

Website Builders: A Tool In Web Design From A Graphic Design Perspective

Winnie Ndukwe

Metropolia
Ammattikorkeakoulu

Medianomi
Viestinnän tutkinto-ohjelma

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Author(s)	Winnie Ndukwe
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Abstract

This final project examined website builders as a tool for website design exclusively from the perspective of a graphic designer with minimal coding skills. Each chapter introduced a new viewpoint that was used to evaluate the potential suitability of a website builder and also aimed to give the reader a general understanding of the significance of each aspect that was studied.

This final project was largely structured around my own experience of rebuilding a custom web layout using a website builder. Therefore, each viewpoint was first explained by drawing from existing documentation, and then given context with supporting analysis of my own experience. The end of each chapter highlighted the most significant points to consider when evaluating other website builders, and also specified whether my chosen website builder was suitable in terms of that specific area of analysis.

As a conclusion, this final project produced a set of key points to help graphic designers evaluate and then choose the most suitable website builder for the projects of a similar nature. The most significant key points explored were areas such as responsive web design, user testing and the underlying logic of a website builder. Though specific examples of website builders like Shopify, Wix and Pagefly were used to illustrate and analyse the key points, the information aimed to be applicable to website builders in the broader sense, whilst simultaneously providing readers with concrete examples.

Keywords Website Builder, Graphic Design, Responsive Design, User Testing

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Tiivistelmä

Tässä opinnäytetyössä tarkastellaan website buildereita eli verkkosivujen rakentamiseen tarkoitettuja sovelluksia. Työ keskittyy tarkastelemaan aihetta sellaisen käyttäjän näkökulmasta, jolla on vain vähäiset ohjelmointitaidot. Jokainen luku esittää uuden aspektin, jonka avulla website buildereiden mahdollista soveltuvuutta tarkastellaan. Tavoitteena on antaa lukijalle yleinen käsitys kunkin tutkitun näkökohdan merkittävydestä.

Työ sisältää toiminnallisen osuuden, jossa rakennetaan räätälöity verkkosivujen ulkoasuunnitelma website builderin avulla. Luvut koostuvat sekä aiheeseen liittyvästä teoriasta että toiminnan reflektiosta. Jokaisen luvun lopussa korostetaan merkittävimpiä kohtia, jotka on otettava huomioon arvioitaessa muita website buildereita. Niissä määritellään myös, jos toiminnallisessa osassa valittu website builder on sopiva kyseisen näkökulman kannalta.

Työn tavoitteena on tuottaa lista kriteerejä, joiden avulla graafikko pystyy arvioimaan ja valitsemaan samankaltaisiin projekteihin sopivimman website builderin. Merkittävimmät kriteerit, joita työ käsittelee ovat muun muassa responsiivinen suunnittelu, käytettävyydestaus ja website builderin taustalla oleva logiikka. Työssä käytetään tiettyjä esimerkkejä website buildereista kuten Shopify, Wix ja Pagefly esittämään ja analysoimaan keskeisiä kohteita. Käsiteltyä tietoa pyritään kuitenkin yleisesti ottaen soveltamaan muihinkin website buildereihin. Esimerkit myös auttavat lukijaa havainnollistamaan asioita paremmin.

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1

Introduction

Ever since their first appearance in the early 2000s, website builders have been used to facilitate the process of building and launching a website. Today, website builders have been distilled to a point, where launching a website has become a relatively prevalent occurrence. Nowadays, the average person requires next to no coding knowledge to do so.

As the amount of people using website builders continues to grow (Costello 2018), according to Small business trends, they are also proving increasingly popular among small businesses in particular (Maina 2018). Shouldering the burden of coding and designing has had the effect of making the process more accessible to the masses. One of the consequences has been a rise in the number of online retailers (Eurostat 2018), and in my opinion competition. So, despite an increasing share of the global population turning to online shopping (Smith & Anderson 2016), the age old need to stand out as a retailer persists.

The research question this thesis aims to answer is how a website builder's suitability as a tool from the perspective of graphic design can be evaluated. This thesis considers website builders as a tool for website design and achieves this by focusing on the process of rebuilding a custom website layout in a website builder. The subject matter is examined exclusively from the perspective of a graphic designer with minimal coding skills and each section uses a different criterion to examine the suitability of a website builder.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to produce a set of key points, that guide through the process of evaluating and choosing a suitable website builder for projects of a similar nature. However, I believe that anyone looking to gain a basic understanding of website builders will find this relevant, as the information aims to be applicable to most website builders in the broader sense. Since the thesis consists of theory supported with my own experience of rebuilding a custom web layout using a website builder, an additional objective is to analyse the suitability of the specific website builder used in my project and to provide a conclusion.

The term website builder, in its simplest form, is used to refer to an online tool that allows you to build and edit a website without having to write any code (Wikipedia 2019a; Pinegar 2018). Despite several differing technical definitions, for ease of understanding in the context of this thesis the term website builder will also encompass ecommerce platforms, ecommerce software and to a slightly lesser extent content management systems. The technical discrepancies between the aforementioned terms are not integral to further analysis and can thus be overlooked, as at their core they are all able to carry out the function of facilitating website construction. As this thesis aims to be underpinned by the viewpoint of a graphic designer, I will also not address any overly technical aspects of website builders and strictly concentrate on areas that impact the design process. Web or website design is also a dynamic and constantly changing umbrella term, containing areas ranging from search engine optimisation to user experience design. In the context of this thesis, the term web design will be used to refer to designing and shaping the visual aspects of a web page and its content. The technical side of the term web design will not be addressed in this work as, among other things, it can refer more to coding specific elements.

Data collection methods utilised in this thesis to gather information consisted of interviews, researching online sources and related literature, as well as empirical research by analysing my own experience. Interviewing the client for whom the project was carried out shines a light on the reasoning and thought process behind some key decision related to the project this thesis centers on. Researching and referring to online sources on the other hand, supports and defines observations paralleled by empirical evidence resulting from my own experience.

My interest in the subject stems from having undertaken the project this thesis is structured around. At the time, I was not aware that rebuilding a custom layout in a website builder was becoming increasingly prevalent in the field of graphic design. Having been through the process once, it now strikes me how little documentation there is on the subject that can be considered relevant to a graphic designer. The guidelines I aim to produce are intended to improve my ability to evaluate and meet a client's needs regarding web design and will be used to choose the most suitable website builder in future projects.

2

Website Builders and ecommerce

When the World Wide Web was first debuted in 1990 on Christmas day by Tim Berners-Lee (McPherson 2010, 5), the process of constructing a website was extremely different to what it is now. WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) editors such as Adobe's Dreamweaver and others were in existence by the late 90s (Wikipedia 2019b). However, these will be overlooked for the purpose of clarity, as the focus of this thesis falls on website builders developed in the 21st century. Around 2003 saw the launches of some of today's most notable website builders: Wordpress and Squarespace (Wordpress.org n.d ab; Casalena 2012). Website builders began to pave the way for easier website construction by developing add-ons and themes and around 2006 came the launches of Wix, Weebly and Shopify (Wix.com n.d; Square Inc n.d; Duncan 2012). Since then, website builders have continued to develop and refine their offerings. Thus, how we define them continues to change rapidly. In its simplest form, a website builder can be described as a tool that enables users to create their own websites without using manual code (Wikipedia 2019a; Pinegar 2018). Most website builders offer themes and templates that are designs a user can add to their website and make a certain amount of changes to. Others allow plugins or add-ons, such as maps and forms among other things, that can be added to the website with varying degrees of ease.

This section aims to give the reader a general understanding of the features a website builder can offer through the use of examples. Additionally, ecommerce as it relates to website builders will be examined, as it is the reasoning behind the choice of website builder for the project this thesis is structured around.

2.1

Website builders and their features

Over a decade after their respective launches, some of the aforementioned web builders (see section 2) still remain popular choices, despite an increase in competitors. In 2017, Reuters reported that Wix's "number of registered users surpassed 100 million" (Ben-David, Cohen, Scheer & Holmes 2017) and the trend has continued into 2019 (Cohen 2019). Therefore, Wix will be used as an example of a website builder in this section to demonstrate their general features.

Currently, Wix does not require registration in order to browse through templates and other websites built using it. The lower screen shown in figure 1 illustrates that after signing up, the website is able to guide the user through the process and offers a choice of how to proceed at each stage. Choosing the 'Wix Editor' refers to the use of a ready-made template. Once you have selected a template, you are then free to make various changes to it in Wix's editor as is shown in the screen at the top in figure 1.

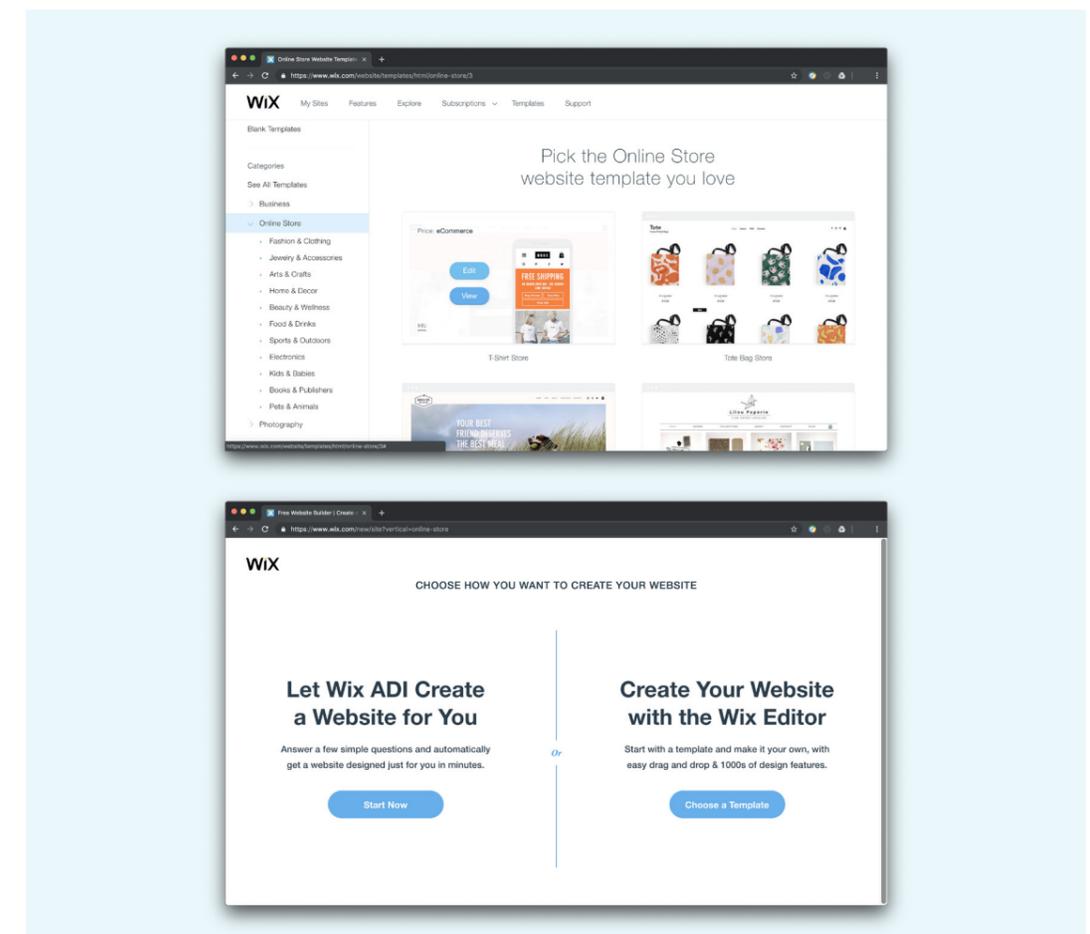


Figure 1. Shows screenshots taken of the Wix editor during the first stages of setting up a website. The lower screen shows that Wix gives the user a choice of proceeding with a template using the Wix Editor. The user can also choose 'Wix ADI', which generates a design based on answers a user gives to a certain set of questions. The top screen shows Wix's editor mode, which opens after choosing a template and the user is able to modify it. (Images taken from Wix.com)

The Wix editor offers a variety of tools that can also be found in other website builders. Key features that are available in Wix's drag and drop editor, among other things include being able to:

- Add text, images and video etc.
- Change the background and other elements
- Edit the site menu and choose page transitions
- Add interactive elements like slideshows and hover boxes
- Add social media, contact forms and blogs
- Add private pages for 'members only'
- Add 'store elements' such as a product gallery

Wix also offers its own app store called the Wix App Market, which essentially offers a range of apps functioning as add-ons to a user's website. Examples of apps include an events calendar and a live chat, all ranging in price from completely or partially free to paid. A large amount of the features listed above can be expected to be found in most website builders, though price ranges may differ, as do the memberships and account types website builders offer to registered users.

2.2

The ecommerce side of a website builder

On Shopify's website, ecommerce or electronic commerce is described as a term that refers specifically to the transaction of "goods and services using the internet, and the transfer of money and data to execute these transactions" (Shopify n.d a). As a feature of a website builder, this typically manifests as the ability to accept online payments, showcase products and manage your inventory. A website builder that specialises in this can also be referred to as an ecommerce platform.

In my opinion, Shopify is an example of an ecommerce platform. It has the features of a website editor, but its main focus is on ecommerce and facilitating the process of setting up an online shop. Despite its early launch in 2006 (Duncan 2012), as of 2019 Shopify can still generally be regarded as having a place among the top 10 ecommerce platforms or website builders (Carmody 2018). In 2017, Shopify was reported to have "powered more than 500,000 business in 175 countries around the world" (Shopify 2017) and this year the numbers have continued to increase (Holmes 2018).

In a similar fashion to Wix, registration is not needed in order to browse the templates Shopify offers and there is also the option of a free 2-week trial. Unlike with Wix however, sign up is required if you wish to apply and edit any template further or see any of the other features.

All of Shopify's own templates offer certain types of modules and upon choosing a template, Shopify's theme editor allows you to drag, drop and edit the content within those modules, as is illustrated in figure 2. Examples of the kinds of modules some of Shopify's own themes offer include, but are not limited to the following:

- Menus and footers
- Announcement bar
- Featured collection
- Rich text, images and video
- Blog Posts
- Custom HTML

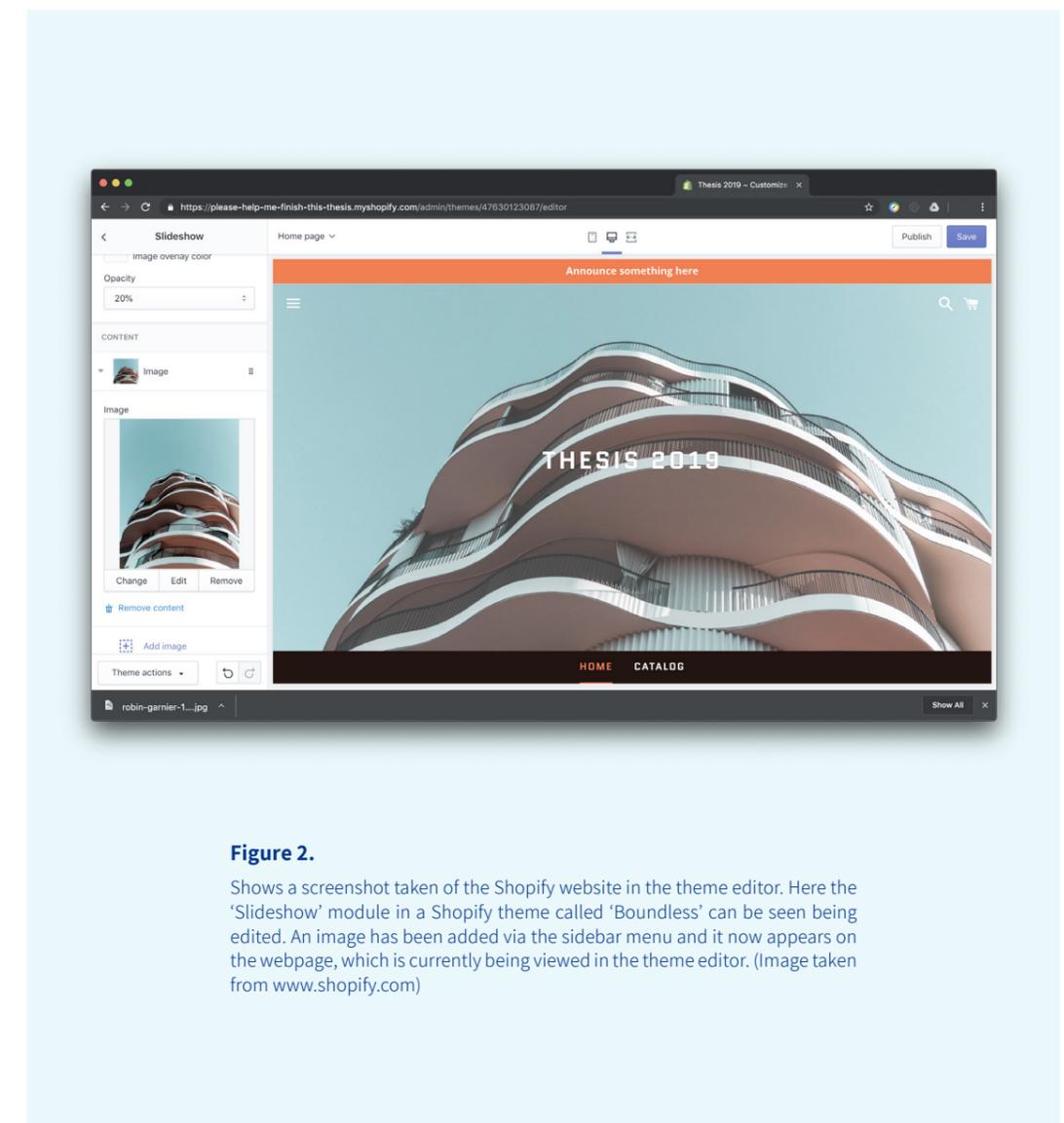


Figure 2.

Shows a screenshot taken of the Shopify website in the theme editor. Here the 'Slideshow' module in a Shopify theme called 'Boundless' can be seen being edited. An image has been added via the sidebar menu and it now appears on the webpage, which is currently being viewed in the theme editor. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

In similar fashion to Wix, Shopify also hosts its own app store. It comprises of free and paid apps or add-ons supported by Shopify templates, allowing the user to integrate features that extend beyond a chosen template.

Alongside the app store and template editor, Shopify also provides ecommerce tools that fall into the five following categories: orders, products, customers, analytics and Marketing. The 'analytics' tab includes a dashboard that monitors and shows users everything from total sales to online store sessions by location, as is illustrated in figure 3.

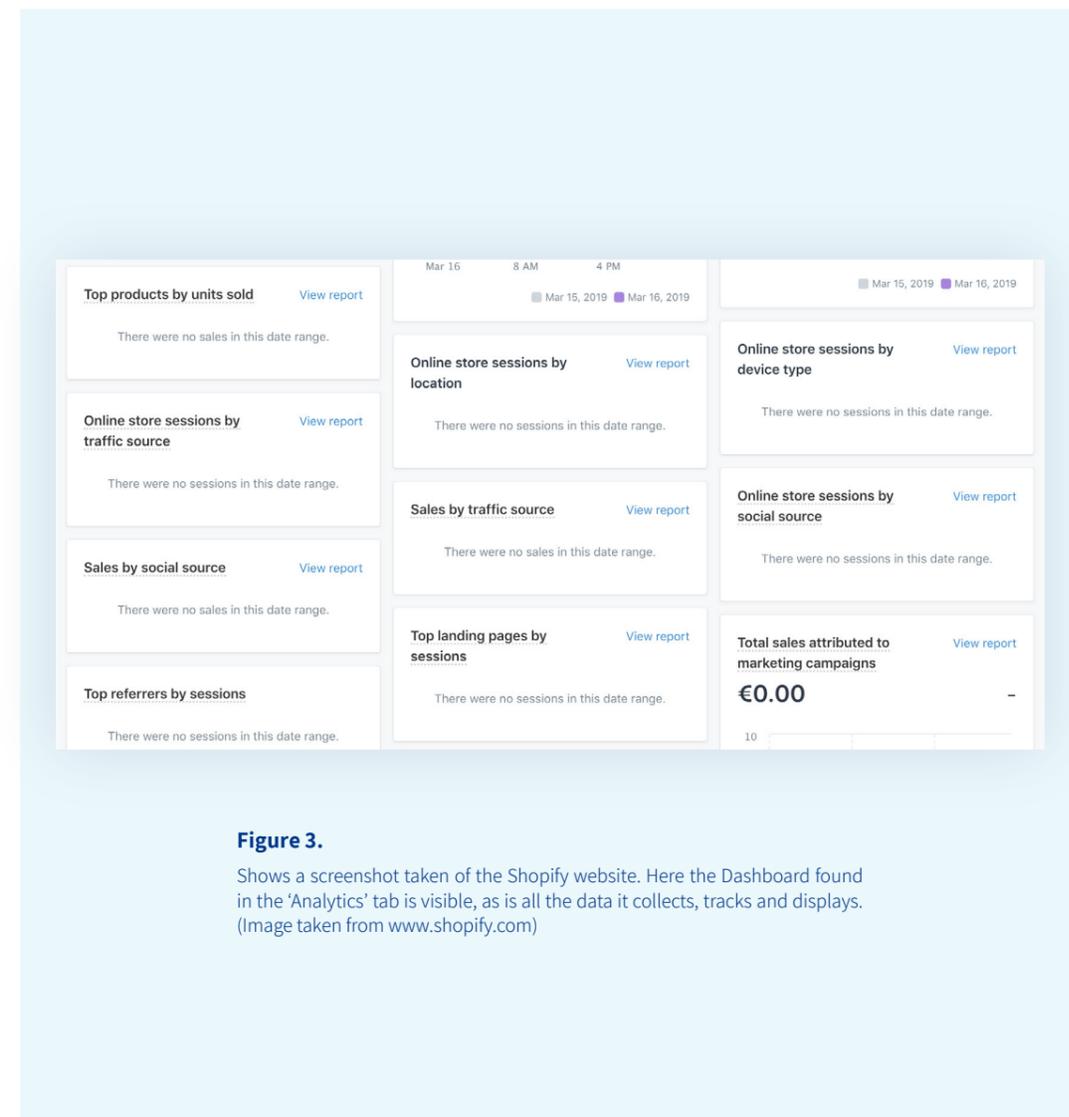


Figure 3.

Shows a screenshot taken of the Shopify website. Here the Dashboard found in the 'Analytics' tab is visible, as is all the data it collects, tracks and displays. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

Shopify's ecommerce tools also include a live view illustrated in figure 4. With the Live View the user is able to see page views in real time and how customers are behaving in the online store. One method utilised is monitoring for example the number of active carts.

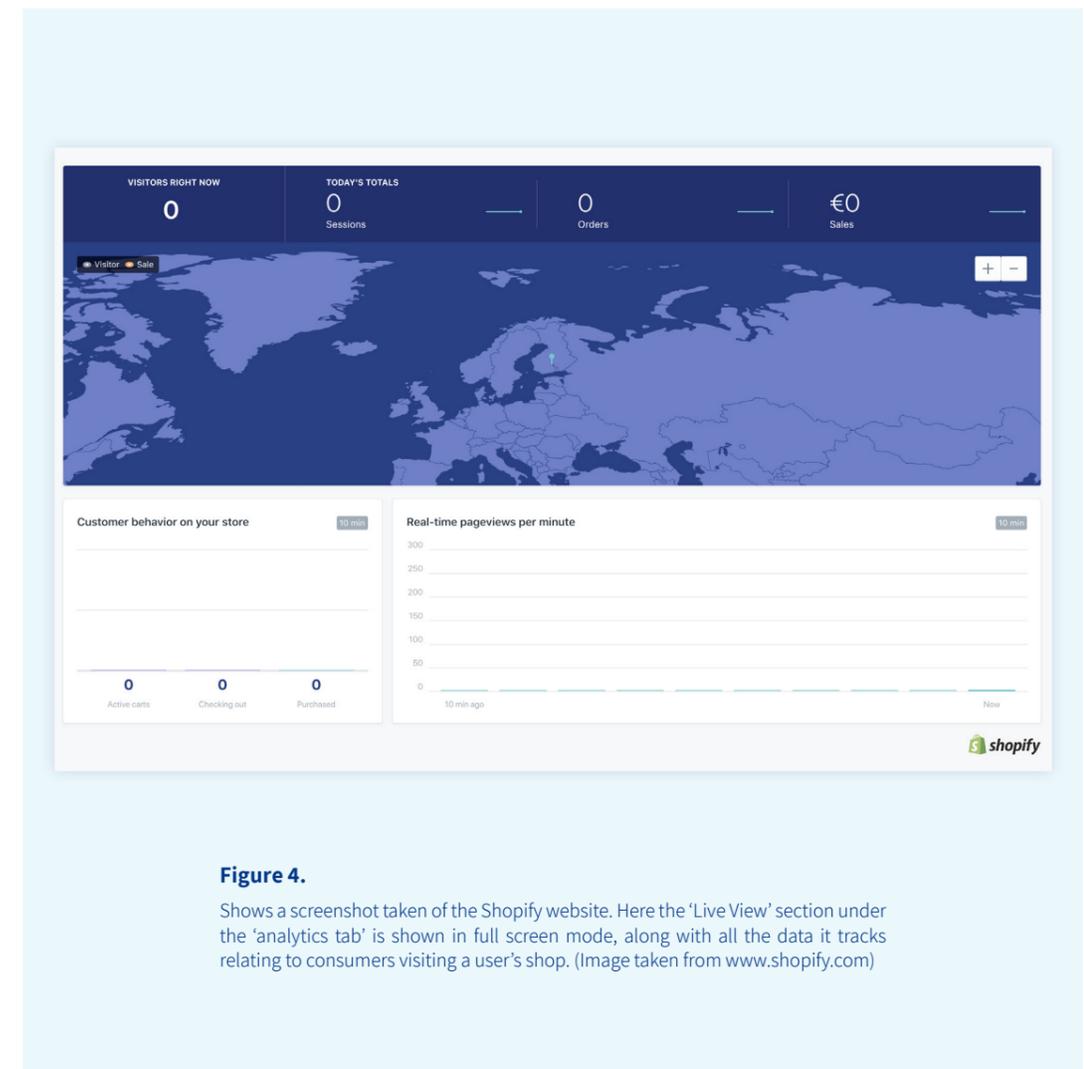


Figure 4.

Shows a screenshot taken of the Shopify website. Here the 'Live View' section under the 'analytics' tab is shown in full screen mode, along with all the data it tracks relating to consumers visiting a user's shop. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

Other mentioned tools such as the 'Orders' section allows the user to manage the shop's orders. The 'Products' section deals with inventory and the 'Customers' page allows the user to see the details and purchase history of their customers. In the 'Marketing' section, Shopify gives the user the option of setting up a marketing campaign. This essentially means that Shopify helps the user to manage different channels by integrating them into the dashboard. Currently, examples of integratable marketing channels include facebook marketing, Google Shopping, Youtube, Google Search and Gmail. Once a user has chosen a marketing channel, any activity resulting from it can then be followed in the 'Marketing' section, giving the user a better overview of the results.

2.3

The choice of website builder in the context of my experience

As previously stated in the introduction, this thesis is largely structured around a website design project I completed in 2018. The empirical evidence stemming from my experience of using a website builder is used to support the theory-based analysis of website builders from different angles presented in each section. This is achieved by giving the reader context and thus increased relevance. The aim of this subsection is to present and explain the circumstances around the website design project I was tasked with.

The company the project was completed for is called ProbiSolution. The company specialises in selling cleaning products that make use of probiotics, also known as “good” bacteria or beneficial microbes. In Q1 of 2018, the company could still be regarded as a small business, having less than 10 employees. The starting point for the project was that a logo, business cards, leaflets and labels for the product range had already been designed. As illustrated in figure 5, the look and feel of the brand was already somewhat established, before I was charged with designing a custom website layout for them.

At the time of being briefed, an official brand guide for ProbiSolution did not exist. Therefore, among other specifications, I was told it was to be a continuation of the brand already visible in the other aforementioned material already created for them. Other specifications for what the website should contain included:

- General information about how the products work
- A store section where the products could be sold
- General information about the company
- A contact form for recruitment

A custom web layout was designed and during that time the client was deciding between the website builders Wix and Shopify. Ultimately, Shopify was chosen and I was tasked with the transfer of the custom web layout.

Based on an interview with the client, the reasoning behind the decision to go with Shopify instead of Wix stemmed from their own research. At the time, the client stated that Wix did not appear to have a clear ecommerce option, which made Shopify the more favourable choice. An additional factor was that the client’s online search yielded Shopify as an alternative appearing to be widely in use. The client reasoned that Shopify’s large number of users gave the impression that it must be a satisfactory option. (Vainio 2019.)

In resolving the next steps, it was also decided that some time should be allocated to researching and getting used to Shopify as a tool. In hindsight, I believe this was a good idea. However, in looking back I also believe more time should have been afforded to this stage. Additionally, more thorough researching should have been done on my part, owing to the fact that I had never heard of Shopify prior to that time.



Figure 5. Shows a brochure that was created for ProbiSolution. (Image: Keskiö Design Agency / Severi Roms)

3

The user promise & underlying logic

Today, an increasing amount of website builders are able to offer a wider variety of features from enhanced editing capabilities to refined ecommerce tools. For a graphic designer, a larger selection of seemingly capable website builders also means an increased chance of being faced with one you have no prior knowledge of within the confines of a project.

Whether you are well versed in using a specific website builder or have prior experience, it is important to recognise that knowledge can be outdated or unsuited to the task at hand. This is why when choosing a suitable website builder, it is useful to take some time to familiarise yourself with what it promises to its users and the underlying logic regarding its usability.

This section explores the significance of researching a website builder's user promise and aims to familiarise the reader with how they are usually presented through the use of examples. The importance of examining a website builder's underlying logic is also illustrated by analysing my own experience of the Shopify website builder. Evaluating some of the decisions taken at that time specifies the short and long term impact this area had on the project.

3.1

Research the user promise

In the context of this subsection, a website builder's user promise is used to refer to qualities or features a website builder advertises and states as being available to its users. At this point, it is also important to distinguish this from a website builder's actual features relating to its editor or ecommerce tools (see subsections 2.1 and 2.2). A website builder's promise can usually be found advertised on its home page and conveys its key attributes to potential new users without them having to register. Figure 6 illustrates the sort of information that can be easily found with a cursory glance at the home pages of three website builders: Wix, Squarespace and Shopify.

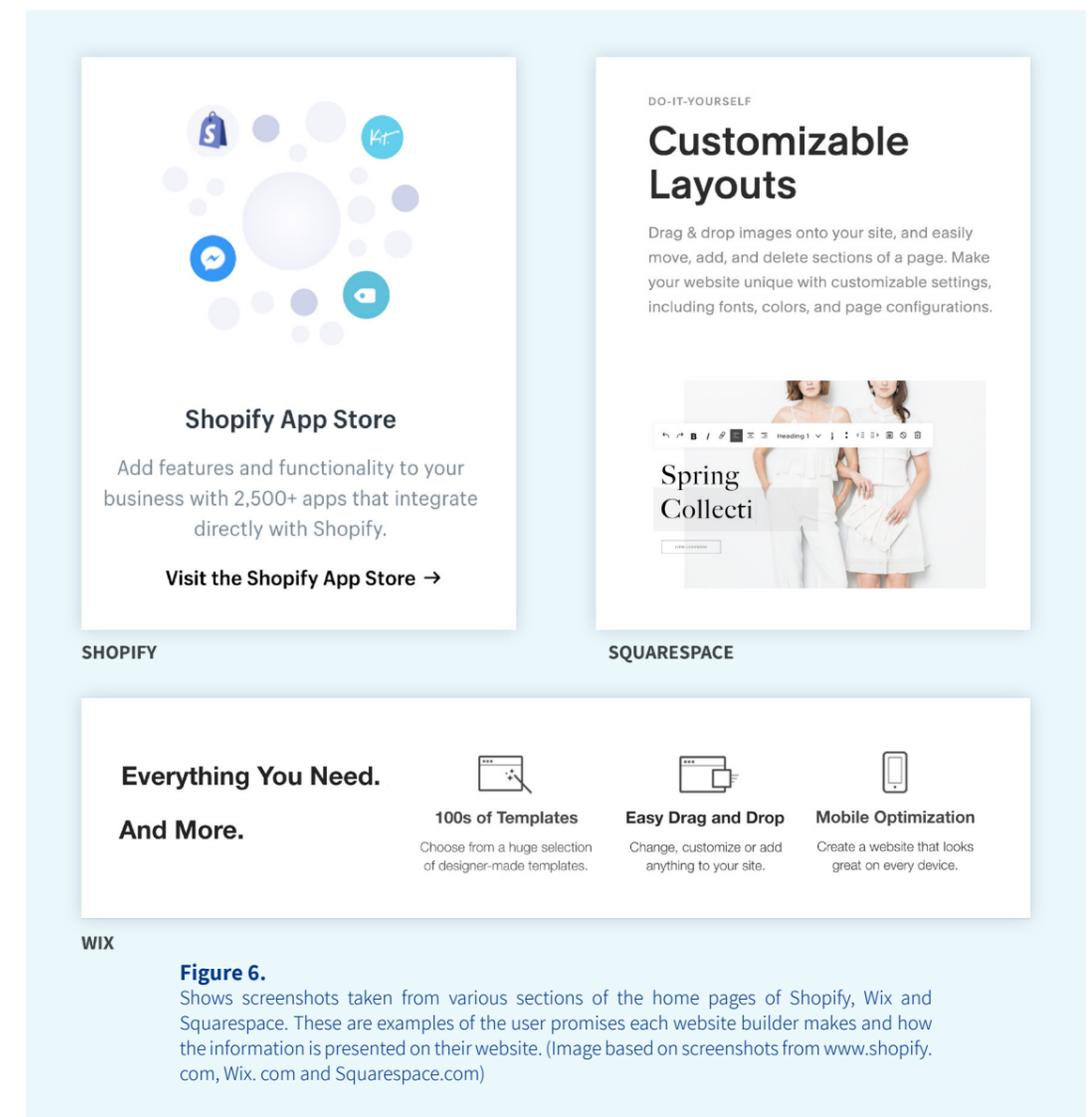


Figure 6.

Shows screenshots taken from various sections of the home pages of Shopify, Wix and Squarespace. These are examples of the user promises each website builder makes and how the information is presented on their website. (Image based on screenshots from www.shopify.com, Wix.com and Squarespace.com)

As shown in figure 6, a wide range of information is readily available with just a few clicks and no need to register or open a demo. A lot of the phrases used are far from concrete or detailed explanations. However, it is beneficial to have a cursory understanding of some key attributes, as it can serve as the first step to narrowing down a list of potential choices for a suitable website builder. And whilst having the potential to point you in the right direction, it is important to note that home pages do not usually list all of a website builder's features. In most cases, to see all of the features on offer, registration is almost always necessary. That is why this first step is largely perfunctory and helpful in cases with a long list of potential options.

Third party sources like online articles and blogs with comparisons can also be used to quickly find out about website builder's promises to users. However, these sources should be looked at critically as they are usually based on the author's opinion and are therefore subjective, not fact-based. Another drawback is that it can become quite time-consuming to find for example a comparison that seems reliable and uses criteria relevant to your needs to evaluate a website builder. This aspect is discussed in more detail in section 7.

3.2

Learn the underlying logic

The previous subsection addresses the benefits of being familiar with user promises and using them to whittle down a long list of potential choices when choosing a website builder. This subsection moves onto the next or corresponding step, which is familiarising yourself with the underlying logic of the website builder's editor. Here the term 'underlying logic' is used to refer to a website builder's editor's usability. It can also be conflated with the term web usability for the analytical purposes of this subsection. Wikipedia defines some components of web usability as:

“a small learning curve, easy content exploration, findability, task efficiency, user satisfaction and automation” (Wikipedia 2019c.)

These components can be used to measure the level of web usability and being aware of a website builder's usability can factor significantly into choosing a suitable one.

Based on my experience, in order to test out a website editor's functions, signing up or opening a template and starting a free trial of some sort is often mandatory. As mentioned by Wikipedia, usability can be measured by focusing on the different components that it consists of. In an article on usability, Johnson touches on some key components to keep in mind as they apply to an editor's usability: clarity, learnability and feedback (Johnson 2015).

Clarity refers to how 'intuitive' the website builder's editor is to use and essentially how easily the user is able to find things within it. Johnson's definition of the term learnability is similar to this, but falls more in line with Wikipedia's (2019c) description of 'a small learning curve' as a component of usability. Learnability is therefore best described by Johnson as a measure of "how easy it is to accomplish tasks for the first time". The last term, 'feedback' is quite self-explanatory, meaning the 'direct feedback' users receive from interactions. Johnson's stated example of a form of direct visual feedback is a "button which appears to be depressed and then released when the user clicks on it". (Johnson 2015.)

When contemplating the suitability of a website builder it is worth assessing its usability. This is important because of its potential to impact multiple stages of the design process, when rebuilding a custom website layout using a website builder. Similarly, considering how the different components of usability balance out may be beneficial in determining if a website builder is worth using. For example, a website builder's editor might have very low clarity but high feedback and learnability. This means it is hard to find things, but if the user makes a mistake they are immediately made aware and the editor is easy to learn to use. In this case, it is plausible to say that this editor could be suitable, providing the user is willing to invest some time into familiarising themselves with it.

In other cases, the time required to learn to use a website builder's editor might be very low. Nevertheless, it is important to consider how much time you are able to invest in this area, as it will undeniably have an impact on the overall timetable of a project. For projects with a tight schedule, a website builder with high usability may be more favourable. However, a website builder that is easier to use may give the user less control and mean compromising on editing capabilities. The client's budget may also be impacted if a costlier website builder is favoured over a cheaper one because of its usability. The cheaper website builder may be able to fulfil the needs of a given project. However, more time may need to be invested in learning its underlying logic, leading to increased costs for the client regardless.

As demonstrated by the above scenarios, usability ties in with many different factors, that can end up having any amount of knock-on effects and severely impact the outcome of a project. The time allocated to this stage is largely dependent upon the complexity of a custom web layout. However, in my opinion being aware of the significance of carving out time to learn the underlying logic of a website builder's editor allows for a more informed and professional approach to any project regardless of the final choice.

3.3

The significance of the user promise and underlying logic in my own experience

As stated in the introduction, one of the aims of this thesis is to provide an in-depth analysis of website builders as a tool for web design. This is done by examining and analysing my own experience of a specific website builder called Shopify, in the context of the scenario presented earlier: rebuilding a custom web layout using a website builder. This subsection focuses on my experience and specifically looks at how much time was put into familiarising myself with the user promises (see subsection 3.1), learning the underlying logic (see subsection 3.2) and its impact on the project as a whole.

In section 2.3, I mention that I had no knowledge of the website builder called Shopify, prior to the undertaking of the web design project for the company ProbiSolutions. However, at the time I did have a basic understanding of how the website builder Wix worked. The client explained that the reason for choosing Shopify, was that at the time it was unclear if Wix featured ecommerce capabilities. Shopify, who clearly market themselves as an ecommerce platform, unsurprisingly came up in the ensuing google search and thus became the website builder of choice. Looking back, I realise that I did go through the motions of specifically examining the user promise (see subsection 3.1). However, when it came to inspecting the underlying logic of Shopify's editor, I did not look further than the listed features of a few of the templates. This is because one of the user promises on their home page was "free, customizable themes" (Shopify n.d b), which seemed to meet the needs of the project.

As promised, Shopify does provide its users with 10 "free, customizable themes". Technically the templates do also use a form of the drag and drop mechanism, which refers to the ability to pick and drop elements in various areas around the screen using a mouse (Wikipedia 2018a). Despite this, the underlying logic was not what I expected and I found the editor to be extremely limited. In Wix and other website builder editors, the user is free to drag and drop elements almost anywhere on the page. However, Shopify's editor only allows the movement of modules up and down the page using the sidebar shown in figure 7.

As Shopify's theme editor's extremely limited editing capabilities became apparent only after the client and I had agreed to move forward with Shopify, the potential ramifications were significant. Replicating the original custom layout designed for the client would have been impossible with the current template. It had elements situated side by side and Shopify's theme editor's drag and drop mechanism and modules would not permit such a thing. Shopify did not offer the option of using a blank page setup either, and this could have been avoided by simply investing some time in examining the underlying logic beforehand.

Another limitation that became apparent, was that Shopify's templates only offer a limited amount of specific pages. These are even less customisable than the landing page shown in figure 7. As an example, the 'Debut' theme currently offers only six additional pages, one of which is a 404 page, which is usually where an internet user ends up if the link they are trying to open is broken or the page cannot otherwise be found (Cavaness 2018).

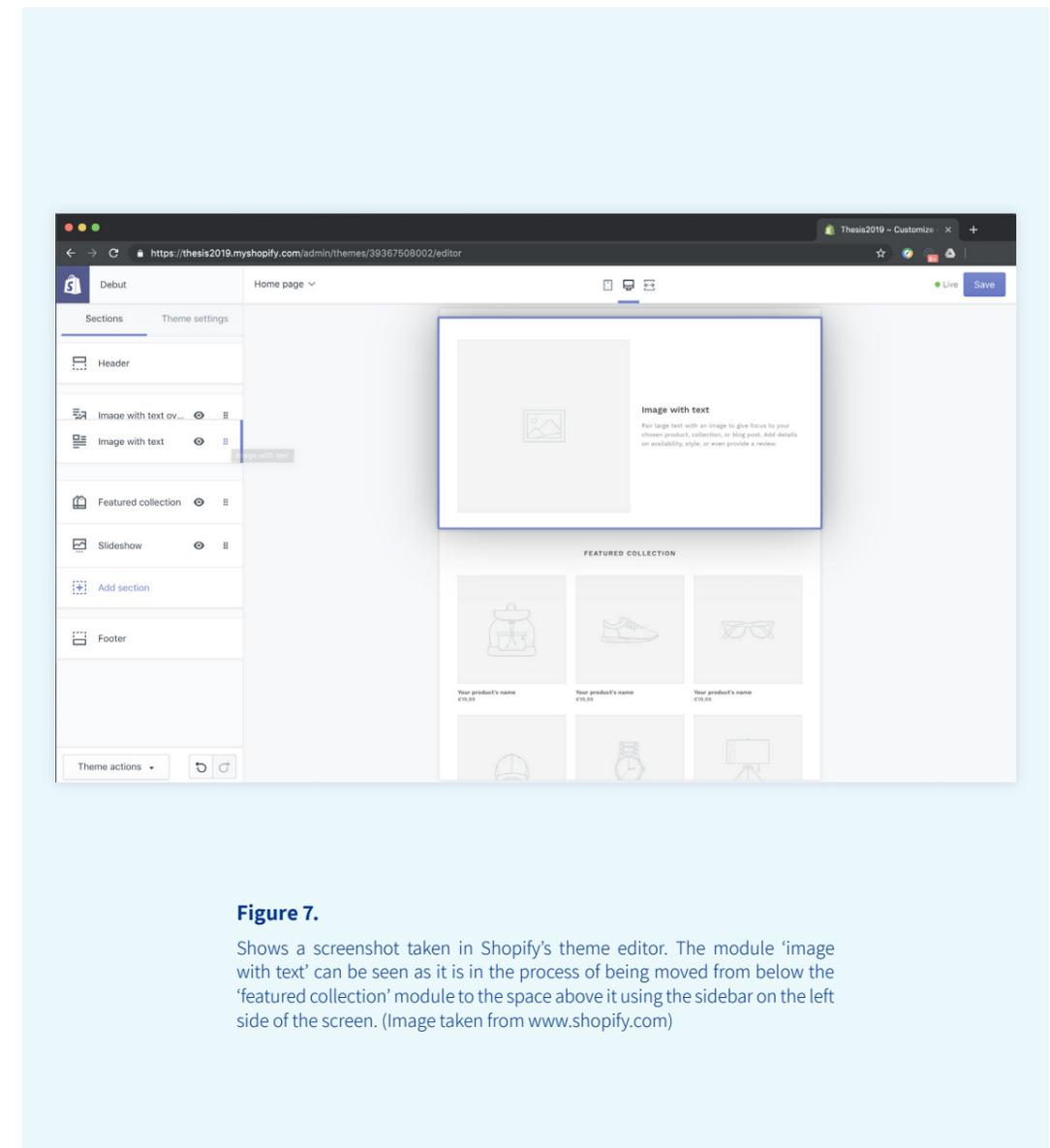


Figure 7.

Shows a screenshot taken in Shopify's theme editor. The module 'image with text' can be seen as it is in the process of being moved from below the 'featured collection' module to the space above it using the sidebar on the left side of the screen. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

Initially, I found the usability of Shopify's theme editor to be quite high. It's clarity was relatively low as some things were hard to find, especially inside modules. However, there was a good amount of feedback and the learning curve was relatively small, as I did not have to invest a great deal of time into understanding the underlying logic. As previously mentioned, I did not in my opinion invest enough time on the steps addressed in subsections 3.1 and 3.2. In hindsight, if I had I would easily have been able to circumvent the ensuing problems by choosing a more suitable website builder. One of the repercussions of this was that it led to spending hours searching for a solution. This had a negative impact on the timetable we had originally laid out and also threw up some unexpected problems in later stages of the project. These will be addressed in more detail in subsequent sections.

3.4

Shopify's App store and a solution: Pagefly

As explained in subsection 2.2, Shopify hosts an app store that currently offers over 2,500 applications created by third parties. Naturally, the apps vary in their capabilities and a select amount of them concentrate on expanding Shopify's editing capabilities with regards to the themes on offer. At the time when I experienced the problems with Shopify's theme editor described in subsection 3.3, I came across two apps: Shogun Page Builder and Pagefly Advanced Page Builder. Both offer free trials and claim to allow a user to build additional pages using their respective editors and later integrate them with any Shopify template. The editors both advertised a more promising drag and drop mechanism than Shopify offers (see subsection 3.3) and so I briefly tried them both out. Ultimately, it seemed to me that the two apps appeared to be quite similar in terms of how the editors looked and behaved as shown in figure 8. In the end, I chose to continue with the Pagefly app, as it seemed to possess more clarity than Shogun.

Based on my experience, in comparison to Shopify's theme editor, the Pagefly editor offers a much wider range of editing capabilities. It stands by its promise of seamless integration by facilitating the use of your chosen Shopify theme's header and footer across the pages created in the Pagefly editor. You do not need to use additional code and the drag and drop feature is not nearly as restrictive as Shopify's. It is reminiscent of the mechanism showcased in the Wix Editor (see subsection 2.1) and allows the user to add anything from product prices to Youtube videos anywhere on the page.

In terms of usability, understanding the underlying logic of Pagefly's editor requires some time, as there is a limited amount of feedback. Additionally, exploring and manual testing is required due to the extensive editing possibilities. However, it does afford the user a huge amount of control over the aesthetics of elements. This allows for a more accurate replication of a web layout and minimises the need to compromise on aesthetics.

As part of my web design project for ProbiSolution, a decision was made to move forward with Pagefly. Though the Pagefly application is not free, it was within the client's budget. This time, allotting enough time to familiarise myself with the underlying logic was taken into account in the overall project schedule. With that in mind, in this scenario Pagefly proved to be a suitable workaround, as the client was able to make provisions for the change in website builder.

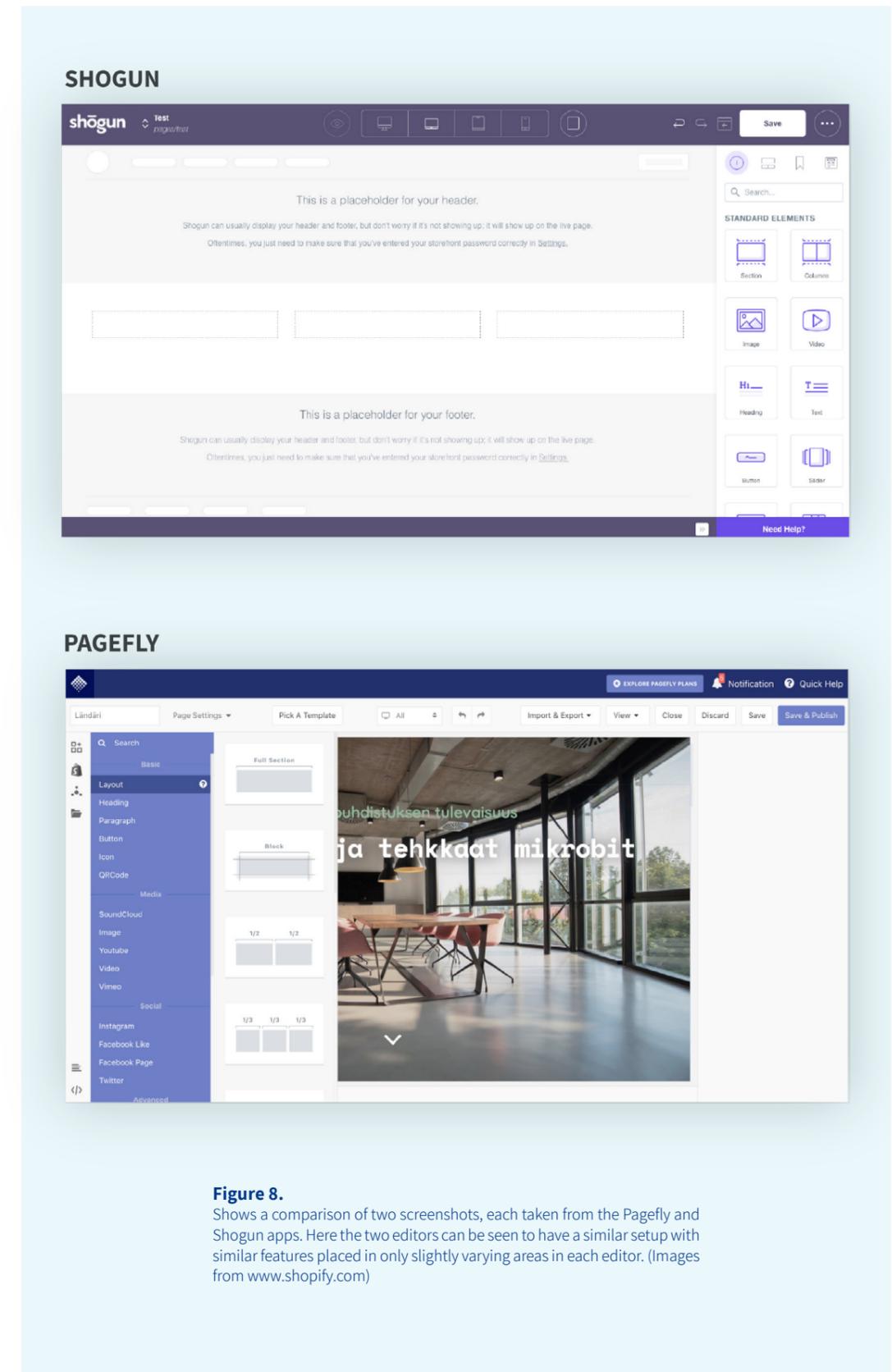


Figure 8. Shows a comparison of two screenshots, each taken from the Pagefly and Shogun apps. Here the two editors can be seen to have a similar setup with similar features placed in only slightly varying areas in each editor. (Images from www.shopify.com)

4

Scope for content flexibility and limitations

At the beginning of a project it is usual for a client to provide a graphic designer with some sort of design brief. And while it can come in many forms, an article provides one description of a design brief as being:

“An initial document, created by both the designer and the client, which provides a point of reference to work from across the entire design process.” (Bwired 2015.)

There are many more reasons why it is important to compose a design brief, but in the interest of fulfilling the aims set out in this thesis, the focus of this section will be solely on its impact on choosing a suitable website builder. This section aims to address the advantages of being aware of the range of web content required by a project. In this section the flexibility and limitations surrounding web content will also be examined, by analysing my own experience of presenting and producing web content using the page editing app Pagefly.

4.1

Flexibility in shaping the web content

An article by Workfront presents the idea that “you can’t design something you don’t understand” and this also applicable to the conundrum of choosing a suitable website builder: you can’t choose the right website builder if you don’t understand what it’s for. (Workfront 2019.) In the context of the scenario presented in this thesis, a custom layout is already prepared and probably cannot be changed significantly. However, the process of coming up with a design brief is also a good opportunity to ‘understand what you are designing’ by assessing how flexible the client is willing to be with the way web content is presented.

The term web content refers to, among other things, “text, images, sounds, videos and animations” encountered online (Wikipedia 2019d). Aspects you can question to specify a client’s flexibility include for example, how much content needs to be visible at any given point, in which format and for how long. How information is presented has an impact on how it is received and these questions are relevant in the interest of information design, which centers around the effective presentation of information (Wikipedia 2018b). The degree of flexibility a clients is willing to afford you should be considered when choosing a website builder, as it directly determines whether you are able to fulfil the task. Take for example a scenario in which a client is unwilling to be flexible with how web content is presented. They have decided that the original custom web layout must be strictly adhered to, because the website will be used to showcase a short movie portfolio. In this scenario, the website builder you choose must be able to support video, otherwise you are unable to complete the website layout. In a scenario where you are afforded more flexibility with web content, the choice of website builders is broader, allowing you to take into consideration other criteria that may influence your choice.

Alongside the previously addressed idea of flexibility, it is also beneficial to assess the structural and hierarchical needs of web content. According to Grass, hierarchy can refer to how “content is organised across an app or site” or in relation to other elements on a page. In an article he points out it’s importance by stating that it helps with navigation and guides the viewer’s attention to the most important things. (Grass 2018.)

When choosing a website builder, depending on how flexible you can be with web content, an area of consideration should therefore be whether it allows for a clear hierarchy through the creation of contrast between individual elements. This is particularly important when a website builder offers limited editing capabilities or the web content you are dealing with is very monotonous. My experience of Shopify’s theme editor (see subsection 3.3) chronicles a scenario in which the website editor Shopify is not able to meet the web content’s structural and hierarchical needs. In contrast though, Pagefly was able to offer the editing capabilities that did meet the requirements of the web content (see subsection 3.4).

4.2

My experience of flexibility in shaping the web content

During the web design project for ProbiSolution, the client was extremely forthcoming and showed great flexibility with the way web content was allowed to be presented when asked. After the initial design brief was agreed, another meeting was had with the aim of specifying flexibility with web content. As the company deals with chemicals certain regulations must be followed, meaning that certain content like product information and instructions relating to safe usage had to be displayed in certain formats at all times on the website.

A benefit of a large degree of flexibility when displaying content was that some content was able to be optimised. This means that it was presented in a more engaging way than previously planned. An example of such a case was replacing a diagram with an animation that showcased the same information. The static version of the diagram was also available, just in case somebody wished to view it in a different format.

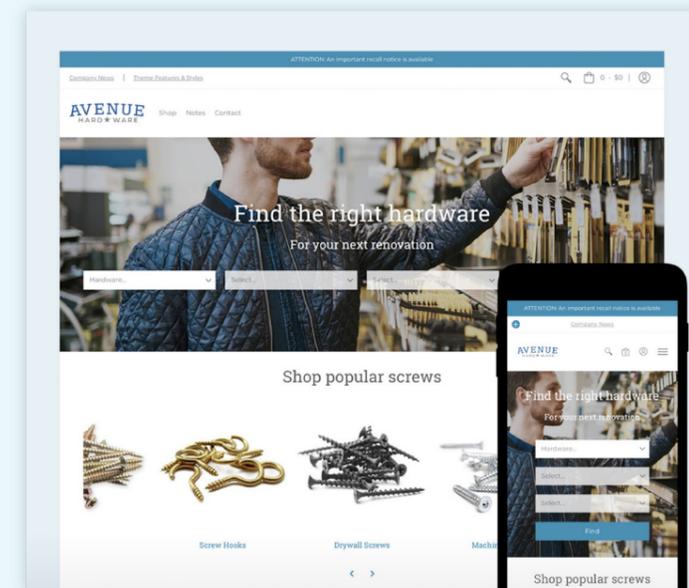
4.3

Choose a good starting point: themes and Pagefly

Continuing with viewpoint of flexibility with web content as a criteria, this sections examines the significance of choosing a good starting point using ready made themes. As addressed in section 2, most website builders offer a selection of ready made themes or templates and it can be said that some themes are better than others at bringing different aspects to the forefront. Figure 9 shows the two Shopify themes Avenue and Mr Parker side by side. The descriptions found on Shopify for each theme it makes it very clear that each has a different objective. The Avenue theme is described by Shopify as “designed to help your customers quickly find the product they want” (Shopify n.d c). Whereas, the Mr Parker theme is described as being “great for showcasing multiple featured collections” (Shopify n.d d).

As illustrated in figure 9, different themes highlight different things, so it is worth considering what the main aim of the web content you wish to present is. If a theme is chosen as a starting point to rebuild a custom layout, then it makes sense to choose a theme that will support that aim and already includes the features that you will use. It may also be that you cannot find a website builder with a theme that includes features exactly matching your custom web layout or fulfils your client’s wishes with regards to how web content is

AVENUE



MR PARKER

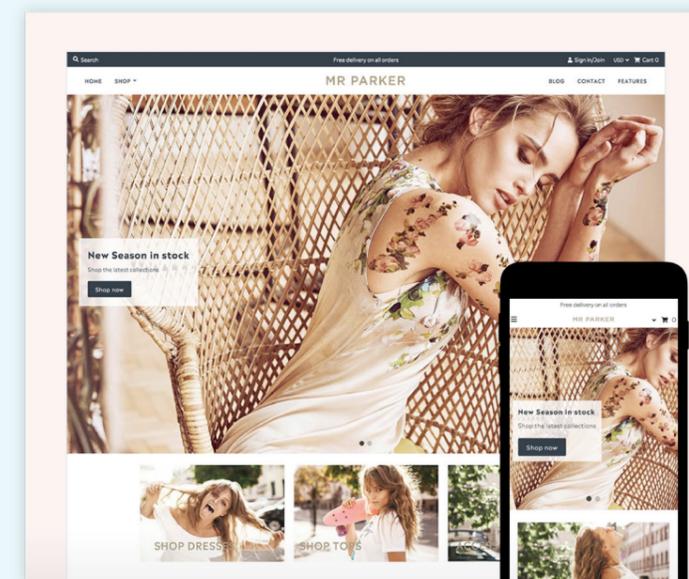


Figure 9.

Shows screenshots taken from Shopify’s theme store of two themes side by side: Avenue and Mr Parker. The Avenue theme is optimised to help potential buyers find products as quickly as possible, This is apparent from the product slideshow and searchboxes visible in the theme. On the other hand, the Mr Parker theme is optimised for bringing featured collections to the buyer’s attention first, with images of featured collections covering the theme’s main page. (Pictures taken from themes.shopify.com)

presented. In this case, if you have a lot of flexibility (see subsection 4.1) then it may be beneficial to look for a theme that has the potential to be modified closer to your requirements.

If the objective is to replicate a custom website layout exactly and no website builders offer themes that are even remotely close to the design, then it makes the most sense to choose a website builder that allows the user to start with 'blank page'. A blank page refers to a completely blank canvas the user is able to add elements of their choosing to. A blank page also frees the user from the constraints usually imposed by a ready made template.

4.4

Shaping web content and the use of themes in Pagefly and Shopify

In the previously mentioned meeting to decide on the flexibility of web content (see subsection 4.2), the client and I also chose a Shopify theme to proceed with. As mentioned in subsection 3.3, currently Shopify provides just 10 free templates and the rest are paid and made by third parties. The current price range of the paid themes is between \$140 and \$180 and most offer 2-3 alternative styles inside a theme. Each theme offers specific modules and the alternative styles usually mean a different colour scheme or slightly modified layout and are also included in the price.

Returning to my experience from the perspective of the web content flexibility, in hindsight it is now clear that not taking the time to learn the underlying logic of Shopify's theme editor also affected my ability to evaluate Shopify with regards to web content flexibility. If I had taken the time to consider the web content, I may also have noticed the following phrase tucked neatly under each theme description in Shopify's theme store: "All themes on the theme store also include: Customizable content sections on home page" (Shopify n.d c). Despite having the right idea of choosing a template with features to support the web content, I regret not taking this moment to evaluate Shopify's suitability for the task. The fact that only the modules of the home page are somewhat customisable clearly pointed to Shopify being an unsuitable website builder for the project in question at the time. Additionally, thinking further than the landing on my part may have saved some time and alerted me to Shopify's limitations sooner.

Learning from this experience, in the future I will aim to put the web content first when assessing a website builder. Remembering to consider the web layout as a whole, instead of solely focusing on the main page is also a priority. Based on my experience and the requirements of the project in question, it is now abundantly clear that Shopify's themes would have fallen short. They failed to meet the basic structural needs of the web content in question, as discussed in subsection 3.3.

It is important to note that at this stage, we did not have knowledge of the Pagefly application, and later went back to amend the choice of template, basing our decision on ease of replication. The aim was to make the pages created in Pagefly fit together seamlessly with the chosen Shopify template.

After discovering the Pagefly application and familiarising myself with the underlying logic, it also became apparent that like Shopify, Pagefly also offers a small range of templates. However, Pagefly also offers the choice of starting with a blank page. In offering this option, Pagefly proved a good choice in website builder under the circumstances of my project. The blank page option along with drag and drop features and no advertising allowed for an extremely personalised design and replication of the original custom template. Additionally, Pagefly offers an extensive range of ready made elements and modules. As there is a significant amount, this means the user does not have to worry about coding or using as many third party add-ons for different types of elements.

With regards to the scope for content, Pagefly is very versatile with the types of files it supports. Everything ranging from pdfs and image to videos is able to be uploaded and supported across all pages. This means that the user has to compromise less on aesthetics and changes to original web content can be kept to a minimum.

5

Responsive Web Design

The term responsive web design refers to web design that responds to the device it is being viewed on, by changing in size or how content is ordered (Pillon 2018; W3Schools.com n.d). For example, the same website viewed on a desktop would scale down in size and perhaps display content one underneath the other when viewed on a mobile device.

With the number of people browsing the internet using a mobile device constantly on the rise, the argument for having a mobile optimised site seems to be gaining validity as laid out in a Forbes article. The article states that “mobile data traffic across the globe is projected to increase nearly sevenfold by 2020” (Kreyenhagen 2018). Based on this responsiveness can be considered an important factor and should be accounted for when choosing a website builder.

This section considers the suitability of a website builder based on its responsive web design capabilities. This section also aims to explain how responsive design can be achieved in a website builder. Pagefly and Shopify as examples, and empirical evidence stemming from my own experience is used to support existing documentation on the matter.

5.1

Responsive design in Shopify & Pagefly

In Shopify, the presence of responsive web design can already be seen in the ‘Themes’ dashboard as illustrated in figure 10. After clicking ‘customise’, you are then taken to Shopify’s editor, where the chosen template automatically opens in the desktop view.

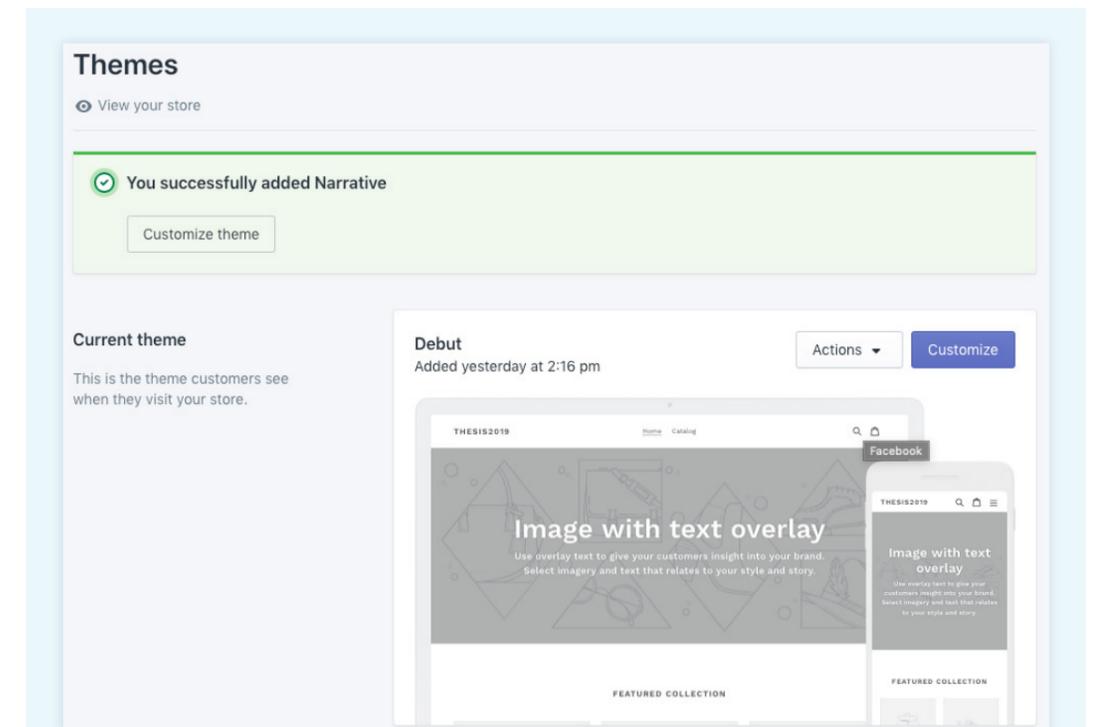


Figure 10.

Shows a screenshot taken in the dashboard view of the themes tab. Here a preview of chosen theme is visible in both desktop and mobile views. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

Inside Shopify’s theme editor, along the top of the screen there are three icons symbolising the different sizes a user can choose to view their template in: mobile, desktop or full screen. Clicking on each of the views in turn scales the template and shows the user’s template in the respective size. All of Shopify’s own themes are responsive, meaning that they have built in code that scales the template to fit the device it is being viewed on. In my opinion it works relatively well. However, you cannot make changes to individual elements depending on the device it is being viewed on. On the one hand, if the custom web layout a user aims to replicate has a specific design for a certain screen size, they likely will not be able to replicate it

perfectly without editing the manual code due to the aforementioned restrictions. On the other hand, this can be seen as a positive, since the users doesn't need to worry about overall responsiveness when making and changes to the design.

In comparison to Shopify, Pagefly has a much more developed and extensive set of tools to handle responsiveness. Though Pagefly doesn't preview your web page in the Dashboard like Shopify, it does offer a wider range of screen sizes to scale your design to. The screen sizes can be found in a drop down menu at the top of the editor as shown in figure 11.

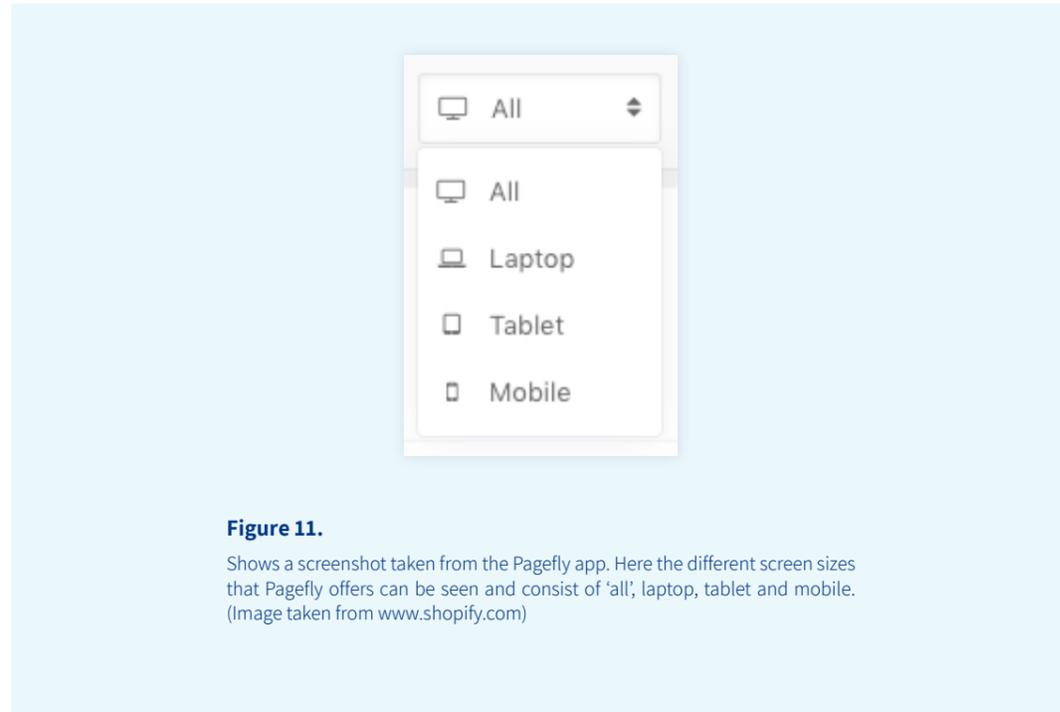


Figure 11.

Shows a screenshot taken from the Pagefly app. Here the different screen sizes that Pagefly offers can be seen and consist of 'all', laptop, tablet and mobile. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

Pagefly's default viewing mode is 'all' and any changes made here have the potential to affect all the different sized versions of your design. Pagefly allows the user to make specific changes to individual elements in each of the different 'views' in a variety of ways. The first way is simply by making changes in each of the different 'views' by selecting them from the top of the editor. The downside to this method is that oftentimes the changes do not 'stick', which is a problem that will be discussed in more detail in a later subsection. Another way to impact the responsiveness of a design is to use the 'page outline' feature that can be found in the bottom left corner of the editor. Once opened, you can see an outline of all the elements and modules present on the page and Pagefly gives the user the option of hiding or showing elements on specific devices. This method can be used to optimise web content by, for example, hiding bulky and unnecessary elements in the mobile view and only making them visible to desktop users.

With Pagefly, responsiveness isn't automatically built in and so unfortunately it requires the user to take the time to manually go through whole website design page by page. Based on my experience, the easiest way to lessen the work is to use the 'blocks' that divide the page as they scale automatically and a quite reliable.

5.2

My experience of using Pagefly from the perspective of responsiveness

Throughout my project, the client was quite aware of the need for a responsive design, and especially the importance of having a mobile optimised site. At the beginning of the project due to the fact that there were so many changes to the web layout, I made the decision to leave the responsiveness of each page until after the layout was finalised. Despite having tested it out, it still came as a shock and I underestimated the time it took to go through all the pages individually and make sure all the elements worked as they were supposed to across the three different views. In the future, budgeting an adequate amount of time for optimisation and responsiveness is a must and I believe it also would make sense to discuss this with the client in more detail. This is because sometimes the web content has the capacity to be optimised and made more engaging and it would be a shame to waste the opportunity.

A significant difficulty I face when using Pagefly, was that some elements would sometimes suddenly stop working or appear differently. This was an issue with elements such as buttons that needed to look a certain way in the mobile view and slightly different in the desktop view. To bypass the hassle of restyling elements everytime they stopped working, I decided to make two copies of all the elements and the products that the buttons were linked to. The idea was to style one set specifically for the desktop and laptop views and the other set for mobile. The button meant for the mobile view would then be hidden from laptop and desktop users, whilst the desktop and laptop styled button would be hidden from mobile users. The workaround worked surprisingly well, until I ran into an error too technical to go into in the context of this thesis. In simple terms, the product page ran out of space, rendering it unable to accommodate all the products at the same time. I was unable to fix the problem myself and it required multiple conversations with the Pagefly helpline. Eventually, instead of compromising on the original design or having to start again, a decision was made to spread the products across two pages.

In light of my experience, when styling the width of elements, I found that sticking to percentages allowed for more consistency in responsiveness across the different screen sizes. Using percentages lessened the workload when it came to making the design responsive across all platforms as it automatically scaled them and left only a little fine tuning to be done. This is because setting the width of an object as a percentage allows it to scale more easily to a device. If the width of a button is set for example as 300px (300 pixels), it may span the width of the screen on a mobile. However, on a desktop it will not span the width of the screen and could be considerably smaller than the rest of the content that may have been made responsive. In such a case, the designer would have to manually scale the button across the three different views. This would take a lot longer than if the button's width was set to for example 75% of the viewport width. An article by MDN Web Docs explains that "the browser's viewport is the area of the window in which web content can be seen" (MDN Web Docs n.d) and when elements are scaled to the viewport width as opposed to a fixed size, the chance that it will sit well across different platforms greatly increases, lessening the designer's workload.

Based on my experience, Pagefly affords the user greater control over responsiveness and how a web layout is viewed across individual devices. Unfortunately, it also means that the user has a greater responsibility and task of making sure that the layout is responsive and scales well across most platforms. With Pagefly, in the context of my project I was able to accomplish my goal. However it was extremely time-consuming and required external help from Pagefly's customer support. Pagefly has turned out to be a multifaceted tool that takes quite some time to learn. However, with some effort good results are achievable and it paid off in this project, making Pagefly a suitable tool with respect to responsiveness.

6

User Testing

Today user testing can be carried out in many different forms. However, simply put its main goal "is to inform the design process from the perspective of the end user" (Babich 2017). According to Babich, in 2017 some of the most common methods included usability testing, focus groups and surveys. Other forms that are perhaps in my opinion less well known are A/B testing and blur tests, demonstrating the diverse applications of user testing (Brooke 2018).

This section aims to give the reader a general understanding of the different forms of user testing and its widely regarded benefits. A closer focus is placed on a specific form of user testing called usability testing (somewhat touched upon in section 3) and this section also draws from the context of my own experience to inspect how website builders can facilitate user testing, using the examples of Shopify and Pagefly.

6.1

Three different forms of user testing and their benefits

As previously stated, there are many ways in which user testing can be carried out. Factors such as the scale of testing and at which stage of the project it is carried out can affect the relevancy of the results in relation to the design process. These should be considered when choosing which type of user testing to implement.

Conducting a focus group is a form of user testing and is also considered to be a form of market research by some (Shopify n.d e; Cambridge Dictionary n.d). It is generally considered to be a small group of people brought together in order “to provide feedback regarding a product, service or concept” over a certain period of time, for example two hours. It is also common to have a “trained moderator” present to help lead the discussion. (Shopify n.d e.)

In the context of a website, Babich indicates that a focus group could be used to “discuss issues and concerns about the features of a user interface” (2017). He also suggests that “the proper role of focus groups isn’t to assess design usability, but to discover what users want from a product—their personal thoughts and preferences”. So with this in mind, Babich proposes that a focus group is best implemented during the beginning phases of a project. If conducted during the early phases of a project, by determining user needs, findings from a focus group can then be used to amend designs to better meet users needs and expectations. (Babich 2017.)

As previously discussed, focus groups are a form of moderated user testing. This means that a moderator, often a trained professional or “facilitator”, is present and according to Brooke, gathers feedback from actual users (2018). An example of an unmoderated form of user testing is Unmoderated Remote Usability Testing (URUT) and unlike a focus group, its results are much more relevant when deployed after the early stages of a project and used to back up moderated testing (Babich 2017). According to Brooke, URUT “is usually conducted through a website or platform that records the session, tracks metrics and randomizes tasks and groups” (2018). Both Babich and Brooke agree that URUT is a method that yields a “large sample of results” with a relatively low cost and quick turnaround time. It’s also a method that Babich suggests is best used for the purpose of answering “very specific questions about how people use a user interface for relatively simple and straightforward tasks” (2017). This is why, as stated earlier, I believe URUT would provide increasingly relevant results when used on a design that is complete enough to be put to use and tested between the middle and end stages of a web design project.

Beta testing is the final form of user testing highlighted in this subsection, and can be described as the testing of a “near-complete product” by a limited amount of individuals who provide “critical feedback” (Babich 2017; Rouse 2015). Babich argues that beta testing should only be performed when the product or, in the context of this thesis: website, is almost complete. It is a form of user testing used to gather, in Babich’s opinion, constructive feedback from end-users that steers away from finding bugs and rather aims to

collect feedback that can be used to refine the design (Babich 2017). For this reason, Babich highlights the need for “sufficient testing” before beta testing is carried out and in my opinion makes it suitable for the final stages of design just before a website is launched (2017). In an article about beta testing, an example of how it can be carried out for a website is a software that “sends a random user to your website and asks him or her to record his impressions in an audio track while trying to use your website” (I.T. Roadmap 2017). Although that particular piece of software referenced in the article is no longer available, similar software still exists and testing can also be conducted in-house. Sometimes this negates the need for such software, as users can be observed in person.

Illustrating just three different examples of user testing: focus groups, URUT and beta testing, demonstrates why timing factors into the type of user testing that can be implemented at each stage of a project. It also shows how user testing can be carried out on varying scales with or without moderation. Despite the many factors to consider, the reason user testing is carried out is due to the benefits it can bring when done correctly. An article by Quovantis aims to define these benefits and it is notable that they somewhat overlap with the principles of usability covered earlier in section 3 (see subsection 3.2). Quovantis lists some of the benefits of user testing to include checking “if the product” meets user’s expectations, matching “business decisions to real-world use” and removing “flaws in the product” (2017). Quovantis also mentions that user testing “allows you to see how successful users are with their tasks” and is “useful for getting user interactions and feedback about the product” (2017). Acting on the results of user testing can essentially allow a business to increase their product’s competitiveness, and save time and money by fixing problems in the early stages of design (Quovantis 2017). Increasing a product’s, or in this case a website’s, usability essentially translates to a good user experience. According to an article on the subject, is likely to lead to an increase in revenue, as customers will prefer it to other websites offering similar content (RubyGarage 2019).

6.2

The user testing capabilities of website builders

When acted upon, the results or information gathered from user testing has the potential to be used to improve a design (see subsection 6.1). In the context of the scenario presented in this thesis, which includes a complete custom website layout, some of the most useful insights can thus be considered as those that help to spot and remove flaws in the website. Depending upon the size of the website in question, I would argue that some light user testing is always necessary before a launch. Therefore, it is important to be aware of how a website builder allows for different forms of user testing and how it may affect a project. In this subsection, Shopify and Pagefly will be used as examples and examined to illustrate the potential differences between website builders from this perspective.

At present, when a user first creates an online store using Shopify they are asked to add a password to it. This effectively allows the store to be online and simultaneously stops anyone without a password from seeing any further than a login page. Therefore, despite barred access, people who come across a password protected store can still be made aware that the website in question is yet to be launched and is coming soon.

Figure 12 illustrates how, inside Shopify's theme editor, the screen is divided into a sidebar featuring the template's different modules, and a 'live preview' of the template in the chosen view. The 'live preview' is constantly visible to the user and automatically updates when changes are made to the template via the sidebar.

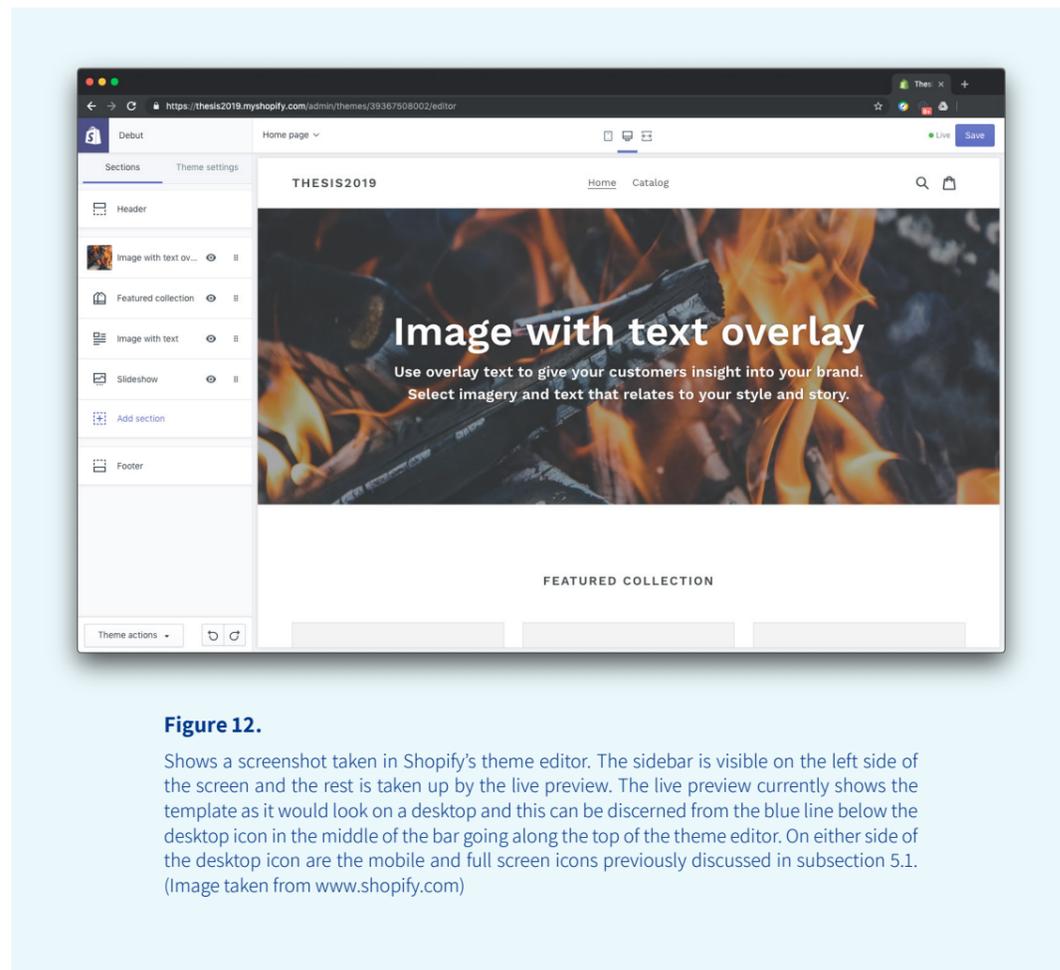


Figure 12.

Shows a screenshot taken in Shopify's theme editor. The sidebar is visible on the left side of the screen and the rest is taken up by the live preview. The live preview currently shows the template as it would look on a desktop and this can be discerned from the blue line below the desktop icon in the middle of the bar going along the top of the theme editor. On either side of the desktop icon are the mobile and full screen icons previously discussed in subsection 5.1. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

In addition to a live preview inside its theme editor, Shopify also allows the user to preview their template inside the browser. This is a common possibility in website builders and in Shopify, this feature can currently be found under the 'theme actions' menu in the bottom left corner, as can be seen in figure 12. Choosing this option essentially opens the user's template inside the browser they are using, which in the case of figure 12 is Chrome. Whilst previewing in the browser, Shopify also provides the option of sharing the preview and this allows the creation of a link to the user's online store that bypasses the password discussed

earlier. Anyone with the link is able to access the user's online store for 14 days, without the ability to buy products. A benefit of this is that user testing is not confined to just the designer or group of people working on the website, by way of being able to share the link. The downside, is that unlike inside the theme editor, when changes are made the template is not automatically updated. This means that in the event of sudden changes, the viewer must refresh the page in order for them to take effect in the browser.

Unlike Shopify's theme editor, Pagefly's editor does not offer users a constant live preview of the website. This is due to the fact that Shopify only permits the user to perform actions in the sidebar, whereas Pagefly allows the user to interact with the whole canvas using a drag and drop mechanism (see subsection 3.3) as illustrated in figure 13. In Pagefly's editor, the general position and styling of elements in relation to each other and the browser is somewhat visible to the user. However, applying for example a certain type of positioning to an element may manifest differently in the browser and the element may interfere with the positioning of surrounding elements.

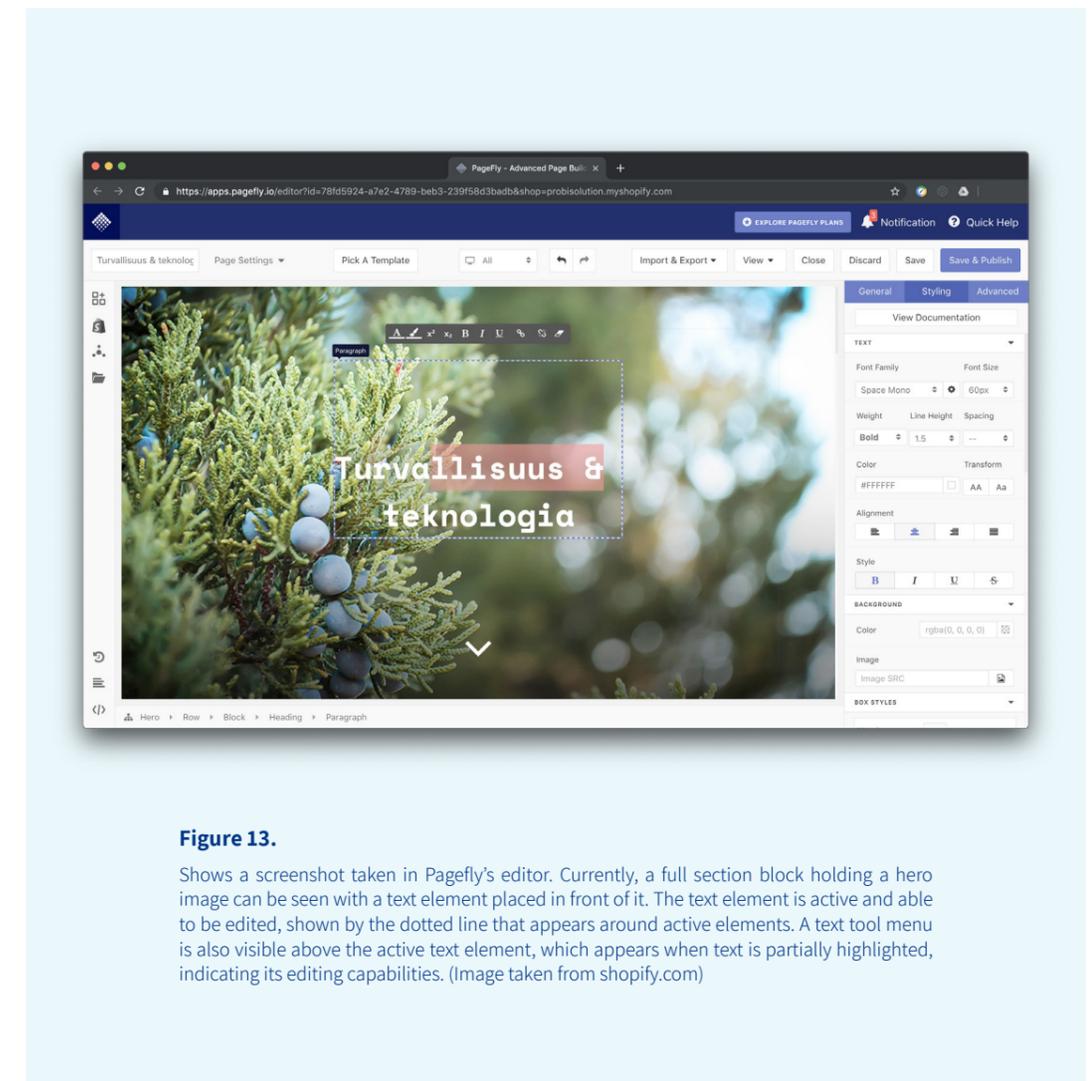


Figure 13.

Shows a screenshot taken in Pagefly's editor. Currently, a full section block holding a hero image can be seen with a text element placed in front of it. The text element is active and able to be edited, shown by the dotted line that appears around active elements. A text tool menu is also visible above the active text element, which appears when text is partially highlighted, indicating its editing capabilities. (Image taken from shopify.com)

Figure 14 illustrates the two previewing options a user can choose between in Pagefly's editor. In a similar fashion to Shopify's theme editor, choosing 'Preview' opens a new browser window and shows the template in the browser, though it is not live. Choosing the 'Live Page' option differs from this by opening a live version of the template in the browser. A benefit of having two previewing modes, is that the user is able to make and preview changes to the template without transferring those changes to the live version of the site (or online store in this case) directly. A previously mentioned example of why a user may want to preview changes before saving them is how some aspects of styling manifest differently between the editor and the live online store. By allowing the user to make changes and then choose 'preview', they are able to view those changes in the browser. With the 'preview' option, the user can thus edit without the fear of causing permanent changes to the online store. The changes are only transferred to the live version of the online store by choosing the 'save and publish' option.

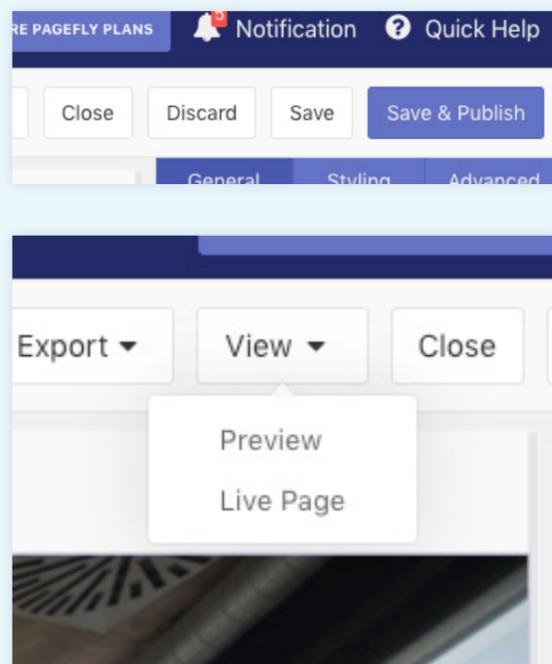


Figure 14.

Shows a screenshot taken in Pagefly's editor. The two different options for previewing can be seen in the dropdown menu at the top of the editor emerging from the 'View' button. The 'save' and 'save and publish' buttons are also visible in the top right corner of the editor. (Image taken from shopify.com)

It is important to note, that since Shopify automatically adds a password to the online store until the user chooses to remove it, publishing a live version of a template in Pagefly does not circumvent said password. Therefore, the user is free to update a live version of their template in Pagefly without fear of it being accessed by someone else before its official launch. The url generated by Pagefly can be shared manually, allowing for user testing. However, unlike Shopify it does not have a time limit on it, though the url can be modified relatively easily, thus preventing access. One other drawback that Pagefly shares with Shopify, is that if incremental changes are being made, the browser must always be refreshed in order for them to take effect. This can sometimes be a slow process within Pagefly's editor, as I believe the speed at which changes are uploaded correlates to the amount of content on the page.

6.3

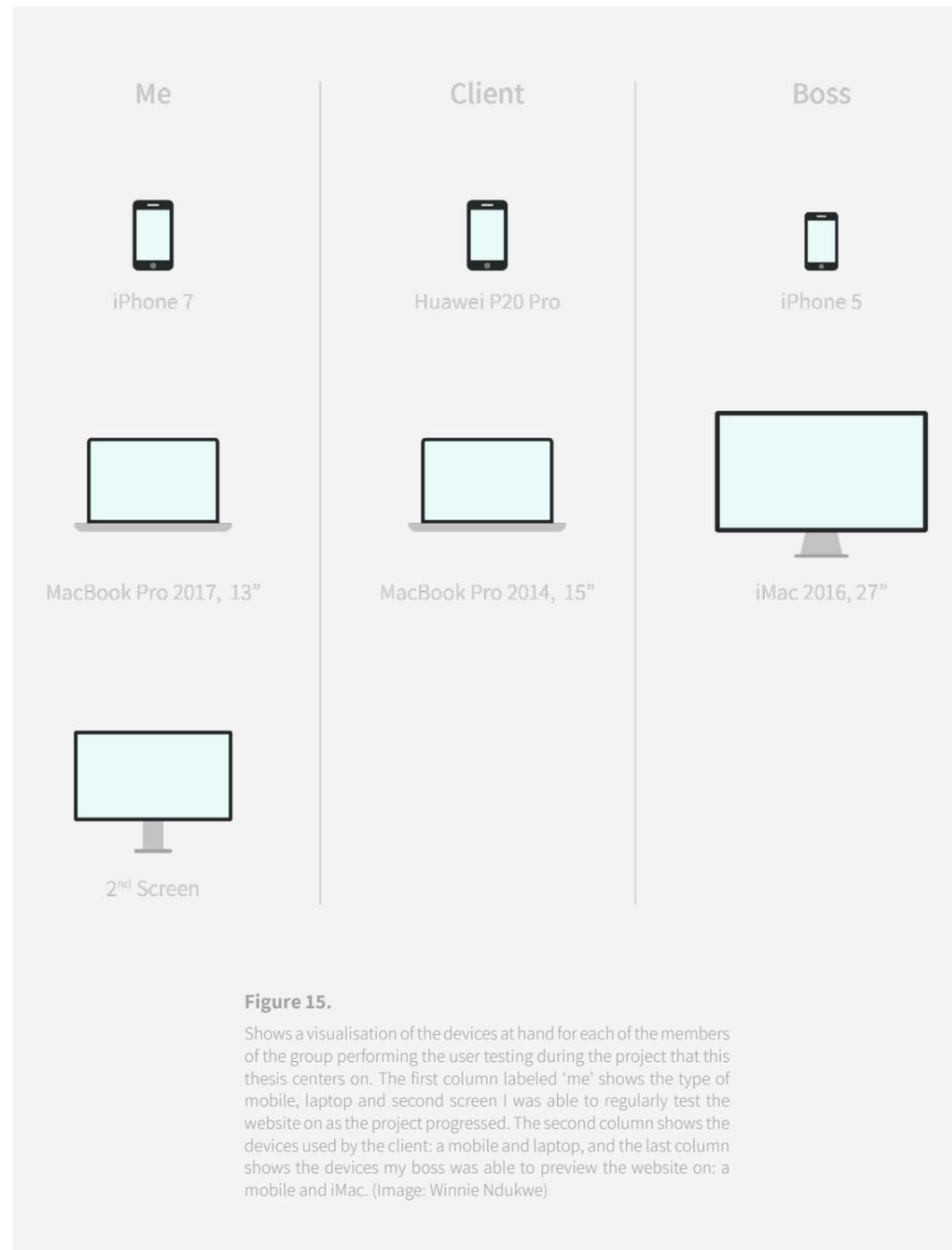
User testing in the context of my experience

Looking back on the project from the perspective of user testing, in my opinion this was an aspect that was not planned for as thoroughly as it could have been. Throughout, a decision was made to keep Shopify's password on the site up until its official launch. However, that was the only concrete step I remember being decided with regards to user testing before the project began. As keeping the password meant that the online store couldn't be accessed further than the login page, the login page was modified to state 'coming soon'. The reasoning was that since other social media channels such as Facebook and LinkedIn were already up and actively being used to promote the brand, though inaccessible, potential customers were still informed that an online store was on the way. The login page had links that led back to the social media channels, which were used to keep interested parties up to date and ultimately inform them when the store was eventually launched.

I believe part of reason why user testing was somewhat overlooked and not planned for as thoroughly as some other areas, was that the project centered around replicating a ready made custom web template. This meant that the design had already been the subject of scrutiny, which perhaps subconsciously negated the need for focus groups or similar forms of user testing that according to Babich, aim to influence the design process in its 'early stages' (2017). Nevertheless, as previously covered in subsection 4.4, the client afforded me a lot of flexibility regarding the presentation of the web content, and this led to multiple changes to the original custom web layout as the project progressed. In hindsight, the amount of changes directly influenced the need for user testing and though I did not think of it specifically being that at the time, some light user testing was carried out.

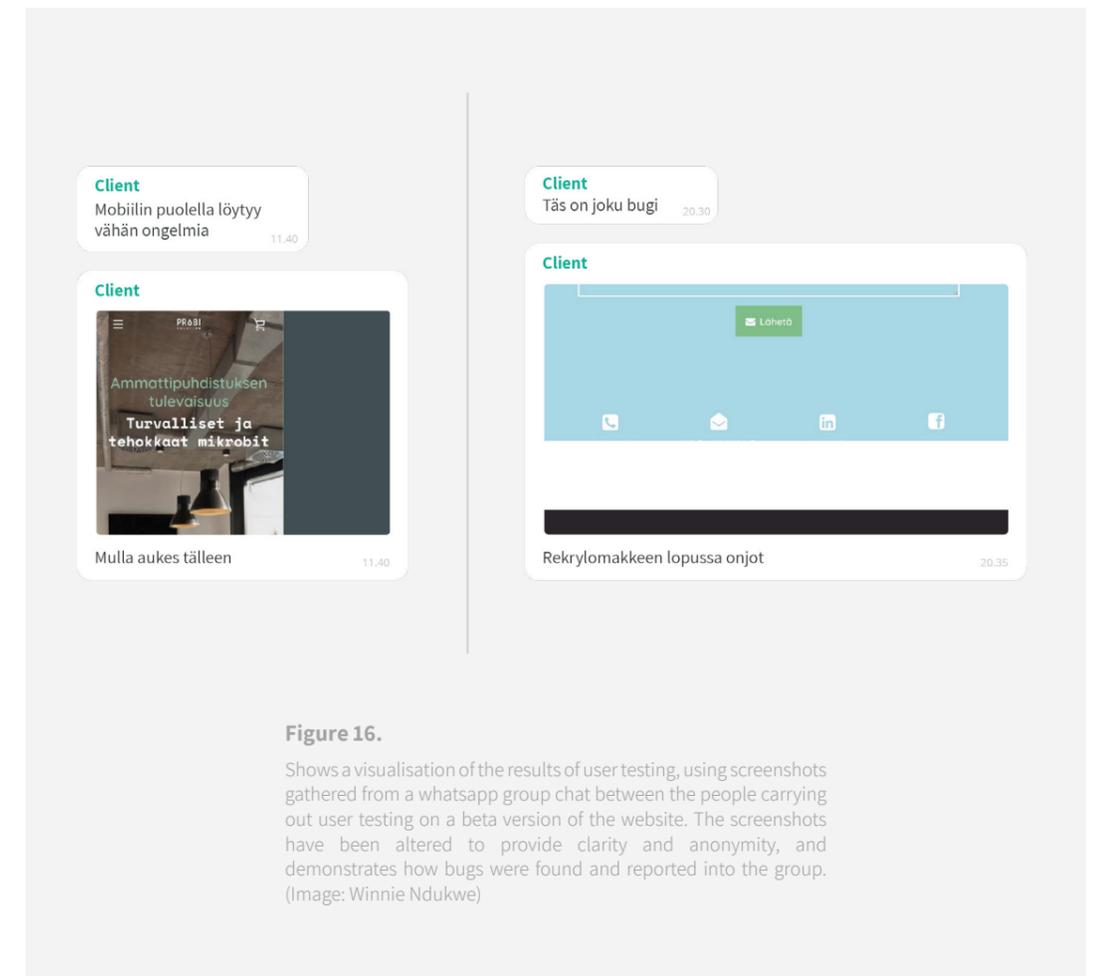
The website, which included an online store, was not considered to be very extensive. Therefore, the general consensus from the beginning was that a large group would not be necessary for user testing. For this reason, we settled on confining user testing to a small group consisting of the client, my boss and myself.

User testing was performed more or less weekly, increasing in its frequency towards the end of the project and an informal combination of unmoderated remote usability testing and beta testing was used throughout (see subsection 6.1). Each member of the group used the devices available to them at different times and locations and figure 15 illustrates the range of different devices we were fortunate enough to have access to.



Though unplanned, figure 15 illustrates that as a group we had access to both small (mobile), medium (laptop) and large (desktop) sized screens. This proved extremely beneficial, as discrepancies in the web content in terms of responsiveness and functionality did occur between different devices. Thus, the main purpose of user testing in this project at that time, was to find and fix flaws in the website - a benefit of user testing highlighted in an article addressed in subsection 6.1 (Quovantis 2017).

Figure 16 illustrates examples of some of the bugs encountered during the project, as well as the way the results of user testing were communicated: Whatsapp, an instant messaging service (Wikipedia 2019e). The first message is of a bug found by the client that did not immediately manifest on iphones. For reasons unknown to myself, a dark blue background appeared underneath the web content and became visible when the web page was pulled to the left. Another bug found on desktops that was not visible on mobile screens, was the appearance of a sizeable white gap between the lowest web content and the page footer. Both of these issues may not have been found had we not had a range of devices to preview the website on and consequently check that a working fix was applied. Other problems related to responsiveness and scaling also occurred and almost all were fixed by making sure that each individual element had its width defined as a percentage, instead of a set amount of pixels (see subsection 5.2).



Ultimately, the combination of unmoderated remote usability testing and beta testing allowed us to make sure that changes that were made to the web content were working solutions and that a responsive design was achieved across a majority of devices. With reference to planning however, I believe that the limited range of devices for testing was one factor that could have prevented the potential benefits of user testing from being maximised during this project. For example on the one hand, between us we were lucky enough to each have devices with some form of small, medium or large sized screens (see figure 16). On the other hand, nobody in the group owned for example an iPad, and so we did not preview the website on a screen size, which would likely have fallen between a mobile and laptop. In the context of this project, not previewing the website specifically on an iPad did not end up having any serious repercussions. Although, we had no way of knowing until the website and online store were launched, with currently no complaints from iPad users.

I believe user testing is an area that should be taken into consideration regarding future projects of a similar nature. Depending upon the extensiveness of the website in question, based on the sources referenced in previous subsections of this section, it is likely that user testing a wider, or alternatively a strategic set of specific screen sizes, would allow for increasingly relevant results. The results could then be used to further fine tune the appearance of the custom web layout across different devices, and positively impact aspects of usability outside of the design itself (see subsections 3.2 and 6.1).

Alongside planning, Pagefly's user testing capabilities coupled with continuous and active feedback from the client were central to the project from this perspective. When changes were made to optimise web content, quick and informal communication via Whatsapp worked well and all members of the so called user testing team were able to preview the changes irrespective of their location at the time (see subsection 6.2). Based on my experience and disregarding communication within the team as a factor, direct access to the website and Pagefly's live preview feature (see subsection 6.2) reduced the bureaucracy around and increased the pace of decision making. A drawback I experienced was that when moderated remote usability testing was being conducted, Pagefly was oftentimes slow to save and update the changes made inside the editor. This was particularly time consuming when multiple incremental changes had to be made based on live feedback. An example of such a situation was fixing a bug not directly visible on the devices I was personally using. Live feedback had to be waited for to see if a solution had worked and for each attempt, more time had to be spent waiting for the new changes to take effect.

Despite being sometimes slow to update, in my experience this was directly dependent upon how much content was on the web page in question. In this project, the quantity of web content proved to be manageable and from the perspective of user testing, Pagefly was an adequate tool. The user testing group was kept to a very small group of three people, all with credentials to the Shopify account. This meant that everyone was able to bypass the Shopify password on the online store (see subsection 6.2), view a live preview at all times and provide feedback on changes made in Pagefly.

Despite serving as an adequate tool in this project, I do not believe Pagefly is suitable for user testing on a larger scale. If a larger group had been used for, for example URUT (see subsection 6.1), it is unclear if despite Pagefly's user testing capabilities, the Shopify password would still act as a block. This could be circumvented using Shopify's previewing feature to share a link, though the link would only be valid for two weeks at a time, complicating the process (see subsection 6.2). Additionally, making changes based on live feedback with a larger group would not be as effective as the small group proved to be in the context of my project. Inferring from my experience, the increased amount of feedback, opinions and possibility of varying devices would lead to an increase in at least incremental changes. Consequently, this could cause more time to be put into waiting for those changes to be uploaded and slow down the process.

To draw a conclusion based on my own experience, in order to choose a suitable website builder from the perspective of user testing, it is necessary for the user to first establish the needs of their custom web layout. Factors that are central to resolving this are knowing the final extent or size of the website, as well as the desired goal of any user testing. The answers to these questions can then be used to determine the most suitable form of user testing and the appropriate size for that user testing group. By considering the various components in conjunction with other angles explored in the earlier sections of this thesis, a user can better analyse whether a website builder's user testing capabilities are able to meet the needs of their custom web layout.

7

Customer Support & existing documentation

In the context of this section, the term customer support is used to refer to the ways in which a website builder is able to provide help to its users. For the purpose of clarity, the term existing documentation is therefore used to refer to documentation produced by parties separate from the website builder. Both of these terms form the angle from which website builders will be analysed in this section.

This section focuses on customer support and existing documentation as criteria for choosing a suitable website builder. The relevance of this criteria stems from its relationship with the perspective used to underpin analysis throughout this thesis. This section aims to address the importance of evaluating a website builder from this perspective, by familiarising the reader with the forms of customer support and where it can be found. Additionally, using existing documentation to solve problems is explored. This is supported with analysis of my own experience using the examples of Shopify and Pagefly to add relevancy through context.

7.1

Customer support channels

Today, even on a governmental level, it is widely regarded as a positive move for businesses to provide some form of good customer support (Australian Government 2019). In their guide for starting a business, the Australian Government highlights that good customer support has the potential to lead to a good reputation and increased customer satisfaction (2019). It's therefore in a business' interest to do well in this area, as "customer retention is cheaper than customer acquisition" (Amareesan 2019).

Some of the most common examples of customer support addressed in an article on the subject include a helpline or telephone support, email and 'help content' such as FAQs or frequently asked questions (Ciotti 2019). Ciotti's article also mentions live chats, sometimes referred to as live help, and is described by Beal as:

"a web service that allows businesses to communicate, or chat in real time with visitors to their website". (Beal n.d.)

The examples discussed demonstrate that customer support can come in different forms. Arguably, the different forms are better suited to different types of needs, so as a user it is important to evaluate which form is best suited to your requirements.

A principal area of consideration is the speed or general rate of reply to expect from each type of customer support channel. Based on my own experience, email can generally be categorised as having the slowest rate of response and live chats as the fastest, thanks to instant messaging. This knowledge in the context of choosing a website builder to replicate a custom web layout can be useful, if a user decides on a website builder with low usability (see subsection 3.2). If the same website builder also provides a swift customer support channel to its users such as a live chat, that may help to counterbalance and compensate for the low usability. A fast rate of response is also beneficial within projects that work around tight schedules. If an error occurs, a fast response can be the difference between missing or meeting a deadline. Conversely, it is important to note that slower channels of customer support such as email, can also be sufficient. Ciotti notes that email support creates records of discussions that are easily accessible at later dates (2019). In such cases where a problem has multiple steps or reoccurs, such a trait can be viewed as convenient.

Customer support channels can be located slightly differently depending on the website builder. Inside Shopify for example, in my opinion the easiest way to locate customer support is by typing in the word 'help' or 'support' into the search bar illustrated in figure 17. Currently, the results of typing the words 'help' or 'support' can direct the user to the FAQ page. The page features a considerable amount of answers and explanations to frequently asked questions, which are set out clearly and can be followed relatively easily to resolve a problem.

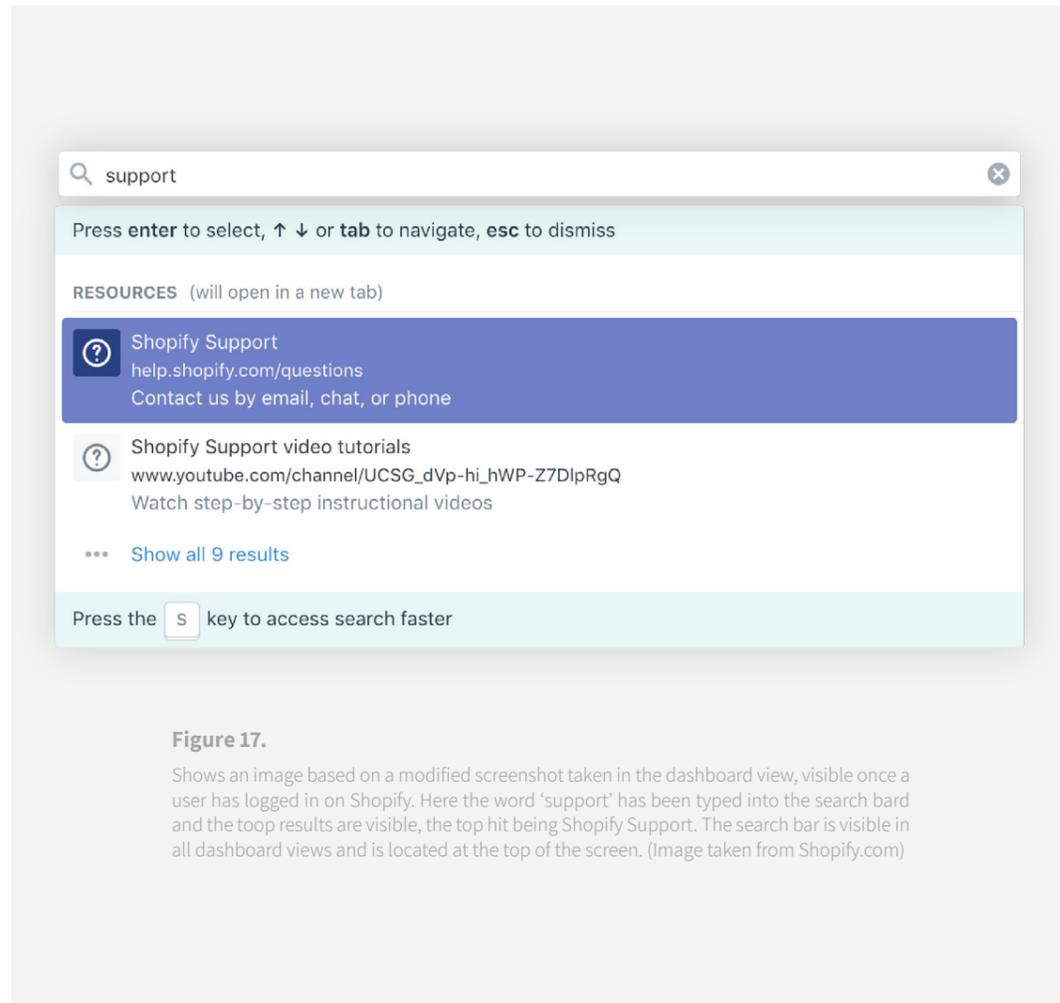


Figure 17.

Shows an image based on a modified screenshot taken in the dashboard view, visible once a user has logged in on Shopify. Here the word 'support' has been typed into the search bar and the top results are visible, the top hit being Shopify Support. The search bar is visible in all dashboard views and is located at the top of the screen. (Image taken from Shopify.com)

If not the FAQ page, another place a user may be steered is the Support Channel page. Figure 18 illustrates the four different channels of customer support currently featured here: chat, email, phone and twitter. Shopify also offers video tutorials, which can be found in a similar way. However, all of Shopify's customer support is centrally located in the Shopify Help Centre, which in my opinion is not immediately obvious from the dashboard view as a user.

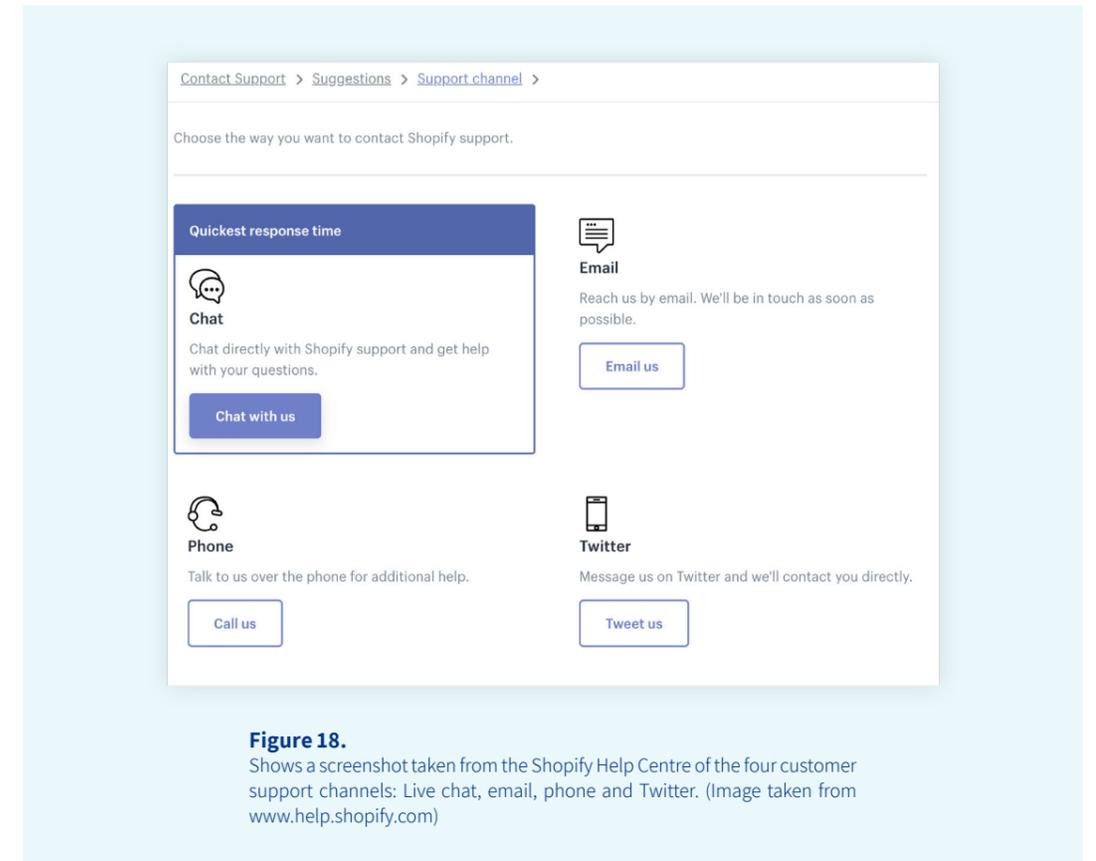


Figure 18.

Shows a screenshot taken from the Shopify Help Centre of the four customer support channels: Live chat, email, phone and Twitter. (Image taken from www.help.shopify.com)

In comparison, Pagefly's editor houses a 'quick help' button illustrated in figure 19, which is visible at all times in both the dashboard and inside the editor. The 'Quick Help' button opens a dropdown menu containing links to multiple channels of customer support, including FAQs, How-to tutorials and the 'Help Center'. Additionally, in the bottom right corner a live chat icon is constantly visible in both the dashboard and editor, illustrated in figure 19. Clicking on the live chat icon causes the chat to open, and the user can see whether a developer is currently online. The user is also able to see when a message has been read, as well as any previous messages sent.

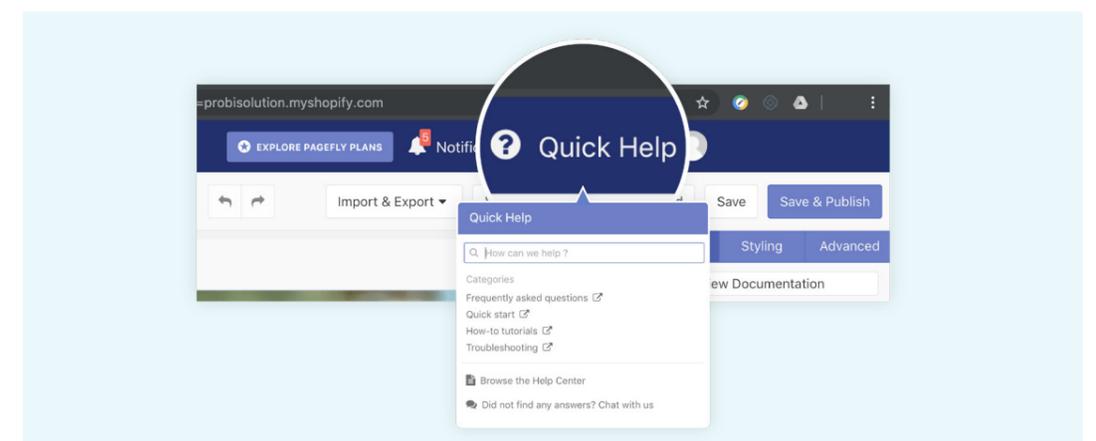


Figure 19. Shows a visualisation of Pagefly's customer support channels, based on multiple screenshots of the Pagefly dashboard. (Image taken from www.shopify.com)

7.2

Customer support channels in the context of my experience

During the course of my project, there was a need to contact customer support from both Pagefly and Shopify on numerous occasions. Without specifying technical details, as that would go outside the scope of this thesis, an example was an issue with Pagefly's cart element. In this context, the cart element illustrated in figure 20 refers to an element comprising of an item's name, price, quantity and 'add to cart' button. Simply put, Pagefly's cart element was unable to interact with Shopify's payment framework, which meant that customers would be unable to buy products from the online store if the issue persisted.

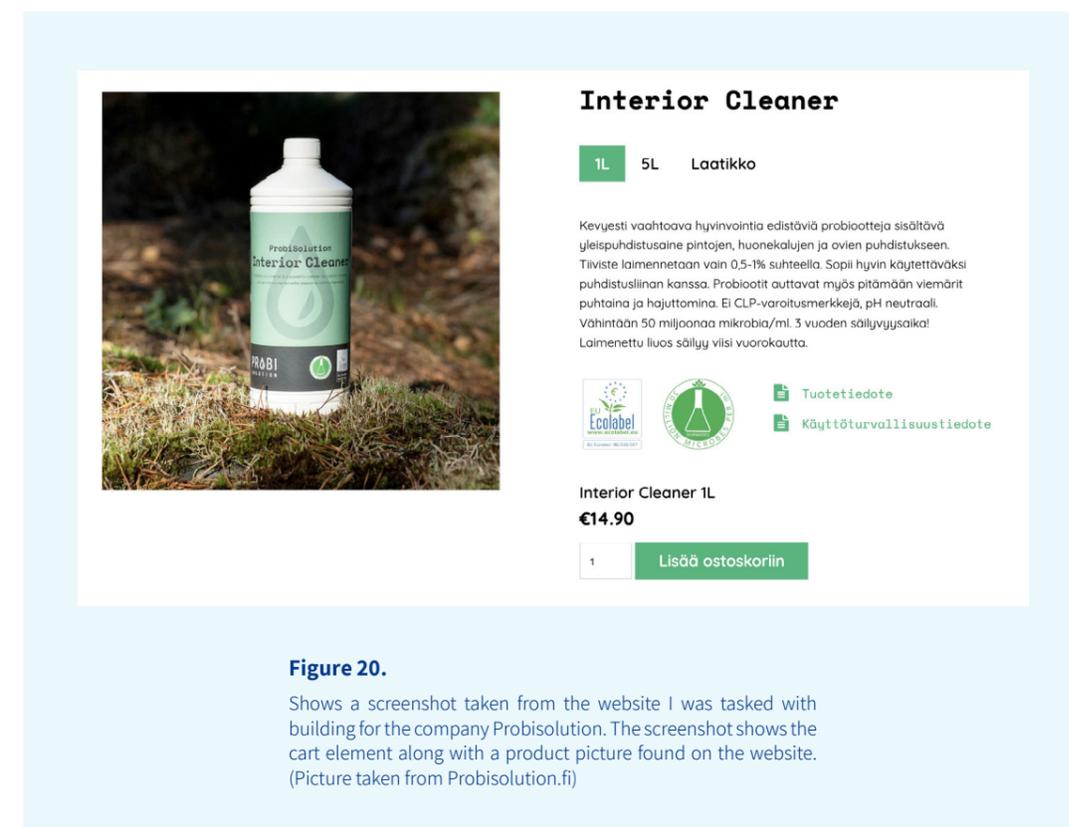


Figure 20.

Shows a screenshot taken from the website I was tasked with building for the company Probiosolution. The screenshot shows the cart element along with a product picture found on the website. (Picture taken from Probiosolution.fi)

The bug took a few days to fix and required contacting both Pagefly and Shopify, the former via live chat and the latter via email. I believe, this particular experience highlighted one of the drawbacks of using a third party plugin like Pagefly within Shopify (see subsection 3.4), as I essentially became a kind of middle man. The two customer support channels were not able to speak to each other, and so it fell to me to communicate between the two. The most difficult aspect was resolving whether Pagefly or Shopify was the

cause of the problem and initially the process proved extremely slow. The positive side of this experience, was that Pagefly's customer support was extremely proactive and eventually resolved the issue. I found that in extreme cases such as this, with the user's permission Pagefly's developers are able to take control of the user's online store. The developer can then make the needed changes inside the editor themselves. This is convenient when instructions prove too complicated for the user to carry out on their own or a user is unable to describe the problem clearly enough.

One other example of a significant issue that occurred involved the product page as explained in subsection 5.2. In this case, despite the fact that Pagefly's developers tried their best, the cause of the issue turned out to be out of their hands and would have taken too long to resolve completely. In the end, in the interest of keeping to the timetable set for the project, I came up with a compromise that included spreading the products over two pages.

Despite the lack of a resolution to the previously mentioned issue, on the whole my experience with the Pagefly customer support staff or developers was a positive one. This is because in my interactions with them, I found them to be very professional, polite and proactive when possible. The multitude of customer support channels available to users is very convenient and helps to counterbalance the fact that on occasion, Pagefly can prove challenging as a tool in web design. I was also pleasantly surprised to find that the majority of the FAQs listed Pagefly's Help Center were very relevant, concise and clearly laid out. Therefore, based on my own experience and from the perspective of customer support, Pagefly is a very capable tool.

7.3

Existing documentation

As stated before (see section 7), for the purpose of this thesis existing documentation refers to documentation produced by parties separate from the website builder. Examples can include youtube videos, blog posts and articles about specific website builders and can also be viewed as secondary sources of information. Similar to the reasons mentioned in subsection 7.1 for why it is beneficial to have a multitude of customer support channels, it is also important to be aware of existing documentation. As previously discussed, good customer support channels can help offset poor usability in a website builder (see subsection 7.1) and a good source of existing documentation could arguably do the same. As an example, a favoured website builder may have recognisably poor customer support channels. However, if there is a large community around it and a significant amount of documentation on relevant issues and their resolutions exists, the user may be able to substitute customer support for existing documentation.

Based on my own experience, one method to roughly assess the amount of existing documentation available, is to do a quick google search. If a large amount of documentation exists, then there is a also good chance that it can be used to solve common problems resulting from the website builder. Worth mentioning is also the fact that some projects may contain sensitive information. In such cases, existing documen-

tation may be more favourable than using a support channel, as information will not have to be disclosed. Similarly, in a previously described situation (see subsections 5.2 and 7.1) where a resolution was taking too long to find, existing documentation may help to find alternative solution and save time.

Referring to existing documentation may also save time due to the way information can be presented. For example, a live chat (see subsection 7.1) has the ability to provide fast feedback. However, a user may find it difficult to adequately describe a problem in the first place or even follow the steps to resolve it. Using existing documentation such as a Youtube video that shows how to solve a particular problem may be easier to follow, and consequently be a quicker solution.

When referring to existing documentation, as a user it is important to always be critical of sources. Since existing documentation is produced by a third party, a drawback is that some content can be subjective, harmful or untrue and it is important to remember this before applying any advice. Independent publishers are not held to the same standards as publishers of official content for website builders and so care should be taken when selecting sources. An example I came across during my project was comment threads and blog posts. In some cases, content can be sponsored by a party that stands to gain from boosting for example their own product, or tarnishing the reputation of a rival. Advice posted in comments can also be motivated by similar factors, and one way of to examine such sources can be as simple as checking subsequent comments. Usually, if advice for a solution to a problem works, other users will comment afterwards explaining that it solved their problem or the opposite.

Comments by other users are only one way to ascertain the legitimacy or trustworthiness of existing documentation. However, it is not a determining factor that can always be relied upon. I believe it is important to be cautious when relying on a secondary source of information and precautions should be taken in case it proves to be harmful. One way to guard against faulty information is to make sure that the chosen website builder has some sort of 'undo' function. This can either be an actual 'undo' button that retracts any changes made, or not saving any changes, causing the website builder to return to an earlier version of the page.

8 Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, a stated aim was to consider website builders as a tool for website design, by focusing on the process of rebuilding a custom website layout in a website builder. The subject matter was examined exclusively from the perspective of a graphic designer with an emphasis on minimal coding skills. Additionally, the suitability of a website builder was evaluated using specific criteria that consisted of:

- Researching the user promise
- Becoming familiar with the underlying logic of a website builder's editor
- Specifying the flexibility for shaping the web content
- Choosing a good starting point with regard to themes
- Inspecting responsive web design capabilities
- Contemplating user testing capabilities
- Inspecting customer support channels and existing documentation

In my opinion, spreading out the different factors into separate sections allowed this thesis to fulfill the aim of evaluating website builders using specific criteria. In each section, analysis was informed with empirical evidence resulting from my own experience, as well as information from existing documentation, which allowed the information to stay applicable to website builders on a broader level.

The order of the aforementioned criteria to evaluate a website builder naturally arose from the chronology of my project. I believe them to be applicable in any order, though the order they are placed in now is perhaps the most efficient and logical. All the factors contemplated in this thesis are illustrated in figure 21, and also fulfill the main goal set out at the beginning of this thesis: To produce a set of key points, that guide through the process of evaluating and choosing a suitable website builder for projects of a similar nature.

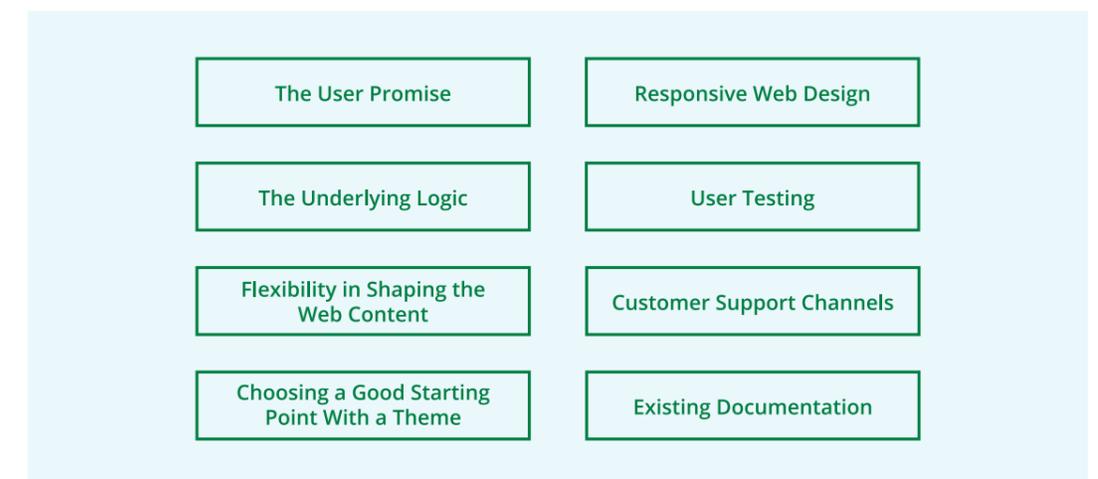


Figure 21. Shows a visualisation of the criteria forming the key points to be used to evaluate a website builder's suitability from a graphic designer's perspective in projects similar to the one framed in this thesis. (Image: Winnie Ndukwe)

One way to improve upon the set of key points illustrated in figure 21, could be to specify the role and responsibilities of the graphic designer in the context of this thesis more clearly. As I did not do this, it presents a flaw in the thesis. Depending upon the responsibilities of the graphic designer, they could be used to concentrate on differing and arguably more valid criteria, with which to evaluate a website builder. Based on my own experience detailed in the thesis, I only answered for replicating the web layout in Shopify using the Pagefly app. However, if my duties had expanded to considering marketing through other channels, then another consideration for choosing a website builder could have been checking its integration possibilities with other platforms and social media apps.

Another area of consideration that was not explored in this thesis, is the further development of the project after the design process has ended. This thesis only considers the task up until the website is launched and the project is complete. However in reality, oftentimes the client has to be able to continue to update the website on their own after the designer's responsibilities have ended. In this instance, it would be beneficial to write about considering the repercussions of making 'quick fixes' and such, as the client would eventually have to learn to manage the website builder themselves. If the client is not as technically adept as the designer, then this might present problems in the future. Consequently, it's not out of the question to consider producing additional material for a client. The material can be used to explain how to manage and update their website using the website builder after the designer's responsibilities have ended to ensure its continued upkeep.

An additional goal set out in this thesis was to analyse Shopify's suitability as a website design tool from the perspective of a graphic designer. Based on the criteria used to evaluate it through the course of this thesis, I believe Shopify itself cannot be classed as a suitable website design tool in the context of my project. As a tool it did not prove to be versatile enough to meet the needs of my custom website layout, and fell short in almost all the viewpoints considered. On the other hand, Pagefly, which I was able to integrate with Shopify, proved to be an adequate tool. Despite the steep learning curve, using Pagefly paid off thanks in large part to the content flexibility I had as a result of the client. Overall, Pagefly performed well when evaluated using the different factors examined in this thesis, despite the fact that it could not be regarded as the perfect tool from one perspective.

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