

Media and the Construction of Reality:

Analyzing Patriarchy Through Media Exposure

CJ Close

University of South Florida

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Our understanding of gender and identity expression is largely influenced by the social institutions that raise us. The morals we carry through life are primarily taught by our family and our schools, but with our growing exposure to media, we show a dependency on the content shown on television. How may this experience shape our cultural normalizations, and what dangers do we face by becoming reliant on mass media? The contrasting commercials produced by Venus and Gillette show how we have come to accept presentations of binary and patriarchal systems in our society, and how this may be harmful to individuals and people as a whole.

Our sense of understanding for the world revolves around our construction of **identity**. As worded by DeFrancisco, Palczweski, and McGeough, “identity refers to how people see themselves as individuals and as members of groups and how others see them as individuals and as members of groups” (2014, 8). Identity is the language we put to our feelings of self and belonging. One way identity may be avowed is through the claiming of **gender**. This concept describes the socially expected ways that individuals should behave in accordance to their sex. This could be a simple concept to understand if it were black and white, but to accept a binary reality would be to ignore endless opportunities of self-expression. Instead, it would be more fitting to look at gender through the continuum it exists upon. The structure of gender relies on maleness and femaleness, and then masculinity and femininity. These terms refer to the behaviors that are associated with male versus female presenting individuals. To counter this concept of polarization, the continuum is used to better understand individual expression based in personal identity, rather than social expectations perpetuated by established norms. Gender is

not only a conceptual identity, it is a form of performance in itself. Candice West and Don Zimmerman coined the term “**doing gender**” in 1987. Gender is not something that one owns; it is a collection of the everyday actions they perform that expresses their identity. Thus, with gender existing on a continuum, one does not have to be categorized as simply man or woman. This does not, however, make a claiming of woman invalid. With an understanding of self, individuals participate in **identity work**. Through interpersonal interactions, we participate in identity work to express our claimed identities to others. While identity is created and claimed by the self, there are external factors that manipulate and frame certain fundamental acceptances.

The world is understood through the language and communication that individuals within a society construct. Because of this, there are various social institutions that define reality. Some of these institutions include family, education, religion, work, and media. Each of these various institutions that we subscribe to have their own boundaries for cultural acceptance of norms. Families are the first institutions we are exposed to. Through our families, we learn a basis of morals and values; we are introduced to representative culture and we are reprimanded for following or disregarding norms. Additionally, families are our first introduction to **gender/sex roles**. These are the roles that individuals within the family fulfil, usually in correlation with their gender, since families are typically organized by gender (ex. mother, father, daughter, son). The stress put onto family members to follow these gendered expectations carry over through all aspects of performance.

In today’s climate, the institution of media has become more and more influential on our construction of reality. Contemporary media includes television, movies, radio, magazines, music, video games, videos, Instagram, Twitter, and more. With an increase of media usage, it is no surprise that advertisement has reached its way into every corner of television, radio, and

internet. It is estimated that the average American is exposed to 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements each day, whether it be intentional or not (Simpson, 2017). Additionally, “television ads [generally] target men ages 18-24” (Miss Representation, 2011). Through constant brand placement and online interaction, most do not even recognize this exposure. Brands are always looking for ways to appeal to customers, so even a simple post in your Instagram feed can act as a catalyst for priming. With a growing reliance on mass media, questions must arise regarding the impact of media influence on the construction of reality. What does media have to do with our creation of identity and maintenance of norms?

In 2002, Gillette’s Venus razor company released a video commercial for its “Divine” product. This thirty second clip shows women walking around a secluded waterfall, focusing on their smooth legs. The flaws of this commercial may not be plainly recognizable. Upon analysis, though, one can see how incredibly gendered this advertisement is. First, we must acknowledge how heavily gendered the product itself is. It is not a necessity for women to shave their legs. The gendered behavior of shaving one’s legs has become so normalized, that it is frowned upon not to shave. The purpose for shaving, then, is to be attractive to men/sexual partners. It can be argued that men also shave, which is true. Why, then, would women need their own product if razors are completing the same job for men and women? This is one example of how not only people, but also products are categorized into binary sexes. Next, we delve into the concept of **objectification**. Objectification is a concept that describes how one may be diminished to their physical qualities for the pleasure of a viewing audience. In other words, instead of being valued as a person, individuals are valued by their bodies for the benefit of an advertisement. In 1976, Simone De Beauvoir explained that women “appear essentially to the male as a sexual being” in her explanation of the concept of woman in *The Other Sex* (xvi). In

this Venus commercial, the women are dressed in bikinis by running water. There are several shots in which the video pans in slow motion as the women show their bodies of sensually. If this is a commercial selling razors for shaving leg and underarm hair, then what is the importance of showing of a woman's stomach and breasts in a bikini? It becomes clear that the commercial is not only aimed to sell products to female audiences, but also please male viewers. This commercial plays in the role of the construction of woman because it is selling the product of an "ideal" attractiveness. When women watch this commercial, they will not only take away the need to conform by shaving their legs, but also by being thin, long limbed, and perfectly tanned. The models in the video have just as much, if not more, influence on the viewer as the product does. With a slogan like "Reveal the goddess in you," the commercial is implying that the women in the video are goddess types, and to achieve their standards of confidence, you must comply to physical norms for attractiveness. Just as media may perpetuate social norms, they also participate in the reconstruction of meaning.

Seventeen years later, Gillette has shifted its presentation of gendered norms. Rather than specifically selling a product, Gillette goes through a form of rebranding in its 2019 short film "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be." This short film addresses the controversial topics being presented in the news, such as the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment on television and in the workplace. Gillette participates in the reconstruction of man by doing something similar to **resignification**, which "exposes how the term's meaning is constructed, and attempts to change its connotation" (DeFrancisco, et al., 2014, 119). As of now, our society is quite patriarchal. As explained in the film *Miss Representation*, "patriarchy is when men hold the power and privilege" (2011). Men have more influence in the construction of language, and therefore reality creation. In addition to our tendency to look at things through a binary lens, categorizing things

to be either masculine or feminine, there is an equal amount of pressure on men to conform to norms as it is for women. This short film expresses the need for sensitivity and empathy in men, which contradicts the current stereotypes of being tough and emotionless. The film concludes with saying, "It's only by challenging ourselves to do more that we can get closer to our best." *Miss Representation* includes a quote saying, "we are a nation of teenage boys," but if these teenage boys were raised with a new, more equality driven language, then we would be able to create a more supportive society for all. Gillette encourages its audience to actively participate in the language reconstruction of man, and therefore redefining the role of man in today's climate.

Altogether, both the Venus commercial and Gillette short film to be representative examples of the impact media has on everyday identity and reality construction. With such a rapidly increasing reliance on media sources, it is important that we are conscious of how our understanding of world can be negatively and positively changed due to even the smallest external exposures. We can this new reliance on media to create positive changes within our cultures. By steering away from binary normalization and patriarchal bias, we can open more opportunities for both men and women to develop emotionally and industrially. In the same sense, we must make efforts to rebrand our constrictive products in media and consider limitations when advertising products that could potentially harm and discourage certain groups. As taught by Gillette, it is every individual's responsibility to partake in the efforts toward creating a more nurturing society for the rising generations.

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