

GIRLS ON GRASS

Reconstruction and Expansion of Female Gender Presentation in Higher-Ed Marketing Materials

MALS Capstone Project

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INTRODUCTION

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In a pulmonology center in a hospital that is connected to a very prestigious university I sat waiting, hopeful of finally getting some answers to some asthma-like symptoms I had been experiencing; shortness of breath walking upstairs, tiring easily, not able to catch a full breath even when sitting. I went through all the tests with the seemingly friendly male doctor. There was plethysmography, a test measuring how much air you can hold in your lungs and the amount left after you exhale as much as you can. There was Spirometry, measuring how fast you can move air and I even did gas labs which look at oxygenation rates in the bloodstream. It was all very thorough and very modern. At the end, the doctor told me my results would be ready in a day or so and we would discuss later with my primary care provider. It was my primary doctor who contacted me with two words. In the email she simply put, “Diagnosis: Hysteria.”

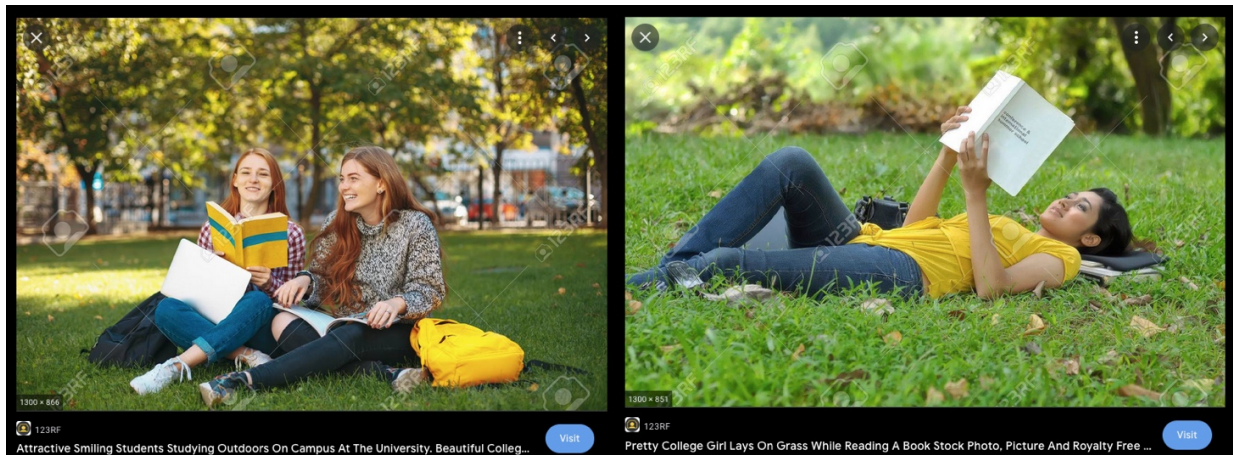
I stared at her message blank and dumbfounded, but also filled with the thought, “I have arrived. I am a woman.” I am transgender and had only been living publicly as a woman for about a year at the time of that appointment and what I felt then, I later read echoed from Simone de Beauvoir who suggests in *The Second Sex* that “one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one.” (Beauvoir 283) de Beauvoir is talking about the construction of the female gender, and that was my moment; a construction based on ideals that go all the way back to Plato and

Hippocrates, and their fourth century B.C.E assertion that the womb inside women travels, and in doing so, is the source of hysteria in women. They might be shocked to discover that I do not have a womb at all, much less one that might be wandering around causing bouts of dramatic behavior. Despite that fact, not only did I arrive into my gender through a co-constructed and medicalized moment, but it planted the seed of an idea that would later become my professional and academic focus; what are the phenomena that construct our gender(s) and how can we expand what is possible with/in the identity of women.

Research Topic Introduction

I work in central marketing for a major public university. My job entails creating photographic and video assets for admission and recruitment efforts designed to tell a story of the university. The story we are required to tell is pretty basic, with an emphasis on the pretty. Messages are designed to say “look at our beautiful campus made up of beautiful people.” One day several years ago, I was meeting with our chief communications officer. He had just received a test print for a new admissions brochure. He handed it to me and remarked, “look more girls on grass. Are we ever going to get away from that?” I asked what he meant by the term and he pointed out that in higher-ed materials, women were typically depicted lying in the grass socializing with a book. At that point, my work had granted me access to classrooms for everything from high-tech science courses to complex branches of engineering, all of which had a healthy population of women doing the work at the same level as men. I even filmed women working in an instructional model of a nuclear reactor. Because of this, I knew what my boss was showing me in that brochure was a false narrative. I knew that it was more likely a constructed moment than a candid one for the two women in the image.

That phrase, “girls on grass” stuck with me from that point and joined up with the earlier idea of looking at existing modes of gender construction creating a combination that forged my research path. If you were to do an internet search for the phrase “girls on grass,” a fair number of the results would bring back images of young women lying in the grass with an open text book. They are clearly not studying because they are too busy socializing with the friend next to them or smiling for whomever is taking the picture. Even though I have yet to find where the phrase originated, this image is a trope so entrenched, as my former colleague pointed out, in higher-ed communications that it is commonly spotted in admission and recruitment materials. All forms of marketing, both inside and outside universities, continue to frame women in the same restrictive narrative of decades past; women should be seen as passive, small, submissive. Even in the metadata for these images, this narrative exists.



As shown here, phrases such as “attractive smiling students studying outdoors,” or “pretty college girl lies on grass while reading a book” are the categories being created for women in this setting.

My research examines old and new imagery of women in college marketing materials to join research and conversations that explore the construction and performance of gender in marketing materials. My work contributes to a framework for discussing the existing problem in

search of solutions to make space for expansive gender presentations. Though there is much work to do in all gender presentations, the scope of my work focuses on female identified people who use she/her/hers pronouns.

PART ONE: The philosophical and psychological history/framework for understanding gender construction in society.

This research project is about the way that women are constructed within contemporary higher-ed marketing materials, but it is a construction built on the framework that hails from ancient Greek times, around the fourth century BCE. Because this framework crosses so many aspects of history, culture and society, the research calls for an interdisciplinary approach that includes, but is not limited to, pulling from psychology, areas of rhetoric, design with a heavy reliance on women and gender studies as well as touch points into new media.

Gender and Culture in Psychology by Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek is my foundational work for this project because it introduces a lot of theorists that help me think through these concerns. This text is an overview of how society (for our purposes, society in the United States) constructs gender in a way that requires, and reinforces, repressive notions of femininity, even today as we try to be more expansive in our understanding. For example, when we set out to be categorical, label making, or meaning makers, usually there are boxes for similarities and for differences, and one way we can talk about differences in men and women is by examining the unequal positioning in social structures. (Magnusson, Marecek 9) These structures that Magnusson and Marecek point to are areas like pay disparity in the workplace between men and women, or the expectation of women having to stay home and be wives while the men worked. As I later discuss, images of women in university archives capture the ways in which women were limited in academic pursuits.

The classical point of reference that helps frame modern conversations around gender is the Platonic view versus the Sophists. In Platonic thinking, categories are “inherent or essential” while the Sophists understand categories to be “human made.” (Magnusson, Marecek 10)

Essentialism, defined for my research as the belief that some things have an unchanging, stable set of characteristics that make them what they are, is a term that comes up frequently in conversations and debates around what it truly means to be a woman. Most often it is a way for cisgender women to counter the validity of transgender women by restricting the right to the label of woman by using characteristics that some societal group considers to be “inherent” and “essential” to being a woman. Often, the requirements for being a true, “essential” woman become quite extreme such as the ability to give birth or being born with specific genitalia that is deemed appropriate. This essential view of gender construction is easily undone, however, by any cisgender woman who is unable to give birth.

As Magnusson and Marecek go on to point out, sex categories are “contingent and human made, not natural.” Contingency in this case means that the sex categories become a product of human sense-making. (Magnusson, Marecek 10) To put this idea of contingency in context of my research, an easy analogy would be to imagine you have a dozen images of a bird that every bird specialist has labeled a cardinal. One day you are in the wild and you see a bird and you compare it to all the images that were labeled cardinal by the experts and it matches, so you label it that way as well. Gender has the same contingency or reliance on previously agreed upon images of what a certain gender looks like. For women, the agreed upon image has traditionally come from a series of hegemonic dominant constructions that have remained unchallenged long enough to act as part of humans' sense making system. This idea of label making and sense making as humans will come up again and again in this research.



| 1950s Engineering coeds in the student engineer's lounge in Riddick Building- note the gender construction of positioning them reading magazines like ladies are expected to do |

A power that drives this sense making and label making and one that is an important concept to bring into this discussion is ideological power. It is simply “the power to shape people’s ways of seeing the

world, their meaning and interpretations, preferences and wishes.” (Magnusson, Marecek, 24)

Ideological power is also a form of social inertia. For instance, if you have ever heard “that’s just the way things are” as a counter argument to any kind of social reform, you have heard the basic argument for inertia masquerading as understanding. Ideological power is likely what drove a photographer in the 1950’s to have a group of female engineering coeds pose in a lounge reading magazines instead of operating some highly technical equipment. One could surmise that since these women were engineering students, they had just as much ability as the male students.

However, the dominant social construction, one that states that women are more suited to sit holding magazines than being stationed at high-tech machines, seems to have won out. (M,M 24) In addition, the image softens the presence of women for men who may want to be engineering students, subtly reassuring them that the women they are encounter are non-threatening. This likely reduced the possibility that those women were treated as peers.

Marketing images for universities rely on familiar social constructions to portray women as objects at the university rather than subjects in the university. *Gender and Culture* point to a 1966 article from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann titled “The Social construction of reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge.” In it, Berger and Luckmann argue that reality for people hinges on “social consensus rather than empirical validity.”(M,M 27) Marketing materials for higher-ed can be looked at with this same lens. A photographer for university marketing

materials typically takes dozens of photos for every one that they use. The choice in which one they make public facing creates a reality that audiences read into but it is purely constructed and almost always follows dominant consensus. Every woman we pose in diminutive ways that ignore their multifaceted identities as leaders, teachers, engineering students, astronauts, etc... is a moment when we are continuing an outdated hegemonic social consensus.

Another sense-making practice that humans engage in is subject-positioning. Generally speaking, subject-position relates to how humans make sense of who we are by what social narratives we place ourselves in. Philosopher Michael Foucault has an approach that takes this concept and puts it in a framework that brings in ideas of power that have similarities to the idea of ideological power. For Foucault, it is a relationship between knowledge and power; specifically disciplinary power. This is an important consideration for my research because that disciplinary power that he is talking about is what starts to create hierarchies in categories such as normalcy and health, etc. Magnusson and Marecek see Foucault's idea of subject as having two meanings. The first is being a subject in the sense of being “tied to one’s own identity by a conscious or self-knowledge.” Secondly, is simply being subjected to an outside power structure.



| 1960s woman in engineering program. His posture represents a visual example of the power-over subject positioning that happens to women in education, workplaces and society as a whole |

Foucault goes on to point out that in this society where dominant culture is so established, individuals are not exactly forbidden from going against the norm but our everyday social collective is shaped such that “going

with the grain appears to be the best option or even the only one.” (M,M 25)

Most situations that humans engage in exist within premade and pre-agreed upon subject-positions to the point where one can argue that we are not free to act how we wish or say what we want but must instead fall in line with the structure entered into. (M,M 81) The image above shows a female engineering student from the 1960s. There are improvements from the 1950s image in the sense that at least she is seated at a machine instead of with a magazine, but the subject-position is still male dominated and the posture of both makes her a subject who is very submissive and diminutive to the man who clearly is presented as the holder of all the power.

As a visual storyteller, I feel this quote from Dan McAdams. I live it, but I also believe it could easily be changed to say, “We are all performers. And we are the gender we perform.” In 2003, Marianne LaFrance, Marvin A Hecht and Elizabeth Levy Paluck compiled 418 studies of smiling in men and women. When the participants were aware of being observed, girls and women smiled considerably more often than boys and men. When there was no awareness around being observed, the differences were nominal. (M,M 166) This reinforces the idea that will be repeated throughout this research, gender is not just a performance but also a construction. For example, if I decide to go out into public wearing a dress and full makeup then I might be labeled as enacting a female performance but it is really the outward gaze of others that constructs that performance as being feminine, all based on agreed upon dominant conventions. The performance is enacted upon through social expectations that have developed from the dominant discourse around gender. In texts like photographs, new media and the marketing materials my research is focused on, these expectations are not only constructed by social consensus but also given through outside direction of a designer, photographer or

marketer. This direction shows up in how women are chosen by looks, are directed to smile, to stand, to angle the body slightly and constantly put on display.



| Then and now. It's clear from the photos the women were asked to stand in classic model pose where they are putting objects on display for the viewer, including themselves |

PART TWO: A rhetorical approach to exploring gender presentations in marketing materials.

In addition to a psychological approach, I chose to look at these materials with a rhetorical approach. A rhetorical approach is critical here as we understand that texts can be anything from a journal article, to a work of art, to movies and new media. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Philosopher Kenneth Burke defines rhetoric as “the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents.” (Burke, 41) With this definition, any form of discourse from written to visual that might be used in service of persuasion towards a feeling or an idea should be looked at through a rhetorical lens. Imagery in higher-ed, designed entirely to elicit feelings around how it feels to be at a certain college or university certainly fit this model of persuasion. The rhetorical research that follows is critical to understanding how we begin to reframe the presentation of gender in higher-ed materials.

In *Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence Prelli notes, “Our encounters with others enact displays of self and of others that imply who we desire or otherwise take ourselves to be.” (9) Labeling and categorization as discussed earlier is the problematic human tendency that drives a collective agreed upon idea of what it means to look like a woman. The place we need to arrive is that there is no set “look” for women. Prelli goes on to say, “our encounters with others enact displays of self and of others that imply who we desire or otherwise take ourselves to be.” (9) I argue that who we take ourselves to be is built upon the existing hegemonic dominant narrative of who we ought to be as men, women or gender non-conforming humans. Expected scripts exist for all of these and are performed out on a daily basis. Any gender performance is part of the social construction built by human need for categorization discussed throughout this paper. In his work, Kenneth Burke notes that “Humans have an inherent need for labels unconsciously or consciously to construct reality. Individuals are constantly assigning meaning to the stimuli they encounter, whether physical objects or abstract ideas.” (Foss et al. 33) For example, in gender constructions, someone wearing a dress is usually given the meaning of being female or someone with feminine qualities. Gender itself is an abstract idea that is often given meaning through physical presentations.

Burke is an important voice in rhetorical theory because what is referred to as his “sacred texts” perform a lot of the work in highlighting the type of problematic binary and dominant power-over narratives that gender expression still has to be framed inside. As my work seeks to change this trend of how the female gender is constructed in higher-ed marketing materials, a balance with looking at a feminist approach was needed. Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin present this framework in their article *A Feminist Perspective on Rhetorical Theory: A Clarification of Boundaries* by placing Burke’s texts against the feminist writer Starhawk. For me, this work

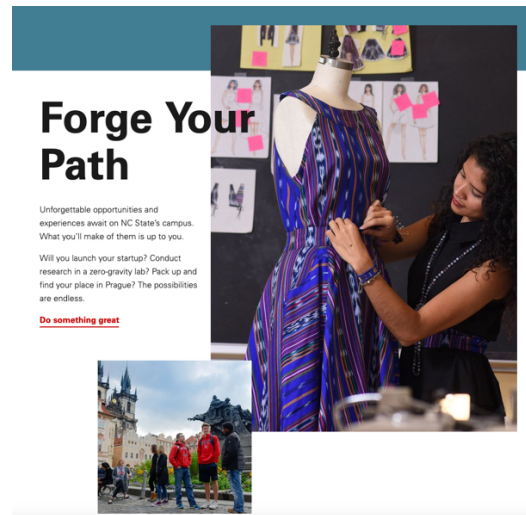
provides both a foundation of where we still are with existing dominant ideologies and a road map of a way forward to real change in the construction of gender within educational institutions. Burke's work is indicative of where we are now, sitting comfortably with a patriarchal basis and representing a rhetoric of hierarchy and power-over. Foss and Griffin point to this hierarchical structure, a system that values some over others, the worth of the self "Is not given, it must be earned, achieved or granted." (Foss, Griffin 336) Because gender is part of the patriarchal hierarchy, it operates in the same way. Gender norms are human made social constructs derived from dominant culture ideas around what constitutes being a man, woman or a non-binary person. When we show up in social settings, our appearance, or gender performance, is viewed against these social contracts and corresponding labels are then granted based on how the performance aligns.

For instance, even if we restrict the criteria to appearance only, there are going to be some women that perform a more normative binary presentation of what a feminine appearance is more than others. In these cases, the ones with the presentation that meets this hegemonic view of what is expected are granted the label as woman more easily. As discussed earlier, the social constructions around gender also lead marketing imagery to passively conform to these hierarchical norms. In any marketing situation, many images with different angles and set-ups are taken before arriving at the one that gets chosen. Higher-ed images operate from outdated cultural scripts, merely recreating gendered expectations for women in images. The modern image of Lisbeth Arias is a good example. She is an entrepreneur and a successful clothing designer with her own line. From this photoshoot, many images exist where she is taking up the whole frame, centered with a direct, challenging gaze to the camera. The one that got chosen, however, showing how hegemonic constructions of gender always win out, puts her sideways,

diminutive and more in the context of a seamstress which fits dominant patriarchal rhetoric around what women can and should be doing.



| Then; a woman in the late 1950s posing on campus. She is turned, daintily positioned and a bit lower than the camera. Now; Lisbeth Arias works on her clothing line. She is positioned to the side, diminished by the space around her and she is unthreatening to the camera. |



A rhetorical examination of higher ed marketing materials reveals that a feminist rhetorical approach is the best way to expand visual presentations of women. As Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin claim, “scholars working from a feminist perspective suggest that most theories of rhetoric are inadequate and misleading because they contain a patriarchal bias. They embody the experiences and concerns of the white male as standard, thereby distorting or omitting the experiences and concerns of women.” (331) Imagery in higher-ed marketing has done the same in distorting the concerns of women. In the images I present here, as well as the hundreds that exist that I do not include, the trend is the same. Women are presented in some subordinate way to men, either through activity they are engaged in, position to the men in the image, body scale or in some way being submissive to the audience versus the men who get to be more direct.

I also found that the feminist approach of Starhawk, a theorist working in neopaganism and ecofeminism, helps break open the possibilities for images of women. Starhawk centers her ideas around “protection, preservation, nurturing, and fostering of the great powers as they emerge in every being.” (Foss, Griffin 330) Where Burke’s human is the symbol-making relying on hegemonic categories and existing in a world of hierarchical earned value, Starhawk’s ideal human is where “every “being is sacred” and possesses inherent value, one that does not have to be “earned, acquired or proven; It is inherent in our existence.” (Foss, Griffin 334) Women’s inherent value helps ground the change I am seeking to bring about in higher-ed marketing materials because it reveals that the identity of women can exist independent of social expectations and constraint of the binary gendered scripts. In Starhawk’s worldview, if a woman identifies as such, nothing else needs to be proven or confirmed via gender presentation, performance or extraction from existing scripts. Starhawk goes on to assert that “your life is worth something. You only need to be what you are.” (334) This is the core of what I want to change visually about higher-ed marketing materials, women should simply be granted the space to show up as they are without barriers. Starhawk’s notion of “Power-with” is the antidote to Burke’s “power-over” the idea that a person has to earn their personhood by meeting an external standard. Starhawk’s power-with, by contrast, “affirms, shapes and guides a collective decision, but it cannot enforce its will on the group or push it in a direction contrary to community desires” (332) For this project, this means that women should be taken on their own terms, and not have to meet any existing hegemonic expectations around gender to literally or figuratively be seen.

Following Starhawk, I take “empowered action.”(335) Put simply, empowered action rejects terms of a system and refuses “to be negated by systems of control.” Starhawk believes that there is resistance and creation in this kind of action. She goes on to say that as a whole we

need a strong vision of what society we want to create so that “we can embody aspects of it in each act we take to challenge domination.” (337) Where Burke and Starhawk agree is that the rhetoric of domination is structured upon hierarchy. Empowered action gives back inherent value to everyone equally and if we add to that, changing images of women in higher-ed from just being girls on grass, we can enact the resistance of dominant culture and the hierarchical hegemony.

PART THREE: Visual storytelling and the future of how we construct gender through scripts, performance and ideology.

We are all storytellers. And we are the stories we tell.

– Dan P. McAdams, psychologist

If we are the stories we tell, then these images tell us that women even bright enough to be engineers still need to look as if they are seeking permission before opening a book, or that women must always make themselves shorter than a man to receive his knowledge.



| Then: Late 1960's. Note how diminutive her size is in how she is framed compared to the books. Now: An engineering student from around 2015. Note how crouched she is, making her diminutive to the man in the photo. |

In “Gender Stories,” by Sonja K. Foss, Mary E. Domencio, and Karen A. Foss, they discuss the “master narrative of gender.” It is a narrative that shows up again and again in both old photos and new as evidenced by this pair from the 1960s and 2015. The master narrative is one in which men get to be “active, aggressive, athletic, competitive, dominant, independent, logical, self-confident and unemotional.” Meanwhile, the ideal woman is “passive, cooperative, emotional, submissive, dependent.” (Foss et. al 59) In the photos above, that submission comes out clearly in posture and framing. In the photo from the 1960’s not only do we once again see a woman in engineering relegated to reading a book, but we see her posture as shy and demure with a head turned to an unseen authority. Her gaze has an expression of permission seeking as if checking to see if it is alright that she even be reading such a book. It is also worth noting the way her hair is done and how the style of dress makes her appear almost doll-like. Her style of dress and her gaze create a construction of her as a delicate object in someone’s possession. In the image from 2015, also a female engineer, at least she gets to be working in construction, but note the posture differences. The woman is lowering herself and practically bowing to the male in the image as if this is the only position she can be in for him to teach her. This is a stance and framing dictated entirely by the photographer and chosen after the fact to be the representative image for this program.

We shift now to look at how gender is understood through stories of lived experiences and from the work of people like Judith Butler who seek to help us understand the history of gender constructions, performances and expectation. With these stories and histories as our roadmap, we can see how profound even the smallest change in marketing efforts could be. They could help disrupt the hegemony of the gender binary, and make room for understanding other

lived genders. Ways of gender expression such as androgyny, or non-traditional gender roles such as women not interested in parenting are considered “peripheral but not mainstream.” (Foss et al. 238) For gender in the dominant culture ideology, this means the binary dictates you can only have man and woman; two genders. While it is true that the binary is starting to be challenged in more expansive ways, there is much work that remains to be done as marketing is not at pace with these expansive ideologies.

The arc of change is slow. In 2021 we sit 100 years from women gaining the right to vote, 60 years from second wave feminism that saw an expansion in the kinds of educational programs and careers that women could go into and yet it is all too easy to pair images of the 1950s with images of 2021 and find the clothing has changed, but the ideologies are much the same. Now that notions of gender are expanding more quickly than they historically have, marketing materials from higher-ed institutions should represent the diversity of women that already exist. At the root of this expansion is a reconstruction of gender. French writer and philosopher Monique Wittig points to the way gender has previously been constructed, writing, “when particular types of people are seen as women, they are women. But before being seen that way, they first had to be made that way.” (Foss et al 39) This idea is a parallel idea to the one pointed to earlier from Simone de Beauvoir, “one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one.” (Beauvoir 283) Marketing materials that show all kinds of women help to also make all kinds of women able to be seen.

The kind of construction Foss et al and Beauvoir refer to happens because of gender scripts. The American Psychological Association dictionary defines gender scripts as “a temporally organized, gender-related sequence of events.” The definition proceeds to list out stereotypical activities such as “doing laundry or preparing dinner in the kitchen,” for women

and for men they list such things as “building a birdhouse or barbecuing.” While these activities are labeled as stereotypical for these genders, it is important to note that it is the dominant hegemonic ideology that dictates what is stereotypical for which gender. The dominant hegemonic scripts have, to this point, constructed what women look like and the types of activities we should be most engaged in. When a woman shows up who has fully engendered these scripts, she will be accepted as such.

To add to the ideas around construction, Foss et al. point to the work of American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler. Butler points out that before one performs their gender, it does not exist “your own gender then is only potential until you enact it through performances.” (Foss et al 165) To Butler, gender construction is not something that most people will do consciously before entering a space. Personal gender identity, they point out, “comes into being through performances—some repeated and some novel. “(Foss et al 166) If most people do not sit and do this consciously before leaving the house, then the question for our research efforts becomes, why are higher ed institutions constructing gender for women in the ways that we are? When a photographer in any marketing environment including higher-ed tells a female subject to smile or look off to the horizon or turn slightly, angle your head a little, crouch a little, etc... then they are arguably making choices for the tone of the image that create performances in women that aren’t inherently there.

In their own book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler develops Beauvoir’s claim to assert that gender is an “ongoing discursive practice.” (Butler 45), a constant negotiation with audiences and expectations. Butler states that “gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the ‘congealing’ is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means.” (45) What they are saying is that if a gender is allowed to congeal or settle into form, it

is still doing so on the basis of constructions that have come before. What Butler poses as a solution is the same work being taken up by my capstone project, “if identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old.” (45) Butler is referring to how essentialism is often used in the construction of female genders. In her view, a move from this essentialism, might speak to a broader range of genders which is exactly the arc of my research as well.



| Two ways in which choices by the photographer
Construct a woman's gender. On the top, Astronaut Christina Koch as created by NASA. She is given the chance to be confident and confrontational to the camera. The bottom image is from a higher-ed institution. The construction here makes her diminished and almost appearing to be daydreaming and not able to take on the viewer at all |



PART FOUR: Commodification of Gender and How we Engage with it

In advertising, the use of women as pretty objects offers the viewer a glimpse of who to be, or who to expect, in a given situation. In my work in higher-ed marketing I have witnessed photographers at photo shoots and in meetings where image selections were made. I can attest that every angle, every outfit, every location choice is a calculated effort in order to sell a story of the university. The university will tell you that the story is about coming to a beautiful campus where smart, beautiful people exist. To tell that story, however, the women must be beautiful in a way that satisfies the hegemonic male gaze. Whether this appeal is to get alumni to invest, to get new recruits in faculty or staff, or attract new students, every photo that a university produces can be assumed to be transactional. In her article *From Homo Economics to Homo Communicans*, Eva Illouz points out that “economic transactions are embedded in cultural meanings and that interpersonal transactions, far from being inimical to the market, can be facilitated by it.” (58) Higher education imagery has been facilitated by the market to be sure.

It is true that to some degree, the market has changed. We show women of engineering programs actually working on machines and projects instead of reading a magazine. But the part of the hegemonic dominant market that has not changed also dictates that even while doing something meaningful and traditionally thought of as man’s work, women must continue to look small and, in a variety of ways, powerless. Illouz also talks about emotional capitalism and emotional laborers, “women who had to repress their emotions in order to sell the image of their company” in relation to flight attendants. (61) I argue that women in higher education must perform the same emotional labor, even in photographs. Women in university marketing images must be submissive and pleasant, while images of men reveal them as dominant and powerful.



Kyle Breen,
Management and Leadership
Outstanding Graduate



Kaitlyn Neal,
Human Resources Management
Outstanding Graduate



Katherine Harris,
Entrepreneurship and Business
Development Outstanding

| Three outstanding graduates in a management program. Note the strong direct gaze of the male versus the posturing of the women |

Images of women lure predominantly male audiences within higher-ed as well by showcasing a pretty female population that promises prospective men the availability of heterosexual sexual partners. As seen by this spread highlighting award winning students within a management program, the man gets a professional headshot, direct gaze to the camera and dressed in what dominant discourse labels as proper business attire. The women, who won the same accolades, however, are angled, demure with their hands on their hips, dressed more casually and in fashion model like poses.

Commodification and visual culture are inherently linked.. In *Art, Design and Visual Culture*, Malcolm Barnard defines visual culture as “Anything that can be seen is visual and culture is human made art performance Culture is subjective” (10) He places this definition alongside the idea that society is a society of the spectacle where people “passively consume

images and representations, spectacles, that are divorced from real life and their real life needs.“(1) The girls on grass trope in no way represents the many ways that women actually work and live on a university campus, yet the dominant culture still gets lost in it as the ideal and so it continues to be pervasive even in modern materials.

Barnard draws from Foucault to say that we are not just a society of spectacle, but more pointedly of surveillance. ““People are not watching, but rather being watched, inspected and recorded all the time; they (we) are reduced to appearances, to be scanned and scrutinized by anonymous and unseen authorities.””(1) Higher-ed marketing efforts construct women as objects to be surveilled, and create expectations that we should always be performing for the hegemonic male gaze. Photographers also scrutinize every image they take and they choose to highlight the one that is not only going to best sell the university, but also represent the expected scripts for a pretty college girl . This matters for my project because even as I seek to change the girls on grass trope, I must also reckon with the reality that all images of women will be used to sell a narrative of the university. The intent of my work is to make the story more expansive, and to create space for all identities to be authentically represented.

In (not) Getting Paid to do What You Love, Writer Brooke Erin Duffy makes the point, “the gendered history of the producer/consumer binary is a multifarious one, structured through evolving norms about what women’s social positioning within various spheres, most especially the public and private domain” (43) So if we reposition women in this way, it needs to be part of a deep reform kind of social change and not come out as leveraging authenticity for a boost in social standing for the university. In fact, the “real woman” narrative that many companies employ in an effort to celebrate “all women” is problematic. “This label--confounding as it is--- implies a veneration of aesthetics that reside at the margins of hegemonic beauty culture.” (Duffy

44) The underlying statement here is that some women are more real or trying to negotiate what it means to be a real woman. To return to Starhawk , being a real woman is just something that inherently exists any way that a woman chooses to be and realness does not need to be earned, but can certainly be celebrated. Therefore, marketing materials should reveal that reality, not construct a different one.

PART FIVE: The project in action.

My project involved looking at many university websites in areas that dealt with campus life, academics, admissions, and campus culture. I do not call out one university over another because I believe the problem to be systemic across all universities. I did however find one university that fit well for the need of a mini-case study in how women are positioned within academic marketing for universities. For this particular institution, the images to follow are what they use to visually represent the kinds of majors you can pursue. For each example I have a small explainer of the issues I see as it relates to the construction of women. The overarching problem here is which majors seem like they are positioned for women and which seem only accessible to men.

Mini Case-Study



Engineering

Engineering

| Image 1:

For their engineering program, they are showing highly technical imagery, but there are no women present. This feels exclusionary. |



Pre-Health Professions Program

| Image 2:

Now we see women in Pre-Health. While it is nice to see representation of women in medicine, they are positioned almost off frame, looking very diminutive and the male is the center of this image and the one clearly with knowledge. |



Interdisciplinary
Studies

Arts Management and Entrepreneurship

| Image 3:

We see a woman centered by herself with no men holding power over her or the image. At closer look, it is clear why she is granted space. This image tells me that it's ok if women are in charge of ceramics, namely, bowls and plates, things akin to a woman's place in the kitchen. |



Food, Food Systems and Culture

| Image 4:

This image is not even subtle. While it is allowed to be all women, the program is food and food culture. This is a clear nod to the hegemonic ideals around gender. |



Art History

Art History

| Image 5:

Here we have images of individuals who might identify either as women or non-binary. While It is nice to see representation like this, this makes it seem like it can only happen in the weird world of art. |



Women, Gender, and
Sexuality Studies

Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

| Image 6:

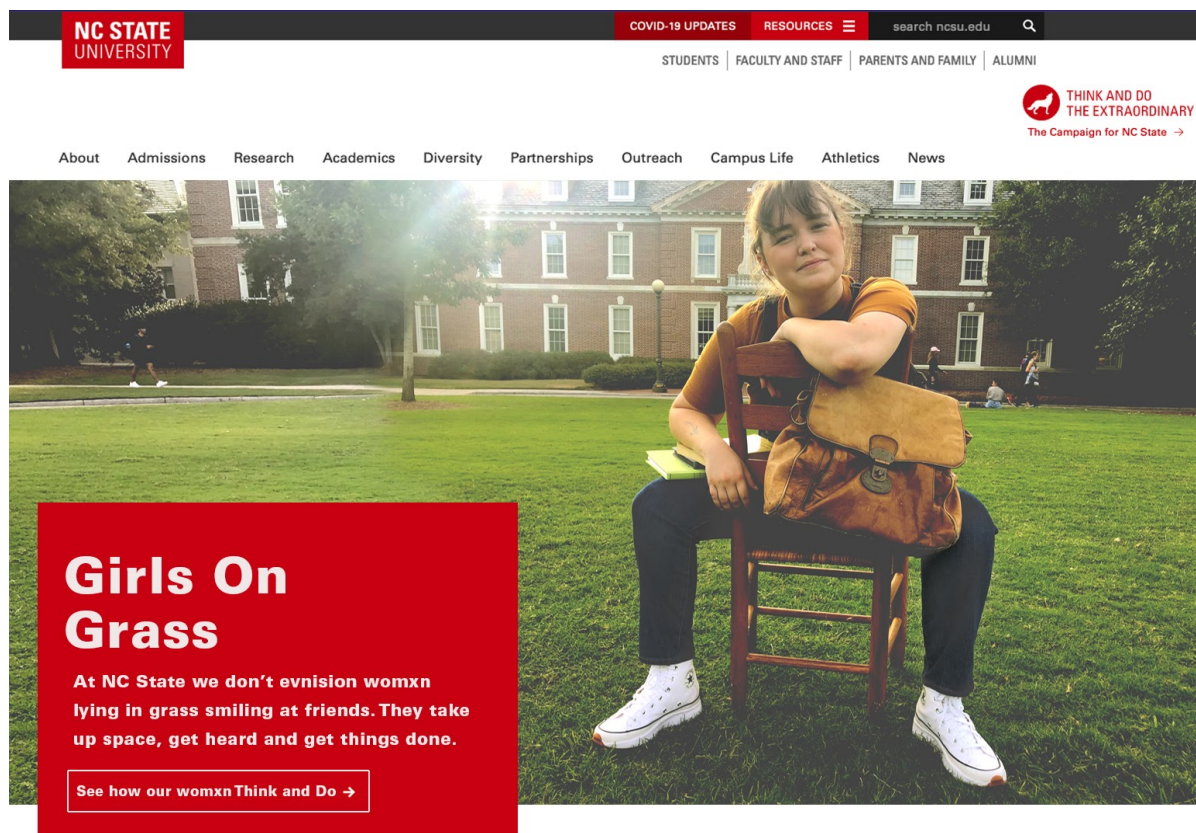
This image has nice diversity in race and gender presentation. Upon further examination, we see that the real focus of the image is the woman who has an off-shoulder garment posed in a slightly alluring way. While women should not be objectified for clothing choice, it feels like this was a conscious decision of photographer and designer to use this image in a way that does objectify. |

Conclusion

The images to follow are my own and include a visual pitch for the change I wish to see in higher-ed. One thing to note is that with the COVID-19 pandemic, gathering students and being able to film on campus was hindered. I hope in the future to expand upon the photographs that follow once access opens again. By intentionally seeking out a range of women from traditionally feminine presentations to more modern non-binary presentation, my hope with this project is to open space for the way that more accurately represents the range of how all women present. Beyond challenging gender presentations based on appearance alone, I am also taking on other aspects of how women are constructed in higher-ed marketing materials. For example, I am exploring framing of women in an image. If a woman is alone, my intent is to make her the dominant part of the frame and if she is with others, I am interested in making sure there is an equitable visual balance. Whether framed alone or with others, I want to keep it clear that women have agency and power in whatever the setting of the image. Another of the aspects I am looking ensuring that we as university marketers create more realistic depictions of the academic

activities women are engaged in. If a woman is in a high-tech field such as engineering, then she should be shown in proper contexts to that field.

The girls on grass trope provides a good foundation for discussing the types of narratives in higher-ed institutions that I want my research to change. The students, staff, faculty of a university are not the stories that they tell, they are the stories that the institution creates. We as marketers have the room and power to change this to align with stories that women might be happy to talk about themselves. In my work, I want women to take up space, challenge the camera, the viewer and the hegemonic conventions to show that they do more than just read magazines, socialize and look pretty. They get things done.



NC STATE UNIVERSITY

COVID-19 UPDATES RESOURCES search ncsu.edu

STUDENTS FACULTY AND STAFF PARENTS AND FAMILY ALUMNI

THINK AND DO THE EXTRAORDINARY
The Campaign for NC State →

About Admissions Research Academics Diversity Partnerships Outreach Campus Life Athletics News

Girls On Grass

At NC State we don't envision womxn lying in grass smiling at friends. They take up space, get heard and get things done.

See how our womxn Think and Do →

| This photograph and text copy created by me and plugged into the NC State web template is a pitch for a better way to be more expansive in depicting how all women show up |



| Photographs and design by me as a mock-up of a possible banner a university could use to start displaying the importance of pronouns |

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