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THE BASIS OF SELF AND OTHER IN GENDER CONSTRUCTED IDENTITY

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This paper is an extension of previous research projects wherein I applied theories of identity and labeling (Garfinkle), power (French and Raven) and gender (Pearson, West and Turner) to adolescent girls' identity construction. Using methods of textual criticism, I argued then that the advertising targeting adolescent girls at the crucial transitional period between child identity and adult identity was dominated by patriarchal imagery, the implications of which are sexual violence, low-self esteem and self-objectification by young women.

This paper applies the same methodology but to identity formation of adolescent boys, arguing on the basis of Hegel's master-slave dialectic that adolescent girls' construction of "self-as-object" does not reinforce the patriarchal norm unless there is a complementing identity construction among adolescent boys of "self-as-subject" in relation to "other-as-object." As in the first study, this case looks at advertising that targets adolescents specifically.

In the tumultuous navigation of gender identity among adolescent males, it is important to understand not only the numerous external sources that influence the formation of identity, but also how the reinforcement of “self-as-subject” is perpetuated as being complementary to the adolescent girls’ identity construction of “self-as-object”. Within a patriarchal society this becomes a translation for a relationship of male “self-as-subject” to female “other-as-object” which this paper will argue on the basis of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic that requires that one cannot be reinforced without the other. This phenomenon is also further perpetuated by intertextual messages specifically targeted at adolescents.

At the onset of this discussion, it is crucial to make a distinction between *sex* and *gender*. Pearson, West and Turner (1995) point out “that biological sex converges with gender so that, practically speaking, it becomes difficult to disentangle the two” (p. 6). Generally however, the term *sex* designates biological fact, the presence of either XX chromosomes (female) or XY chromosomes (male) or the presence of “external genitalia (penis and testes in males, clitoris and vagina in females) and internal sex organs, (ovaries and uterus in females, prostate in males)” (Wood 2003, p. 19). Gender, conversely, is symbolically constructed. It consists of “the learned behaviors a culture associates with being male or female” (Pearson, West & Turner, p. 6). Wood (2003) further contended that gender “is neither innate nor necessarily stable” and its acquisition occurs through “interaction in a social world” (p. 21).

One of the primary assumptions of this research is that this interaction with the social world is mass mediated. The documentary *Women Seen on Television* (Sass & Yes, 1991) contended that school aged children will spend 27,000 hours watching television compared with 18,000 hours in the classroom between kindergarten and their graduation. The Media Education Foundation (n.d.) added that, among children between 8 and 16 years old, 56% have televisions in their bedrooms and as much as 81% of television viewing among children younger than 8 years old is unsupervised. Nor is television the only screen which occupies children’s attention. Of the four hours and forty minutes per day in front of a screen, only two and half are spent in front of a television. Computers, video games and other media are rapidly increasing their influence over the social world, meaning they have a greater influence over the formation of identity and the construction of gender.

The second assumption of this research is that media messages can be subjected to rhetorical analysis. Pearson, West and Turner (1995) suggest that culture communicates “ideals” of masculinity and femininity which form the basis or the standard around which the individual constructs his/her gender identity. Rhetorical scholar Richard M. Weaver (1995) has argued that it is the nature of consciousness to “revolve around some concept of value” and so important is that concept that when “withdrawn, or when forced into competition with another concept, the human being suffers an almost intolerable sense of being lost.” Individuals must know their location within the “ideological cosmos in order to coordinate” their lives (p. 213). Because discourse constructs the ideals and values around which behavior and identity is constructed, rhetorical methods are ideally suited to the analysis of identity laden messages.

The transition during adolescence from childhood to adulthood is dominated by biological and physical transformation. This change in physiology is accompanied by a change in identity, the shift from “child self” to “adult self”. At this crucial juncture, the barrage of images and messages increasingly directed at adolescents in the form of entertainment and advertisement have a profound impact upon the formation of that “adult self” and, this paper

argues, this impact is overwhelmingly negative. An increasingly consolidated media proceeds from a narrow ideological range which is, to quote the critical theorist bell hooks (Jhally, 1997), “dominated by a white supremacist, capitalist and patriarchal perspective”. In particular, the productive context for media messages, a context wherein the motive of the media is to serve the commercial interests of large corporations which increasingly understand adolescents as a target market, emphasizes needs, deficits and imperfections which have material (and therefore commercial) remedy.

One of the primary difficulties in approaching this issue is focus. The texts and images targeted at adolescents generally, and adolescent males specifically, are nearly overwhelming. This research is focused upon a single advertisement by Duff’s shoes that appeared in the June 2003 issue of Transworld’s *Skateboarding* magazine. What made this particular advertisement a decided focus of this research is the fact that it not only targets adolescent males, but that it gains the ability to do so by coming into the average home undetected by parental radar under the innocent guise of a magazine focused on an adolescent interest in the activity of skateboarding. This ad was specifically targeted at pre-adolescent and adolescent males in an age range of primarily 10-15 years old. This ad acts to influence the male perception of masculinity, which in this case, is not a positive or desirable influence.

We are bombarded with media images, multiple times every day. Television, movies, magazines, t-shirts, radio, the internet, etc.. When we hear and/or view these ads, we are being given a message. In part, those messages are urgently trying to persuade us to buy the product that is being promoted. However, there are other simultaneous messages we receive that, to some degree, reflect society, and to a larger degree, serve to instruct society in terms of how gender should be performed. The ads portray how we should be or however they want us to desire to be, while simultaneously convincing us to buy their product.

I am going to approach this document from the vantage point of a dialectical theory which would assume that ideas arise in tension with their opposites. Hegel, one of the early dialectical theorists argued, for example, that we cannot have slaves unless we have masters; that one idea defines the other. They cannot be defined independently of one another. In the same way you cannot have teachers without students or employers without employees, you cannot have objectifiers without objects.

The male identity, influenced by this advertisement and the numerous intertextual messages that adolescent males are bombarded with all work synergistically to begin to mold an image of how males are supposed to look, talk, dress and act. This is achieved primarily through what French and Raven (1990) call “referent power” which has its basis in the identification or feelings of oneness or the desire for oneness which is experienced by the adolescent male in relation to the images he strives to emulate.

It is “the reader” who “affords the space upon which a web of textual quotations (i.e. a text) is inscribed; consequently the ‘unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination’” and to the degree that texts exist “within an endlessly expanding matrix of intertextual production, readers continuously bring new texts to bear upon their readings” (Ott and Walter, 2000, citing Barthes, p. 431).

Intertextualization, however, is not solely a strategic practice. While on one hand it can be an encoding strategy “consciously incorporated by media producers that invites audiences to make specific lateral associations between texts”, it is also an “interpretive practice unconsciously exercised by audiences living in a postmodern landscape” (Ott & Walter, 2000, p. 430).

As a general tendency, rhetorical analysis is antithetical to theorization. Rhetorical study, rather, begins with the text and allows the theory to emerge from that text. The interpretation begins, then, by carefully unpacking and deconstructing the images present within this particular advertisement. So how do images like this contribute to the construction of the male identity?

Applying Hegel's theory to this ad, we have the inscription of a "pet-owner consciousness". The dehumanization utilized in this layout has served to take these women from being identified solely as human beings and inscribes on them the identity of a pet, as they are being shown to be bunnies in a rabbit hutch. In doing this, there is the implied inscription of the viewer as a potential "owner". So who is intended to be "viewer as owner" in this instance? One must consider the fact that skateboarding is a leisure activity that also tends to be somewhat expensive. This is a strong indication that the intended "viewer as owner" is not only 10-15, but likely the product of a white middle-class upbringing.



So what other messages are layered in this ad? The women are shown to be bunnies in a rabbit hutch which LeMoncheck claims, "In short, a person is dehumanized when that person is treated as an animal, body, part of a body, or object in ways she or he should be treated as a person, that is as a moral equal" (1985, pp.29-30). By inscribing these women as pets, the underlying message is that pets are something that one chooses and owns. This singular fact automatically conveys a message that reflects an imbalance of power through dehumanization and objectification. This creates a situation in which a woman becomes a man's subordinate, something to be dominated or controlled. The specific choice for portrayal of dehumanization in this advertisement reduces the women to being deprived of the same rights to freedom that male viewers would have. In the same instance, it also puts these women in competition with each other to be chosen and implies they want to be chosen, and therefore want to be owned. Notice

the most upper right corner hutch is empty. The empty hutch tells us that; a “woman as bunny” has already been chosen, that another “woman as bunny” will join the others and increase the sense of competition or that a “woman as bunny” perhaps did not survive and was removed.

Also notice that each of the compartments within the hutch are individualized and the women are made to look like slightly different from one another, complete with name cards and descriptions which are individualized enough to attract a prolonged gaze in the “choosing” process by the potential “viewer as owner.” This strategy, in keeping the gaze time maximized, allows the image to become more indelibly imprinted within the memory. In this specific instance, most young boys would automatically intertextualize these images with the well known Playboy bunnies, which further serves to leave a lasting impression with the adolescent male.

The woman in the bottom left compartment is named “Lazy Lover” and is said to love belly rubs and is described as very playful. The wording used here is begging for this woman to be owned and invites her to be touched. Notice also the positioning of her body in relation to the view. The camera directly focuses on her breasts and between her legs, which is not uncommon in advertising photos of women.

The woman in the bottom center compartment is a bit more aristocratic and gets the name “Princess.” We are informed that she “needs to be alone,” “does not play well with others” and is “noisy and mouthy.” When the instructions say, “do not open or put fingers in cage,” it lets us know that to own this one will require a bit more work than the average bunny. This is more of a socio-economic statement than implied by the others. Her description implies characteristics of purebred animals, in terms of temperament, insinuating being well-bred. Relative to women, it implies a high-maintenance stereotype attached to some women, but desirable by men for transference by association of the socio-economic standard to the man that chooses her.

The bottom right compartment is where we find “Giddy Up” who we are told is not housebroken and that she considers herself to be “such a silly willy girl.” This approach to identification relies primarily on words to make her appear more childlike and her appearance is comparable to a child playing dress-up, which implies passivity and lack of authority in relation to self. It is very common for the advertising world to use ploys such as these to portray adult women more as children, effectively disempowering their presence as adults.

Layered beneath the gender messages are somewhat subtle racial politics as well. We can see that the minority women in the upper compartments of the hutch do not make eye contact with the viewer, effectively eliminating their authority to influence anything. This is in direct contrast to the eye contact with the viewer that the Caucasian women engage in to influence the choosing process. Observe also the isolation that is enacted here. These women are isolated and they are confined in a space that is too small for them to even stand up in. Therefore, the dehumanization process not only shows women as animals, but takes it to a deeper level of inscription by “caging” them. This would also have to mean that the owners are free to move about while these women are not, subliminally inscribing an imbalance of power once again, which is exercised by the males who view, choose or own one of these bunnies.

The African-American woman is shown to be submissive with a pacified acceptance as an object. Her identification card tells us her name is “Bling Bling,” she is “great with children” and knows the command of “sit”. This states that she is more obedient, therefore more likely to accept someone having authority over her and considered to be more closely aligned with the ideal of a submissive woman with someone (historically male) providing for her.

The Asian-American woman is portrayed to be more excitable and has a collar, still further reinforcing her dehumanization. Her tag gives the name “Creepy” and says, “I’m scared,

please pet me,” to invite an owner to touch her while the collar hints at a lack of consensual acceptance, implying she will need to be controlled. It is also clearly subliminally insinuating of sadomasochism.

Now that we can identify some of the ways in which this image impacts the female identity, we can also begin to understand the impact upon the male identity “... because they are women, they are defined as Other, as object or thing, “inferior and inessential” by men considered the defining “subjects” of contemporary western culture...by having value in the culture only in so far as those other than themselves place value on them” (LeMoncheck, 1985). First and foremost, the male identity becomes “owner-ized” in relation to the female identity becoming “animal-ized.” The male viewer is inherently positioned as the potential “owner” of the viewed female “pet” and the right to choose being reserved for him is clearly sending a message that the female has no choice or authority, or at least a diminished capacity for such. However, it is intimated that she may be able to influence that choice by attracting the male “owner” gaze. The image in this instance provides a framework in which young adolescent males can begin to form ideas of what masculinity is “supposed to be”. This, of course, is only one small part of a larger framework in which to construct the male identity, with this being an extreme example of the media beginning to manipulate the adolescent concept of masculine identity and domination.

We have an inherent tendency to think of domination as being something physical. No physical interaction is shown here, but domination is demonstrated on many levels and the image used here indicates a *domination* consciousness by the owners of the pets by using the *dominated* consciousness of the female subjects who are being conveyed as objects in this instance. The use of dehumanization as a representation for the women takes us down a dangerous road. The women in the ad have been effectively demoted from human being to animal. This becomes very important as it becomes easier for a man to enact violence against a woman, particularly when that woman has been dehumanized and made less equal to a man. This singular ad will not be the cause of a woman being abused by a man. However, this image combined intertextually with others like them work to devalue women on many different levels and do have a definitively negative impact. Ads like this do influence the male identity to inscribe this perception of women on to their consciousness which directly influences their perceptions of women as less than human, and arguably, more acceptable to treat inhumanely. Katz states, “Ninety-five percent of serious domestic violence is perpetrated by males, and it has been estimated that one in four men will use violence against a partner in their lifetime. Over 95 % of dating violence is committed by men, and very often it’s young men in their teens” (Jhally, 1999).

This ad is not completely surprising in that it actually contributes to the perpetuation of a male dominance because of its existence within a patriarchal society. It gets the power to achieve this because it is constantly reinforced by many of the other intertextual images that prevail in our society. Consider the popular music artists - how they are promoted and how their music is marketed. Look at some of the most popular personalities in sports. These are examples of how society generally, and gender specifically, is often reflected by the media which simultaneously becomes instructive toward society and gender. We are a primarily visual society which is influenced by representations that reflect the male power that permeates our society. Katz also contends that, “They learn it from their families, their communities, but one of the most important places they learn it is the powerful and pervasive media system which provides a steady stream of images that define manhood as connected with dominance, power and control” (Jhally, 1999). A prime example of this is the stance, dress and language of the angry,

dispossessed black male emulated by white males to project their toughness and irrefutable masculinity. In terms of historical perspective, blacks are not usually emulated by whites, so this becomes somewhat of a phenomenon in itself. This scenario becomes an establishment of terms and rules for engagement that are woven into the masculine representations.

The question then becomes, “What can we do to change this?” Obviously advertising is such a huge institution that it becomes an unlikely beginning to effect change in this arena. It is more important and would be more effective to challenge the perceptions of these images. To begin to do this, we need to inform and educate. Children in our country typically begin sex education while still in elementary school. Perhaps just before the stage of pre-adolescence would be a proper point in their lives for beginning to educate them on how advertising is an intertextual tool that is not only persuading them to buy a product, but that it also is trying to persuade them to “buy in” to an image. When we can affect critical thinking about how we perceive and react to these images, we then have the ability to realize positive change regarding the formation of adolescent identity. However, since the identity of one gender is inextricably linked to that of the opposite gender, changes have to affect both genders simultaneously to become effective in any meaningful, positive manner.

It is important to remember that as a dimension of identity, adolescents accept these premises as facts. The social construction becomes a personal construct and the subject and object become unaware participants in systemic, patriarchal oppression. This is the nature of bell hooks’ argument that the term sexist, which implies male domination, should be rejected in favor of patriarchy which means the presumption of male domination by both women and men.

The fact of oppressive and dominating structures should be, on its own, warrant to change those structures, the more tangible impacts of those structures on the lives of girls and women should not be ignored. Tjaden and Thoennes (2000), in research by the Center for Disease Control, found that 25% of women would experience rape or physical assault by spouse, partner or date. The problem is particularly severe among adolescents where “surveys indicate that from 9 to 57% of adolescents have had at least one experience with physical aggression in their dating relationship” (Cleveland, Herrera & Stuewig 2003, p. 325), and while both males and females have been abused in their relationships, the incidents of violence occur more frequently with the impact of that abuse being greater among females. 50% of female victims reported physical injury and 30% reported emotional trauma. Cleveland, Herrera and Stuewig (2003) conclude that “violence in dating relationships, although it may in many cases be bi-directional, is not necessarily symmetrical” (p. 325) and this is particularly important to the degree that “early patterns of abuse can continue within relationships—setting the stage for violence in future dating relationships as well as in marriage” (p. 325).

The impact of the sexual objectification of women has been well researched and documented. The question which remains is not whether or not something needs to be done but what, exactly, should be done. The most likely answer, which is to regulate and restrict the imagery and these representations, is not likely to be productive. Not only are the implications of censorship a significant concern, but it does not change the nature of the problem, which at its core is not the particular representation that those who wield a disproportionate amount of power over those representations chose to enact, but rather that there are those who wield a disproportionate amount of power over representations at all.

There must be, and it must be sooner, not later, a fundamental change in the way media is dominated by a small number of corporations who have an interest in promoting insecurity, weakness, vulnerability and subjugation in females and power over females by dominating,

powerful and controlling males. Not only are they perpetuating the idea that either gender should create themselves to be desired by the other, they are also perpetuating the ideals of patriarchal supremacy that continually feed a system of oppression. As long as the context that such messages are produced within remains unchanged, there cannot be any meaningful change in the messages produced within that context.

More immediately, however, the direction of message production must be challenged. Barthes (1988) offered at least one key step in challenging representations. The unity of a text, he argued, is not the origin but the destination. "Since a text exists within an endlessly expanding matrix of intertextual production, readers continually bring new texts to bear upon their readings" (Ott & Walter, 2000, p. 431). The question is not how to eliminate particular texts but rather what new texts can be introduced which provide us with the interpretive lens necessary to exercise power over the images rather than be the victims of them.

In her lecture on cultural criticism and transformation, bell hooks (Jhally, 1997) argued that the capacity for critical thinking is the key to social and cultural transformation. Moreover, as Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally point out in the ground-breaking documentary *Tough Guise* (Jhally, 1999), the problem of the gendered nature of power is its invisibility. It is not discussed in the popular media but primarily in college classrooms, research conferences and other forums among women and men who will, undoubtedly, benefit from the discussion but who already have firmly grounded identities.

Cultural transformation has to occur at the site of identity development. This conversation, not just this particular paper, but the work of bell hooks, Sut Jhally and others, must become part of the narrative. Developing the capacity to critique media, to unpack and uncover the gender politics of media messages is essential and it must begin at a younger age. Adolescents are being targeted by advertisers who have demonstrated their willingness to use gendered images and their intention to sexually objectify younger and younger audiences of consumers.

The capacity to understand those messages and to uncover them, to intertextualize those messages with critical inquiry, with a grounded discussion on power and identity, begins with the assumption of reader-power, of the reader's power over the message rather than the presumption of the message's power over the reader.

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Some of her favorite non - academic activities include reading, construction, refinishing, archery and various outdoor activities.

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James Dimock is a member of the faculty of the Speech Communication Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato where he has taught courses in communication study since 2002. Dimock received his Bachelor of Science in 1996 from Black Hills State University and his Master of Arts from the University of South Dakota in 2000 and his Master of Fine Arts in Forensics from Minnesota State University in 2006. His scholarship emphasizes rhetoric; specifically the rhetorical theory of Richard Weaver and the rhetoric of war and violence. He lives in North Mankato with his wife, Peggy and their five children, Alex, Andrew, Maggie, Keaton and Claire. When not teaching or researching, he enjoys backpacking and canoeing.