MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION STUDY GUIDE

THE CODES OF GENDER
Featuring Sut Jhally

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We've also set it up to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video's sections with a series of key summary points and discussion questions specific to that section. A list of assignments are at the end of the study guide.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Discussion Questions provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for "free-writing" or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Codes of Gender applies the late sociologist Erving Goffman's groundbreaking analysis of advertising to the contemporary commercial landscape, showing how American popular culture reflects, and in turn shapes, normative ideas about masculinity and femininity.

UMass Communication professor Sut Jhally explores Goffman's central claim that gender ideals are the result of a ritualized cultural performance, uncovering a remarkable pattern of masculine and feminine displays and poses. Jhally looks beyond advertising as a medium that simply sells products, and beyond analyses of gender that focus on biological difference or issues of objectification and beauty, to provide a clear-eyed view of the two-tiered terrain of identity and power relations.

Pre-Viewing Questions

1. What is the purpose of advertising?
2. Do you think that advertising has an effect on you? If so, what sort of effect? If not, why not?
3. Would you say that ads are a reflection of real life? Or simply a kind of fantasy?
4. Have any ads ever seemed strange to you? If so, how? Explain your thoughts.
5. Beyond what it does or doesn't do to individuals, what kind of effect, if any, do you think advertising has on culture?
6. Do there tend to be differences in the ways men and women are portrayed in advertisements? If so, what kinds of differences, specifically?
7. What is the difference between sex and gender?
8. What are some stereotypical masculine traits? What are some stereotypical feminine traits? List as many of each as you can.
9. Have you ever heard of the term gender *performance*? If so, what's your understanding of what gender performance is? If not, what do you think the term means?

Chapter 1 | Introduction

- Our ability to recognize someone as either male or female is absolutely fundamental to our ability to interact with them.
- There is nothing natural about this recognition; it is dependent upon signals that allow us to place people in different categories.
- Sociologist Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* (1978) analyzes how the communication of gender takes place in ads, and explores what advertising tells us about ourselves.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Jhally points out that the character Pat from Saturday Night Live tells us something revealing about gender. What do you think he means? What do you think this character reveals about the way we define gender?
2. Define androgyny. What are some characteristics of an androgynous person? What are some examples of people you would consider androgynous?
3. Have you ever met someone whose gender you couldn't immediately identify? How did you react? Did it make you uncomfortable? Whether you've had that kind of personal experience or not, why do you think some people might say they're uncomfortable with androgynous people? Think it through: what might be the source of this kind of discomfort?

Chapter 2 | Sex + Gender

- Unlike biological sex, there is nothing natural about *gender identity* – it is part of a socializing process.
- SEX refers to our different biological characteristics at birth, what makes us male or female.
- GENDER refers to the cultural definitions given to these physical, biological differences, characteristics that the culture defines as masculine or feminine.
- These gender categories are presented as mutually exclusive by the culture.
- The two-sex, two-gender system is a socially created one, and is culturally dependent; it consists of certain agreed-upon codes; and each of us learns how to display these "codes".
- This binary distinction downplays the things that males and females have in common, while at the same time downplaying all the ways that males are different from other males, and females are different from other females.
- GENDER DISPLAY is the process whereby we perform the roles expected of us by social convention.

- CODE is a shorthand language that everyone shares; a set of rules, a code of behavior.
- Cultural codes are best demonstrated by one of culture's most exaggerated forms – advertising (and by extension, popular media).

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. How do you define sex and gender? Do they have the same meaning? If not, what are the differences? How can we distinguish between them? Does the difference matter?
2. What are the codes of gender that Goffman refers to? What is "gender display"?
3. Jhally points out that some cultures have a third, or middle sex. What does that tells us about our two-sex, two-gender culture?
4. How do simple things, such as the way we walk and talk, communicate our gender to others? What are other examples of the ways we communicate our gender?
5. What does Goffman mean by referring to advertising as "commercial realism"?
6. Why did Goffman focus on advertisements?

Chapter 3 | The Feminine Touch

- Female hands in ads have a different relationship to reality than male ones.
- Female hands are weak and cradling; they trace the outlines of objects; they are delicate, superficial.
- Male hands are powerful, assertive, bold, controlling; they manipulate the environment.
- Women are constantly shown touching or holding themselves; men are rarely shown in these positions.
- Goffman suggests that to understand how bizarre these postures are, substitute men for the women in these ads and monitor the reaction. If we are startled by the result, then it shows that an expectation of how we identify gender has been breached.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. How are female hands commonly displayed in advertising? What are the common characteristics of these displays? What about men? What are the common ways male hands get displayed in advertising?
2. How are female hands presented in advertisements in relation to others?

3. How are male hands presented in advertisements in relation to others?
4. Goffman refers to a phenomenon in advertising he calls self-touching – where models are shown with their hands touching their shoulder or face, caressing their neck or appearing to hold up their apparently delicate bodies. What is the significance of this? Why does it matter?
5. Jhally notes that men portrayed in postures like self-touching are defined as feminine and are therefore not 'real' men. What does he mean? What defines a "real" man in this coded advertising realm?

Chapter 4 | The Ritualization of Subordination

- The ritualization of subordination refers to how the presentation of the female body in advertising links up with broader cultural definitions of femininity as passive and powerless.
- Women are often shown lying down – signaling submission, powerlessness and sexual availability.
- Other common poses are the "bashful knee-bend," a canting posture in which women are off-center and ungrounded; the "head-cant," in which the head is tilted and women teeter; and images of women holding a foot or shoe, again off-balance and de-centered.
- Women are presented as defenseless, accepting their subordination.
- In these ways, femininity becomes defined as submissive, powerless, and dependent, reinforcing larger cultural definitions and stereotypes.
- At the same time, men are presented in the opposite position – face down and eyes trained upward from below.
- Stereotypically feminine poses illustrate a relationship of subordination between the watcher (typically male) and the watched (typically female).

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What are the characteristics of female sexuality as decoded by Goffman?
2. What is a "canting" posture? What are some examples of canting postures and what larger cultural significance or meaning does Goffman ascribe to them?
3. Goffman points out that it is common in advertising to see a woman's head lifted upwards, her neck exposed, while with men we frequently see the opposite: their heads tilted down, eyes trained upward from below. According to Jhally, what does this difference signify?

4. Jhally suggests that each of these contrasting head positions is animal-like. How so? Why does he say this matters? What do you make of these differences? Do you agree with Jhally that they matter? If so, why? If not, then why do you think advertisers deliberately and methodically resort to these poses over and over again?

5. Why do you think these bizarre contortions and postures are seen as desirable in the world of advertising? If ads are designed to persuade an audience to purchase something, why do you think this pattern of portraying women in positions of subordination helps sell products – to *women*?

6. Jhally compares the story commercial photography tells about female sexuality to how female sexuality is presented in the world of pornography. On what basis, specifically, does he make this claim? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

7. Jhally argues that the presumed audience for these ads is men, and that men overwhelmingly produce the ads as well. How do you think this affects the kinds of images we see in advertising? How do you think these ads might be different if women were the presumed audience? Or if the ads were produced and photographed by women?

Chapter 5 | Licensed Withdrawal

- In advertising, women often seem to be psychologically adrift: spaced-out, inattentive, unconscious, unaware of their surrounding environment, asleep, nervous, emotionally vulnerable, helpless, knocked-out, or even dead.
- In contrast, men are usually portrayed as focused, aware, monitoring, protective, in charge of their surroundings.
- When women are not presented as withdrawn, they are presented as over-engaged, to the point of losing control: laughing uncontrollably or overcome with extreme emotion.
- Men are presented in exactly the opposite way: active, in control, their emotions in check.
- This dynamic of men being in control and women being out of control is most clear when men and women are presented together. 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."
- These portrayals are dangerous because they reproduce and glamorize an image of women as weak and vulnerable – in stereotypically victim-ready poses.

- These poses are nearly the exact opposite of what is taught in self-defense classes – where students are taught to be in charge of their bodies and their safety, to be alert and autonomous.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Why do you think it's so popular for women to be presented as "zonked-out zombies" in ads? As asleep or even dead?
2. Explain what this code tells us about cultural ideals of gender when women are presented as withdrawn and men are presented as active and in control?
3. Does this code extend into other forms of media as well? Can you think of movies or TV programs or even video games where female characters are portrayed as helpless, unaware, emotionally unstable or losing control, while the male characters are portrayed as in control?
4. A recent study found that men convicted of physically assaulting women chose their victims partially based on body posture and non-verbal cues. According to Jhally, these body postures mirrored the gender displays in commercial advertising. What's the point of Jhally's comparison here? Is he blaming advertising images for men's violence against women? Or is he saying something more subtle?
5. Jhally points out repeatedly that advertising images like these appear normal when we see them on billboards or in magazines. Do they appear normal to you while watching this video? If so, explain. If not, describe how seeing them back-to-back with commentary and analysis changes the way you look at these ads.

Chapter 6 | Infantilization

- According to Goffman, advertising tells us that boys must prove themselves in a rite of passage to show they've left childhood behind, while little girls never seem to grow up at all.
- In the world of advertising, little girls and grown women are presented as essentially the same (same clothes, same hair style, etc.).
- Women are often presented as little girls, infantilized through childlike poses: depicted as anxious or shy; shown with one or more fingers in their mouth (in sexually suggestive ways that mix adult sexuality with childhood); dressed like young girls; lying in the fetal position; hiding behind objects.
- One of the most extreme examples of this infantilization was the Harper's Bazaar layout featuring the 19-year old model Gemma Ward, who was made to appear as though she was 10 or 11.

- The result of all this is that grown women are rendered childlike while young girls are equated with mature womanhood and sexuality.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. According to Jhally, one of the most common ways that women get infantilized in ads is when they're shown with their fingers in their mouths. How often are men seen in a similar pose? Explain the difference.
2. Jhally believes this is an extremely problematic portrayal of women. Why? Is it possible that these images are simply what we naturally consider sexy and that's why they are so prevalent in commercial photography? Or do you think advertising plays a role in shaping ideas and ideals that some people consider to be "natural"?
3. How can we distinguish between harmful and benign ads? Is there a line between what some people might consider innocent and playful and what others might consider problematic? If so where do you think these infantilized images fall on that spectrum?
4. More generally, when does something meaningless and fun in pop culture become meaningful, in your view? Is anything ever actually meaningless? Give specific examples either way.
5. Not only are women often shown explicitly as little girls but, as Jhally points out, we also see the opposite: little girls being portrayed in adult poses – scantily clad and in sexually suggestive poses. Why do you think this has become so common? How does this tie-in to things like beauty pageants where very young girls wear lots of make-up and dress and act like adult women?
6. Jhally says, "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." What do you think are the possible consequences he's hinting at?

Chapter 7 | The Codes of Masculinity

- Masculinity is largely defined in opposition to femininity in the culture – defined as much by what it is *not* as by what it is.
- Traditional ideals of masculinity are about power, control, confidence, intimidation, independence, and activity.
- These ideals are embodied in masculine postures and facial expressions: men are typically shown in upright positions, looking prepared and assertive, with a direct gaze.

- Men are often shown standing upright with hands in pockets or arms folded, looking out at the viewer. This projects power and confidence, sometimes bordering on outright menace and threat.
- Men are almost never posed in the ways women are – in canting postures, off-balance or in odd contortions.
- When exceptions to these masculine codes appear (e.g., Abercrombie and Fitch), men are often shown with women who are posed in even more subordinate postures to downplay the homoerotic nature of many of these images, as though to affirm that these are heterosexual men.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Jhally asserts that masculinity "is defined through what it is not – through its opposite – meaning what the culture defines as feminine." What does he mean? What are some ways this definition through absence manifests itself in advertising? How about in the wider culture? How about in the actual day-to-day world around you?
2. What are some of the ways advertisers like Abercrombie & Fitch seem to go out of their way to prove that their male models are heterosexual even when they are posed in highly feminine ways?
3. Jhally points out that the Abercrombie & Fitch ads portray men slightly outside the traditional gender code. Are women ever portrayed outside the gender code? If so, what are some characteristics of those ads? If not, why do you think that is?
4. What might a more diverse range of male portrayals in advertising actually look like? Be specific.

Chapter 8 | Trapped in the Code

- Since Goffman developed his analysis, alternatives to the representations in the traditional feminine code have emerged (women sometimes appear active, aggressive, in control, vicious, and autonomous).
- These alternative images have become more visible in action movies with female leads, and also in the arena of female athletics, where, since Title IX, we've seen an explosion in the number of women who participate in sports.
- Despite challenges to the traditional codes and gender norms, though, traditional femininity always seems to reappear.

- Case in point: female athletes like Indy Car driver Danica Patrick – a woman who's successfully broken into a rugged, dangerous, and male-dominated sport – has appeared in the most defenseless and sexually available positions in countless magazine spreads.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Besides the female action heroes mentioned in the film, can you think of other examples of women who have seemed to break with the traditional feminine code in pop culture? Do they seem to have expanded Goffman's idea of the gender code? If not, why not? If so, do they seem to have conformed to the code as well in any way?
2. Can you think of any men who are action figures or heroes who also exhibit feminine characteristics?
3. What are some of the reasons female athletes so often pose in men's magazines in the same submissive postures as female models? Do you think this increases, decreases, or has no effect on viewership of their respective sports? Explain.

Chapter 9 | History, Power + Gender Display

- The images found in advertising are not new, and advertisers do not create images out of nothing.
- Advertisers draw upon what Goffman calls "the same corpus of displays" – or body of images – that already exist within the culture.
- Commercial photography is an extremely concentrated reflection of gender differences and displays – a narrow set of images that Goffman calls a hyper-ritualization of gender codes and norms.
- John Berger, a cultural critic, points out in his book *Ways of Seeing* that there are many similarities between images of women in contemporary commercial photography and images of women in classic European oil paintings.
- The famous, and influential, ad campaigns of the GUESS clothing company display classic femininity while channeling the mythic image of the old American West in which women "knew their place."
- These images are not accidental – they are selected by human beings and carefully constructed – and we can choose whether to passively consume and accept them or question their seeming "normality."
- That was the point of Goffman's analysis – to make this often-invisible code visible, so that we can actively choose how to respond to the images around us.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. How do you think the postures we see in contemporary advertising became the dominant trends in modern modeling and advertising? John Berger, author of *Ways Of Seeing*, argues that these poses were created hundreds of years ago. Why does he say this?

2. What does Goffman mean by "hyper-ritualization"?

3. GUESS founder Paul Marciano is quoted as being "attracted to the femininity of the women of that [Western 1950s] era." What specifically does Marciano like about this era and the types of femininity portrayed? Why does Jhally find this significant, and troubling?

4. Marciano says GUESS ads "always use models" because "real women, they aren't as cooperative as real men." What does he mean? How do you think he's defining real men and real women here? What's your take on this?

5. Do you think these gender codes in advertising have any real effect on how we see each other? How we interact with each other? Do you think they affect your own life?

6. Jhally asserts that it's "only when you make something strange" that you have any chance of changing it. Do the gender codes in advertising need to be changed? If so, what are some of the ways we can make them "strange"?

Assignments

1. *The Codes of Gender* opens with clips from the following films: *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Transamerica* (2005), and *It's Pat: The Movie* (1994). Watch one of these films. First, make a list of the major characters. Then, write a response paper answering the following questions: How do these characters conform or not conform to the gender code? How do the characters that do conform to our gender ideals react to those who don't? [*Relevant Sections: Introduction; Sex & Gender*]

2. Research the controversy surrounding the South African track star Caster Semenya following her win in the 800 meters at the 2009 World Championships. Why was there such a media firestorm? What was the focus of the debate surrounding her eligibility as an athlete? Bearing in mind some of Goffman and Jhally's central points, what does this controversy tell us about gender? [*Relevant Sections: Introduction; Sex & Gender*]

3. Cut out 3 or 4 magazine ads that feature pictures of men and women. Tape your ads to the walls of the classroom and then walk around to look at what everyone else brought in. How many of the codes can you detect (e.g. the feminine touch, licensed withdrawal, infantiliazation, the head-cant, etc.)? As a class, discuss any patterns that stand out to you. What consistent stories about gender are told in these ads? [*Relevant Sections: The Feminine Touch; The Ritualization of Subordination; Licensed Withdrawal; Infantilization; Codes of Masculinity*]

4. The Box Exercise: Draw two boxes on a chalkboard. First, come up with a list of characteristics of "real men" that are displayed in these advertisements. Write these characteristics inside one of the boxes. In the other box, write the characteristics of "real women" that are communicated by these ads.

   Talk about any consistent theme or themes that emerge from what's written inside the box. Then, outside of the boxes, write down characteristics of men and women who don't measure up to these traits. What are some of the possible consequences for men and boys who possess qualities that are outside the box? How are they different than those for women and girls? [*Relevant Sections: Codes of Masculinity; Trapped in the Code*]

5. Watch one hour of television. Pay special attention to the commercials. Take notes about each commercial with these questions in mind: What is the ad trying to sell? How is gender communicated in these television ads? Are you noticing any recurring stereotypes? How are these moving images similar to the print advertisements that were Goffman's focus and are the primarily examples in *The Codes of Gender*? How are they different? Can you pick up on any of Goffman's codes of gender in the commercials? [*Relevant Sections: The Feminine Touch; The Ritualization of Subordination; Licensed Withdrawal; Infantilization; Codes of Masculinity*]

6. In a group, formulate an advertising plan for GUESS clothing company that could realistically sell jeans in ways that include a wider variety of portrayals of both men and women. [*Relevant Section: History, Power & Gender Display*]

7. Research the Hijras, or third sex, in India. How would a Hijra person be categorized here in the United States – as male or female? Explain your answer. What about them makes them more one or the other? Do you see any parallels to groups in American society? [*Relevant Section: Sex & Gender*]

8. Break into groups of 3 or 4. Prepare to represent one side in a debate on the following proposition:

   The differences between men and women in commercial photography and advertising are simply reflections of biological differences that occur naturally.

   Your job is to make the best case you can either for or against this proposition. Regardless of which side you are on, be sure to back up your position with a clear summary of Goffman's argument regarding hyper-ritualization. [*Relevant Sections: Sex & Gender; The Ritualization of Subordination; History, Power & Gender Display*]

9. The third section, *The Feminine Touch*, starts with Jerry Seinfeld referring to a woman he's dating as having "man hands." Assigning a gender to certain traits is more common than you might think. Think of expressions like: "He throws the ball like a girl" (which suggests that only men or boys know how to throw a ball correctly), or "Who wears the pants in the relationship?" (which suggests that the one with power in a relationship should be a guy – or at least dress like one.)

Break into groups of 3 or 4 and come up with as many examples like this as you can. Then analyze your list, try to think through what it amounts to, what it means. Why do we use these expressions? What do these idioms communicate to us about what it means to be a man and a woman? How do seemingly innocent things like this link up with larger dynamics in the culture? [*Relevant Section: The Feminine Touch*]

10. Watch the MEF video *Dreamworlds 3*. How do the recurring themes and stories about gender in advertising relate to the stories told about gender in music videos? Write a paper summarizing any connections you see between the key arguments in *Dreamworlds 3* and the key arguments of *The Codes of Gender*.