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Performing gender in postures

Everyday life is a stage on which we present ourselves¹

In this IZI study, teenagers from different countries and cultures were asked to decode photos with gender-specific gestures and to perform their own gender in sitting postures.

In an international IZI study on gender performance and the decoding of gender-specific gestures conducted in 2007, we questioned 263 young people from South Africa, Germany, the USA, Hungary, and Columbia. In the qualitative part 95 teenagers from South Africa, Qatar, Germany, and Hungary were interviewed. The average age of the participants was 13 years. The focus of the study was on cultural differences in decoding gender-specific gestures and on whether gender-specific, cultural differences can be found in the way the teenagers presented themselves sitting.

Gender-specific gestures

What are the gender-specific, stereotypical gestures we consistently encounter in everyday life and in the representations in the media? Media representations of gender in particular tend to absorb the socially existing role categories "man" and "woman" and reinforce them almost without exception with stereotypical gender role presentations (see table 1).²

Decoding gender: typically male, typically female?

A selection of these gestures was used as a basis for the compilation of 12 photos which were used to test to what extent young people perceive these gestures as typically male or female.

Man	Woman
Steady, stable posture (symbolic enlargement, accenting one's standpoint)	Frail, crestfallen, and bent posture (symbolic diminishment, attempt to please the other by adaptation)
Space-consuming gestures (symbolic enlargement, gestural attempt to intimidate or belittle the other)	Space-minimising behaviour (symbolically keeping a small profile, not providing the other with a target, gestural demonstration of submission and adaptation to their space)
Posture of ease, only temporary/partial body tension (symbolic statement that one is in charge of the situation)	Physical containment (feeling of insecurity in the situation, always prepared to re-adapt to the situation)
Extending body to maximum height, pumped-up chest (display behaviour)	Crookedness, contortion, ducking (symbolic diminishment, e. g. through bent head)

Table 1: Examples of stereotypical postures

Each of the gender gestures displayed in these 12 photos, whether they were coded as male or female, was performed by both a man and a woman. For each picture the teenagers had to answer the question: "Is this rather typically male or female?" The response was given using a 5-level scale. Additionally, the qualitative part of the study enquired about "why" in the context of a group discussion.

Out of these 12 photos the following 4 were regarded by the teenagers from all participating countries as those representing the most typically male or female gestures (see ill. 1 to 4).

As an explanation in the qualitative part the respondents repeatedly cited their familiarity with those same ges-

tures from the media. The teenagers reasoned that ill. 1 represented a typically female posture: "Because the way she twists herself is just like in the commercials" (boy, Germany). "This is quite feminine. The arms and legs and the way she puts her arm around herself" (boy, Hungary).

Or, with regard to ill. 2: "The way he sits is so casual. I've seen that in the commercials" (boy, Germany). "This is typically male, his style, he's so cool and casual" (girl, Hungary).

Ill. 3 displays a man holding a woman. The teenagers assess this situation as typically male and reason: "He protects her, this reminds me of Sarah Connor and Marc Terenzi [a currently popular German celebrity couple]" (boy, Germany). Alterna-



Ill. 1-4: Most typically male or female gestures



Ill. 5-8: Photo series Ursula (left to right: questions 1-4)

tively, they draw on everyday life observations: “A man would probably more likely put his hand on his buttocks and I think a woman would put her legs closer together and she would be more reserved, a little more bashful” (boy, Germany).

Ill. 4 shows a woman leaning back against a wall. All in all, her posture takes up little space, is very closed, and unstable. A girl from Germany explains: “You can see that a lot among fashion models in magazines.”

Overall, in their reasoning of why certain images were regarded as typically male or female, the young people talk about well-known media presentations as well as their culturally moulded knowledge of gender roles.

Encoding gender

The mimicry of certain gender role models can become part of our self-presentation and body language. For this reason, as part of the qualitative study the young people were asked to give a presentation of themselves sitting. After the initial invitation “Take a seat, please!” (1), they were asked to give a self-presentation focussing on their country of origin “How do girls/boys from ... sit?” (2) and “How would you never sit?” (3) and “What is your favourite way of sitting?” (4). The young people were photographed in those 4 situations. The international comparison of 95 children from South Africa, Qatar, Germany, and Hungary reveals a cross-national body language norm. While girls tend to assume a closed, space-minimising sitting position, boys display a more space-consuming

and open posture. The analysis also points out that across national borders the response to the question “How would you never sit?” entailed in most cases a differentiation from the opposite sex. In other words, boys assumed a posture which for them was coded as female, and girls adopted what seemed to them a masculine sitting posture (see ill. 7). Having said that, we can, however, also discern culture-specific, individual self-presentations.

Upon the initial invitation the South African girl (see ill. 5-8), leaning back, adopts a relaxed posture. When she receives the open invitation to perform, “How do girls from South Africa sit?”, she moves to the very



Ill. 9-12: Photo series Hammad (left to right: questions 1-4)

front of the chair, raises her upper body, and puts her crossed arms, which are now tightened closely against the body, into her lap. She appears to be very alert and thus exhibits more female connoted behaviour (see table 1). Ill. 7 (“How would you never sit?”) shows her mimic typically male connoted space-consuming gestures in that she opens her legs in a symmetrical fashion, upper body fully raised, keeping direct eye contact without showing a big smile. Question 4 has her leave the chair,

adopting a rather closed posture, her legs crossed and her shoulders bent forward.

The postures seen in ill. 9-12 show a Qatari boy and his symbolic enlargement. His body volume is raised through the way he holds his arms and legs in situations 1 and 2; he exhibits sovereignty and relaxation. Question 3 sees him present a bearing deemed, from his perspective, socially undesirable: putting his feet up on the seating surface, pulling his legs close to the body. Here, social desirability is placed before gender consciousness. In the final sitting position he chooses a posture coded as traditional: he kneels down on the floor, his torso slightly bent forward, and puts on an engaging smile.

These case examples illustrate, on the one hand, that each young person is moulded differently, on both an individual and a cultural level, when his or her gestures are concerned. On the other hand, however, the young people are gesturally influenced by role models and aware of stereotypes presented in the media. ■

NOTES

- 1 Goffman, E. (1959). *The representation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: The Overlook Press.
- 2 Wenger, E. S. (2000). *Wie im richtigen Fernsehen: Die Inszenierung der Geschlechter in der Fernsehfiction*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac.

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