

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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THE CODES OF GENDER *Identity and Performance in Pop Culture*

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

Boys Don't Cry

- I'm so sorry, Mom. Look, I can explain. We can work this out.
- Fucking pervert. Are you a girl or are you not? Are you a girl or are you not!?

The O'Reilly Factor

- Now the question is: Is she a man or a woman?
- Well, she says she's a woman.
- She says she's a woman. And then they raised a challenge.
- They still don't know whether she's a man or a woman?
- They have to have weeks of testing.

Transamerica

- Are you a boy or a girl?

It's Pat: The Movie

- There's a word for what you are. Spike, what is the word I'm looking for?
- Androgynous.
- That's right. Androgynous. That's what everyone says about me. Good old androgynous Pat.
- So what the hell are you? A man or a woman?

SUT JHALLY: Like all good comedy, the character of Pat from Saturday Night Live, played by actress Julie Sweeney, tells us something very revealing – that our ability to recognize someone as either male or female is absolutely fundamental to our ability to interact with them, and that there is nothing natural about that recognition. It's dependent upon certain signals being communicated that allow us to position people in categories – male/female – that make sense to us. If we can't properly understand or properly read those signals, or if they're not being sent out in ways we can understand, then it is almost impossible to proceed to any further social interaction. And so those people who present themselves as androgynous – ie. as not fitting cleanly into the typical masculine and feminine gender roles of their society – pose a challenge to a cultural system that is dependent upon those categories being clear. In fact, if this clarity is not achieved, then everything seems to fall

apart.

The L Word

- What the hell are you doing in here, boy? Can't you read this is the ladies' room? Get the fuck out!
- I'm a girl.
- You see that freak there? It was just in the girls' bathroom.
- Must be a faggot!
- Faggot!
- Faggot!!!
- Hey, faggot!
- What did you say?
- Just let it go, Jenny.
- Johnny, you're crazy.
- I called you a faggot.
- Look, man. We don't want any trouble. Okay?
- No. I don't want any trouble either. Just want to get to talking, girl. A little talk.
- Look. We're out of here. All right?
- Dude, leave us alone.
- Fuck you, faggot.
- Get out!
- Shit.

SUT JHALLY: So, if we want to fit in and function "normally," we have to learn both how to send out the right signals and how to read the signals that are being sent out by others.

I've been teaching and studying issues of media and gender for more than 25 years, and one of the richest tools I have come across for understanding the way our visual culture links up with larger issues of gender and power comes from the work of the late sociologist Erving Goffman. A book written by Goffman in 1978 was about precisely how the communication of gender takes place. Entitled *Gender Advertisements*, the book is less about the effects of advertising on us and much more about what advertising tells us about ourselves. Goffman was a social anthropologist who taught at the University of Pennsylvania. His most famous book is *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1969, which uses the metaphor of the stage actor to demonstrate how we are always playing what we think is an appropriate role for the situations we encounter in our daily activities. But *Gender Advertisements*, while sometimes overlooked, provides an equally fascinating analysis that still resonates 30 years later.

SEX + GENDER

Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

- Show it to the mother. That's enough. Sedate her. Number the child.
- Is it a boy or a girl?
- Now, I think it's a little early to start imposing roles on it, don't you?

SUT JHALLY: Goffman argues that there is nothing natural about gender identity. That is, we don't just pop out the womb with our gender identities imprinted in our genes; that it is part of a process whereby we learn to take on certain attributes that we think are appropriate to our understanding of ourselves in gendered terms. Therefore, we have to analyze how the society constructs the categories within which we fit. And to understand how that takes place, we have to first make a distinction between the terms "sex" and "gender."

Sex refers to our different biological characteristics as we come out of the womb. Gender refers to the way those differences are made sense of within culture – in most cultures, by assigning it to one of two categories: male or female. And then each of those categories is further defined with a set of characteristics – that seem to be mutually exclusive – that are labeled as masculine and feminine.

This does not mean that everything is about culture. The point is that while we are born with a set of different individual physical and biological characteristics, these traits are then made sense of through the categories of culture. In this way, there is nothing natural or biological about gender or our gender identities. We learn to inhabit the gender category that we have been assigned from outside, from the culture.

There are some interesting cases where individuals born as one sex have been assigned to the "wrong" gender category. That is, someone born with male physical characteristics but assigned to the female gender, and they then grow up as that gender, despite the physical sexual origin.

And there are some cultures that actually recognize a "third" sex, or a "middle" sex, with its own set of gender characteristics. For example, in the culture of the Indian subcontinent, there is a whole class of people, who are called "hijrah," who are neither male nor female but a third intersex category. They have a recognized and legitimate role to play in the society, and it is estimated that they number close to a million people. If nothing else, these examples show that our ideas and attitudes about gender are shaped by the culture and society we grow up in.

But while potentially, and in actual real life, there could be many different categories of genders, western culture mostly operates with the two sex/two gender distinction. It is starting to break down a little as transsexual and transgender people have challenged this binary distinction and insisted upon having a legitimate place in the culture – not on the margins but at the center of the society. And their example shows us that the two sex/two

gender distinction is a socially created one – not natural. However, a clear and unambiguous two sex/two gender distinction is obviously the norm, and a couple of consequences have resulted from this.

First, the neatness of this distinction has functioned to downplay similarities between the sexes – that is, the things that men and women have in common as human beings in favor of highlighting their differences. And second, this distinction downplays the variability within each sex. It papers over the differences between men, between different ways of being a man, as well as the differences between women, and different ways of being a woman, so that it is presented that there is only one dominant and normal way in which to be feminine and only one dominant and normal way to be masculine.

And what Goffman is interested in is how the two sex/two gender categories – these codes of normality – are created, and, more importantly, maintained and held in place. He makes us see that because these distinctions are not natural but created, we all have to learn how to send the signals to others as to how we want to be understood in socially recognizable gendered terms. That is what Goffman means by what he calls “gender display,” the process whereby we perform the roles expected of us by the social conventions that surround us. In this perspective, our gender is not assigned by birth or by nature but is the result of an active process whereby we are performing it by learning a script or internalizing a set of shorthand codes.

So we can understand the term “code” in a couple of ways. First of all, it refers to a kind of shorthand language, that everyone shares and understands, through which we can communicate some larger ideas. And secondly, it refers to a set of rules or ways to be in the world – like a code of behavior.

The Birdcage

- Too swishy?
- Let me give you an image. It’s cliché, but it’s an image. John Wayne. Nice touch.
- Howdy, man. No good?
- Actually, it’s perfect. I just never realized John Wayne walked like that.

SUT JHALLY: So the human body – for example, the way we walk – becomes the medium through which we communicate. And because these codes are so deep – so deep they almost appear natural – it is difficult to even see them, or consciously recognize them in operation, until they are pointed out.

That is one of the main things that Goffman wants to accomplish – to make visible what seems to be invisible, or at least below our level of conscious perception. And while he’s really a student of interpersonal behavior – that is, the way people talk and interact face-to-face – he thinks the best place to clearly see the codes is somewhere else: in the culture; in one of its most concentrated, exaggerated, and distilled forms: advertising – and, by extension, other popular media.

He actually calls advertising “commercial realism” – that is, it is trying to present the world in ways that could be real. And because advertising is usually operating in a context where audiences are quite resistant to being exposed to commercial intrusions, as well as being bombarded with messages from other advertisers, they need to communicate in a way that is quick and which is deep at the same time. And using the codes of “gender display” fulfills both those requirements. They reference a deep aspect of individual identity and can be communicated quickly – at a glance – because they’re so familiar. So Goffman focuses on advertisements not so much because of their impact or effect on us – not because of how they make us act or what they make us buy – but because of what their seeming normality tells us about ourselves.

In fact, Goffman says that perhaps the most negative thing that we can say about these gender displays in ads is that they do not look strange to us – that is, as depictions of reality, they do not look peculiar or weird. They actually look kind of normal. It is only when we start to look at them carefully that we begin to see how strange and weird they actually are – and begin the process of thinking independently, for ourselves, about what the culture holds up as normal.

In this way, according to Goffman, to see one of the deepest aspects of our identities, we have to go outside ourselves to the messages that surround us. We have to become, in a way, visual anthropologists, looking at a world that seems very familiar and natural – advertising – in a way that provides some analytical distance from it. If we can do that – deconstruct the smallest details of the commercial environment that envelops us with the same meticulous care and attention to detail that their makers put into creating them – then we may be able to see ourselves in a new light.

THE FEMININE TOUCH

Seinfeld

- Jillian! Hi.
- It's very nice to meet you.
- It's nice to meet you.
- She had man hands.

SUT JHALLY: Goffman starts his analysis of gender display with something seemingly simple and trivial – the way that hands are represented in advertising as male or female. He argues that female hands have a different relationship to reality than male ones. Female hands are shown not as assertive or controlling of their environment but as letting the environment control them. So, for example, when women are shown holding something, it often looks as though it is just resting there – not being held in a strong manner. Female hands are shown just tracing the outlines of an object, or cradling it – rather than carrying it and being in control of it – or they are presented as just using the ends of the fingers to hold objects, delicately and lightly, rather than using the whole hand.

When this feminine touch is applied to other people – men – it is also light, soft, and caressing. Goffman says, like the interaction between two electrically charged bodies.

In contrast, the masculine touch is powerful and assertive, presenting a different relationship to the world. Instead of tentative, the male touch is utilitarian, controlling, and bold. Male hands are shown as manipulating their environment, molding it to their desires. And when applied to others, the touch is commanding and firm.

Sometimes you can see the difference in one image, where masculinity is about power and strength, and femininity is superficial and weak.

Goffman further argues that the soft feminine touch can be extended into what he calls self-touching, which conveys a sense of the body as being a delicate and precious thing. In fact, women are constantly shown touching themselves – and there really is no part of the body that is off-limits. Whether it is the shoulder that is being utilized, or the face being touched in this soft and caressing manner, or the neck – symbolically connected with vulnerability and openness – there seems to be no end to how women will touch themselves in the world of commercial realism.

Women are also shown in a kind of breathless posture – though the world around them is too much for them to cope with – or holding themselves protectively, as if the body is a delicate thing that needs support. These are undoubtedly conventionalized positions of passivity and acquiescence to whatever else may exist in the immediate social situation.

One of the interesting aspects of looking at these images is how rare it is, in comparison, to find men touching themselves in these ways. In fact, Goffman suggests, as a thought

experiment, that we imagine men instead of women in these postures, and then monitor our reaction. If we are startled by the result, then it shows that an expectation has been breached and reveals the degree to which these images that suggest fragility, softness, and powerlessness have become almost exclusively defined as feminine – in direct opposition to what is considered authentically masculine. In this way, even though all of these are merely poses, even though there is nothing inherently natural or biological behind any of it, we are conditioned to believe that men utilizing these postures are not “real” men.

THE RITUALIZATION OF SUBORDINATION

SUT JHALLY: With this idea that the body is a text, a means of communication, that body postures carry deeply significant meanings, we can get to the heart of Goffman's analysis – what he calls the “ritualization of subordination” and of how female bodies, in particular, are used to demonstrate the broader social idea that what the culture defines as feminine has a subordinate relationship to what the culture defines as masculine.

The starting point is his observation that women, with far greater frequency than men, are very often shown lying down in a recumbent position. Goffman makes two important points about the significance of this pose. First, he says that in this position, it is difficult to defend yourself, and that therefore you are dependent upon what he calls “the benign-ness of the surround.” That is, the reclining position that women are placed in gives them no defense against possible threats. It is a submissive and powerless position, utterly dependent on the world being risk and danger free, and Goffman's point is relatively simple – this is a posture that communicates submission and powerlessness, and women are overwhelmingly featured utilizing it.

In fact, Goffman's suggestion that we imagine a man in these body postures, and monitor our reaction, is particularly effective here.

The second point that Goffman makes about these displays of female powerlessness is that they have become sexualized. He says they are also a conventionalized expression of sexual availability. In this way, commercial realism shares a great deal with the world of pornography in its expression of female sexuality, in that it is overwhelmingly coded as submissive, powerless, and dependent. And when feminine identity in the culture is predominantly equated with this version of sexuality, then femininity itself, as a whole, is defined as submissive, powerless, and dependent.

Viewed through this lens, the difference between femininity and masculinity is stark – a difference illustrated very clearly when men are pictured in the scene. The men are active, alert, ready to respond to or to initiate action. The women are defenseless and in no position to initiate any action or to defend themselves. They are powerless, whether it is draped over an operating table, or on their knees tugging at a dress in front of a muscled male, or sitting on the floor at his feet looking up with a desire to serve.

Again, Goffman's point is that while occasionally we can see the reverse, what matters is that it is rare.

The one place you can more readily find men in these postures is in some photography of gay men. So, for example, you can see images here of the ritualization of subordination, where men are lying down in much the same manner as women in commercial photography. What that should tell us is that there is nothing natural, in gender terms, about the action or the pose – that its link with femininity in the mainstream culture and commercial imagery is not

inevitable or biological but profoundly cultural. In fact, what seems to connect these stereotypical feminine poses with these stereotypical gay male poses is the fact that they share the same presumed audience: men. In each case, the subjects of these photos, whether male or female, are there to be looked at by men, and so they embody cultural assumptions about male desire, about what men want. So rather than nature, we could say that one of the things that is being expressed is something that lies outside the frame of these images – the very cultural notion of the male perspective, of what the power of the one looking does to the one being looked at. In this way, it is not just femininity or masculinity that is being expressed but instead a relationship of subordination between watcher and watched.

Advertising's ritualistic display of the female body to communicate powerlessness is also accomplished when women stand with what Goffman labels "the bashful knee-bend." He calls these "canting" postures – meaning the body is tilted – positions that take the body away from being upright and perpendicular and places people off-center. In fact, as with the other submissive positions, "the bashful knee-bend" projects a sense of the woman as ungrounded, less than fully prepared to react quickly and firmly to her surroundings. As Goffman writes: "Once again, one finds a posture that seems to presuppose the goodwill of anyone in the surround who could offer harm."

This posture is ubiquitous across our media landscape, so much so that it seems to define a core aspect of femininity. And once again, the posture has also been sexualized in the process, reinforcing yet again the notion that female sexuality is equated with submission and deference.

Variations of this canting posture include the crossed leg position, which has the same effect of putting women into a defenseless posture, again presupposing that there is no danger in the surroundings.

Similarly, women are posed holding their feet, or the heel of a shoe, once more leaving them off-balance, teetering, ungrounded, and precarious – as they stand on one leg, vulnerable and defenseless.

And then there is the head cant, the head repeatedly leaning to one side, as women – rather than holding their heads up high, upright, and firm – are posed again and again with their heads in tilted and awkward positions, bent and angled – once again, off-balance and de-centered.

An extension of this has the torso of the body itself being twisted and bent away from the vertical.

Goffman argues that all of these head and body canting configurations leave women in a position where they seem utterly defenseless and, in this way, can be read as both an expression and acceptance of subordination, of ingratiation, submissiveness, and appeasement.

The coy over-the-shoulder look, where the head is twisted to the side or sometimes behind, is also an extension of this body and head canting posture. At the same time, the pose is sexually suggestive, positioning women as the willing recipients of the look coming from someone else.

While the most unnatural, and sometimes even grotesquely contorted, poses struck by female models may make us wonder what is going on in the minds of the creative directors and photographers who position them in these ways, it is perhaps more revealing that, for the most part, we go about our business and don't even notice these images as being especially strange. It is only when we see them adopted by unusual people – men – that we notice how normal looking are the conventions that link being a woman with powerlessness and submission.

And in perhaps its most extreme expression, the head is lifted upwards, exposing the neck in a vulnerable manner, calling to mind the positions that animals, like dogs, take up when signaling their submission to other aggressive creatures. Outside of the animal kingdom, in the actual human world women inhabit, it clearly signifies that the woman has surrendered her agency within the social world – and accepted her helplessness.

And if there is any doubt that such images carry meaning, consider that the reverse is the very picture of masculine power – the face down and the eyes trained upward from below, suggesting an animal stalking its prey. Once again, the key here is that none of this is biologically determined or predestined. This is simply a story that the culture tells us about how femininity and, by extension, masculinity are to be performed.

LICENSED WITHDRAWAL

SUT JHALLY: In addition to portraying women as having a distinctive physical relationship to the world around them, the gender codes of our society also posit a distinct psychological relation to that world. Women are often presented as not paying attention to what is happening around them, drifting from the scene in a dreamy fashion, off in a world of their own. As Goffman says, “women, more than men, it seems, are pictured engaged in involvements that remove them psychologically from the social situation at large, leaving them un-oriented in it and to it and presumably, therefore, dependent on the protection and goodwill of others who might come to be present.” So when women are presented in this spaced-out mode, they are not attentive to the world around them, not conscious of what is happening, oblivious to any threats that might be posed and apparently indifferent to any actions that may need to be taken. In this way, just as physical femininity is presented in ways that highlight subordination, so too psychologically it is defined in non-powerful or non-assertive ways – with women shown as essentially having checked out of the surrounding social scene, with their head down, eyes averted to whatever is happening around them.

So that over and over again, we have women presented as essentially dazed, zonked out zombies. Or lying totally passive, naked on a bed. Or almost passed out. Or wandering around a field in a man’s white shirt, not quite aware of what is going on.

And while they are barely conscious when awake, women are also frequently shown literally asleep – or perhaps even knocked out or dead.

Awake, they are emotionally vulnerable – frequently nervous, biting their lip. Or holding themselves in a way that suggests fragility and emotional weakness or helplessness.

And when they are not withdrawn, they seem to be over-engaged – with the same result: a loss of emotional control and restraint. Most of the time, this is shown as uncontrolled laughter – not just a smile but a much more extreme response. While men have to hold their emotions, women express them to the breaking point as a matter of course. In fact, perhaps the most interesting thing this particular feminine code signifies has to do with masculinity.

Men are repeatedly presented in precisely the opposite way to this idea of withdrawal and losing control – as active, in control, aware of the world around them, in charge of their surroundings.

And when men and women are shown in the same image, this different relationship to the world becomes even more explicit. As Goffman puts it, “women are shown mentally drifting from the physical scene around them, while in close physical touch with a male, as though his aliveness to the surround and his readiness to cope with anything that might present itself were enough for the both of them. At the same time, the male may well wear a wary, monitoring look.” So while women drift, men anchor and protect.

While these images may appear strange here, as we isolate and analyze them, it is their seeming normality in our everyday lives that most interested Goffman. For it is in their normality that we begin to understand how imaginary and fantastic, and sometimes destructive, images on a page can come to affect and shape our experience of the actual world.

In one particularly striking example, some very interesting research a few years ago found that men who had been convicted of some sort of physical assault on another person made choices about who a good victim of their violence would be. That is, they didn't attack just anyone but picked victims who gave non-verbal cues – by their body postures – that they would be an easy target and not fight back. Tellingly, the way femininity is defined through these gender displays is precisely what the perpetrators said they were looking for in victims. In a perverse way, the mainstream media landscape, which seems so normal, so unworthy of our serious critical attention, actually reproduces and dangerously glamorizes images of women as weak and vulnerable in stereotypically victim-ready poses.

It seems worth noting in this context that women's self-defense classes teach almost exactly the opposite of what the culture tells us about femininity – that to be in charge of your own body and its safety, to be alert and autonomous, to not present yourself as weak and vulnerable, is the key to securing your safety. What does it mean when the visual culture that surrounds us repeatedly idealizes the polar opposite of this kind of feminine power and strength?

INFANTILIZATION

SUT JHALLY: Some of Goffman's most intriguing insights about gender come from his analysis of the relationship between girls and women in the culture. He argues that while boys have to prove themselves in some rite of passage to signify that they have left childhood behind, women – even adult women – never leave girlhood behind. In a wonderful turn of phrase, Goffman says that “boys have to push their way into manhood, and problematic effort is involved while girls merely have to unfold.” In advertising, this is reflected in a couple of ways. First, little girls and grown women are presented as essentially the same, wearing the same clothes, having the same hair, doing the same things. In the world of commercial realism, women never seem to leave girlhood behind.

In fact, it seems that all they want to do is get back to the world of childhood.

Fruit of Loom Ad

- When you were two, there was no greater joy than the feeling of being naked. Fruit of the Loom makes panties, and now bras – yes, bras – all in one hundred percent comfortable skin-soft fabrics. Twenty years later, you can get that feeling all over again. Fruit of the Loom.

SUT JHALLY: The second way in which women are linked with childhood is by being presented in infantilized ways. For example, just as children put their fingers in their mouths when nervous, uncertain, or shy, so women are shown taking on similar poses – their expression anxious and uneasy, drawing a ritualistic link to childhood. And there are many variations on this theme.

It can be combined with one of the ritualized positions of subordination – like lying down, or even in a fetal curled up pose. It crops up in the presence of a man, or even on your wedding day. There can also be an explicitly sexualized dimension to this finger to mouth pose.

When combined with a coy turn to the viewer, the mixing of adult sexuality with childhood is straightforward and clear. These stereotypical displays of infantilism are mixed with hints of sex so frequently that the association has come to seem unremarkable, natural, and normal.

Again, we can see how inextricably linked this pose is with our understanding of femininity, when we see it utilized by men and are jarred by our reaction. And that is Goffman's point. Only when the code gets broken does it become visible in other contexts.

Further, like children who often peek from behind things to pretend that they can't be seen, women are also shown hiding themselves in an endless variety of ways – behind their hands and arms, behind clothes like gloves and hats, behind objects like shopping bags, newspapers, or ornate clocks – or peering from behind walls, curtains, or even a pool table.

Women are also shown snuggling into men, looking for comfort and protection. An especially prominent version of this convention finds women leaning into men from behind, holding

them in a way that suggests reliance and dependence. The point is not that there is anything inherently wrong with these poses, as they also signify love and connection and intimacy. The point is that because the opposite – men snuggling into women – is hardly every shown, then there must be more being expressed here than simply love and connection – namely, a form of intimacy that seems to fix dependence and need on the side of women alone.

When the positions are reversed so men are behind, the pose is totally different – the man is enveloping, containing, and controlling the women with his power.

And again, in poses similarly impossible to imagine a man in, women are shown in the silliest and most childish positions that one can imagine – like kids who are hamming it up for the camera.

Along these lines, but even more directly, women are also often explicitly presented in an infantilized way, literally shown as young girls. Sometimes in how they are dressed. And at times, it's almost as if they are not real people – but dolls – so you can do whatever you want to them.

Nowhere is this childlike masquerade more prominent than in fashion shows. No matter how ridiculous women look, it doesn't matter, and this must be because they are not fully grown or developed human persons. They are children. And again, if we're tempted to say this is all just an innocent and playful aesthetic spectacle, we might ask why men are also not presented in this way – and why, when they are, it is so often played for comedy.

The link between womanhood and childhood is further reinforced when women are repeatedly shown hugging each other like giggling schoolgirls. And it is reinforced some more when they hold themselves in a vulnerable and uncertain way, or tug at their dress in a girlish way, or hide under their skirts.

An especially clear illustration of how our cultural codes of gender tend to link womanhood with girlhood can be seen in the adaptation of the famous Coppertone ads that historically featured a little girl having her underwear pulled down by a dog. In the modern version, on the cover of *Esquire*, the adult Carmen Electra now takes the place of the little girl, in exactly the same pose, except that now it has also been sexualized.

This movement to presenting grown adult women as little girls reached one of its most extreme forms in this *Harper's Bazaar* layout, featuring the 19-year old model Gemma Ward, made to appear as though she is 10 or 11. Amazingly, the title of the spread was "And God Created Woman." Whereas in the 1950s, Bridget Bardot was the symbol for this, in the contemporary period, it is now the image of a little girl that stands for womanhood.

One of the obvious consequences of presenting adult woman in this way is not only that grown women become equated with childhood but that young girls have increasingly become equated with mature womanhood – presented as full-blown sexualized subjects, utilizing the familiar ritualized codes of adult femininity. I am not sure that we, as a society, have realized the possible consequences – not least for the developing identities of young girls – of populating our cultural spaces with images like these.

THE CODES OF MASCULINITY

Armani Ad

- Do you have the code? The ultimate code of seduction. The Armani code.

SUT JHALLY: While Goffman's analysis focuses a great deal on the gender displays associated with femininity, it would be a mistake to say that he has nothing of significance to say about masculinity – and that is because masculinity, the ideal of what it means to be a man, is always defined in relation to what it means to be a girl or a woman. It is virtually impossible to speak of one without reference to the other; they are part of one complex. Masculinity, in particular, is defined through what it is not – through its opposite – meaning what the culture defines as feminine. So masculinity is not about powerlessness. It is about power. It's not about defenselessness but about always being prepared. It's not about being child-like but always being grown up and an adult. It's not about showing weakness but always maintaining emotional control.

Standing upright with hands in pockets is a common pose that communicates this kind of easy confidence and strength. It suggests comfort as well as control of the world that surrounds them.

A stronger and more aggressive variation of this posture features the arms folded, looking out at the viewer. It projects confidence, and even intimidation, if not outright menace and threat.

Rarely, if ever, are men shown in feminine canting postures that depict them as off-balance or ungrounded. Rarely, if ever, are they forced into the kinds of absurd contortions that define the feminine code. Instead, they are coded masculine: upright and prepared for whatever might come their way – independent, within themselves, in control of the situation – their gaze directed outward, rather than inviting us to gaze at them. The position of the body communicates self-assurance, poise, and self-possession.

And when they are not projecting power and control, men display a relaxed calm – an almost unperturbed presence. They are portrayed in a laid back, casual, and yet grounded manner that seems utterly foreign to the women of advertising.

And, of course, they are also active in the world – alive in their surroundings, taking charge in a positive, self-assured, and assertive manner.

Interestingly, the only time we see this masculine code of control breached in the culture is in exceptional circumstance, such the reaction of brokers to the extreme stress of the financial meltdown. The poses and codes are classically feminine, and looked at out of context, these images look strange because we do not think of normal masculinity in this way.

Since Goffman wrote his analysis 30 years ago, a new style of images that show men in non-traditional postures, and while these are certainly still the exception to the rule, there is no

doubt that their emergence represents a significant change in the culture.

One of the main reasons for this shift, for this apparent opening up of the cultural codes of masculinity, is that advertisers have recognized that there is a very large market in men's fashion and clothing and so have targeted men explicitly, and with new force in their campaigns, positioning them now as the objects of the gaze – the ones being looked at – not simply the subjects – ie. the ones looking. In this way, in addition to women's bodies, men's bodies too now are under scrutiny from other men. As such, these images look a great deal like the world of gay male fashion, which for a much longer time has been focusing on men's bodies from a perspective of desire – rather than identification.

The images associated with the clothing retailer Abercrombie and Fitch provide a good example of the issues at stake here and how the codes of gender not only communicate ideas about gender but also police what is considered normal or acceptable. On the one hand, A & F models – at least their styles and poses – seem to make reference to, or be drawn explicitly from, the world of gay fashion. And given the larger codes of traditional masculinity that still dominate, this poses a clear risk. For mainstream advertisers trying to sell to a heterosexual consumer base, these kinds of images can be problematic because they have to convince straight young men, in a largely homophobic culture, that buying a pair of jeans and paying attention to fashion does not imply that they are gay.

So how do you deal with this conundrum? Well, there are a couple of options. First, you introduce women into the pictures so that this can be transformed from a potentially homoerotic tableau to a more conventional heterosexual one. Actually, Calvin Klein was perhaps the first advertiser to use this tactic with ads in the 1980s, where women were strategically placed in situations to ease the homoerotic undercurrents. The same stratagem is used right up until the present – with the same end – to reassure straight male viewers that the relationships on view are actually quite traditional, even though they may look very unconventional. The second strategy used to play down the potential of homoerotic aspect of these images is to make sure that the male bodies that you put on display are not weak and powerless but powerful. And you do this by focusing on muscles, especially abs – the six-pack. This is not just a body to be looked at; this is the body of an athlete, of someone who does things. Unlike the bodies of objectified females, these are not bodies that you mess with.

In these ways, the gender displays connected with masculinity can be broadened in potentially liberating ways that break with restrictive masculine codes, while at the same time remaining within – and even policing – the contours and boundaries of something much more traditional and acceptable.

TRAPPED IN THE CODE

SUT JHALLY: Since Goffman developed his analysis, an apparently code-breaking new representation of femininity has also emerged. In contrast to the traditional code of submissiveness, powerlessness, and childishness, we have seen the rise of prominent representations of feminine power, captured in the emergence of the female action hero – a seemingly new ideal of women as active, aggressive, and in control. Far from being flailing off-balance airheads and victims, these are tough girls who kick butt.

Whether it is Jennifer Garner as Elektra, or Uma Thurman in Kill Bill single-handedly taking on a score of men, or Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft in Tomb Raider dispensing her own brand of justice, these women seem to be different, never backing down, sometimes even vicious.

But for all these displays of stereotypical masculine power, and what appears to be a new brand of female autonomy and strength, what may be most notable here is how even this new brand of super-hero sized power isn't enough to break the old feminine codes. The most striking example of this phenomenon appears in the recent Charlie's Angels series of movies where you have three women who appear confident, empowered, in charge, controlling the action – really the authors of their own fate. But keep watching, and you see that the traditional gender code is never far from the surface.

There's a very interesting sequence in the first film in the series where the character played by Lucy Liu is talking to a group of supposedly nerdy programmers trying to get them to do something for her. She is acting very forcefully, using a whip aggressively, and talking in an empowered manner. So, on the one hand, she is breaking or expanding the standard gender code. But, at the same time, when she wants the men to do something for her, she transforms instantly into the opposite – seductive and submissive.

Charlie's Angels

- Tell me. Or better yet, can anyone show me?

SUT JHALLY: All the standard codes are there – the legs twisted, the body canted, the head tilted, hair being twirled. Now there is no doubt that the filmmakers are using the codes of gender in an ironic and playful way here. But there are many other incidents in the films that use the standard codes of female sexuality – without irony – to prove that the Angels really still are just girls, despite being powerful and empowered. Whether it is Lucy Liu giving a very unconventional kind of massage, or Cameron Diaz practicing her dance moves in front of a mirror, or Drew Barrymore wandering around in a towel, or holding a group of men at bay between her open legs, the female body is used in a way that is at odds with the idea of autonomy and independence.

In fact, this was taken to absurd lengths in a photo-shoot for the men's magazine Maxim, where these three actresses were presented in the most childlike and submissive poses – fingers in their mouths, giggling like young schoolgirls, shown on all fours crawling around,

lying down with head tilted, biting on fingers. That is, they are shown not merely sexualized but by using the ritualized codes of femininity, subordinate, powerless, and frivolous as well.

This is also true for Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider*, which not only features her naked in both films but dressed in clothes that highlight a very conventional sexual identity. It's as if viewers need to be reassured not only that she is female, as she lays waste to male bodies, but that she is womanly – just so things don't get too confusing.

And similarly, when the prostitutes of *Sin City* are mowing their male enemies down in the finale of the film, they do it in teddies, garters, and stockings. This seems to be the required uniform when women are allowed to take control in the world, although, even here, it is pretty clear who is really in charge.

This dynamic is also at work in the arena of female athletics. Now in the last 20 years, as a result of the success of Title 9, there has been a huge explosion in the number of women engaged in athletic competition. This has resulted in women participating in high level and professional sports in a way that simply was not the case in previous years. And yet when you look at how female athletes are represented, and represent themselves, outside of athletics, it is as if there exists a strange parallel universe in which these otherwise powerful women do all they can to disavow their power and strength as athletes by presenting themselves in the most conventional, subordinated, and so-called feminine ways.

All the stereotypical codes come to the fore: lying down in the position that Goffman identifies as part of the ritualization of subordination, symbolizing defenselessness and sexual availability; contorted in awkward ways, as they throw sultry and inviting looks over the shoulder; kneeling in submissive poses, looking over their shoulder in an explicitly sexualized manner.

At other times, the kneeling pose is more straightforward.

All the conventions are on display. They are shown exhibiting the sexually suggestive self-touch, or twirling the hair in a girlish way, or lying down and biting their fingers in both a childish as well as sexually provocative manner.

Similarly, we can see Goffman's canting categories at work, and they are shown contorting their bodies into awkward poses, placing themselves in the most defenseless positions, demonstrating again and again how these otherwise fearless and groundbreaking female athletes must obediently follow the culture's most stereotypical prescribed formulas.

It is almost unthinkable to imagine male athletes being presented in this way.

The question, of course, is why this pattern of representation should be so prominent when it comes to female action figures and female athletes, why – for all of their power and strength – they seem to be trapped in the code. And I think there are two possible, and related, reasons. First, because each of these – action films and sport – are so clearly defined as

masculine spheres, there would seem to be a suspicion that any women who identifies with these spheres so closely is not fully a “real” woman, is more mannish than properly womanly. Therefore, for example, female athletes have to make sure that they are recognized as real women by utilizing the ritualized displays of gender in the most visible manner. And second, connected to this, there is the widely circulating societal idea that the heterosexuality of women who identify with the world of sports may be suspect. So again, female athletes have to prove that they are not lesbians by adopting the ritualized displays that communicate not only femininity but heterosexual femininity.

Once again, it is as if power and control cannot, by definition, exist side by side with femininity – unless, at the same time, women can also demonstrate their obedience to the gender code.

And in the world of sport, there may be no more powerful illustration of this than the example of the Indy Car driver Danica Patrick. Now, motor racing is just about the most rugged and dangerous sport that one can imagine – with cars traveling at speeds of up to 200 miles an hour on a crowded track. You need skill, strength, daring, and courage to win, and Danica Patrick is at the pinnacle of the sport. But, as these characteristics in the culture are almost exclusively connected with masculinity, she has to prove that she is a real woman by adopting the ritualized displays of gender that everyone will recognize. So, in magazine spreads, she is shown lying down in the most defenseless and sexually available positions – twisting her body, looking behind her as she disrobes, crawling on all fours, and canting her body and legs in ways that normalize her in the eyes of the culture. That is, as a weak and powerless girl.

HISTORY, POWER + GENDER DISPLAY

SUT JHALLY: So the obvious question to ask at this point is: where do these images come from? Does advertising create them out of nothing? And I think the answer to that is pretty straightforward. No, these images do not get created out of thin air. Instead, advertisers draw upon what Goffman calls “the same corpus of displays” that already exist within the culture – the function of which is to communicate something quickly. As Goffman says, “advertisers conventionalize our conventions, stylize what is already a stylization, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is hyper-ritualization.” In other words, advertising takes something that already exists in the culture and concentrates it even more. It privileges it in the culture, and by giving it that priority and emphasis – while at the same time ignoring other things – it creates new meanings about gender. That is what Goffman means by hyper-ritualization.

And it is crucial to bear in mind that the options advertisers choose from have already been whittled down and significantly narrowed by what history has bequeathed.

A striking example of what history can tell us about how advertising draws upon codes of gender comes to us by way of the cultural critic John Berger in his seminal work, *Ways of Seeing*. Berger makes the point that there is a strong relationship between how women were presented in European oil painting and much later in contemporary commercial photography. In fact, commercial photography draws its inspiration from those historical representations. So Berger’s point was that to understand the present we have to analyze the past, the context within which the female nude evolved in European oil painting. Berger argues that the defining aspect of this context was hierarchical gender relations, whereby women were positioned to be watched by the powerful men that either commissioned the paintings or were the intended spectators. The women looked at the men who looked at them. For example, in the painting of Nell Gwynne, the mistress of Charles II, her passive nakedness is a submission to the gaze of the owner of the painting. In this way, and out of this context, emerged the idea that men gaze, and women present themselves to be gazed at. This is not natural but social and contingent.

So everything – including gender displays – has a history. These displays come from somewhere, so the choices that people make – including advertisers – come from a range of options that have already been constrained. As a result, our ways of seeing, of looking, even our understanding of ourselves, reflect the past – even as they create a new reality.

A more contemporary example of how history selects, shapes, and conditions the gender displays we see can be found in the advertising – and history – of one of the most visible clothing companies in the world, Guess, which over the last two decades, right through to the present, has been responsible for some of the most vivid and memorable images in the media landscape.

In the mid 80s, Guess advertising achieved remarkable visibility under the leadership of one

of its founders, Paul Marciano. The first thing that was striking about Guess' images was the fact that they were black and white, shot in a grainy style that recalled a simpler American West of the 1950s. And in fact, this harkening to the past was not accidental but deliberate. The journalist Susan Faludi quotes Paul Marciano as saying: "When I came here, I fell in love with the American West. I set the ads in the West because you will not see any change there."

And it is clear from an official Guess publication that what Marciano really liked about the past was that women knew their place and were untouched by the influence of the modern women's movement. "Women are treated with great respect, but it is assumed they know their place, which is supportive, and their function, which is often decorative."

Marciano goes on to say: "I'm attracted to the femininity of the women of that era. The femininity like you find in Vargas drawings. That's what we want to bring back – everything that has been lost." So, for Marciano, representations of gender are not just reflective of what is in the culture but are part of a battle to bring back an idea that he thinks was lost: women as passive, supportive, and decorative – i.e not modern women as independent, powerful, autonomous, and in control.

It is also worth noting that he says that the femininity he wants to bring back can be found in the drawings of the artist Alberto Vargas, who was known for his portraits of nude women from the 1920 to the 1950s. His drawings are already far removed from the reality of women's bodies. If they are reflections of anything, it is the fantasy world that operates in his head. But this is the femininity that Paul Marciano wants to return American women to. And actually, a lot of advertising – not just Guess – looks explicitly like the Vargas drawings.

Sometimes, the link is absolutely direct.

But perhaps the most telling insight of how all these images work comes from Marciano himself. Talking about the female models Guess uses, he says: "We always use models. It's difficult to find real women who fit what we're trying to say. Real women, they aren't as cooperative as real men." So while the cowboys, matadors, and truck drivers in Guess advertising are real, the women come from the fantasy, or some would say deluded, world of his imagination – women as passive, decorative, powerless, submissive, and subordinate.

And in communicating Marciano's regressive vision of femininity, Guess photographers draw upon the full repertoire of the codes of gender.

For example, the ritualization of subordination that shows women lying around in sexually available positions of passivity, or crawling around on their hands and knees or kneeling with head thrown back. Their necks are exposed in a classic pose of passivity, and their bodies contorted as they look over the shoulder.

Using the classic head, body, and leg canting posture, they place themselves off-center, and off-balance, as they grab one foot while standing. Peeking from behind curtains, they hold themselves in a nervous and emotionally protective manner. They signal girlishness and

frivolity by twirling their hair with the ends of the fingers in a distracted mode.

And if that is not enough to distance Guess women from the world of adulthood, they are also posed with their fingers in their mouths in an unambiguous connotation of infantilism. Giving up any sense of being actively involved, they are represented as emotionally withdrawing from the world around them. And in a reverential tribute to the vision of Vargas, they lie around totally defenseless with their feet and legs high in the air.

Ultimately, looking at these images in this analytical way shows us that the strategic use of the posed gender codes is not an abstract, a-historical process but one that is guided by a particular imagination and set of interests. But there is nothing unique or exceptional about these Guess images. They are a concentrated microcosm of the world of advertising – and the culture – as a whole.

And this may be Goffman's most lasting contribution – to help us question what we're told is normal or natural, when it may just as well be destructive or unjust. While these representations may look normal – in that they don't look strange to us – we have to remember that they communicate powerful ideas surrounding femininity and masculinity. And while the gender displays have been around for some time, the fact is that they have been chosen for prominence. And this means that the ideas they communicate come from someone's imagination. Images do not fall from heaven fully formed. They are the creations of human beings. People are behind the cameras giving instructions. There is no such thing as a neutral or natural image. As one ad very tellingly states: "Our fantasies, your realities."

All images are authored by someone, and it is up to us whether we choose to participate passively in the worlds that are created for us by meekly accepting the ideas behind them, and reinforcing them through our silence, or whether we choose to engage the world actively by recognizing what is happening and not reinforce it – question it, point out how strange normality can actually be. It's only when you make something strange and unacceptable that you have any chance of changing it, any chance of intervening into that social process. And that was the main point of Goffman's analysis – to make what was invisible visible, so that we have a choice to make about how we want to participate in the worlds we inhabit.

[END]