

REINFORCEMENT OF SEXISM THROUGH MEMES

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ABSTRACT

This paper ventures to examine the pervasiveness of sexism and misogyny in the Meme Culture and how it manifests itself. The focus is on the extent to which such humor encodes sexist ideologies and its prevalence. Popularly referred to as Memes, this seemingly innocuous form of humor is a cultural staple and can distill complex social mores and cultural events into a compact and highly shareable image, and their lightning speed distribution rates enable the ideas they embody to be exposed to colossal audiences. Especially in the intensely patriarchal institutions of the Indian society, memes can express misogynistic views in the guise of an innocent joke to which reactions to which would be interpreted as overtly sensitive, which was found to be true. A corpus of various memes has been retrieved from various social media websites, which will be given to the participants to be interpreted using the set of questions which include the Bechdel test. The questionnaire also aims to gauge the prevalence and reach of these memes, using the Likert scale.

KEY WORDS- sexism, sexist ideologies, Meme Culture, misogyny, Bechdel test

Introduction

It is no mystery that sexism has become so commonplace, it has become the norm for many of us worldwide. Women are treated unfairly in the workplace, houses, and healthcare. Especially in the intensely patriarchal institutions of the Indian society, Sexism and Gender roles are an integral constituent. These two are correlated, as sexism mostly revolves around gender roles. Ambivalent sexism is a theoretical framework which posits that sexism has two sub-components: "hostile sexism" and "benevolent sexism". Hostile sexism reflects overtly negative evaluations and stereotypes about a gender. Benevolent sexism represents evaluations of gender that may appear subjectively positive (subjective to the person who is evaluating), but are actually damaging to people and gender equality more broadly (Glick and Fiske, 2011). A Large-scale study by Brandt (2011), based on data from 57 countries, including Britain and India, found that, in general, men had higher levels of sexism than women did and that sexism directly predicted increased gender inequality. Meanwhile, Gender roles have been defined as expectations applied to individuals on the basis of their biological sex, and attitudes toward women, or gender role ideology, as individual views of appropriate roles for men and women (Boehnke 2011).

Gender Based Humor: Sexism in Humor?

Humor has the potential to completely disrupt the meaning of a sentiment, whether decent or reprehensible, as a matter of play owing to its levity. Humor communicates an implicit message to the receiver that the usual rules of logic and expectations of common sense do not apply. When presented with a joke, people do not evaluate the underlying message with the usual critical, literal mind-set; they abandon the standard serious mode of information processing (Attardo, 1993; Berlyne, 1972; Gruner, 1997; McGhee, 1972; Mulkay, 1988). Disparaging humor trivializes the derision of social groups, thus expressing an implicit norm that it is acceptable to relax the usual critical reactions to discrimination and treat it in a light hearted manner. If the receiver accepts the disparagement as "only a joke" then he or she tacitly assents to the normative standard that, in this context, it is acceptable to make light of expressions of prejudice (Bill & Naus, 1992; Fine, 1983; Francis, 1988; Khoury, 1985). Bill and Naus (1992), for instance, found that men rated sexist events as "acceptable" and "harmless" when they perceived the incidents as humorous (i.e., when they switched to a nonserious humor mind-set to interpret the events).

On the same note, Gender has been a pivotal theme in humor for ages. Indeed, ever since the day Sarah reportedly laughed to herself with the prophecy about her much-belated motherhood (Genesis, 18:12), people have been giggling about sex and gender, wives and husbands and Blonds and bosses. Sexist Humor can be defined as the denigration of women through humor. It trivializes sex discrimination under the veil of benign amusement, thus precluding challenges or opposition that non-humorous sexist communication would likely incur. Gender can be communicated both overtly and covertly (Kotthoff, 2005). Stereotypes in joke content can bring gender issues to the foreground of attention in an affirmative or in a subversive way (Holmes, 2003).

In humor research, a general distinction is applied between conservative and subversive humor. Conservative humor makes fun of disempowered and weaker segments of society, thus

contributing to reaffirmation of social inequality. In contrast, rebellious/subversive humor is employed as a weapon by minority groups against those in power and thus challenges well-established hierarchies (Billig, 2005). The feminist analysis of humor and gender is mostly based on the analytical differentiation between affirmative-sexist humor and subversive-feminist humor. As a type of conservative humor, sexist humor has been an integral part of many patriarchal cultures for centuries. Underlying such humor are sexist beliefs about the inferiority of women. It portrays them as stupid, illogical, ignorant, or irresponsible, and it tends to build on sexual objectification of women (Bergman, 1986). Sexist humor is manifest in both general and specified forms. In the former, sexist jokes disparage women collectively, while specifically sexist jokes both construct and mock certain feminine groups such as “the Blond” or “the Terrible Wife” who are depicted by exaggerating traditional feminine stereotypes (Shifman & Maapil Varsano, 2007).

However, with the advent of the internet and the ever rising popularity of “memes”, sexist humor has found a brand new outlet for its expression. A meme can be defined as an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture—often with the aim of conveying a particular phenomenon, theme, or meaning represented by the meme (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). A meme acts as a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols, or practices, which can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena with a mimicked theme. It can be stated as the cultural analogue to Genes, in that they self-replicate, mutate, and respond to selective pressures (Graham 2002). Some commentators have likened the lightning fast transfer rate of memes to contagions. Social contagions such as fads, hysteria, copycat crime, and copycat suicide exemplify memes seen as the contagious imitation of ideas. A recent study of prevalent themes of online humor found that sex and gender are the most popular topics on major humor websites (Shifman, 2007). These sexist notions that are prerequisite in the creator’s brain may transmit themselves in the form of a meme and influence the consumers in various ways, and it especially reflects on the manner of current thinking of the consumer. Memes are only profound if they resonate with an idea already present in a user’s mind, and this speaks a lot about the popularity of sexist memes.

Present Research: Overview and Hypothesis

Although there exists a lot of literature studying sexist humor and its various repercussions, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the universal phenomenon of memes and its role in reinforcing sexism and misogyny. Especially in intensely patriarchal institutions of India, where women have always been accorded the status of a secondary citizen, there has been absolutely no attention paid to the rising popularity of memes that target women and the rationale behind it. Memes have the power to spread simply because they can, and the consumer responsible for its propagation may not be aware of its adverse effects.

Researchers L. Shifman and D. Lemish have an extensive portfolio of research done on this particular topic, although their surveillance was targeted at US citizens specifically. In their paper “Mars and Venus in Virtual Space: Post-feminist Humor and the Internet”, they draw a line between sexist and feminist humor, with their focus being on post-feminist humor. The study talks about the employment of irony in sexist humor as a way to “have it both ways”, i.e. it

allows for the expression of sexist, homophobic and other reactionary beliefs while maintaining a safe distance from such sentiments. They selected and analyzed over 150 jokes and memes over the internet and identified themes in Gender based Humor, namely “Marriage”, “Sex”, “Blondes”, “Mars & Venus”, and “Girl Power”. They found that women were seen as nothing more than sexual objects, with men as lustful subjects and women’s sexuality being another object of ridicule. In another paper titled “Between Feminism and Fun(ny)mism”, they attempt to analyze gender in popular internet humor. Here, they have selected and analyzed memes based solely on popularity and ease of access. These memes feature women as sex objects, terrible wives, and stupid blondes, thus replicating old and well-documented patriarchal notions. Their findings indicate that they are still highly popular on the internet. In marked contrast to the popularity of sexist jokes is the scarcity of what can be identified as “feminist” texts. Only two texts out of 150 were found to be fundamentally critical of the current state of affairs in gender relationships, and even those solely addressed the division of labor in the private sphere.

Research Methodology

A corpus of 5 memes was selected on the basis of their popularity and applicability on the Bechdel test, which is a method used in media criticism to gauge the degree of representation and development of female characters within a work of fiction, and therefore, any gender bias against women that may be present in it (where it is applicable). The Bechdel test states that for any form of media, be it Movies, Comics, and in this case, memes to be free of sexism, it should have at least two women in it and they should talk about something else other than men. However, this test does not draw attention to various other factors, such as the plot or the quality of the content in question. Hence, it is not a reliable test to gauge the pervasiveness of sexism in the meme culture so this test was only used as a criteria for the selection of memes for the analysis by participants.

Sampling the Internet is one of the main challenges for scholars using Web-based content analysis, as the enormous size and mutability of the Internet complicates the development of scientifically random samples (McMillan 2000; Weare & Lin 2000). In considering how to deal with these characteristics, it was decided not to generate a random sample of Internet jokes about gender, but rather to sample highly popular memes. Since humor reflects social perceptions, it was safe to assume that popular comic texts may provide more direct, concise access and valuable data about prevalent perceptions of gender. The memes were selected from the top posts on famous social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram along with Google images and Quickmeme.com. Some of the images were shared worldwide and were immensely popular. Another factor for selection was whether the meme in question was involved in any controversy with women regarding its content. These memes were given to participants who had to answer five simple questions designed to gauge the participant’s perception of gender equality, sexism and whether he or she might partake in the ideologies communicated in the meme. The participants also underwent the gender equality test. The survey was done under complete anonymity to ensure that the participants were free from any bias. Age has not been counted as a restricting factor.

Sample Size

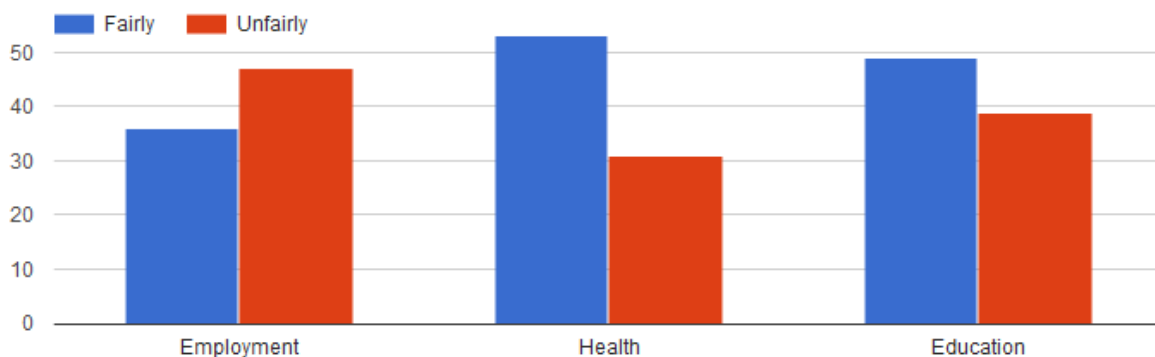
Out of 146 people who participated in the survey, 105 valid responses were considered. Out of these, 48% were women, another 48% were men while 4% of participants preferred not to divulge their gender. Incomplete and invalid responses (Such as "...") were not considered. The age of the participants ranged from anywhere between 16 and 52. The age group with the most participants was 23 years, with 15% of responses belonging to this age group.

Results

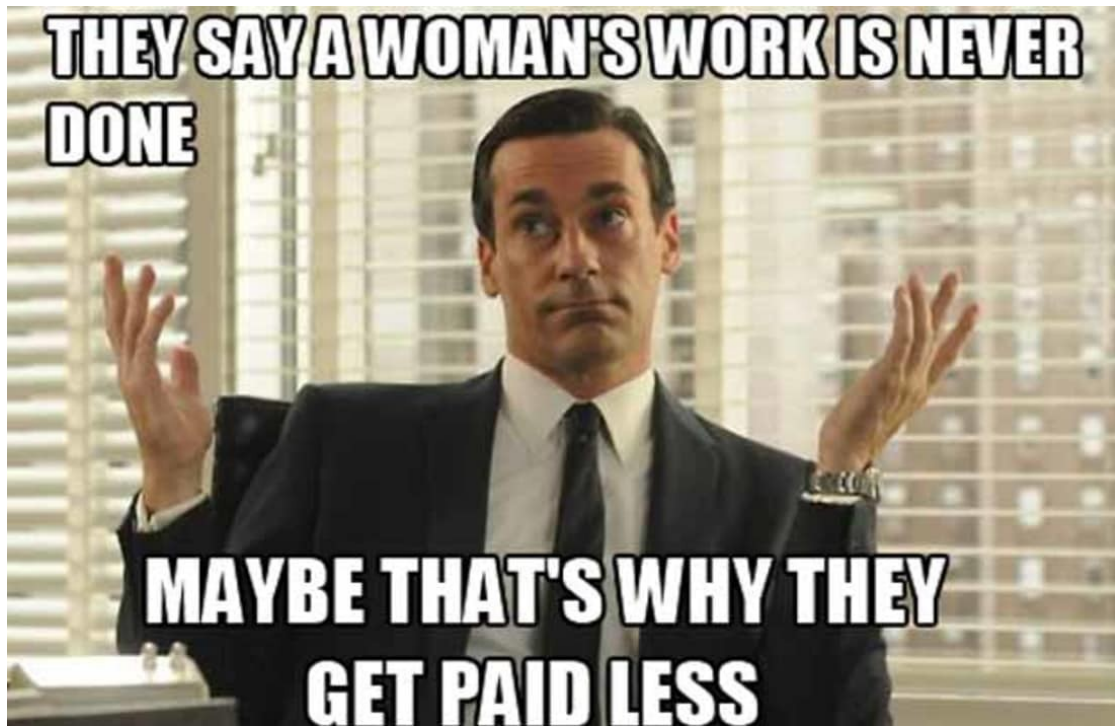
Gender Equality Test-

The gender equality test was used to determine the present attitude of the participant regarding Gender Equality. The test consists of 4 questions, and the Likert scale was used. Over 94% participants agreed to their conviction in Gender Equality. However, 5.7% participants did not believe in Gender Equality. These results were in stark contrast to the 4th questions, which more or less meant the same but was worded differently. Over 12.5% participants disagreed to the statement "Men and Women are created Equal", with 4% participants remaining neutral and 83.7% participants agreeing. The results for the 3rd question are as follows:

How do you think women are treated in the following areas:



Over 61.9% participants have experienced Gender inequality at some point in their life, 38.1% have not.



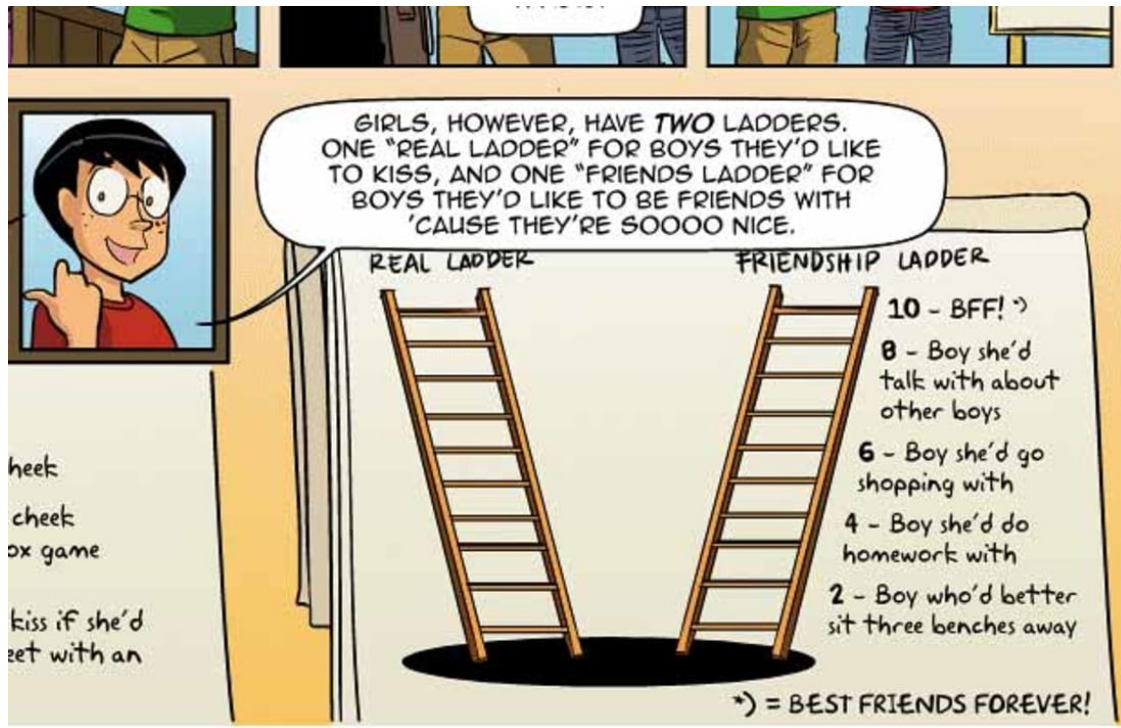
Sample Picture 1

The largest Majority of the participants agree that this meme represents sexist ideologies, at 72%. Over 9.5% of the participants disagreed, while 17.6% participants remained ambivalent and neither agreed nor disagreed. This meme, which is a screenshot from a highly popular TV show called “Mad Men” received a lot of flak for representing such ideologies in the present era where women are struggling to overcome the discrimination they face at the workplace. The quote in question is an extension to a very famous saying which means that domestic work of a woman is never done, because it keeps coming, however with a very sexist connotation that women are incapable of completing their own work. This image implies that women are supposed to be paid less because they are not competent enough. Over 19% of the participants have seen this meme before, and over 12.5% considered sharing this meme through their social media. A point to be noted is that male participants exclusively considered sharing this image via social media, which is an incredibly alarming statistic. When asked the reason why they felt that this image was not sexist, 9.4% participants felt that it was because this image was true to a large extent, 18.9% felt that it was specific to a few women they know. A participant felt that the creator of this meme was being sarcastic and that it wasn’t meant to be taken literally. Another Participant commented that this image was “Stupid Funny”. These comments shine a light on the afore-mentioned point that such humor is not meant to be taken seriously, in spite of what they may or may not imply.



Sample Picture 2

In the second image, Majority of the participants agree that this meme represents sexist ideologies, at 67.45%. Over 12.9% of the participants disagreed, while 19.6% participants remained ambivalent. This meme is specifically popular among the viewers of a Hindi daily Soap called “Tarak Mehta ka oolta chashma”, and it compares the bosoms of two of the leading female characters. There are varied interpretations of this image, as some consider this as not misogynistic but as objectification of women. This meme was immensely popular as a WhatsApp forward, and it was especially viral during the time when Narendra Modi Became the PM of India, thus this image was also seen as a propaganda against the BJP leader. Over 15.2% of the participants have seen this meme before, and over 8.7% considered sharing this meme through their social media. When asked the reason why they felt that this image was not sexist, 9.4% participants felt that it was because this image was true to a large extent, 8.6% felt that it was specific to a few women they know. A participant pointed out that this image is not sexist, as it depicts the sexuality of women, which is a common trait in both the genders. However, the participant felt that the image is highly offensive as it paints the people mentioned in a bad light. Another participant pointed out that “it’s a fun fact” and that it is nothing to gloss over or think further about. Many participants think that it depends on the persons ideologies. Here it is also observed that almost all the participants who felt that the image was not sexist were men.



Sample Picture 3

In this study, this meme was found to be the most conflicting as only around half of the total participants found this image to be exhibiting sexist ideologies. Only about 46.75% of the participants found this meme to be sexist, meanwhile 24.9% participants disagreed. 28.3% of participants responded with “maybe”. It should be noted that a large number of participants who disagreed were men. This image is highly subjective as it can be interpreted as a mockery of how today generation views relationships but then again it can be said that this is plain generalization of women. This image arose amidst the massive debate of “friend zoning”, wherein a boy or girl relegates a person who is interested in them romantically as just a friend. Since a large amount of internet humor is created by men, this image only addresses problems from their point of view. A participant pointed it out, by stating that even if the genders are switched the meme remains the same with no change in its meaning whatsoever. This meme has been seen before by 10.6% of the total participants. It was also one the most shareable memes in this study as over 28.1% of the participants considered sharing this meme through their social media. A participant pointed out that “In socio-cultural terms, it is a very restricted example”.



Sample Picture 4

This meme is the most viral image chosen for this study. This image was uploaded by popular image sharing website 9gag on their Facebook and Instagram accounts which collectively garnered more than 50,000 “likes”, with 24,737 likes on Facebook alone. This meme is titled as “Feminist Nazi”, and features the photograph of Australian reality TV star Layla Joyce Subritzky from the ninth season of Big Brother Australia. Jezebel, a blog geared towards women, published an article on the image macro series, calling it the “world’s worst meme.” The article accrued more than 60 comment threads within five hours. More than 130 Feminist Nazi images can be found on meme sharing website Quickmeme.com, and it is still under active circulation. In the present study, over 40% of the total participants have already seen this meme, making it the most visible meme among the bunch. Although this meme stirred up national debate worldwide, only around 53.2% of the participants in this study found this image to be exhibiting sexist ideologies. 26.1% felt that this meme was not sexist, while 20.8 remain ambivalent. Even here we observe that most of the participants who disagreed were men. One of participants felt that this women do need special treatment in some cases, for instance pregnant women require leave, whereas men do not. Another participants feels that Special treatment is a necessity since women are oppressed so much. Around 15.2% of the participants felts that this image was true to a very large extent, meanwhile 42.4% felt that this meme applied to specific women they know in real life. Around 21.3% consider sharing this image via Social media.



Sample Picture 5

This meme specifically targets Indian women, essentially south Indian women. This thread of images is called, “Scumbag South Indian Girl”. Although this image originated in India and gained a lot of popularity, it quickly became viral in the western society as well. The image presupposes that women who indulge in social drinking should also engage in pre-marital sex. This image has more than 1,202 shares on quickmeme.com, and over 15.3% of the participants in this study have seen this meme before. Over 60.5% of the participants agree that this meme exhibits sexist ideologies, with 18.1% participants disagreeing and 21.45% remaining ambivalent. Again, we can observe that men are mostly the ones that disagree. A very large cultural stereotype against Indian women is that they are “prudes” or too orthodox and unwilling to have fun or let loose. Especially in media, Indian women are shown as such. This image portrays the same mentality. When asked for a reason for their disagreement, 25% of the participants felt that this meme was true to a large extent, thereby confirming to the above mentioned cultural stereotype, while 21% felt that this meme applied to a few women they knew. A participant mentioned that “It isn't sexist at all. It might be an opinion of a person. All memes cannot be considered sexist.” Another participant states that this meme is not so much about women as much as orthodox stereotypes.

Reactions

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In this section of the questionnaire, the participants were asked how they would react in case someone else reacted against these meme. Over 37.6% of the participants would take no action whatsoever. Over 34% of the participants would report the meme to the website. Over 20.8% of the participants would get into an agreement with the person who uploaded the meme. On the contrary, a participant mentioned that he/she will “Try to make both of them see the flip-side. The person posting such content isn't completely to blame. Ideologies are constructed and propagated through various socio-cultural institutions over time. They are extremely easily internalized without us even realizing it“. This can be seen as an extremely proactive solution, as it would change the mindset of the person who posted the image. A lot of the participants are of the opinion that these are just memes, and they are not meant to be taken seriously. Another participant is of the opinion that social media is not a good outlet for breaking down ideologies. Over 5% of the participants would call the person who reacted against the memes something like “Feminazi” or “Feminist Nut”.

Conclusion

All throughout the study, one thing remains constant: that men are the ones who refuse to accept that these memes represent sexist ideologies. In every single analysis, it can be noted that a large proportion of men seem to diminish the seriousness of the situation, probably because they themselves subscribe to such sexist notions that women are supposed to be paid less than men, that women who don't have pre-marital sex are prudes and so on. It is appalling to see that such a large number of participants simply dismiss it as being “just a meme”. Almost all the images were ultimately analyzed to be sexist, by rule of majority. All of the pictures selected were highly popular internet content, and this is a direct reflection of the society and its views on gender equality. Another striking state of affairs is that if someone does react against theses image, they will be deemed as “Feminazis”. Another participant simply commented, “Feminism Sucks”. This can only be changed by a radical change in the mindset of people, as all of the participants are well educated and progressive, yet they subscribe to such sexist ideologies.

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