Gender Identity and Perceptions of Femininity in Everyday Life: a Multi Country Study of Contemporary Young Female Achievers

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INTRODUCTION

For the first time in recorded history large numbers of young women have the 
opportunity to strongly determine their lifestyles and gender roles in a wide variety 
of life domains (Solomon 2004). These domains include romantic relationships, 
family, (un)paid work, formal education, politics, religion and consumption. Statistics support this idea. Time survey 
udies in many countries show that women spend much less time doing household work. The average age for marriage and 
birth of first child among educated women is increasing to thirty years or higher 
(www.un.org; www.ssb.no). Female fertility and labour force participation have 
shifted from a significant negative to a positive correlation (Ahn & Mira 2000). At 
Norwegian universities young women outnumber the men (www.ssb.no). Young 
women are no longer expected to choose marriage or parenthood over education and 
career. Instead they can simultaneously participate in a large scale in public and 
private spheres. These trends exist in many parts of the world including Asia (Tu & 
surprisingly substantial interest exists in how young women are reacting to this 
situation (e.g. Kacen 2000; Scott 2005; Wolf 1990).

In this study we explore this situation by studying contemporary young female 
achievers - defined as young women who have excelled academically throughout the 
educational system, who have finished tertiary degrees at a university, and who 
aspire to a career in a competitive work 
environment. Contemporary young female achievers constitute a historically unique 
cohort because of its significance in size compared to young male achievers in the 
same age cohort. Moreover, these young women can be seen as mainstream opinion 
leaders for other women, the behaviour of whom is likely to be indicative of other 
young women’s behaviour in the future. 
Our study report how three young female achievers from three different nations today 
perceive their own and others’
femininity/masculinity including physical appearance; how they choose to enact a variety of gender roles and which consumption practices they believe to be gendered. The paper proceeds as follows. Our theoretical framework and research questions are based on a literature review of gender identity, femininity, and role theory. The methodological procedures - interviews, observation, transcription and coding - are explained. Analysis of the findings is couched in the terms of our stated research questions.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Our literature review highlights facets of gendered behaviour that are salient to our research interests. Gender identity theory provides inventories of feminine and masculine personality traits (e.g., Bem 1974). Gender role theory provides concepts for understanding the dynamics of multiple role identities (e.g., Gecas 1982; Stenius, Veysey, Hamilton & Anderson 2005). Theories on physical appearance and femininity highlight the role of the female body in gender identity construction (e.g., French 2002). Our analysis is also informed by knowledge from other sources, notably literary works that are widely available (e.g. The Beauty Myth by Naomi Woolf 1990; Machiavelli for Women by Harriet Rubin 1997; and Fresh Lipstick by Linda Scott 2005).

Gender Identity

**Personality Traits.** Gender identity represents an individual’s self-perceived (implicit as well as explicit) endorsement of personality traits deemed by wider society to characterise masculinity and femininity (Auster & Ohm 2000). Gender identity is socially constructed, being a consequence of interpersonal influence experienced in contexts associated with family, religion, education, the media (Kacen 2000), social class (Schaninger & Buss 1986) and ethnicity (Raffaelli & Ontai 2004). Physical appearance drives the nature of gender related influences to which a person is subject, hence biological sex correlates closely (but not always) with gender identity. Gender identity resists change, as a result of developing primarily during intense periods of socialisation in early childhood (Katz 1986).

Gender identity is conceptualised as two independent dimensions; femininity and masculinity that underpin a person’s self image (Bem 1974). Based on self-ratings, individuals can be categorised into four groups: androgynous, masculine, feminine and undifferentiated. Traits traditionally associated with feminine and masculine gender identity appear in Table 1. Traditionally masculine traits are valued more than feminine traits (Kacen 2000). A person’s own perception of the extent to which they are masculine or feminine influences the likelihood of their reporting behaviours traditionally ascribed to either gender. Once a person is classified by others (including themselves as a third person) as masculine or feminine (Biernat 1991), they are expected to be masculine or feminine in other ways. (See Table 1 here.)

Recent research suggests that traditional notions of gender identity are changing. Auster and Ohm (2000) find that young well-educated American women regard their ideal selves as comprising a mix of 15-20 masculine and feminine traits. Of these, eight are traditionally masculine traits, notably independence, individualism, defending one’s beliefs and self-reliance. Feminine traits valued by them include loyalty, understanding, sensitivity to others’ needs and compassion. In a similar vein, young tertiary educated American men, see their ideal selves comprising a comparable combination of masculine and feminine traits.

Additional research provides mixed support for these findings. For example, Hupfer (2002) observes that females (especially
females who identify as feminine) are attracted to advertising content featuring appeals to the self, in particular individual achievement, as well as caring for others; in contrast they observe that males tend to be attracted only to appeals to the self.

**Gender Roles.** Creating, negotiating and juggling multiple roles and role-identities can be seen as the quintessence of contemporary women (Ahuvia 2005, Thompson 1996). Role identities are particularly dynamic during certain life stage transitions, such as the transition from adolescent to adult. During transitional stages individuals need to define how they want to enact their roles according to desired selves (Arnould, Price & Zinmikhan 2004). In addition to personal transitional phases theorists propose that a substantial structural shift has recently occurred - away from an institutionally and towards a more internally driven sense of self (Gecas 1982). In changing environments, redefinition of self is typically necessary for successful social functioning and survival (Gecas 1982). The shift from stable and institutionalized ascribed adult roles for women implies that today’s young women have greater liberty and greater individual responsibility in composing their feminine gender role identities. An additional consequence is that females most likely to achieve what they desire are likely to be aware of which behaviours best serve their purposes when enacting their gender roles. For example a young woman might act in deferential way with her parents yet when aspiring to a management position at work act much more assertively to communicate readiness and the competence and intelligence necessary for the position.

In the past, researchers have viewed the adoption of multiple roles negatively (Goode 1960). They believe that commitment to each role necessarily detracts from resources available to another role; each person has a fixed amount of energy to spend on their various roles. Too many roles are likely to result in an inability to successfully carry out the duties assigned with each role (Frone, Yardley & Markel 1997). However in recent times, an alternate explanation, that is, role accumulation theory suggests that beneficial effects result from commitment to multiple roles. Multiple work and personal roles provide varied opportunities for satisfactions and pleasure, thereby enhancing psychological functioning and self-efficacy. Skills and learning acquired from one role can be applied to another (Marks & MacDermid 1996).

The extent to which a set of roles provides positive affect (e.g., happiness, joy, humour, comfort) is likely to impact upon the benefits people derive from multiple roles. Rothbard (2001) found that women’s positive family affect associated with greater work absorption. Positive mood states result in people making connections between ideas more easily and being more physically active (Isen 1987). Multiple selves lived through multiple roles can therefore be seen as resource for young women to build self esteem and self-efficacy: defined as greater belief about their capabilities and control over their life (Arnould, Price & Zinkman 2004; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer & King 2002; Thompson 1996). While earlier generations of women had restricted role domains contemporary women would have a larger “space” to define their gender roles. Exploring how young women navigate this gendered space promotes insights into how they deal with multiple roles and their associated contradictions.

**Physical Appearance.** Although historically women have worried about their physical appearance (Shilling 1993), for the past century or so, they have paid special attention to their bodies (Blumberg 1998). This pre-occupation has been accompanied by the adoption of beauty and dietary regimes requiring substantial time, self-control and money and subsequent display of hitherto hidden body parts such as
breasts, abdomens and legs (Blumberg 1998). Research commonly highlights negative outcomes of women’s focus on their bodies such as unhappiness, negative perceptions of self and eating disorders (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn & Twenge 1998). However French (2002) finds that for women, not men, significant earnings premiums exist for physical attractiveness. This finding garners support from a swathe of studies suggesting that more physically attractive people are perceived as having more desirable personalities, higher intelligence, greater mentally stability and hence are offered assistance more readily, secure better jobs and have more interpersonal influence than others (Dion, Bershied & Walster 1972). What is beautiful is good or better!

Wolf (1990) points out that over the past thirty years affluent well-educated women have experienced more pressure than at any other point in history to comply with feminine beauty ideals. She posits that the quality called ‘beauty’ is more an imperative for women than for men, since women’s beauty is perceived to correlate to their fertility (Wolf 1990 p. 12). It is also argued that due to men’s traditional sexual objectification of women, heterosexual women regard their physical bodies as a primary resource in gaining a sense of identity, accomplishment, and control (e.g., Claude-Pierre 1997).

Research Questions. The prior literature review directs our exploratory inquiry regarding young female achievers: 1] What do they consider feminine or unfeminine/masculine; 2] how does their gender identity reflect from specific characteristics on which they place more or less value, 3] how do they negotiate and enact roles in their current role set, 4] what role does physical appearance play in their self-expression, and 5] how does certain consumption practices relate to their gender identity and behaviour. The young female achievers in our study can be seen as representatives for a new cohort of women at a transitory point in life. They have to make strategic decisions about career, family, and future life style. Throughout our exploratory analysis we have put effort in communicating these young women’s own words in order to capture their true perceptions and outlook on life.

METHODOLOGY

Sample. Three women aged 25-30 years, who reside in Oslo (Norway), Shanghai (China) and Sydney (Australia) respectively comprise our convenience sample. Global sampling frames to explore identity formation and change across post-modern multicultural societies are commonly used in ethnography and cultural geography (e.g., Ley 1996). All informants are well-educated (with tertiary degrees in medicine, arts/business and business/law respectively); and notably achieved outstanding grades during their formal tertiary studies. Their employment status is as follows: 1) medical doctor, 2) unemployed and actively seeking a position in event management, public relations or marketing, and 3) science project officer who plans to be a lawyer. Hence, they are at similar stages in their life cycles, in particular making choices about job and career for the first time and speculating about sexual relationships, marriage and children with little past experience. Despite these similarities, their family backgrounds differ as follows:

Data Collection. We interviewed and video-taped each informant over several days at home. We observed their interaction with relatives, lovers, and friends and their living quarters, possessions and places of leisure and work whenever possible. Each interview was transcribed in full. The data collection instrument comprised a standardised interview framework of open-ended questions. Topics covered in the interview were wide ranging including self-concept,
gender roles, perceptions of femininity and masculinity, work, play, social relationships, consumption, physical appearance, and life history. All interviews took place during spring (March and April) 2005. The two authors analysed the interview transcripts separately and together. Codes derived from the literature review formed the basis of the analysis. Disagreements between coders were resolved by discussion and reference to the literature. Although the small convenience sample inhibits our offering solid generalisations about CYFAs, the richness of our data allow us to cross validate information from several methods (interviews, observation, social interaction, and possessions).

FINDINGS

Feminine Traits and Behaviour

Despite differences in their country of residence and ethnic origins, informants’ views regarding what they consider to be (un) feminine and masculine personality traits are remarkably similar. Significantly Bem’s (1974, see Table 1) list of feminine and masculine role traits strongly reflects their answers - a trait inventory list developed at the time when their mothers were young. Shanghai’s response to what she considers feminine and masculine exemplifies their stance: “Being nice, smiling, kind and being soft….not really confrontational… a competitive side is more masculine…the feminine side [looks] for win-win situations. They are looking for, ‘you are good and I am good too.’ But men probably with the masculine side, is ‘I have to beat you. You have to lose. I win’ (Shanghai).”

Other informant responses are equally illustrative, emanating from discussions of femininity with respect to mother, grandmother, female best friend and female celebrity. In this context, feminine behaviour strongly associates with stoicism, empathy and care for the welfare of others: “I like Audrey Hepburn. She is very feminine…. she is very caring. She gives all her energy to her family and bring up her kids and during her old age she acted as the ambassador for the UN and visiting all those poor countries and passed love and hope to children” (Shanghai). Creating a warm home environment is an example of caring for others: “I like colour in general and I think that’s quite a feminine thing. When I look at boys rooms everything is black and wooden and I find that too dull” (Sydney). Another thoughtful act is ensuring that romantic relationships run smoothly: “…it’s always the woman that ends up she’s really the leader of the relationship…woman have to teach men…if the mothers don’t teach their sons then often it’s the girlfriend or the wife teaching their boyfriends” (Sydney).

Additional feminine behaviours include effectively juggling numerous roles (Thompson 1996), such as earning a decent living through paid employment, bringing up children, and maintaining a clean and tidy home. In sum, informants’ responses suggest that a feminine person should be able to show vulnerability but at the same time be strong enough to maintain multiple feminine roles in everyday life.

Their descriptions of unfeminine behaviour in women tend to anchor in public persons such as celebrities and politicians. Jennifer Lopez is not perceived as feminine because she appears spoiled, unapproachable, self-absorbed and tough (Sydney). A female Norwegian politician is described as unfeminine because she has a masculine body language, makes demands and does not care of what other people think (Oslo). Hilary Clinton is similarly regarded, as well as disliked, because she is perceived as confrontational, calculating and that she sacrifices love for ambition (Shanghai). Unfeminine behaviour or personality is seen both as lack of desirable feminine traits as well as presence of undesirable masculine traits.
With respect to feminine physical appearance, all informants report that multiple ideals of female beauty exist. In particular, they exhibit an understanding probably common to educated consumers (Solomon 2004) that ideals of beauty are not fixed, changing as a consequence of variation in socio-historic context (i.e., place and time period a person lives). Shanghai and Sydney believe that slimness is preferable. Oslo, perhaps not surprisingly as a doctor of medicine, use the phrase ‘lack of obesity’ at the links to better health outcomes. She elaborates that an appearance of health and vigour is important. Oslo and Shanghai suggest that beauty can originate from within rather than external attributes; notably through the expression of confidence and acceptance of one’s natural physical form.

Despite favouring slimness in themselves, our informants indicate that plumpness and/or muscularity in other women is acceptable, for example: “I think all people like curves. Women are born with beautiful curves” (Shanghai). “If someone looks sporty or voluptuous or something I think they are all pretty in their own way” (Sydney). This apparent contradiction suggests that women might proffer politically correct views as a means of currying social approval while concurrently ensuring that they manifest the most venerated form of female physical self in mainstream circles and therefore win the femininity game. More importantly they realise that men prefer physical features of women that are linked to upper social status, which in affluent countries includes slimness (Buss 1998).

Contrary to recent research (Kacen 2000), the above discussion suggests that young female achievers have very traditional perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Women considered feminine are both admired and used as role models (social friend, mother, and celebrity). One of the most prominent feminine features mentioned is taking care of social relationships. “I look around at my friends and family and the men and the women and the relationships that they have and I see how everything really depends on the woman” (Sydney). Oslo’s response supports this: In my family women know the time schedule of the family and I kind of follow this up in my own relationship. I’m the one who knows what we’re going to do on Friday and I’m the one who knows who has a birthday and who has to buy presents for it. It’s been like that with my father and mother and certainly in my grandfather and grandmother’s relationship – that the man is dictated in a way by a woman... That’s a woman’s quality that I see around me in all generations”. Shanghai use a movie metaphor to explain this: “Just like I watch the movie My Big Fat Greek Wedding, they said, in a Greek family, the man is the head, but the woman is the neck. They move the head the way they want in a smart way”. According to these quotes, women believe that being feminine is being both socially responsible and subtly powerful in their direction of men. In the next sections we will analyse to what degree women choose to live up to these ideals in their own gender roles and everyday activities.

Enactment of Role Set

In the interviews we asked the respondents how they behaved in different social contexts such as family, social life, work and leisure. The answer from Oslo is representative in this regard: “I think that my femininity shows on different levels, depending on what I do. I have met people when I’ve been walking been hiking in the mountains and they would see me as a power woman who is not feminine at all. And they wouldn’t believe that I love dressing up in huge dresses and love going to parties in stilettos. So I think I have different sides that collide and I realise that I surprise people sometimes. I can take off
all my femininity and be one of the guys and still I can put it on again in different social settings, and use my femininity very deliberately. I think I have a quite feminine appearance but it’s not all about appearance, it’s about how I feel.”

This quote illustrates several mechanisms in manufacturing a feminine self. First it expresses a high consciousness of operating in different social settings with different demands and options in how she enacts her role. Second it reflects a sense of flexibility or freedom to choose how she can enact a role. Third, the quote expresses two types of strategies in role enactment. One is choosing to be predominantly feminine or masculine in a role, the other is to combine masculine and feminine traits in one role. The three respondents were very similar on all these aspects in their role enactment. However, the way they chose to define the roles in their role set varied according to their social setting and life situation. In analysing this we used a version of the Bem (1974) trait inventory modified according to our findings and recorded feminine and masculine traits in each role in their role set: Daughter/family; Romantic partner; Social friend; and Work role. By identifying the presence or absence of feminine and masculine traits in their interview transcripts we categorized their different role strategies according to the four types: Androgynous (high masculine/high feminine), masculine (high masculine/low feminine), feminine (low masculine/high feminine) and undifferentiated (low masculine/low feminine). Figure 1 is a visual configuration of their role strategies. (See figure 1 here.)

*Androgynous Role Enactment.* Three role adaptations— social friend and daughter for Oslo and romantic partner for Sydney are categorized as androgynous. Oslo explains her androgynous role adaptation by defining one role into several sub-roles. In her roles as social friend she has one type of role enactment with female friends and another type of role in relation to her male friends. With female friends she likes to go shopping and to talk about substantive matters. With her male friends she typically goes hiking in the mountains and she enjoys enacting her competitive and masculine sides. In her family roles as daughter and sister Oslo reports three types of role enactments— little spoiled girl because they love her anyway, grown up adult taking responsibility for the welfare of the family, and the strong and competitive sports person. She is very aware of role expectations to be caring for her parents, but feels free to enact many sides of her self in the family setting. Her competitive side is especially enacted in relation to her brother when they compete in sport. In this context she perceives herself as being more assertive and persistent than her brother.

Sydney has adapted to the challenges of having a boyfriend who works very long hours by taking leadership of several life domains in their relationship. While she in general is very explicit about presenting herself as a very feminine person in her relationship she acts as a leader, defines their ambitions for their relationship, is very analytical about their relationship and their aspirations, defends her opinions strongly, is very independent and travels the world, often alone. She explains that she has progressively displayed more of these behaviours over the course of her six year relationship with her boyfriend. She attributes this development to a growing independence and confidence in her ability to make her own choices; arguably a more masculine than feminine stance. In a similar vein she finds her boyfriend’s recent “clingy” behaviour annoying: “He wants me to call him a lot of times during the day. He doesn’t want me to go overseas for ten months so if I push that too much then I think it will become impossible for him to handle because I think as I have become stronger he seems to have become weaker.” Despite this behavior, she displays what could be construed as a typically feminine
distaste for his strong career focus including his working ten-twelve hours seven days per week and rigid over bearing manner during discussions.

Informants’ androgynous enactment of gender roles suggests that androgyny is likely to be a more effective approach for women in some situations, rather than others. In particular, the development of androgyny by a female in a relationship with a male romantic partner might lead to conflict and relationship failure. A male could possibly interpret strong masculine behaviour as a surrogate indicator of other more masculine characteristics traditionally not regarded as attractive in women, such as a lack of loyalty, a refusal to defer to him and at worst unfaithfulness and promiscuity (Buss 1998).

**Masculine Role Enactment.** This type of role enactment – a combination of more masculine and fewer feminine traits – was identified in the following instances: 1) Shanghai daughter, 2) Oslo romantic partner and 3) Sydney employee.

Shanghai experienced her parents’ divorce at a time when divorce was not common in China. She decided as a young child to help her mother so that they could have a happy life in spite of social constraints. “So by age of eleven, I said to my mum, I know you were not happy. If you really want to get a divorce, do it. At least one out of us three will get happiness. I don’t mind, I will grow up and leave this family but if we live like this, none of us will be happy. I feel I did a great decision for my mom during the period of the divorce which lasted two years. My mom suffered under a lot of pressure from her peers and from her work. I had to act strong for her and she needed someone to talk to and I am the insider who knows how my dad acts and so on. But that helped me grow up quickly.” Her care for her mother is feminine but the way she enacts her caring role is more masculine taking responsibility for the well-being and ambitions of both herself and her mother. She left home early and went far from home to high school and university and did very well. Her responses express a pragmatic and analytical perspective on how she and her mother could achieve their goals. Already from an early age she had defined her role as a daughter to be both responsible and independent.

Oslo has been in a steady relationship for two and a half years and is very happy with her role as a romantic partner. She said that her relationship made her feel more feminine than she ever had felt before. However, when we look at how she enacts her role as a romantic partner the trait profile is more masculine than feminine. Similarly to Shanghai’s role as daughter, Oslo enacts her feminine social responsibility as a romantic partner by being assertive, the initiator and organizer. Moreover she is the most athletic one and is more economically successful and independent. Her boyfriend was the more caring, impulsive, and unstructured of the two. The gender roles are reversed and she was happy with this. She was looking for these qualities in a man. “I get the chill of very predictable people - and I might be very predictable myself. So now I’ve found this guy who’s totally unpredictable and a handful sometimes but I knew exactly when I met him that this is something I’ve been looking for.” When socialising she likes to talk about what she regards as serious rather than superficial matters such as shopping or weight-watching. “Sometimes I feel that in bigger groups there is nothing going on here. We aren’t talking about real things. We’re just talking about shopping or consuming stuff and about weight watching and then I can be very angry and go home and think, ‘what am I doing with these people?’ so some people see me as challenging in the sense that I want to have real discussions and real talks. Guys have always found me challenging because I haven’t managed to be as giggly or as sweet as many of my girlfriends. When I grew up
I always... people always just said, ‘why can you just relax and have fun?’ ‘Why do you always have to be so moralistic or be so eager to discuss...’ so I think I chased off some guys.” Her descriptions of her self as challenging and argumentative in relation to men in general and as romantic partner suggest that she is comfortable to wear the pants in relationship with men.

Sydney, very confident in her professional skills, enacts her more masculine side at work. She wants to show off her ambitions, analytical capabilities, and her ability to work independently and to exceed expectations of the boss. “I think I am a very good worker. I’m ambitious and I am hard working. I’m also a perfectionist so I like to do it well and I’ll spend a lot of time on it and I don’t mind about that I just want to get it done and want my boss or whoever to be happy with me about it. I don’t need a lot of supervision and I’m quite happy to work on my own. I always tried to exceed expectations and I always tried to do a very good job and I think I was successful at doing that because my boss might have wanted a little one page point form dotted summary about something. Then I would make it more in depth and more detailed so I’ll meet his expectations and exceed them as well.” This can be interpreted as ‘clever girl’ behaviour. However, this young woman expresses strong confidence and independence in executing her work tasks. On one side she wants to please her boss but more importantly she want to use her analytical and professional skill to achieve her own goals. These three examples of masculine biased role enactments emerge from different social and psychological stimuli. Shanghai’s personal ambitions for a meaningful and happy life drive her masculine adaptation to the daughter role. Arguably she realized this very young, which in turn fuelled her successful pursuing ambitions for other life domains. Another adaptation to this role – more caring, submissive, and less ambitious – would have probably ended in a quite different scenario. The masculine role enactment in the romantic partner role (Oslo) is differently motivated. This young woman has been raised very free with opportunity to explore different role domains based on preference. She feels that she needs a correction in her life to become less structured and more impulsive. Hence she finds a boyfriend who can complement her in this regard. In this way she can play out her masculine sides at the same time as she can feel like a woman. Finally, Sydney understands that a predominance of masculine rather than feminine type behaviours allows her to succeed in the professional work domains in which she desires a career.

Despite differences across the three cases, we suggest that women manufacture a more masculine self when they perceive that such an adaptation allows them to enhance an interpersonal relationship that they value, for example with a mother, boyfriend and boss and/or to gain access to scarce resources.

Feminine Role Enactment. We found four examples of predominantly feminine enacted roles in three different role domains: employee, social friend, and daughter. Oslo, who is a doctor, sees herself as a junior at her workplace and chooses to be sensitive to the demands of superiors, subordinates and her patients. She deems it important to be humble and to learn the profession at this stage. This causes her problems particularly in relation to subordinates, and she struggles to find a way to gain the authority she needs to get the assistance necessary for her work role. “I sometimes compensate my lack of knowledge with being the nicest doctor so at least they will feel I am doing my best. Also I feel like I am very much a woman at work. That’s probably the place that I feel my gender is most important because I see my fellow doctors who are men who can just tell a nurse, ‘I want this and this done-can you arrange it?’ Sometimes if I do the
same I get this answer: ‘Well I don’t have time, can you do it yourself?’ or ‘Do we really need to do this now?’ The male doctors just don’t get that kind of comments. It’s probably not only because of gender but I think it’s a mixture between that and me showing my insecurity in a way that it doesn’t make them feel they have to respect me as much, I don’t know. But I’ve had some problems defining my role at work.” Now that she is aware of this she is working to find strategies to regain authority in work relations and deliberately use a more assertive and less feminine way to communicate her needs for professional assistance.

Female friendships, going out at night, and dressing for work are arenas in which Shanghai enacts her feminine traits. “With my female friends I am lively, energetic, and communicative. But with my friends, my active personality, my active side like— I am a comedian. I always bring fun. I would like to make fun of myself, make them happy. Like I say shocking words the girls wouldn’t say and mimicking old teachers or boss and make them laugh and they like me. And sometimes I act mature or give advice. Sometimes if we do have time, we have dinner, go out, talk, and go shopping. All girls enjoy shopping - we are alike... Night is the time for sexy so I will make myself really nice looking and feminine. And if at work I have to wear suits and those boring things, in the night I will try to colour myself out with a dress - anything really feminine.”

Sydney blends her role as daughter and social friend, which is a truly feminine domain for her. “I am very close to my mother. I am an only child so I suppose I am lucky that I am close to my mother because I know a lot of only children feel quite separated from their parents because of the age gap. She is my best friend we quite often do things together we go out to dinner go to the movies probably more so than a lot of my friends would with their mother.” Sydney also explains that her mother is seen as a friend among her female peers. “My mother is also quite popular among my friends who come over here they all often talk to my mum. One of my friends recently said she wanted to come and talk to me and my mum so we talked all three of us together.” Loyalty is important for Sydney in her relationship to friends. She says that it’s more important to her to have fewer friends that she can rely on when something goes wrong and she needs comfort and understanding. She also wants to be there for her friends. “I am really very happy whenever one of my friends has a good success and whenever something goes wrong I feel it deeply as well and I try to help them as much as I can. Sydney has friends for different needs and moods – one friend for laughing and fun and one friend for deeper conversations. She says: “I think you need a balance of different types of friends”.

Informants’ feminine enactment of gender roles suggests that women see heightened femininity as very much belonging to life outside of work. Femininity associates with light hearted fun, conversation, empathy, emotional support, reciprocity, sharing, sensuality, and indulgence. Not surprisingly our respondents did not report examples of undifferentiated role enactment (low feminine and low masculine). These women are highly involved in all the role domains covered. They give each role a lot of reflection and thought and being high achievers on many arenas they put a lot of energy in being good in their different roles.

Gender Preference. We presented the women with a scenario where they could choose their gender in ten lives in the future. Their responses suggest that they believe that men comparatively have greater freedom, experience less complexity in everyday life and lead less stressful lives. Despite expressing these opinions, women appear unwilling to engage in wholesale
adoption of masculine behaviours, inferring that they find only certain aspects of masculine behaviour attractive. They have an ambivalent attitude towards the more fractured lives typical to most women. They perceive that women have more freedom to choose from a variety of roles and hence the opportunity to be fulfilled in many domains. Alternatively they bemoan the lack of status afforded women and the expectation that women must always strive to create social harmony.

Physical appearance

All informants’ appearances reflect specific feminine ideals; notably ideals traditionally reflecting from international advertising and media (Blumberg 1998). They are slim, well groomed, and fashionably dressed. Shanghai and Sydney take special care in presenting themselves as stereotypically heterosexually feminine (McGinnis, Chun & McQuillan 2003). They are svelte rather than muscular, don clothes with floral prints, frills, lace and embroidery and wear make-up and jewellery everyday. Sydney’s responses, in particular, suggest that she aspires to traditional female attractiveness. “We are really talking [feminine] stereo types but…I’ve always had long hair, I’ve always put make up and [before I go out] make sure I don’t have hair in unwanted places…paint my toenails paint my fingernails (Sydney).

In comparison, Oslo is tall and athletic. She dresses casually in jeans combined with a feminine top. She reports regularly playing sport. When asked what she likes about her appearance she states that she enjoys embodying feminine and masculine traits: “I think my build is both strong and feminine at the same time, which is something I like…I’ve got broad shoulders and quite a straight back. I think I look tall and look like I can handle physical challenges. And since I’ve got a narrow waist and relatively broad hips, I also feel feminine, when that’s needed” (Oslo). Oslo’s attitude towards her body reflects the more contemporary ideals for female bodies including high muscle tone and strength (Blumberg 1998).

Informants’ responses regarding what they disliked about their appearance, suggest that they are anxious to appear stereotypically feminine rather than masculine. Sydney aspires to an hour-glass figure: “I’m such a typical girl. I think that my thighs are too big and my bum is too big… I would like to have a flat stomach and I used to have an issue with my breasts because they were too small…I think I am more comfortable now that I was in the past especially thanks to padded bras” (Sydney). Her comments and that of other informants suggests that being physically in proportion is important: “I am happier with my body than if I were bigger or if I had narrow shoulders or other not unhealthy shapes that I still don’t consider as beautiful as those more proportioned. But that’s very subjective and that’s just my personal taste (Oslo), and “What I don’t like in my body… is my calves. In proportion, they are relatively bigger and all those elegant ladies in the magazines have beautiful calves but I don’t” (Shanghai). Preference for a well-proportioned figure suggests that women are aware that males tend to seek symmetry when choosing a mate for breeding. Evolutionary psychology explains that asymmetries are signs of possible health or reproductive deficiencies (Buss 1998).

Compared to other informants, Shanghai makes greater use in her assessment of her physical attractiveness of what she believes men find sexually attractive. Her attitude likely reflects her current single state (Oslo and Sydney have boyfriends) than any cross-national/cultural variation: “…those guys who look at your boobs are sensual. They like sex and pay attention to the physical appearance of a woman most. And those who look at a girl’s calves are more romantic or spiritual. They like to build a relationship which is not just for sex. And
those who look first at a woman’s neck and upper back are not that sex oriented.”

All informants openly admit that they wish to appear slim. Shanghai values her own slimness because of its ability to facilitate performances likely to attract the opposite sex. Significantly she is casually dating three to four men, although she wants to eventually marry: “I want to look slim… because I want to dance. A dancer cannot fly away with so much fat… I go [dancing] with male friends, which is bad. That means there is less opportunity of being approached, by other males. Or I go with my females friends which is better….I would like to keep it a couple of years and when I have enough fun, then I’ll get married.” She explains that remaining slim is a challenge: “Personally I like to do exercise but at the moment I don’t. So I try to eat less but it is very difficult.” Dancing is currently her main source of exercise as she is using most her time to find a job after completing a Masters degree: “Actually I like gym but I don’t go. I am not self disciplined since I came back to Shanghai…. I like to be thin, to be watched.” In a similar vein, Sydney suggests that maintaining her ideal weight is challenging: “I was away for six months last year overseas and I gained a couple of kilos… when I came back I was pretty unhappy because I could not fit into most of my clothes so I decided that’s it I am going to go detoxify and exercise a lot.”

In contrast, Oslo indicates she has little difficulty in remaining slim. She attributes this factor to a busy work schedule and regularly playing sport. However like our other informants she has experienced challenges maintaining a desired weight: “I used to worry a little when I was sixteen ‘cause I could easily put on 5 kilos just ‘cause I love chocolate. I’ve always felt that I weighed 2 kilos more than I wanted, but it never became a serious thing…..” Oslo’s comments reflect awareness that worrying about slimness can be unhealthy, a view mirrored by Shanghai: “I think the sense for slimming is a little bit too much” (Shanghai). Arguably, both informants understand that excessive concern with body weight could deplete the psychological and physical resources needed to achieve other more important goals such as forging a successful career, becoming a mother. Moreover appearing skinny could signal an eating disorder to others that could further suggest mental instability and a lack of suitability to the professional spheres in which they currently work, or aspire to (Oslo, medicine; Shanghai, marketing/publicity; Sydney, law).

All informants report considerable effort in looking after their physical appearance. They control their weight through moderate exercise, typically two sessions per week. Shanghai and Sydney engage in the traditionally feminine styles of exercise that are less strenuous and involve more graceful movements such as yoga, Pilates and dancing. Oslo, in contrast, chose sportive type exercise traditionally considered more suitable for men masculine such as skiing, kayaking and running (McGinnis et al. 2003). All strive to be slim. All spare no expense with clothing, accessories and grooming products. They report dressing according to the occasion, for example presenting themselves as less sexually attractive in the workplace compared to during leisure.

We conclude that women understand that their physical attractiveness is important to their own self esteem, how they are regarded by others and their ability to succeed in various domains. Hence their views differ little from women throughout history. This situation seems strange given widespread approval of feminist ideals amongst young women (e.g. Gardyn 2001). A possible explanation (other than Wolf’s 1990 beauty myth as feminist backlash explanation) is that irrespective of sex, attractive physical appearance is currently
valued in most affluent countries (Solomon 2004). Significantly informants’ comments suggest that women understand that their physical appearance, including dress and grooming, acts as a signal that they can exercise high levels of self control and mastery (rather than sexual attractiveness) when operating in non-traditional female domains, notably paid work. These characteristics are conducive to career advancement in the conservative professional fields in which they intend or are currently employed.

**DISCUSSION**

This study explores three young female achievers’ views regarding a limited array of issues associated with being a young woman at this point in time. The main findings are depicted in the table below. (See Table 2 here.)

We conclude that CYFAs strive to experience what they regard as the best aspects of female and male worlds. Their thoughts and actions reflect a perception of gender as a liberal space rather than a site of struggle where they choose to display typical feminine and masculine traits according to their own preferences and social settings. In achieving this goal they display substantial energy, self-awareness and flexibility. They employ analytical and pragmatic skills to negotiate and adapt to different role domains; appearing comfortable with blending gender roles and having mutable selves. Alternatively they enjoy social interaction, light heartedness and indulgence, and also competing hard, asserting themselves and exercising intellectual power. Our informants do not express any contradiction between ascribing to certain feminist ideals, notably equality in workplace and greater power in male-female relationships; while in other instances behaving in the opposite way, that is, in a feminine, even ultra-feminine manner.

Many aspects of their consumption reflect very traditional notions of femininity. Social responsibility expressed through consumption seems to be a female practice passed on through generations of women in their families. In their own life our informants take on the role as caring consumers holding their relationship to boyfriend and their family together (Thompson 1996). ‘Shopping’ is explained as a feminine area that they exclusively share and enjoy with their girl friends or mothers. Masculine consumption practices are associated with athletic sports and shopping for athletic sports equipment and are reported as an individual rather than social practice. By engaging in athletic sports they can play out their competitive and masculine sides.

**CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Obviously this study has limitations due to the small convenience sample of well-educated women from middle class backgrounds, with high levels of formal education and current/intended careers in conservative fields of employment. Other sorts of female achievers exist who are also formidable role models, for example media personalities, artists, sportswomen. Significantly young female achievers’ theories about how to live as adult women, lack road-testing. Just how successful they will be at extracting what they desire from important life domains such as romantic partnerships, child-rearing and work remains to be seen. Will their views change as a consequence of their lived experiences? Already research suggests that women with careers tend to seek more balanced lives than their male counterparts (e.g. Prince 2005). In particular, they are more likely to be satisfied with a modicum of success across multiple life domains associated with family, community, career and leisure rather than huge success in one domain (e.g., career, accumulation of money or motherhood).
Even if the small convenience sample inhibits our offering solid generalisations about CYFAs the richness of our data suggests a swathe of useful future research tracks. We propose that the study comprises an important step in understanding how consumption links to contemporary CYFAs’ gender roles, gender identities and perceptions of femininity. Arguably mainstream opinion leaders, the values and norms of these informants are likely to be indicative of other young women’s future behaviour.

**REFERENCES**


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### TABLE 1

**GENDER IDENTITY/ROLE TRAITS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminine Traits</th>
<th>Masculine Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affectionate</td>
<td>Acts as leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheerful</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childlike</td>
<td>Ambitious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassionate</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not use harsh language</td>
<td>Assertive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eager to soothe hurt feelings</td>
<td>Athletic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susceptible to flattery</td>
<td>Defends own beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentle</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gullible</td>
<td>Forceful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loves children</td>
<td>Leadership abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyal</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive to Other’s Needs</td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft-spoken</td>
<td>Self-reliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathetic</td>
<td>Self-sufficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tender</td>
<td>Decisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Strong personality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm</td>
<td>Willing to take a stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yielding</td>
<td>Willing to take risks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: (Bem 1974)*
### TABLE 2
**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender topic</th>
<th>Gendered perceptions and behaviours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Perceptions of femininity** | - Traditional personality traits associated with femininity and masculinity  
- Admire and value feminine role models  
- Being socially responsible a prominent feminine trait |
| **Gender preference** | - Perceive men to have greater freedom and can live a less complex life  
- Women have more freedom to choose from a variety of roles and life domains |
| **Role enactment** | - High consciousness of operating in different social settings  
- Feeling of flexibility and freedom to choose how to enact a role  
- Strategic, comfortable, and playful in choosing to be feminine or masculine in a role or in combining feminine and masculine traits |
| **Physical appearance** | - Acknowledge the importance of physical attractiveness for their own self esteem and  
- how others perceive them  
- Put effort in looking after their physical appearance |
| **Consumption practices** | **Feminine practices**  
- Consumption as care and social responsibility  
- Feminine shopping associated with leisure and female friendship  
- Personal grooming  
**Masculine practices**  
- Consumption of athletic sport equipment and  
- athletic sports activities |
FIGURE 1
HOW GENDER TRAITS CHARACTERIZE GENDER ROLE AND PHYSICAL APPEARANCE ACROSS INFORMANTS

Oslo-case

Feminine

- Social friend
- Daughter
- Physical appearance

Employee

L

H

Romantic partner

L

Shanghai-case

Feminine

- Social friend
- Physical appearance

(Romantic partner)

L

H

Daughter

L

(Employee)

Sydney-case

Feminine

- Daughter
- Social friend
- Physical appearance

Romantic partner

L

Employee

L