

Phase 2
Workbook

Funding
Application

Workshop 02
(18)

Phase 3

Research
Funding

Interviews (8) +
Online Questionnaire (38)

REPORT



“While working with agencies, I was a mentee. As soon as I was self-employed, I became a mentor with universities and also design platforms. My mentors have helped me handle my fears and self-doubt. In being a mentor, I find fulfilment in helping other people reach their potential. There was a period in my life where I was trying to reach my potential and find validation. Now that I’m filling my own cup and that validation for myself, I have more to give to other people.”

Our Findings

Brave New Normal produced new insights and perspectives based on lived experiences. The resulting recommendations might provide an interesting starting point for an ongoing dialogue and/or developments across the graphic design sector:

- **Encourage and empower women designers through education, training and mentoring**
- **Build confidence and self-esteem, regardless of background, ethnicity, gender, social status**
- **Ensure work settings and practices are aligned to the needs of women designers**
- **Provide guidance for establishing contacts, self-promotion, managing workplace inequalities**
- **Develop a safe, supportive, and inclusive network of women graphic designers**
- **Create an online platform with access to relevant resources and events**
- **Invite male educators and leaders in design to join the discussion.**

Our Call To Action

The result of this study is a call to action. Those engaged in the *Brave New Normal* project have a vision of the future where women graphic designers occupy positions as creative decision makers and industry leaders; where their life experiences and diverse histories are both respected and shared as a matter of course. Women designers will have equal access to high quality education, training, and employment opportunities alongside their male peers. Importantly, the sector will improve its efforts to value and empower women designers and seek out their involvement whether as consumers, audiences, educators, or colleagues. We remain some distance from these aspirations. We are therefore asking both educators and design leaders to sign up to the following five principles, underpinned by a process of intergenerational mentoring:

- **A need for education institutions and design studios to include the multiple perspectives of women in all creative outputs, including exhibitions and events**
- **A need for design organisations to challenge discrimination in all its manifestations**
- **Improved awareness training across the sector regarding gender equality, employment rights, disability and/or access needs**
- **Education and training programmes to be designed and delivered in consultation with women professionals from across the sector**
- **A promotion of diversity and inclusion within and across the sector, with increased opportunities for women in education and employment.**

Brave New Normal advocates for an approach to intergenerational mentoring to include a two-way dialogue – or 360° perspective – where both participants stand to benefit equally. However, what might constitute a model of effective practice? How might it be designed, delivered and by whom? Does it remain appropriate to use the terminology of mentoring/mentor/mentee, in attempting to promote less hierarchical and/or more inclusive structures? What are the ‘key components’ for such a programme to achieve maximum, positive outcomes? And crucially, how might we ensure such a scheme meets the diverse aspirations and needs of those women studying and/or working across the sector today?

The next steps for the project are for *Brave New Normal* to be made available on partner websites, and copies sent to advisory board members including design advocates at the RSA, Design Council, and the British Council. Plans for dissemination also include a launch event to be held in Autumn 2022, where, importantly, we can bring our Co-Researchers together, help grow these mentoring networks, and invite further discussion on the issues that are important to women regarding the future of work for a post-pandemic world.



“It may help to break down some of perceived hierarchies, allowing us all to do a better job. Traditionally, this industry has been very competitive but there’s a tangible shift occurring towards a more collaborative culture. Mentoring is exactly the kind of thing to foster that. It would also result in far more thoughtful design. Working in silos results in design that speaks to a single audience. Intergenerational mentoring would introduce voices to the table who wouldn’t otherwise have fed into the design.”

BNN Co-Researcher, Autumn 2021

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