

Reinforcement of Sexism through Memes: Harassment and the Current Digital Culture

Suparana Dutta

Associate Professor

Birla Institute of Technology

Mesra, Ranchi, Off Campus

Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Divyajyoti Singh

Associate Professor

Alka Rawat

Assistant Professor

J. C. Bose University of

Science & Technology, YMCA, Faridabad

Faridabad, Haryana, India.

Abstract

Memes are very catchy, attractive, and immensely popular internet jokes which carry content that is usually sexually provocative in an implicit manner. Progressively, for quite some time now, a discerning pattern is the explicitly bold sexual overtones of the messages, exchanged in apparent bonhomie and a casual and carefree charm. This apparently harmless form of humour is now a staple in the daily dose of entrainment in a significant section of the global population, cutting across age and social status. Special groups are formed, just to share memes for indulgence, pleasure, and catharsis. What is becoming worrisome is that this combination of social mores and age-old gendered norms with popular shareable, usually aesthetic images tagged with heady and catchy phrases & exchanged in superfast distribution is frequently becoming a very common instrument of exploitation and harassment. Feminist research & mouthpiece has long been vocal about how such instances of online sexism and gendered jokes are recurrently reframed as “acceptable” by masking them as a form of wit & humour albeit with derision of women as ‘innately stupid and dull’ members of the human race. This paper attempts to analyze some selected memes across a broad cultural milieu and the various labels used to describe the gender politics, relationship, and positioning through the syntactic as well as semantic relationships used and whether it is possible to revert with corrections.

Keywords

Humor; Internet meme; Harassment; Mindset, Gratification, Superfast distribution, and Revert with Corrections.

1. Introduction

In the year 2015, the United Nations established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to achieve gender equality in a world still polarized in the age-worn wars of sexual politics skewed unfairly towards an almost universal & virulent worldview, mindset, traditions & manifestations of patriarchy, sexism, misogyny and the like. Working on the silence of the fair half, the mission of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is to achieve maximum gender equity and equality. The 17 clearly charted goals are efforts to achieve the mission of ‘universal gender equality and endeavour to empower women and girls across the world and all social class & stratification created by man. It is an undisputed reality that, despite obvious improvements across most communities worldwide, we are still far from achieving parity in our Sexual Politics. Ironically, women empowerment itself has paradoxically brought in its wake its own baggage of the new facet of exploitation of women at work.

There is nothing new or surprising in this, so what the SDGs were set to achieve was the reinvigoration of the continual efforts and the endeavour to provide a new stimulus to women empowerment and gender equity at all places, contexts, and instances across the globe irrespective of ethnicity, community or political divides.

Harassment of women is a prime thrust of the SDGs Goal 5 that specifically aims at “gender equality.” Here, the UN candidly speaks of how gender equality is the indispensable foundation for a progressive, peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Accepting unequivocally that the past decades have shown progress in terms of a greater number of girls going to school, fewer getting forced into early marriage, more women going out to work at various levels in the organized sector evolving to serve in positions of leadership in traditional male bastions like the armed forces, in politics & parliaments and in highly competitive global as well as a local business.

So, it is not surprising that across the world we are witnessing laws and legislations being promulgated and reformed to press & push forward gender equality with a renewed zeal and enthusiasm. However, as the UN points out that, despite these gains, many challenges and unaddressed problems still remain at large in terms of existing ‘discriminatory laws’ and ‘regressive social norms’ that still plague a significant number of nations, communities, and traditions. Hence, it is not surprising to still stumble upon stark UN statistics which claim that

still in most countries, women continue to remain underrepresented at all levels of political leadership, and that, '1 in every 5 women and girls in the ages of 15 and 49 report experiencing physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner within 12 months' (UN GOAL 5). Alongside, Article 2 of the UN also clarifies what would include in violence against women in addition to well-understood offences like spousal and non-spousal violence, trafficking, rape, assault, and harmful traditions like female genital mutilation (FGM) and the like. Here, what becomes of interest to this study is the mention of harassment of women at work along with brutalities like violence perpetrated or condoned by the state such as rape in war (Heise, 2018).

It would also make it relevant here to mention Noam Chomsky definition of sexual harassment by what he calls the "manufacturing consent". According to Chomskian notion, harassment arises from the fact that 'men' who still form the ruling classes continue to control the discourse on 'sexual violence' by influencing and manipulating the views of the victims who most often are women.

Goal 5 is thus the aspiration to do away with all forms of prejudice, discrimination, and 'violence against women' in every aspect of her public, domestic or private life and to undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources and access to ownership of property. It is in this very familiar narrative, that we come across the one unique target that particularly talks about enhancement of the use of 'enabling technology', particular in the information and communications technology (ICT), to promote the empowerment of women which is of again of particular interest to the authors of this paper.

The act "The Sexual harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 defines "sexual harassment" (Section 2 (n) as it includes any one or more of the following unwelcome acts or behaviour (whether directly or by implication) namely:-

In a 2017 survey conducted by the Bar Association of India, a whopping 70 percent of the women said they did not report sexual harassment due to the fear of repercussions and harsh consequences.

Sexual harassment can be defined as a kind of undesired sexual attention from a problem holder to its target. Definitions and understandings of this notion vary, since sexual harassment can occur in many different ways: physical, indirect, verbal, or non-verbal. Verbal harassment is predominantly vectored by sexual jokes and comments, whereas non-verbal harassment by and large happens when sexual objects or pictures are displayed overtly or tacitly. Indirect harassment portrays situations

where the sufferer is not directly contacted, however, she still gets affected by my psychological burden from the indirect harassment such as sexual gossips or private information/pictures/chats exhibit in public without her consent. When it comes to direct or Physical harassment, it is when the victim is inappropriately touched or held in an unwelcome way. It includes being pressurized or forced into kissing or even being compelled for sex.

2. This Research Paper is Focusing on the Following Questions

- Understand that do internet memes act as innocent humour or carry a gendered undertone?
- Analyze the role of internet memes in promoting casual harassment in an office environment
- Study the impact of memes on behaviour and conduct towards a female co-worker

3. Hypothesis

H₀: Internet memes make digital migrants less sensitive towards casual sexual harassment but do not influence the behaviour of digital migrants in India.

H₁: Internet memes are innocent but do influence the behaviour of digital migrants in India

4. Review of literature

Women's harassment is not a recent phenomenon. Our society is patriarchal, and women have been suppressed for centuries in various forms. Education and economic independence have brought some changes yet; more needs to be done. Social Media has been serving as a platform for people to exercise and express their freedom and gain invaluable insights.

Similar studies mentioned earlier, a 2017 Ottesen, Kannair, and Bendixen's study highlighted how sexual harassment had a negative impact on student's wellbeing, self-esteem, and body image, which in many cases lead to depression and anxiety in even young adults!

Similarly, the study, "The Economic and Career Effects of Sexual Harassment on Working Women" shockingly brings out how majority women have been 'sexually harassed' at some point in their career. The research on expected lines found that, 'sexual harassment has a negative

physical and mental impact on women affecting various contexts of her life and that it also has the potency to harmfully redirect women's lives and careers. The study also indicates that the adverse effects are supposedly strongest in the so-called "formative career period" (age of late twenties, early thirties).

Depressions, self-doubt, and anger, which creep into the victim usually affect the victims' employability. The research once again demonstrated that women usually preferred to quit their jobs due to sexist, toxic working climates and also due to the seemingly hopeless situation of not being able to 'change sexist structures'. Additionally, their results show that such a toxic working environment also affects other actors, who are only indirect targets of sexual assault. The qualitative findings of this study also confirmed that most of the people questioned experienced many different forms of sex-based discrimination and harassment. Hence, the results are believed to be applicable in a broader context that will include workplace factors of gender violence and harassment like bullying, partner violence, etc. (McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2017).

Pink Ladder, a career enhancement ecosystem specifically for women professionals has released the report "Reach and Impact of Sexual Harassment Policies in India", According to this study, Almost 30 percent of women experienced unprofessional touch, demand for sexual favours, or physical harassment in their team. Nearly 80 percent of female's employees are well informed of guidelines against sexual harassment at the workplace, however, almost 30 percent of female dithered when it comes to complaining about such incidents to appropriate authority.

Social media platforms are being merged with people's lives to a great extent; circles are increasing, and are being used for various purposes (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). One informal definition of Social Media is the following: "Internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses "media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers" (Blackshaw, 2006). Jenkins defines. Social media are also an extension of participatory culture. Jenkins defines participatory culture as a culture "in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 331).

As per Karla, Mantilla Misogyny is adapted by new media in the form of gender trolling. Online Media enabled a new form of virulent sexism that requires more significant analysis. Aggressive behaviour is called trolling in online media language, and it is omnipresent. It is worth mentioning the particular misogyny variant "gender trolling" (Mantilla, 2013).

5. Research Methodology

Qualitative and Quantitative methodology is used for the study. A structured questionnaire is used as a tool for conducting the survey. A survey of working women to understand the impact of chosen office memes on colleagues its influence on official conduct if any. The population is consists of digital migrants between the age of 30 -45 years. The samples are selected based on simple random sampling.

6. Scope of the Study

This research studies the extent of an internet meme in the office environment. This work examines the reach and impact of the meme which are becoming a part of office humour.

The research studies the impact of memes on digital migrants/workforce in India and its influence on official engagements. The selected memes were carefully chosen after content analysis of using women as the centric theme of office humour. The survey also discovered the impact of memes on digital migrants from a cognition and behavioural perspective.

7. Data Analysis

Memos Communicate Gendered Stereotypes

54 percent said that yes the memes do communicate gendered messages and reiterate the stereotypes. 40 percent do not believe so and 6 percent were not sure of the above. Most of the people who filled the questionnaire felt that memes do have a gendered tone and it pushes the stereotypes under the Vaile of humour. When "women" come to office humour are used to make joke upon and stereotypes like women are bad bosses or women change their definition of sexual harassment whichever way they want are prevalent.

Memes as Innocent Humour

When it comes to memes as innocent humour, participants were divided almost equally. 52 percent believes that memes should be taken at face value and should not overthink. Only 4 percent were undecided. 44 percent acknowledged that memes have undertones and could mean something very different from the indented humour.

Meme Makes Harassment casual

44 percent of participants said that memes do make them less sensitive towards casual that casual sexual harassment like women creates drama women harassment is women made thing and women should not take it too seriously. 34 percent is of the opposite view and do not think that memes can make them any less or more sensitive towards the said topic. A comparatively larger number of partakers are in maybe zone and not sure about either-or.

Memes and its Influence on Behaviour and Conduct

This is where most of the contributors said no, that memes don't affect their behaviour towards their female colleagues. 56 percent believe that memes don't change their behaviour or conduct. Only 20 percent stated that memes do influence their behaviour and conduct but don't know the extent of it.

8. Conclusion

Memes work as a medium to share jokes, humour, or satire to entrain the people. It also devolves the issue of harassment at the workplace as casual humour. For working digital migrants memes might be derogatory in some context or gendered in the approach. It still does not change their behaviour or conduct on a significant level.

9. Memes act as Innocent Humour or Carry a Gendered Undertone

Participants think memes could be or could not gendered as they are innocent and harmless if you take them with jest. Memes only turned gendered when the reader looks at them critically and tries to analyze the undertone. So we can say that individual perceptive plays a huge role when it comes to interpretations.

10. Role of Internet Memes in Promoting Casual Attitude towards Harassment

Memes do promote a casual attitude by promoting stereotypes and undermining the seriousness of harassment. It turns a significant topic wage gap or men should behave into a joke or satire.

11. Impact of Memes on Behaviour and Conduct towards a Female Co-worker

Even though memes can be gendered or make people casual towards harassment, or make them laugh.

They are a big part when come to sharing online content and also comes with the freedom to create one. It is still seen as a tool for entrainment that does not bring change on the behavioural level.

However, this study proves that even though change is not happening behavioural level but mindset does get affected and thus a long-term effect can be seen in the future.

Thus the null hypothesis: Internet memes make digital migrants less sensitive towards casual sexual harassment but do not influence the behaviour of the digital migrants in India proves correct.

12. References

1. Hearn, J. (2018). You, Them, Us, We, Too? ... Online-Offline, Individual-Collective, Forgotten-Remembered, Harassment-violence. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25(2), 228-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818765286>
2. Lisa M. Kruse, D.R. (2017). *Social Media as a Sphere?* Politics on Social Media. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 59(1), 62-84.
3. McLaughlin, Heather, Uggen, Christopher and Blackstone, Amy. (2017): *The Economic and Career*
4. Manikonda, Lydia & Beigi, Ghazaleh & Kambhampati, Subbarao & Liu, Huan. (2018). #metoo Through the Lens of Social Media. [10.1007/978-3-319-93372-6_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93372-6_13).
5. Effects of Sexual Harassment on Working Women. *Gender and Society Journal*. SAGE Publishing. DOI: [10.1177/0891243217704631](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243217704631) Dahlberg, L. (2018). The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere. [Online] [Tandfonline.com](https://www.tandfonline.com). Available at:

- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13691180110097030?src=recsys> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2018].
6. Instagram Year In Review 2018, Economic Time, December 2018, #MeToo leads Instagram's advocacy hashtags with 1.5 mn usage. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/metoo-leads-instagrams-advocacy-hashtags-with-1-5-mn-usage-love-most-followed-in-2018/articleshow/67074501.cms?from=mdr>. [Accessed on 16 May 2019]
 7. Fuchs, C. (2018). *Social Media as Participatory Culture*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=m3oEDgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Social+Media+as+a+Public+Sphere%3F+Politics+on+Social+Media&ots=pW6nYy3DaA&sig=pFXL-YLssyP05PZ0r19zB76bCds#v=onepage&q=participatory%20culture&f=false>
 8. Heise, L., Ellsberg, M., & Gottemoeller, M. (2018). *Ending Violence Against Women*. Retrieved from <https://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=googlescholar&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA72739225&sid=classroomWidget&asid=cb4bce4c>
 9. Krish, Nishanth. "Social Media Trends, Prospects, and Challenges in India" 9 December 2015. <https://www.mindjumpers.com/blog/2015/12/social-media-trends-prospects-and-challenges-in-india>
 10. Turton-Turner, P. (2013). Villainous Avatars: the Visual Semiotics of Misogyny and Free speech in Cyberspace. *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*. Retrieved from <https://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A497796458/AONE?u=google scholar&sid=AONE&xid=9fd07353>
 11. Spark Notes Editors. (n.d.). *Spark Note on Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Retrieved December 23, 2018, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/public/>
 12. Fuchs, Christian. "Social Media and the Public Sphere." *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 12.1 (2014): 57–101.
 13. Mantilla, K. (2013). *Gender Trolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media*. *Feminist Studies*, 39(2), 563-570. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719068>

14. Susen, S. (2011). *Critical Notes on Habermas's Theory of the Public Sphere*. *Sociological Analysis*, 5(1), pp. 37-62.
15. Kaplan, A.M. and Haenlein, M., (2010). *Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media*. *Business Horizons*, 53, (1), 59-68.
16. Jordan, Tim. "Social Media Networks." *Information Politics: Liberation and Exploitation in the Digital Society*. Pluto, 2015.120-40. Web.
17. Castells, Manuel. (2010). *The Information Age: Economic, Society, and Culture Vol.II*, The Power of Identity. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
18. Blackshaw, P., and M. Nazzaro. 2006. *Consumer-Generated Media (CGM) 101 Word-of-Mouth in the Age of the Web-fortified Consumer*. 2nd ed. New York
19. Chomsky, N &Herman, E (2008): *Manufacturing Consent: Media and Propaganda*. London: Random House