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Old jokes, new media – Online sexism and constructions of gender in Internet memes

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Abstract
The Internet is a space where the harassment of women and marginalised groups online has attracted the attention of both academic and popular press. Feminist research has found that instances of online sexism and harassment are often reframed as "acceptable" by constructing them as a form of humour. Following this earlier research, this present paper explores a uniquely technologically-bound type of humour by adopting a feminist, social-constructionist approach to examine the content of popular Internet memes. Using thematic analysis on a sample of 240 image macro Internet memes (those featuring an image with a text caption overlaid), we identified two broad, overarching themes – *Technological Privilege* and *Others*. Within the analysis presented here, complex and troubling constructions of gendered identity in online humour are explored, illustrating the potential for the othering and exclusion of women through humour in technological spaces. We argue that this new iteration of heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity in online sexism, couched in "irony" and "joking", serves to police, regulate and create rightful occupants and owners of such spaces.

Keywords
memes, social media, humour, feminist

Introduction

Online harassment or "just jokes"?

The Internet represents for many an extension of our offline interactions, and seemingly mundane and everyday practices (e.g. participating in social media)

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form a significant part of our everyday experiences (Hine, 2012). Unfortunately, it is too common to see examples of the harassment of women and marginalised groups online within these experiences and practices. These examples of harassment have provoked large scale coverage in both popular and academic press (e.g. the rape and death threats issued following a feminist bake sale at the University of Queensland – see Price, 2016). In sum, one does not have to look far to find examples of misogyny perpetuated in and through technology. Some examples of feminist thinking (e.g. Cole, 2015) have drawn on Foucauldian notions of disciplinary rhetoric to conceptualise the kinds of abuse often faced by visible and active women online. Within this small body of research, it has been argued that whilst online sexism and harassment are on the increase, scholarly research addressing this appears to have decreased or often relies on dated literature and fails to acknowledge the "power and prevalence of hostility on the Internet, as well as its gendered nature, and its ethical and material implications" (Jane, 2015, p. 466). Indeed, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) suggest that this networked misogyny is, at present, difficult to account for, and as such is ripe for further exploration.

Moreover, in a postfeminist climate where feminism is increasingly positioned as irrelevant (McRobbie, 2008), it has been argued that it is possible for sexism and misogyny to manifest in new forms masquerading as jokes, irony and humour (Worth, Augoustinos, & Hastie, 2016). It has been argued that sexist humour is an example of symbolic violence, and can serve to subjugate women (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010). An example of this is Cole's (2015) work where it is noted that the most common threats issued to women participating in feminist activism online are rape threats, but these are often qualified with the use of emoticons, the acronym "LOL" (laugh out loud) or similar signifiers of humour and joking. It is through these signifiers of humour that the threat is rendered "harmless". With this in mind, the need for a critical feminist approach to the study of humour in online spaces starts to become clear.

Theorising humour and memes

The study of humour is well-established, multi-disciplinary, and multi-faceted (Johnston, Mumby, & Westwood, 2007) with countless scholars attempting to theorise as to what makes us laugh, what constitutes something funny, and to explore the consequences and functions of humour (Shifman, 2007). Decades of scholarship have resulted in the evolution of three major theories of humour, with the superiority/disparagement theory, the incongruity theory, and the release/relief theory of humour dominating the literature (Billig, 2005). Superiority (or disparagement) theory suggests that humour is derived from seeing the misfortune or suffering of another, and the pleasant feeling of superiority that is evoked is then expressed as laughter. Incongruity theory, however, credits the juxtaposition of incongruent elements with creating humour. For example, a pun or joke that leads the listener one way before surprising them with a different meaning or outcome to the expected. Finally, we find the release (or relief) theory, positioning

laughter and humour as a kind of stress-relief mechanism, providing release from psychological discomfort or tension.

However, critiques of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of mainstream studies of humour have been raised, with regards to the essentialising tendencies around gender, and the artificial and contrived stimulus/response based experimental research designs presented (Johnston et al., 2007). Furthermore, mainstream approaches to examining humour have met further criticism for an adherence to a standpoint of ''ideological positivism'', whereby humour can only be regarded as a positive or beneficial aspect of life, leaving little to no room for consideration of its potential for harm (Billig, 2005, p. 10).

A critical approach to humour urges researchers to consider the potentially negative aspects of humour (e.g. ridicule), and to consider the role of humour in establishing or challenging power relations. In offering a theoretical basis for a critical approach to studying humour, Billig (2005) draws on Holmes' (2000) workplace-based study of humour and suggests a distinction between two different types of humour: disciplinary and rebellious. Simply put, disciplinary humour works to mock those who are outside of social norms, whilst conversely rebellious humour mocks and subverts established rules and conventions. As Holmes (2000) argues, humour can be repressive (disciplinary), or can be used to contest power relations (rebellious). Holmes' work on organisational humour draws upon elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (e.g. Van Dijk, 1993) combined with understandings grounded in Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987, cited in Holmes, 2000) in order to explore the intent and purpose of humour, along with the social position of the person who is using the humour. However, Billig (2005) does suggest a cautious approach here, as even humour that at first appears rebellious may in fact serve to reinforce dominant social norms. For example, those who tell racist or sexist jokes may frame themselves as rebelling against ''political correctness'', positioning themselves ''on the naughty, contestive, powerless side'' (p. 203).

Many have argued for the political importance of the study of humour and jokes (e.g. Billig, 2005; Kuipers, 2011). Discussing feminist humour in particular, Bing (2004) argues that humour has multiple potential functions beyond mere entertainment, including the maintenance and subversion of hierarchies, the creation of solidarity within groups, or the reinforcement of boundaries and stereotypes. It would appear that humour has an important part to play with regards to power, and as such the necessity for a disruptive and critical approach to the study of humour, especially with regards to challenging inequalities, is apparent.

In articulating a case for a feminist approach to the study of humour, Sunderland (2007) outlines four strategies that can be employed in reading sexist humour. The first is for the feminist reader to reject the humour outright, refusing to engage with it. Secondly, it is possible for the reader to critically analyse the humour. The third strategy involves the reader critically enjoying the humour, perhaps engaging with it on an ironic level. Finally, the fourth strategy suggests the humour is reclaimed from a feminist perspective. Sunderland does acknowledge, however, that these readings are potentially complex for researchers to negotiate, and perhaps suited to differing situations.

It is also useful to consider Gill's (2007) notion of the postfeminist sensibility, as this particular conceptualisation of postfeminism is not only useful for the current paper, but also for feminist psychology in a broader sense. In beginning to unpack the concept of postfeminism, Gill (2007) presents the idea of a postfeminist sensibility. She notes that the term postfeminism is highly contested, suggesting that a clear and consistent agreement of definition or understanding is unable to be found. Examples of such contradictory definitions include conceptualisations of postfeminism as an epistemological position, as a particular form of feminism found after the Second Wave, or as a regressive political standpoint. These conflicting notions of postfeminism are deemed problematic by Gill (2007), who suggests that the lack of a useful understanding of postfeminism has implications for its use in cultural or media analysis. In an attempt to address this, we are presented with Gill's (2007) conceptualisation of postfeminism as a sensibility, comprised of several distinctive and interrelated themes. Of note for this paper in particular is the role of irony and knowingness in the postfeminist sensibility. Framing something as "just" a joke is often used as a way of defending or sanitising sexist humour. Gill (2007) argues that the use of irony in postfeminist media culture is a way of "having it both ways" (p. 159) where sexist statements are expressed, yet excused through their framing as ironic, as both harmless and humorous. What is truly troubling here is the effect this has on the potential for critique, which Gill suggests is made much more difficult within the context of irony.

Advocating for academic research concerning gendered humour online, Shifman and Lemish (2010) explored the extent to which popular Internet humour constructed sexist, feminist or post-feminist ideologies by means of a content analysis. Although the sample indicated that men and women were mocked equally, perhaps suggesting a shift away from sexist humour, the researchers discovered that the jokes tended to reproduce stereotypical constructions of women and femininities, e.g. depicting women as dependent, or prone to nagging, etc. Moreover, a strong emphasis on gender differences was apparent through the presence of "Mars and Venus" (p. 886) humour. This work positions popular Internet humour as concurrently sexist and postfeminist. In a move to expand upon and update this work, we decided to explore a novel form of Internet humour, in the shape of Internet memes.

The term meme is a biological metaphor, tracing its roots back to the works of Dawkins (1976) and Blackmore (2000). A meme is simply a unit of cultural transmission, which may represent an aspect of a culture such as language, fashion, songs – things which evolve, change and spread. As genes replicate and mutate, so do memes. Shifman (2013, p. 41), however, challenges this conceptualisation of memes and redraws it for the digital landscape, suggesting that Internet memes should be considered as groups of content rather than single units, positioning them as:

> (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance which (b) were created with an awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.

Internet memes come in a wide range of types and formats, including but not limited to YouTube videos, Twitter hashtags and, of interest in this paper, image macros. An image macro is, quite simply, an image featuring a textual overlay. This particular format is easily created, with a host of applications and websites that can automate the process of adding text to an image. Most image macro generators feature a selection of stock templates/characters for users to work with, allowing them to add their own text to an image, often using a particular mad-libs-style formulaic catchphrase associated with a particular ''type'' of meme. Many of these websites also facilitate the rating and sharing of image macros. Memes are often a source of entertainment, and indeed humour, online.

Although the study of Internet memes is a relatively young field, some literature exists from the fields of computing, networking and mathematics. This work often tends to focus on the spread and longevity of memes (e.g. Bauckhage, 2011; Coscia, 2013), though more literature exploring the content of memes (Milner, 2013a; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2013, 2014) and the potential for their political or activist uses (Milner, 2013b; Rentschler & Thrift, 2015) is emerging, highlighting the academic relevance and currency of exploring this kind of media, especially for critical and feminist psychologists. A key example where participatory media and Internet memes played a central role is the Occupy Wall Street protest movement, which criticised economic and social injustice in the US. The prevalence of memetic content surrounding this movement has been noted, with Milner (2013b) highlighting the possibilities for multiple voices, identities and opinions to be expressed. Others such as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) suggest that the possibility for personalisation of memes can be powerful, bridging the gap between the personal and the political. Of particular note for feminist scholars is Rentschler and Thrift's (2015) paper exploring the 2012 ''Binders Full of Women'' meme, which saw the proliferation of image macros featuring Republican US presidential candidate Mitt Romney following his ''binders full of women'' answer during a presidential debate. They argue that memes such as this allow people to do feminism, building a networked feminist public through humour and cultural participation. Other forms of memetic content such as hashtags have also been highlighted as having potential use for feminist consciousness raising and activism, such as the domestic violence focused #WhyIStayed, examined in Clark's (2016) exploration of hashtag feminism.

Shifman (2013) argues that both the creation and consumption of Internet memes can be political in itself, speaking in a broad sense, and in referring specifically to the social construction of power within memes. She suggests that, where previous work has explored practices such as becoming members of political parties or voting, more recently the idea of political participation has been expanded to consider everyday practices such as sharing political humour. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Internet memes can serve as vehicles for political participation, with Shifman (2013) suggesting that explicitly politicalised Internet memes serve three interconnected purposes. Firstly, it is argued that memes can act to persuade or advocate, powerfully transmitting loaded messages. Additionally, Shifman (2013) argues that memes can bridge the gap between the personal and political,

functioning to promote participation, activism and grassroots action. Finally, she suggests that memes can allow expression and foster the provocation of public discussion. In addition to bridging gaps between the personal and political, we see Internet memes bridging gaps between our digital and physical realities. For example, the widespread physical presence of Internet memes printed out on banners and placards at protests such as the Women's March on Washington (Mina, 2017).

The continued harassment of women in online spaces, often tempered with claims to humour and joking, warrants further examination from a critical, feminist perspective. As Internet memes represent a popular site of humour online, they signify a valid site of study to meet this aim. Further to this, and of importance for feminist activists, they also provide a possible site for resistance, both digitally and physically speaking. We argue that there is a clear case for feminist researchers to begin to examine the messages transmitted in popular Internet memes. The rest of this paper presents selected data from a larger research project concerning Internet memes, humour, and the gender gap in technology. Adopting a critical, feminist approach to the study of humour, informed by understandings of post-feminism as a sensibility (Gill, 2007), we sought to offer an alternative to mainstream approaches, not regarding humour as inherently positive, not exploring an artificial site or source of humour, and assuming a social constructionist position (e.g. Burr, 1995; Gavey, 1989). Drawing on existing research concerning online humour and memes (Shifman, 2013; Shifman & Lemish, 2010), this research aimed to probe the content of this relatively underexplored, contemporary source of Internet data, and to examine representations of gender within popular image macro memes.

Method

Decisions around sampling online data can be difficult owing to the scope and mutability of the Internet (Hine, 2012; Mautner, 2005), thus a sampling strategy in line with previous work around online humour was developed (e.g. Shifman & Lemish, 2010). The method involved the initial identification of popular meme websites (considering the frequency of appearances in search queries, and the page rank of individual sites), then the identification of popular image macro memes from within these websites. At the time of sampling, the three most popular English language search engines (in terms of number of search queries performed) were Google, Microsoft/Bing and Yahoo!. The decision to include only English language search engines was taken as only English language memes were to be analysed, in order to avoid potential difficulties of meanings being lost in translation (Polkinghorne, 2005; van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). Once popular search engines had been identified, the terms *memes*, *Internet meme* and *make meme* were used to generate a shortlist of popular meme-focused websites from which to draw the sample.

In order for a website to qualify for inclusion, it had to meet certain criteria, e.g. having a Google page rank score above 5, and appearing multiple times across the search queries. The websites themselves needed to have transparent ranking

systems, feature an "all time" popular memes gallery, and demonstrate clear social media sharing options. Crucially, the sites needed to possess the functionality for users to view and create image macros without the need for registration, in line with ethical guidelines around conducting Internet research, e.g. the Association of Internet Researchers (2012) guidelines. The three websites finally selected for analysis were MemeGenerator (http://memegenerator.net), quickmeme (www.quickmeme.com) and We Know Memes (http://weknowmemes.com/generator).

A total of 240 English language image macro memes, the top 80 from each website's all time most popular gallery page, were downloaded before importing into NVivo 10. NVivo was used to organise and tag the dataset, coding both the textual and the visual, the subject of the humour and what featured in each image macro. Discussing the use of visual data and methods in psychology, Frith, Riley, Archer, and Gleeson (2005, p. 189) argue that the use of such data offers a "range of possibilities" to psychologists, noting that the combination of visual and textual/verbal aspects work together in ways which can either challenge or reinforce one another. This point is significant for the present study, as Internet memes in the form of image macros utilise textual and visual elements simultaneously in order to create humour, and as such any attempt to separate these properties would be unwise. Thus, for the purpose of this analysis, each individual image macro meme was considered to be a unit of data.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as the method of analysis, due to its compatibility with large data sets, and the exploratory nature of the study. Moreover, thematic analysis is compatible with various theoretical standpoints, allowing for a feminist social constructionist informed approach to be taken (Burr, 1995; Gavey, 1989). Following the guidelines set out in Braun and Clarke (2006), the sample was first read repeatedly in order to gain a high level of familiarity with the data. An initial and simple categorisation of the units took place, identifying the characters and types of memes present, supporting the familiarisation process. At this point, image macros were tagged with the characters or types of meme represented, consulting the Know Your Meme database in order to ensure consistent coding. Know Your Meme is a wiki-like community website where users can contribute to the documentation of Internet phenomena, including (but not limited to) the image macro type memes examined in this study ("About | KYM", n.d.). It should be noted that we did not seek to decide what counted as humour, as definitions of humour are quite broad and this is of course to some degree subjective.

Following this familiarisation with the data set, codes relating to the content or subject of the image macros were generated for each unit. For example, an image macro featuring the character Oblivious Suburban Mom ("Oblivious Suburban Mom | KYM," n.d.) featuring the textual caption "there is always porn on the computer, my son says it is some sort of virus" was coded with *oblivious suburban mom, woman, white, mother, son, pornography, naïve, technology, sex*.

After coding had taken place, the codes were examined with the aim of searching for broader themes. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, this phase re-focuses the analysis, working towards the identification of themes and sub-themes from initial

codes. For example, some codes cohered at a broader level, e.g. individual codes of *sexy*, *beautiful*, *fat*, *makeup*, and *weight* could be summarised under the sub-theme of *Appearance*. The generation of thematic maps aided this process, and was utilised in the final steps of reviewing, defining and naming the broad, overarching themes.

Analysis and discussion

As noted previously, this research formed part of a larger project exploring humour and the gender gap in technology workplaces. Through our thematic analysis of the image macros, we identified two overarching themes. First, Technological Privilege, which sees the construction of an elite, technologically skilled, masculinised identity through three sub-themes: sexy geeks, Internet and technology, and memes about memes. This contrasts with the second theme, Others, where humour is used to construct marginalised groups in specific ways - notably, the most dominant aspect of this theme sees women derogated and cast as 'other', alongside a host of other intersectionalities, ultimately working to promote a form of hegemonic masculinity. The following analysis presents the manner in which gendered spaces, relations and identities are constructed, negotiated, privileged and claimed within both of these emergent themes.

"Maybe if I poke her with it. . ."

Throughout the sample, our analysis identified a clear reproduction of heteronormative (and heterosexist) constructions of sexuality and gendered relations through the use of humour. Interestingly, while memes featuring images of women and men together made up just seven of the memes sampled, all seven of these memes presented heterosexual activities (e.g. a picture of a couple spooning in bed, captioned "maybe if I poke her with it, it'll put her in the mood) that position women as sexual objects to trick and cajole into such sexual relations (e.g. a picture of Stephen Hawking flanked by two women in bikinis, captioned "they feel safe around me because I can't get a boner").

These examples draw upon dominant cultural ideologies regarding compulsive heterosexuality which arguably are the basis for hegemonic masculinity (Rich 1980). Within this discourse men, women, and sexual relations between them are drawn in particular ways, demonstrating a straightforward reproduction of the male sex drive discourse. This discourse can be understood as working together with its partner 'have/hold discourse' (see Hollway, 1984a). These two discourses position heterosexual activity as default, with women positioned as objects or prizes to 'be had', and men as the agentic 'havers' through the use of phallocentric notions of heterosexual acts. Interestingly, women were not only presented as sexually passive, but also as sexually 'oblivious'. Memes featuring characters such as the Sexually Oblivious Female and Oblivious Suburban Mom present women as naïve, misunderstanding the intentions of other people and being unfamiliar with online technologies and spaces ("Sexually Oblivious Female | KYM,"

n.d.). Through the juxtaposed presentation of women as technologically naïve and men as technologically privileged, online spaces and technologies are coded as masculine, and the spaces claimed through the deployment of meme humour.

By contrast to women, men are presented as knowing or 'in the know'. An example image showing the Sexually Oblivious Female character, with the text overlay reading "Go back to your place for a drink? We're already at a bar silly!" draws on notions of tricking and game playing in sexual relations, in line with the kinds of messages seen in 'pick-up-artist' communities, another technological space where the have/hold discourse is magnified and utilised to justify foregoing consent, again positioning women as prizes or rewards (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Holloway, 1984a). Throughout the sample, we also find both explicit and implicit references to the use of Internet pornography, for instance within a Success Kid image macro captioned "Pressed Play - No LiveJasmin pop-up". The joke makes reference to adverts for the LiveJasmin adult video chat site, which typically pop up in a new window when streaming pornography. This occurrence is celebrated through the use of the Success Kid character, a smug looking toddler. In order for someone viewing this macro to 'get' the joke, a certain level of prior knowledge is assumed. This constructs the producers/viewers of these memes as men who are familiar with the consumption of Internet pornography, and in doing so contributes to the normalisation of the consumption (and by extension, the production) of this material for men. As before, there are also implications for gendered power relations being exercised here, with men being constructed as sexually active, and women as passive and/or naïve (Burr, 1995).

In addition to humour being used to reproduce heterosexist practices, we also found image macros using provocative humour around contraception, pregnancy and abortion. For example, within an image featuring Staredad, a popular meme format which takes the form of a comic strip, where a child bursts into a room to tell their father something shocking/important. In the final panel, the father turns to face the child with a menacing stare. The example in question portrayed the child telling the father that they think they may be pregnant, to which the father replies "Coat hanger is in the closet". The child is shocked, and seeks clarification - the father bluntly replies "Did I fucking stutter?". In a similar vein, we encountered images of the Horny Harry format, featuring stills of the characters Harry Potter and Hermione Granger from the film Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Generally speaking these memes tend to play on Harry saying something sexually inappropriate to Hermione, with Hermione being presented as being sexually duped by him ("Horny Harry | KYM," n.d.). For example, Harry informing Hermione that his "birth control spell" didn't work. In another image featuring Success Kid, the character celebrates the arrival of his period, just before he was about to do his pregnancy test. In these examples, pregnancy and motherhood are constructed as deeply undesirable.

Staredad seeks to shock - it is not the unlikely (and therefore comical, if we were to understand this example in terms of incongruous humour) situation of a young boy being pregnant that is the source of humour, rather it is the sincere presentation of a reference to self-induced abortion. This, Hermione's shock, and Success

Kid's celebration all work to construct pregnancy as risky and burdensome, derogating mothers and motherhood, limiting the range of 'acceptable' identities able to be claimed in this media and space.

"You say all guys are the same. . ."

Image macros containing comments on the things women 'are' or the things women say featured throughout the sample and worked to bolster the reproduction of normative femininities. Often there are reproductions of essentialising and binary constructions of women and femininity via Mars/Venus humour (Shifman & Lemish, 2010) which cast women as emotionally unstable, irrational, indecisive, and ultimately provide contrast with constructions of men as rational, knowing and therefore legitimate occupants of this online space.

Constructions of women as indecisive and as a source of the promotion of an 'all men are the same' discourse cropped up across a variety of meme types. For instance, this is illustrated by a Success Kid image captioned "asked girlfriend where she wanted to eat - she gave a decisive answer", and an image featuring the character Philosoraptor (a velociraptor stroking its chin, deep in thought) pondering "If all men are the same why does it take a woman so long to choose?". Along similar lines, an example in the format of Condescending Wonka (which show a still of a sarcastic or condescending looking Gene Wilder in the 1971 film Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory) captioned "You say all guys are the same? You must have tried them all", hints at promiscuity whilst portraying a superior, condescending manner. This works to parody and derogate normative femininities as being the source of the problematic 'men are from Mars' discourse while continuing to reproduce the 'women are from Venus' narrative. It is also not lost on the authors that the gendered positioning of traits such as decisiveness is a common discursive strategy used in wider media (e.g. US politics; Messner, 2007) and is deployed to legitimise the importance of heteronormative, masculinised traits in leadership roles, and delegitimise traits associated with normative femininities. This discursive strategy seeks to reaffirm heteronormative men's dominance in certain spaces and is often associated with wider cultural movements that seek to "re-masculinise" identities, roles and spaces (Jeffords, 1989, p.178).

Other examples featured the Actual Advice Mallard format, which shows a photograph of a duck and typically serves as an 'advice' meme, offering useful tips, tricks, and life hacks. For example, featuring the caption "instead of pressing ctrl + alt + del then clicking the task manager button - you can press ctrl + shift + esc to open task manager directly" ("Actual Advice Mallard | KYM," n.d.). However, this format can be subverted, presenting captions such as "don't try to understand women - women understand women and they hate each other". In this example, Actual Advice Mallard is being used to perpetuate what Hawthorne and Klein (1999, p.5) described as the "patriarchal ideology of women as enemies", but within online space. Hawthorne and Klein (1999, p.5) understand connectivity to be "at the heart of feminism", thus we can understand this troubling construction

of women who 'hate' each other as a discursive strategy which seeks to undermine attempts at cyberfeminism. In addition, the production of the feminine as mysterious and unknowable via a 'fact/advice format', drawing upon early psychoanalytic discourse (Gough, 2004) justifies essentialised gendered relations, the lack of interest of feminine sexuality and separatist gendered politics.

The demonization of women ('they hate each other') is continually reproduced as female characters are portrayed as jealous, vengeful and potentially threatening. For example, images featuring the character Overly Attached Girlfriend portray a young woman smiling manically, with the textual elements working to construct a clingy and possessive girlfriend character ("Overly Attached Girlfriend | KYM," n.d.) in line with popular 'bunny boiler' tropes which feminists have argued to be primarily deployed to problematize feminine sexual agency (Gill, 2008). An example of such a caption encountered in our analysis is "I'm going to learn all your mom's favourite recipes, so you'll never need her again". Through this exaggerated and monstrous construction of undesirable femininity (McRobbie, 2008), appropriate practices are articulated, with Overly Attached Girlfriend acting as an example of how not to be.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of the sample, many memes made reference to various aspects of technology use, e.g. social media, gaming, and self-referential memes about memes. What is more interesting is how gender plays out in these image macros, with men shown playing video games (for instance, in a One Does Not Simply meme, featuring Sean Bean as his character Boromir in Lord of The Rings, captioned "mom, one does not simply pause online game"), demonstrating their skills by downloading material illegally, and using Internet-specific acronyms, whereas women (where present at all) are shown using Facebook to talk about politics they know nothing about, or complaining about their iPhones being scratched (for instance, in a First World Problems meme featuring a crying woman, with the textual component reading "my diamond earrings keep scratching my iPhone").

In a similar way to our previous discussions around sexuality, men are again constructed as active, intellectually-knowing, and as rightful owners and users of online space and technologies, a presentation which is dichotomised with the vain, materialististic, and intellectually-superficial constructions of women. Shifman and Varsano (2007) noted that sexist humour in a 'clean' joke website fell into two categories - general and specified. General sexist humour, that is humour that subjugates women across the board, was less common than specified sexist humour, which targets specific derogative and gendered stereotypes (e.g. the dumb blonde, the nagging mother-in-law, etc.). The sexist humour presented in the memes does not seem to fit with this finding, instead making generalised statements about the characteristics and behaviour of women in general. Shifman and Varsano (2007) suggest that humour reflects "collective fears, ideologies, and social power" (para. 5) - we think that from a social constructionist perspective, this assertion is key to understanding why the Internet meme as a form of humour leans towards the more general rather than specific. We would suggest that, rather than attempting to subjugate a particular character such as a nagging

mother-in-law, these memes in fact seek to position women within unequal relations of power more generally in the digital landscape. The emphasis on gender difference is apparent in our analysis, with constructions of appropriate or stereotypical femininities and 'Mars/Venus' discourses reflecting the work on traditional forms of online humour seen in Shifman and Lemish (2010), or those touched on by Sunderland (2007).

"Get back in the kitchen. . ."

A handful of image macros referenced the two, arguably similar, memes "get back in the kitchen" and "make me a sandwich" ("Get Back To The Kitchen | KYM," n.d.; "Make Me A Sandwich | KYM," n.d.). For instance, an image featuring the character Trollface urging male viewers to "upvote" the meme in order to increase the meme's ranking ("if you're a guy upvote this"), while telling women to go back to their rightful place, the kitchen ("if you're a girl go back to the kitchen"). A Conspiracy Keanu meme shows a photograph of Keanu Reeves, appearing bewildered by the question "if two lesbians are in a relationship, who makes the sandwiches?", and a further Staredad comic sees the following exchange play out:

> Child: "Dad I'm hungry!"
> Father: "Tell your mother."
> Child: "She's not in the kitchen."
> Father: "She's what?!".

These memes work to firmly (re)locate women within domestic spaces, reproducing gendered dynamics of dominance and subordination. Moreover, issues of work and material wealth cropped up in image macros featuring and discussing women. Photographs of women are used in conjunction with textual overlays complaining about waking up for work in First World Problems memes ("Got hired – will have to start waking up early again"), or the joy of sleeping while someone else gets ready for work, implying that they are happy to be taken care of financially (presumably by a male partner). There is a contradiction here for the status positioning of the domesticised woman, with the construction of domestic spaces as the appropriate place for women, while women are simultaneously criticised for being dependent on a male breadwinner, thereby reiterating the costly positioning of women within the 'breadwinner' discourse that earlier feminist work theorises (e.g. Hollway, 1984b). In a Confession Bear meme (featuring a photograph of a bear, usually captioned with confessions of a taboo nature) a story plays out where a female boss is tormented by an employee on a daily basis, demonstrating a lack of respect paired with toilet humour ("I fart in my boss's office every morning before she arrives, and now she has facilities checking the walls for dead animals"). This is a particularly interesting presentation, where the active construction of a woman in management is derogated and disrespected, presumably by a male subordinate.

This humour portrays senior or powerful roles in work spaces as something undesirable or unsuitable for women. Combined with the ''get back in the kitchen'' and ''make me a sandwich'' refrains discussed previously, we suggest that these memes work together to construct the ideal woman's place as in the home, while references to domesticity and incompatibility with employment can be read as constructing women as lazy, unfit for work outside the home, positioning domesticity as an 'easy' job and presenting a 'no-win' situation for women.

We also argue that certain examples seen in the sample (e.g. Get Back In The Kitchen and Make Me A Sandwich memes), whilst appearing to use humour that straightforwardly reproduces problematic gendered stereotypes (albeit in this new and novel online format), are examples of so-called ''hipster sexist'' humour. This term, coined by Quart (2012) suggests that literary devices such as ''mockery, quotation marks, and paradox'' (para. 3) are used as a kind of distancing mechanism, lifting this ironic sexism away from ''classic'' sexism. The jokes in some memes are so explicitly sexist that they should not be taken seriously, and as such their content is removed from 'real' sexism, falling neatly into the category of 'just jokes'. Quart suggests that this ironic sexism ''flatters us by letting us feel like we are beyond low-level, obvious humiliation of women and now we can enjoy snickering at it'' (para. 8). Indeed, a case study analysis of interactions on social networking site MySpace suggests that irony may function as a device to mask sexist content whilst constructing and maintaining dominant forms of masculinity (Manago, 2013). In the same way that threats of rape are rendered 'harmless' through their reframing as humour (Cole, 2015), misogyny and sexism are allowed to flourish through their positioning as ironic jokes (Worth et al., 2015). These new forms of sexism are potentially more difficult to challenge and contest than explicit forms of sexism, with the critic open to being positioned as having an unsophisticated sense of humour or, worse still, no sense of humour at all, a critique which is frequently levelled at feminists who would challenge sexist and misogynistic humour (Shifman & Lemish, 2010).

Notions of hipster sexism and irony are also useful in considering the image macros featuring depictions of violence against women. Violence against women appeared as the subject of humour in a handful of memes (nine total), with elements of sexual and domestic abuse present. Firstly, we will discuss how some of the memes construct general or domestic violence against women and children as normal/acceptable. In another Staredad meme, we find the child complaining that ''Lizzy's teasing me''. The dad advises the child to hit her, at which point the child replies ''Now she's crying''. In the final frame, Staredad suggests he hits her again. An alternative character we find here is Redneck Randal. These images feature a white man in an American pride vest, typically deployed to disparage American 'rednecks', with captions tending to cover incest, racism, and homophobia (''Redneck Randal | KYM,'' n.d.) In the example we encountered, the image is captioned ''I like my violence like I like my beer – domestic''. We also faced images of Vengeance Dad, a format featuring an awkward family photo usually captioned with confessions of tragic or violent events committed by the father against the rest of his family, for example ''My family is a treasure – they can only be found with a shovel and map'' (''Vengeance Dad | KYM,'' n.d.).

In addition to this, some of the sampled memes suggest that sexual violence and abuse in particular are comical subject matter. Memes such as Insanity Wolf, an Advice Animal format meme featuring a snarling wolf on a black background offer particularly violent and extreme captions covering rape and molestation (''Insanity Wolf | KYM,'' n.d.). For example, ''she takes your pencil without asking – take her virginity without asking'' and ''upvote this or I will molest and drown a bag full of kittens''. Continuing with references to sexual assault, another Horny Harry meme shows an interaction between Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, where Harry suggests that he and Hermione play ''the firetruck'' game – he will run his hand up her leg, and when she feels uncomfortable and wants him to stop she can yell ''redlight''. In the second frame Hermione calls redlight, yet Harry reminds her that ''firetrucks don't stop for red lights''.

As with the rape threats in tweets discussed by Cole (2015), the threat of violence here is qualified with a joke. Simply by locating the threat within the visual and textual context of the image macro works in the same way that appending a smiley face or a ''LOL'' would to a tweet – image macro memes are created for humour, the characters and formats indicate the presence of jokes and humorous content. We argue, in the same way a smiley face renders the threat of rape socially acceptable, that the presentation of violence within a meme renders it socially acceptable, and therein lies a certain level of power. As Cole (2015) notes, the use of humour has a troubling disciplinary function here.

Final remarks

Ultimately, our analysis of popular Internet memes has demonstrated the complex nature of a novel form of online humour, with regard to the construction and regulation of gendered identities at the intersection of new technologies. These image macros work in a similar fashion to more traditional forms of humour, and can be used as a means of broadcasting offensive sentiments. Further to this, we suggest their status as humorous objects works to permit or sanitise their content. We suggest that, whilst the image macros analysed reproduce many well-worn discourses concerning gender, they mobilise these discourses in a new medium in order for heteronormative, masculinised identities to claim rightful ownership of this medium and the spaces in which it presents itself.

Further to this, we suggest that these images exemplify a manifestation of the postfeminist sensibility in a novel form of humour, especially with regards to examples so extreme that their ''ironic'' status works to excuse their content, and the reassertion of dichotomous constructions of men and women. Indeed Gill (2007) draws attention to the element of the postfeminist sensibility which sees sex differences reasserted and naturalised. She notes that discourses grounded in essentialism and sex differences experienced a kind of resurgence through postfeminism, pointing towards the ''growing interest'' (p. 158) in evolutionary psychology and genetics research.

It has been proposed that social networking sites serve as arenas for young people to construct identities (or aspects thereof) through digital artefacts

(Manago, 2013). Given that the Internet memes sampled in our research were all taken from sites where sharing via social media was encouraged and facilitated, this is something we argue is central to the analysis – the memes analysed are being used to simultaneously construct and police identities. The representations of women in the image macro memes sampled work problematically, both reproducing damaging constructions of women and femininity, and deriving humour from issues such as sexual assault or domestic violence. It would appear that women are not welcome in memes – they can be visible, but not vocal, rendering opportunities to challenge or resist such constructions potentially difficult. Troubling for our analysis is the reminder that memes can function as powerful persuasive devices, transmitting loaded messages in their content under the guise of humour or jokes (Shifman, 2013).

We argue that a way to combat this troubling aspect of digital media might be to encourage the development of counter-discourses, through the subversion or reclamation of problematic memes. A good example of this can be found with the Feminist Nazi meme reclamation. Feminist Nazi memes feature a still of Australian reality TV personality, Layla Subritzky, open mouthed as if yelling angrily or shocked. The captions work to show a naïve approach to stereotypical feminist ideas (''Feminist Nazi | KYM,'' n.d.) belittling those who identify as feminists or support feminist ideas. For instance, one of the original captions seen in this format reads ''puts on a bikini and leaves the house – calls men pigs for staring at her''. This meme quickly saw an influx of feminists reworking the memes with their own captions in response to the offensive original captions. For example, ''wants to end gender based oppression – thus understands that men are also unfairly represented by gender stereotypes''.

Online responses such as this not only help paint a less bleak picture of online interaction than that evidenced by the memes analysed in this study, but they also create space to subversively respond to some of the wider underlying structural issues that have been discussed. The Internet has the potential to be used as a place where women can find a platform for resisting and challenging dominant discourses (Harris, 2001). More recently, Jane (2016) notes that participatory humour, including the use of Internet memes, is increasingly being used in a subversive fashion in instances of feminist digilantism (Internet-based vigilantism and activism). Thus, in line with more critical approaches to the study of humour, we do not feel that it is appropriate either to wholeheartedly condemn or to celebrate this uniquely technologically mediated form of humour. There is a pressing need for feminist psychologists to continue explorations of misogynistic abuse perpetuated in and through technology, and how it serves to police, regulate and discipline women's identities and practices to reinforce gendered hierarchies.

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