

## INTERNET HUMOUR AND THE NORMALISATION OF RAPE CULTURE

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### Background:

Research into online discourse has seen an increased focus on how gender is constructed in online discourse as well as the prevalence of misogyny online. This includes mapping the discourse on the manosphere (a disperse group of men's rights activists and anti-feminists) (Ging, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2019), investigating the misogyny women experience online (Jane, 2017a; Banet-Weiser 2018) and finally the way in which rape culture (a culture in which sexual violence is normalised and trivialised (Garvey 2019)) is perpetuated in various online communication (Dodge, 2015, Jane, 2018; Kramer, 2011; Zaleski et al., 2016)).

Humour research has a long history of investigating the construction of gender and the perpetuation of misogyny within humorous discourse (Bemiller & Schneider, 2010; Kramer, 2011; Shifman & Lemish, 2010). Furthermore, research into the phenomenon of the rape joke in online communication has also been given some academic attention (Cox, 2015; Kramer, 2011, Lockyer & Savigny, 2019). However, the intersection between humour and sexual violence in internet memes specifically has been widely overlooked in the scholarship on social media.

In addition to this, research has been conducted into the representation of gender in Internet memes (Massanari & Chess, 2018; Milner, 2016) and the role of humour in Internet memes (Milner, 2013a; Miltner, 2014; Shifman 2013b, 2014). However, very little research has investigated the role of humour in combination with the discursive construction of gender (Drakett et al. 2018).

### Objective(s):

This paper investigates the discursive construction of sexual violence in humorous Internet memes. Using #MeToo as a case study, the paper investigates the role of humour in memes that focus on sexual violence. Investigating how gender and sexuality are discursively constructed in memes, the paper focuses on how this plays into the representation of sexual violence. The paper asks: what can Internet scholars learn by taking Internet humour seriously?

### Method:

The case study referred to in this paper comes from a study conducted in 2017 where 866 Internet memes were collected during the height of #MeToo. The memes were collected from three meme-sharing social media platforms (9gag, Reddit, and

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Imgur) using the search terms “Harvey Weinstein”, “Kevin Spacey”, “Louis CK” and “MeToo”. The platforms were selected as these could in some way be characterised as ‘humorous discursive spaces’ as they encouraged humorous content and characterised the platforms as spaces for e.g. “fun”, “laughter” and “entertainment”. The memes were subsequently coded using NVivo and a discourse analysis was carried out. A number of themes were identified which have been discussed elsewhere (Author 2020, Author 2022).

## **Results:**

The paper will briefly outline how gender and sexuality are constructed in the Internet memes that were collected for this study. My research finds that the memes reproduce a discourse which centralises white, male, heterosexual experiences and discursively marginalises and categorises women, people of colour and sexual minorities as “others”.

The key findings of this paper, however is the discursive construction of sexual violence and the role humour plays in this. A himpathetic (Manne 2018) logic runs through most of the memes which centralises men’s experiences and provides disproportionate sympathy with the famous and powerful Hollywood men who systematically abused women.

Sexual violence in the memes is either conceptualised as sexy or as “just sex”. Through the himpathetic lens, women’s bodies are sexualised and it is discussed whether or not certain women are desirable enough to have sex with. In turn, sexual assault is often not understood as such but rather considered through the focus on male sexual desire and sexual entitlement. Victim/survivors’ experiences are thus widely disregarded.

The role of humour is largely one of either inclusion or exclusion. The platforms become spaces for indicating and reaffirming heteronormativity and homosociality. Jokes about rape become ways for the users of the platforms to indicate that they are “in the know” of the subcultural codes where the trope that “there are no girls on the Internet” (Milner, 2013a) is celebrated and perpetuated. In turn, the work done by humour in these memes discursively excludes women, sexual minorities and people of colour. This exclusion extends to victim/survivors who often become the butt of the joke and are used as a prop to create a humorous meme. The paper concludes by noting the ways in which these humorous memes, that might at first seem like examples of rebellious humour (Billig, 2005) instead function as humour with a disciplinary function as it upholds gender norms and excludes marginalised people.

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