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## **GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE IDENTITY**

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Since Garfinkle's ground-breaking work on labeling in the 1950's, the link between identity formation, specifically as constructed by external social messages intentionally directed by authority, and resultant behaviors has been well established. This research has extended upon this assumption, applying critical media and rhetorical methods to advertising aimed at adolescents, a particularly vulnerable group at a point of transition and identity formation. The adolescent negotiation of the transition from childhood (child identity) to adulthood (adult identity), has always been a uniquely critical stage of development. Moreover, the research has indicated that adolescents are particularly susceptible to influence by those in positions of authority. This research, relying in part upon French and Raven's concept of referential power (or a form of authority based upon the subject's self-identification with the authority), demonstrated that advertising directed at adolescents has exerted a significant amount of authority. Print media aimed at adolescents was evaluated from a critical perspective. The research examined the underlying identity messages within various texts, specifically the construction of gender and sexuality. The ideological homogeneity of the marketplace, which has been dominated by sexist (not exclusively male but conceding supremacy of the masculine perspective) and capitalistic exploitation, commoditizes the female identity. The research has articulated implications of this rhetorical practice including, but not limited to sexual violence, low self-esteem and self-objectification.

## **“Who am I?”**

It is one of the enduring questions of philosophy, the struggle to define the self in relation to the world. This paper will not answer that question but does seek to contribute to the dialogue focusing attention upon the identity construction of female adolescents in the turbulence of puberty by unpacking the construction of female adolescent identity as impacted by various modes of mass media and advertising that promote not only a product, but an image.

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 television 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 is 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.

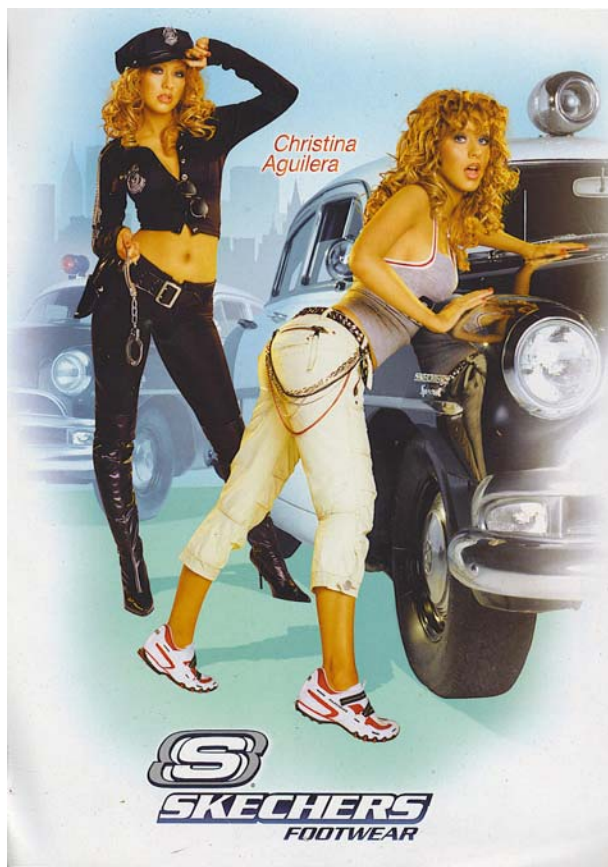
One of the primary difficulties in approaching this issue is focus. The texts and images targeted at adolescents generally and adolescent girls specifically are nearly overwhelming. This research focuses upon a single prominent advertising campaign by Skechers Footwear featuring Christina Aguilera. The advertisement appeared in many different settings, including billboards and shopping malls but was targeted specifically at young adolescents in magazines such as *Teen Vogue*, *Cosmo Girl!* and *Seventeen*. The decision to focus upon Aguilera is motivated by two factors.

First, Aguilera is representative of a new trend in media wherein iconic media personalities have become trans-media personalities. This is particularly true among a new, younger breed of celebrity not content to achieve success within a single genre. Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, Hillary Duff, Lindsay Lohan, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen all have moved to transcend a specific media branching out from music or film into fashion, perfumes and other points of intersection with their audience.

Another reason to focus specifically upon Aguilera is her power as an iconic figure. Aguilera represents, particularly to young girls, an ideal. She is successful, beautiful, and talented and as such she is a performance which can be emulated. It is important to note here that this research is not about Christina Aguilera as a person but rather the performance of Christina Aguilera as an image with what French and Raven (1990) called “referent power” or the form of power the basis of which is identification or the feelings of oneness or the desire for oneness which is felt by her audience.

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.

The most obvious images are the two different pictures of Christina Aguilera, who appears as both the dominatrix police officer and the more submissive woman under arrest. This dichotomy, the two images of a single person, while showing “both sides” of her character, actually limits her within a narrow and sexualized range. She can be both powerful and weak, dominant and dominated, dark and light, controlling and controlled, but all



of these dialectical oppositions occur with a highly sexualized frame. No matter what her mood – expressed by the choice of sneakers or high heeled leather boots – that mood is sexual.

Individually, the images are revealing about the nature of femininity as it is depicted for the adolescent audience. The weak Christina, for example, is depicted as child-like. Sneakers, crop pants and a tank-top along with the studded leather belt and the chains identify her as youthful. Additionally, the pose sexualizes the means whereby law-enforcement procedures are used to control potentially dangerous suspects. Hands placed on the hood of a car, or similar

surface, while the subject leans forward with the legs spread gives the officer control over the subject. The ability of the subject to lash out, either defensively or offensively is essentially eliminated and the officer can place the subject in restraints with little risk of resistance and, should there be resistance, it will be a contest in which the officer has a nearly insurmountable advantage. In this case, however, the pose reinforces the restraint of the subject but sexualizes that restraint. She stands on her toes which lifts her rear-end upward, exposing it while turning sideways to expose her chest. The look of surprise/fear in her eyes is unmistakable. This association of youth with sexual vulnerability and victimization is particularly salient.

At the other extreme there is the authority figure, the police officer dominatrix. The figure of authority has been stripped of official power or what French and Raven (1990) called “legitimate power,” and the power has been narrowed to a sexualized dominance. The leather boots, knee-high and high-heeled, the too tight, open and shortened shirt, the tight pants all strip the police officer of authority while sexualizing the image. Her stance, in contrast to the authoritative stance of male authority figures (feet shoulder width apart, both feet pointed forward) has been twisted (one foot forward the other to the side, all the weight on the right leg, with a hard S turn at the hips) making her a seductress and sexual aggressor rather than an authority figure. Even the officer’s belt, which holds the tools of coercive authority (baton, mace, gun) has been minimalized to the degree where it cannot be said for certain whether or not she is even wearing a gun. The officer’s restraints, old-fashioned hand cuffs, dangle suggestively: an invitation rather than a threat. The hand-cuffs, moreover, identify the officer with her victim who also wears chains. Interestingly, in the process of research, a trip to the local mall revealed that the dominatrix portion of this advertisement was not shown, only the youthful image.

One should also note the less conspicuous differences on the dominatrix Christina the sunglasses, which dangle suggestively on one of the few closed buttons of her uniform. The covering of the eyes, particularly by authority figures (for example the classic film *Cool Hand Luke*'s Boss Godfrey or 'the man with no eyes' played by Morgan Woodward), is typically symbolic of power and cruelty. It indicates a soullessness. In this case the glasses have been put aside to reveal the eyes and strip the authority of its power. In this ad, Aguilera is not just a sexualized police officer but one who has been stripped of her power and re-inscribed within the role of sexual object. At her most powerful, she is still objectified.

These primary images are supported by several supporting images which work to further constrain and narrow the feminine ideal to a passive sexual object. There is, for example, the red light on the police car, which has long been associated with prostitution. Also revealing is the type of car – which appears to be from the 1930's or 1940's. The backdrop is noticeably one dimensional and the position of the two Christinas exaggerates the unrealistic nature of the picture. With contemporary computer imaging, there is no reason why the two figures could not be on the same plane. Along with the sharp, too-clearly defined shadows, the picture directs the viewer to see it *as a picture* rather than as of a depiction of some material condition. This picture as a picture emphasizes the stylistic qualities.

All of this functions to transport the audience to the past. It is a parodic allusion to the pulp fiction novels – novels which capitalized on violent masculine fantasies of heroism and highly sexualized female victims. That it is a parodic allusion is significant. Ott and Walter (2000) described the parodic allusion as a stylistic device wherein a text “incorporates a caricature of another” (p. 435). It differs from parody in that a parody functions as a comedic and/or critical commentary upon the original by “drawing attention to the unspoken norms” (p.



436) while a parodic allusion has been stripped of that capacity for criticism seeking only “to amuse through juxtaposition” (p. 436). Ott and Walter, however, minimize the significance castrating the power to criticize. That juxtaposition does not merely amuse but re-inscribes those unspoken norms, returning the auditor to an era before patriarchal dominance was threatened by racial, gender and sexual liberation movements.

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).

This view challenges the notion of author-centered message production or the idea that the interpretation of the text, in this case Christina Aguilera’s advertisement for Skechers Footwear, is entirely the product of either Aguilera or Skechers and those who constructed the narrative. 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).

In this case, the producers of the text direct the audience toward a particular intertextual interpretation attempting to influence the texts with which the audience identifies this text. That is accomplished by orienting the audience toward the icon of Christina Aguilera. It is not just her image (face, body) that the audience is directed toward by the whole image of Christina Aguilera whose name, in addition to her picture(s), is prominently featured at the center of the

text. The adolescent girls who are the readers of the text are directed to read it in conjunction with the textual images of Christina Aguilera: singer, fashion icon, media personality.

Those images are, in turn, highly sexualized and often incorporate images of abuse and violence against women:



These images, from Christina Aguilera's website (<http://www.christinaaguilera.com>) are only a small sample of the images available in the liner of her CD *Stripped*. These images are highly suggestive of battery and violence against the subject: blackened eyes, stripped of clothing, fetal positioning, avoiding eye contact with the view and/or a timid and frightened look. The images reinforce the Skechers advertisement's timid and dominated figure but, more importantly, they send a clear message to adolescent girls in one of the most crucial stages of identity formation:

*No matter how powerful you are, no matter how high you go, no matter how successful you become, you will always be a sexual object. Your ability to achieve is sustained entirely by your value as a sexual object. Your power is exclusively sexual power. You must not only expect, but accept sexual violence as the social norm.*

It is important to remember that as a dimension of identity, the adolescent girl accepts these premises as facts. The social construction becomes a personal construct and the subject

becomes participant in her own 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.

And while 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 this imagery and these representations, is not likely to be productive. Not only are the implications of censorship a significant concern but it doesn't 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. The truth is that secure, strong, confident girls do not need to invest billions of dollars annually in make-up, in clothing, in surgeries. As long as the productive context 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 adolescent girls 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 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. Icons like Christina Aguilera are known and understood by girls in their preteens. They 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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Julie Lemley is a full-time student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, working part-time as a school paraprofessional since 2002 and is also a yearbook co-advisor at her current assignment. She is currently working toward her degree in Secondary Education to complete majors in English, Speech Communication and Spanish. She lives in Madison Lake, Minnesota with her fiancé, Jim. They have a blended family of six children, Jinny, J.C., Justin and Terri with only the two youngest, Robbi and Jaida still living at home, and two grandchildren, Max and Zach. 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. 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.