

“If It's ‘Unnatural,’ Why is it Normal?”: Investigating the Role of Media and Sport in Normalizing Conformity to Orthodox Gender Roles

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Original Project



Abstract

Despite its unfairness, individuals who do not conform to their gender assigned at birth risk exclusion and ostracization. This facet of society and how it relates to sport was examined through a descriptive analysis of a 2009 documentary, *The Codes of Gender*, deconstructing implicit gender roles in advertising, and a 2023 qualitative study investigating gender role socialization of adult male, Canadian, hockey players. Ultimately, symmetry was found between both sources, revealing common themes of athlete socialization, including bullying and hazing, mirroring roles and concepts portrayed in commercial media.

Purpose

This project sought to understand how sport as a cultural institution, in conjunction with media portrayals of gender, implicitly reinforces conformity to orthodox gender role ideology.

Process

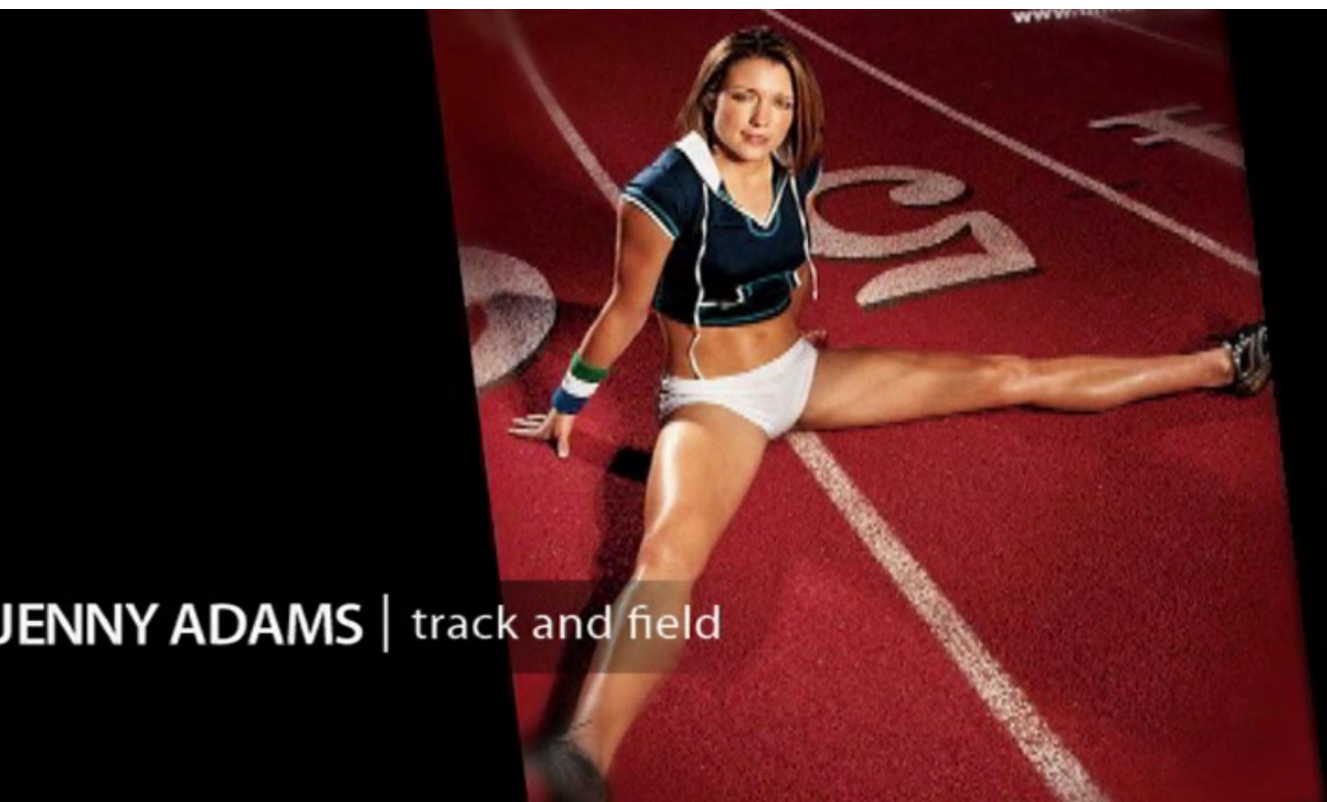


Figure 1. Still from Jhally, *The Codes of Gender* (56:49)



Figure 2. Still from Jhally, *The Codes of Gender* (56:53)

- Film, *The Codes of Gender* (Jhally, 2009), and a qualitative study “Sexism in Men’s Hockey Culture” (Fowler et al. 2023) were analyzed.
- Results of film analysis compared to research findings.
- “Inspirations” and “Inequalities” in sport extracted from film and organized into a table
- Findings from both sources were synthesized to better understand how sport and media work together to reinforce orthodox gender role ideology.

Results

Inspirations

- Spoke of how transgender people breaking down barriers by “going beyond the [gender] binary”
 - Sex as a biological characteristic and gender expression as cultural
- Gave example of women portrayed as “action heroes” in media = active and in control of their surroundings.

Inequalities

- Illustrated how media advertisements very often frame Society = singular way to be feminine or masculine, only designated groups are allowed to be either
- Advertising → “hyper-masculinity” and “hyper-femininity” are idealized and the only correct way for people to perform supposed gender roles.
- Referred to research showing men who commit violence against women target based on proximity to hyper-feminine ideals
 - Given “non-verbal cues”
- Boys push through to manhood; girls stay in girlhood.
 - Media landscape → infantilization of women through childish poses
 - Men are portrayed using tough and dominating poses and action shots

Table 1. Results from the Film Content Analysis and Their Implications

The table above shows a common theme in how the media shapes the narrative and perception of gender roles. On one hand, women may be portrayed as agents of their own lives in action movies, but female athletes can have their agency stripped away in ways that male athletes do not. This legitimizes “punishing or correcting” rejection of feminine softness or masculine dominance (Fowler et al., 2023): For example, bullying, hazing, or hyper-masculine/feminine advertisements.

Conclusion

- Athlete socialization events found in the 2023 study by Fowler et al. mirrored expectations highlighted in advertising shown in the 2009 film.
- Young men and others are socialized into hegemonic masculinity at a very young age through the media they consume, which compounds with sport culture.
- When advertisements present men as tough, strong, and dominant, with women as soft, delicate, and subservient, these roles are normalized. Any challenges to this may lead to misogynistic, sexist, and transphobic bullying in sport.
- Many male athletes recognize something is wrong with this behavior but are unable to articulate specific ties to gender roles and how these issues harm women and gender minorities.

REFERENCES

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