

This is a pre-print version of:

Shifman, Limor & Lemish, Dafna (2010). Between feminism and fun(ny)mism: Analyzing gender in popular Internet humor, *Information, Communication and Society*, 13(6), 870 – 891.

Available at: <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a926388946~db=all~jumptype=rss>

## **Between Feminism and Fun(ny)mism: Analyzing Gender in Popular Internet Humor**

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*This paper presents a first analysis of popular Internet humor about gender. The focus is on the extent to which such humor encodes sexist, feminist, and postfeminist ideologies. Utilizing a novel sampling protocol, a corpus of 150 highly popular verbal and visual comic texts was retrieved from eight English-based websites. The findings of a content analysis suggest that although men and women are mocked to an equal extent, traditional stereotypical gender representations still prevail, along with the emergence of new postfeminist portrayals. The postfeminist, essentialist thesis of gender differences is revealed to be central, while feminist humor about gender inequalities is marginal. The discussion contextualizes these findings and argues they express backlash interpretations of postfeminism. Finally, the results are discussed in relation to the high hopes held for the potential of the Internet to be involved in women's empowerment and the transformation of gender relations.*

Keywords: gender differences, humor, Internet, postfeminism

In a relatively short period of time that it has existed, the Internet has become a major player in the production and distribution of humor, in general, and humor about gender, in particular (Shifman 2007). Since comedic texts draw on prevalent ideologies, stereotypes, and cultural codes, analyses of humor offers a unique perspective for understanding contemporary perceptions and stereotypes of highly charged issues such as gender and sexuality (Billig 2005; Boskin 1997). While massive numbers of Internet users seem to be involved in circulating and reading gendered humor online, academic research to date has overlooked this phenomenon. Accordingly, the aims of this exploratory study are twofold: First, to examine the content of contemporary online humor about gender. In doing so, we posit and then demonstrate the existence beyond 'sexist' and 'feminist' humor of a third, distinctly different form of gendered humor – 'postfeminist humor.' Second, we wish to develop novel methods for sampling and coding online texts, such as humor about gender.

While *online* humor is a relatively new phenomenon, humor about gender has a long history. Existing literature discusses the gendered aspects of humorous content and the

gendered nature of the production and consumption of humor (e.g. Crawford 2003; Eyssel and Bohner, 2007; Franzini 1996). Until quite recently, women have been marginalized in many fields of humor – especially in the public realm. As part of the general expectation that females restrain themselves and repress sexual and aggressive drives, women were expected to smile respectfully when men told jokes, but not to create humor of their own. This asymmetry was also reflected in the topics of jokes as women, rather than men, tended to be the butt of sexist jokes. However, social changes advanced by the feminist movements have been reflected in the production, consumption, and content of humor in several ways. First, there is growing visibility of women in public joke-production domains, such as stand-up comedy. Second, jokes made at the expense of men have become common in industrialized countries, sometimes as part of ‘liberating’ women groups (Bing 2007; Kotthoff 2006).

Since a primary characteristic of the Internet is the active participation of users in the production of content, this medium provides unique opportunities for marginalized social groups, women included, to express their unique voice – in serious as well as humorous ways. Indeed, high hopes have been associated with the Internet and other ICTs as a potential vehicle for empowered women to express themselves and so to transform gender relations (see updated review in Wajcman 2007). Hence, theoretically at least, the Internet may serve as an ideal medium for ‘liberating’ feminine humor. However, this assumption has not been subjected to systematic research yet.

In the first, theoretical, portion of this article, we conceptualize sexist, feminist, and postfeminist humor. The novel method developed for sampling *popular* online content is presented in the methodological section, as well as the codebook and coding procedures employed in this study. Finally, the complex landscape exposed by the results is contextualized and interpreted through contemporary studies of gender representations and postfeminism.

### **Humor and Gender: Three Perspectives**

The division between feminist and sexist humor is well documented in the literature (e.g. Franzini 1996; Kotthoff 2006). It falls in line with a basic differentiation described in humor scholarship between conservative/hegemonic humor that targets disempowered segments of society and subversive/rebellious humor employed as a weapon by marginalized groups against those in power (Billig 2005). The analysis of humor on gender along the axis running from conservative/sexist to subversive/feminist is important

and fundamental. However, we believe that in order to properly assess contemporary humor, a third construct – postfeminist humor – must be conceptualized and assessed.

### **Sexist Humor**

Sexist humor has been an integral part of many patriarchal cultures for centuries. Based on sexist beliefs about the inferiority of women, such humor portrays them through characteristics such as stupidity, illogical thinking, ignorance, or irresponsibility. Sexist humor also tends to build on sexual objectification of women (Bergman 1986). Sexist jokes can come in general or specified forms. General sexist jokes are told about women directly, disparaging them as a unified collective (e.g. ‘*Why don’t women mind their own business? A. No business B. No mind.*’). Specified sexist jokes mock certain feminine groups, characterizing them by an exaggeration of traditional feminine stereotypes. For instance, the dumb blonde is an embellished version of ‘dumb woman’ and ‘sex object’ stereotypes, while mother-in-law-centered humor employs the stereotype of threatening, castrating, sexless womanhood (Shifman and Maapil Varsano 2007). Whereas general sexist jokes are explicit in their focus on gender (one cannot read or hear such jokes without realizing that their topic is gender), gender in specified sexist jokes is often implicit – encoded in well-known stereotypes that are not labeled explicitly as relating to gender (see the nun joke in appendix A for an illustration).

Analyses of sexist humor are strongly associated with the extensive literature on gender representations in mainstream media, such as television and advertising. In a nutshell, this literature suggests that gender representations are ground in well-entrenched, historical constructions of femininity and masculinity as binary as well as hierarchical oppositions (Cirksena and Cuklanz 1992; Van Zoonen 1994). Studies have pointed to substantive differences in the representation of men and women in media: Men are identified with ‘doing’ in the public sphere and the world of occupation and are portrayed, largely, as rational, individualistic, and independent. They are shown to be more culturally and technologically oriented, but demonstrate difficulty in expression of emotions and displaying weakness. In contrast, women are associated with ‘being’/ ‘appearing’ in the private sphere, hence they are also evaluated on the basis of their appearance and sexual attractiveness (Lemish 2008; Meyers 1999). Overall, they are characterized as romantic, sensitive, dependent, emotional, and vulnerable.

There are four key components of sexist humor identified in this literature. First, such humor tends to target and ridicule women, emphasizing their inferiority in comparison to men. Second, the targeting of women can be direct and explicit, but in many

cases is implicit (i.e. uses stereotypical feminine prototypes such as ‘blonde’ or ‘wife’ without signifying explicitly that the joke deals with gender. Third, sexist humor employs traditional stereotypes in which women are portrayed as stupid, dependent, illogical, and nagging sexual objects. Finally, sexist humor not only emphasizes that men and women have different features, in doing so it indicates that there is a clear hierarchy positioning women as inferior to men.

### **Feminist Humor**

A common stereotype claims that feminists lack a sense of humor. Alternatively, since many examples of feminist humor have been described in the literature, it may well be that feminists do not find sexist jokes to be funny. Further, feminist humor differs from ‘female humor.’ Whereas the latter refers to any kind of humor generated by women, ‘feminist humor’ is ground in criticism of the patriarchal structure of society and aspires to reform it (Franzini 1996). Crawford (1995, 2003) defined feminist humor as humor that challenges traditional views of gender by targeting men and resisting dominant constructions of femininity (e.g. *‘A woman’s place is in the house – and the Senate;’* or, *‘If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament’*). Gallivan (1992) presented a slightly different definition for feminist humor: ‘Humor which reveals and ridicules the absurdity of gender stereotypes and gender based inequalities’ (p. 373). Furthermore, feminist humor attempts to expose and criticize ‘the bizarre value systems that have been regarded as ‘normal’ for so long that it is difficult to see how ridiculous they really are’ (Barreca 1991, p. 185). A fundamental feature imbedded in these and other definitions of feminist humor relates to its explicit nature in relation to gender: Whereas sexist humor can build on traditional well-established stereotypes, subversive feminist humor questions these stereotypes, thus exposing gendered power structures.

Building on these various definitions, we identified four major features of feminist humor. First, feminist humor includes opposition to the current state of gender inequalities and hegemonic stereotyping. Second, feminist humor is a manifestation of empowerment and the freedom to express such thoughts and perspectives on social reality; in many cases this also entails targeting men. Third, the explicit focus in feminist humor is on gender. Finally, feminist humor requires access to an outlet, a ‘stage’ or a medium with which to express this kind of humor. As discussed above, theoretically, the Internet may serve as an ideal medium for feminist humor.

### **Postfeminist Humor**

The still somewhat ambiguous concept of post-feminism has evoked heated debate and divergent evaluations in the research literature. According to Gill (2007), 'postfeminism' can be used to describe a certain sensibility or 'gist' prevalent in contemporary media. One of the main attributes of this 'gist' is the intertwining of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on choice and 'power feminism' that moves away from women's oppression to celebrating their abilities and achievements. On the other hand, this choice focuses on consumerism and purchasing (beauty) products. Moreover, empowered women's femininity tends to concentrate on perfect bodies. This has led to defining postfeminism as 'life-style feminism' that 'encourages woman's private, consumer lifestyles rather than cultivating a desire for public life and political activism' (Vavrus 2002, p. 2). Another attribute of postfeminist gist is the emphasis on natural-sexual difference between men and women (Gill 2007), referred to in this research report as the 'Mars and Venus' phenomenon.

Whereas our conceptualization of sexist and feminist humor drew on extant literature, the 'postfeminist humor' construct has not been studied or discussed, to date. Given the complexity and ongoing debate regarding the nature of postfeminism, we decided not to present a closed definition of postfeminist humor, rather we propose that four attributes are emerging in the convergence of postfeminism and humor.

First, postfeminist humor focuses on gender differences, as evident in the following example:

**Girl's diary**

**Saturday 6th March 2004**

Saw him in the evening and he was acting really strange [...] The bar was really crowded and loud so I suggested we go somewhere quieter to talk [...] I asked him again if everything is OK but he just half shook his head and turned the television on. After about 10 minutes of silence, I said I was going upstairs to bed [...] We made love [...] He still seemed distant and a bit cold. I started to think he had found someone else and was going to leave me. I cried myself to sleep.

**Blake's diary**

**Saturday 6th March 2004**

England lost to Ireland. Gutted. Got a shag though.

We suggest the term 'Mars and Venus humor' to describe such comic texts. This term alludes to John Gray's highly popular book *Men are from Mars, Women are from*

*Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships* (1991). The main message of this bestseller, as well as the popular discourse that arose in its aftermath, is that men and women are essentially different beings with opposing communication styles and emotional needs (Cameron 2006; Gill 2007). These differences, it is asserted, are the main causes for problems between the sexes, and conflicts associated with such differences may be resolved once men and women learn to communicate properly. Hence, postfeminist humor tends to emphasize general differences between the sexes and more specifically differences relating to communicative styles and social/emotional needs. Thus, whereas in sexist humor the *hierarchy* between the feminine and masculine features is clear, postfeminist humor will tend to obliterate the hierarchical component and focus only on differences.

Second, focusing on difference means that *both* men and women are targeted in comedic texts, rather than either men or women. Whereas in sexist humor women are the main targets and feminist humor tends to target men, in postfeminist humor the rhetoric of difference also involves ridiculing both men and women for being ‘defective,’ albeit for different reasons (e.g. women talk too much, while men talk too little; women are too emotional and needy, whereas men don’t express emotion at all).

Third, the context of postfeminist humor is the world of leisure and consumption rather than politics or work. Postfeminism has been described as a form of middle-high class ‘life-style’ highly entangled with pleasurable consumerism (Arthurs 2003; McRobbie 1997). Women’s domestic roles are replaced by their seeming new power as consumers, and their independence and individual identities are mostly demonstrated through buying choices. Thus, postfeminist humor will tend to describe women as consumers minded toward self beautification.

Finally, postfeminist humor describes women as sexually proactive, or what Gill (2003) termed ‘sexual subjects.’ Hence, such humor features women's use of their sexuality as a means to empowerment and to achieve their goals. Thus, rather than building on the traditional division in jokes between sex-obsessed men and frigid women, postfeminist humor may ridicule women as being too occupied with sex, just like men.

Based on this conceptualization of sexist, feminist and postfeminist humor, our main research question [RQ] is:

*RQ: To what extent is Internet humor sexist, feminist or postfeminist?*

We related to sexist, feminist, and postfeminist humor as distinctive constructs for analytical purposes, although in reality we can find various hybrids of them. Moreover,

these constructs are very complex and almost impossible to operationalize. Thus, as a meta-question, the research question is addressed through the aggregation of answers to the following secondary questions:

RQ1: To what extent does Internet humor mock men, women, and both sexes?

RQ2: Does Internet humor tend to be explicit about its focus on gender?

RQ3: Does Internet humor tend to focus more on gender inequalities or on gender differences?

RQ4: What are the traits associated with men and women in Internet humor, and how do these traits relate to sexist, feminist, and postfeminist positioning?

## **Methods**

Content analysis was the main method applied in addressing these research questions. We did so because we believe it to be highly useful in providing an overview of a new phenomenon, such as gender-related cyber-humor. However, as described below, the Internet's characteristics and the nature of humorous texts pose a double challenge to content analysis of online humor. Accordingly, we designed sampling and coding strategies that address these challenges.

## **Sampling**

Sampling the Internet is a main challenge 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 and Lin 2000). In considering how to deal with these characteristics, we decided not to generate a random sample of Internet jokes about gender, but rather to sample highly *popular* jokes. Since humor reflects social perceptions, we assumed that popular comic texts may provide us with more direct, concise access and valuable data about prevalent perceptions of gender. Indeed, studying highly popular media content has been widely used in research about 'old media' such as television or cinema (e.g. Allen *et al.* 1998; Worth *et al.* 2006). Yet, whereas it is relatively easy to obtain information about box office hits or television ratings, measuring popularity on the Internet is much more complex.

The novel sampling method we developed in this study was designed to identify *popular websites* and to identify popular texts *within* those websites. The following six

step procedure (summarized in Figure 1) is relevant not only for humor, but also for identification of other popular Internet-based texts.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

**1) Identifying popular humor websites:** The first phase of the novel method applied in this study was based on the protocol developed by Shifman (2007) to identify popular humor websites. Accordingly, three search engines (Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft Live) were used to locate relevant sites. These search engines represent the three current most prominent search engine families (see <http://searchengineland.com/070921-105613.php> for recent ratings, accessed 01.09.09). Although combining their results would probably cover less than half of the web (perhaps under 16% each, according to Lawrence & Giles, 1999), collectively they generate a significant amount of data.

We used two kinds of websites as sources for the texts to be collected: First, humor-dedicated sites and, second, sites defined as ‘viral email’ websites (i.e., large dynamic archives of material circulated by ‘pass along’ or ‘viral’ emails). Although viral sites do not define themselves explicitly as humor sites, most of their content is humorous. Two sets of search terms were applied: for viral email sites, the words ‘funny’ and ‘viral emails;’ for general humor sites, ‘humor’ (or ‘humour’), ‘jokes,’ ‘funny pictures’ and ‘movies’ or ‘videos’ or ‘flash.’

Activating these key words enabled us to create two populations of 90 ‘candidate websites’ comprising the first thirty hits in the three search engines. The candidates were ranked using three criteria: a) The number of appearances in at least two different search engines; b) Google page rank (at least 5); c) inclusion of a wide range of both verbal and visual humor genres. The eight websites that met all three criteria were selected for analysis.

**2) Retrieving relevant texts about gender in the websites:** Comic texts about gender were retrieved from the eight websites using two main methods. First, for websites that included thematic classification of comic texts, we retrieved all texts appearing in gender-related categories, titled, for example: ‘battle of the sexes’, ‘relationships’ or ‘marriage’. When possible, texts were downloaded automatically, using HTTrack software (available at <http://www.httrack.com>). Second, for websites without thematic categories to classify jokes, we used internal search engines to retrieve gender-related comic texts. This search employed a long list of words such as: ‘women’, ‘men’, ‘wife’, ‘husband,’ ‘girlfriend’ and



‘boyfriend.’ These two procedures resulted in retrieval of 1829 files of verbal and visual comic texts about gender from the eight websites.

**3) Identifying recurring texts in popular websites:** Our aim in this phase was to detect recurring comic texts in the sample (i.e., detect texts that appear in more than one website). The hypothesis directing this investigation was that recurrence and Web prominence were positively correlated; that is, the more a text appears in the eight websites the more it appears on the Web in general.

Since we sampled both verbal and visual humor, we used two different methods to identify recurring texts. We used a commercial software package (Image Comparer™) for *visual texts* (such as cartoons). The software compares different images and detects similar elements. In a manual screening of the results produced using this software, we found 25 recurring visual texts that appeared two to four times in our sample.

We developed a ‘R’ program for *verbal texts*. R is a free software environment for statistical computing and graphics (available at: <http://www.r-project.org>). The program calculated a matrix of similarity between all possible pairs of texts in the sample. To activate the similarity measure, we created word sets based on words remaining in texts after eliminating words in an exclusion list (n. b., largely containing lexical items such as prepositions, conjunctions, etc.). The similarity measure (between 0 and 1) was calculated based on both the intersection of words in two sets (treating the words as independent entities) and their order within the set. Thus, the *similarity measure* is lower when two texts share the same sets of words, but the words appear in a different order. Based on this operation, the program created a list of pairs of texts that were candidates for being considered to be ‘the same.’ Pairs that exceeded a threshold of 0.21 in similarity were examined by the researchers in order to determine if they were in fact the same. This yielded a list of 148 recurring texts that appeared between two-seven times in the sample.

**4) Creating a ‘Web-popularity index’ for each recurring joke:** In order to verify the use of recurring texts as a sampling strategy, we utilized a different tool to measure web presence of comic texts. To do so, we extracted a small portion from each of the 148 recurring texts (usually the first sentence or punch line) and used it as a search engine query (e. g., ‘FINE: This is the word women use’). Since each search string is unique to a specific text, each query resulted in a list of URLs of websites that included a specific comic text. Thus, we were able to obtain information about the web presence, or popularity, of each verbal text in our sample. We then calculated a ‘Web-popularity index’ for each of the recurring texts based on the mean average of the results in three search

engines - Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft Live. The values of these popularity indexes vary between 3 (the least popular comic text) and 8743 (the most popular one).

**5) Validating recurrence as an indicator for Web-popularity:** Our sampling strategy was based on the hypothesis that frequency in the initial sample of eight websites is a good indicator of frequency on the ‘general’ Web. In order to test this hypothesis, we compared the number of appearances in the eight websites to the general ‘Web-popularity index’ of each text. This was calculated for all 148 recurring texts, as well as for a random group of 40 texts that appeared only once in the sample (n=188). We found a positive correlation between frequency in the ‘small Web’ of eight websites and frequency in the ‘big Web’: Comic-texts that appear more in the selected eight websites tend to appear more on the Internet in general (Spearman's rank correlation  $\rho = 0.40$ ,  $S = 659938$ ,  $P < 1 \times 10^{-8}$ ). Thus, for instance, texts appearing only once in the eight websites have an average Web-popularity index of 169.8 whereas those appearing four times or more have an average Web-popularity index of 1696.3. Thus, our sampling method that was based on detection of recurring texts in a small universe of websites was validated.

**6) Choosing 150 recurring texts for analysis:** We used our data about Web-popularity to rank all 148 recurring verbal texts. In doing so, we found that although on an average recurring texts are much more popular than non-recurring texts, a minority of recurring texts in our sample proved to have a low Web-popularity index. In order to eliminate non-popular texts from the sample, we decided to include only texts with a Web-popularity of at least 100. Out of 148 recurring verbal texts, 126 texts met this criterion. We thus decided to use the top 125 verbal texts and add them to the 25 recurring verbal / visual texts, to obtain a sample of 150 texts.

### **Coding scheme and definitions**

Our codebook draws on two sources: works on gender stereotyping and gender representation in other media (e.g. Gallagher 2006; Lemish and Tidhar 1999; Lemish and Lahav 2004); and scholarship on the social dynamics of humor (e.g. Davies 1990; Gruner 1997). Surprisingly, we could not find content-analysis based studies of gender jokes. Thus, this study appears to be the first attempt to develop a comprehensive codebook for studying contemporary humor on gender. The codebook included six main variables, each one related to a research question: 1) Target of mockery – The scorned person/group ridiculed or portrayed as stupid or in some manner flawed (RQ1); 2) Explicitness – The

degree of explicit mentioning of gender-related issues (RQ2); 3) Theme – The dominance of a gender theme (RQ3); 4) Sex/body – Themes related to sex and the sexual body (RQ4); 5) Habits/hobbies – Activities or interests pursued outside one's regular occupation and engaged in primarily for pleasure (RQ4); 6) Traits – Personality and behavioral traits (RQ4).

Following Davies' extensive work on ethnic jokes (1990), in which he found that such texts are often constructed around opposing pairs of negative traits (e.g., stupidity vs. canniness, cowardice vs. militarism and over-sexuality vs. frigidity), we constructed a list of paired traits, identified in the literature as associated with prominent gender stereotypes. The variables, values, and some definitions for the more complex components in the codebook are summarized in Table I.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

### **Coding procedure and statistical analysis**

The humorous texts selected for the sample were coded by two coders – male and female, both native English speakers and postgraduate students. To practice coding, we used a sample that was not included in the final analysis. The training period lasted three weeks, and involved modifications of the codebook. For most variables, a high level of inter-coder reliability was obtained. For these variables, each coder coded half of the sample, with an overlap of 40 texts to assess inter-coder reliability. Final inter-reliability scores (Scott's pi) were: Theme (0.82), sex/body (0.91), habits/hobbies (1.00), and explicitness (0.85). Two variables – 'traits' and 'target of mockery' – achieved in our initial measurement an unsatisfactory level of inter-coder reliability (Scott's pi 0.68 and 0.74). These variables relate strongly to the ambiguous nature of humorous texts, which makes them difficult to conceptualize and operationalize (Neuendorf 2002). Accordingly, we decided to use *consensus coding* for these two variables. This method has proven useful in cases when variables are difficult to operationalize and measure, yet researchers still wish to perform systematic analysis (e.g. Cohen *et al.* 1990; Lemish and Tidhar 1999). Thus, for these variables the entire corpus was coded independently by the two coders and each disagreement was discussed by them. In cases in which coders could not reach an agreed decision the classification was coded as 'unable to decide.'

We used the *exact binomial test*, appropriate for small samples, to test the statistical significance of the differences between the features ascribed to men and women in the texts (RQ 5).

## Results

In RQ1, we asked to what extent Internet humor mocks men, women, or both sexes? Results show that, overall, men and women are targeted equally in the sample: 36% of the texts (n=54) mock men, 36% (n=54) mock women, 22.7% (n=34) mock both men and women, and 5.3% (n=8) were coded as ‘unable to answer.’

RQ2 focused on the extent to which internet humor is explicit or implicit about gender. We found that, in general, humor tends to non-explicit: 93 texts (62%) were coded as non-explicit and 57 texts (38%) were coded as clearly explicit. As noted above, this finding may serve as an indicator that humor is still based, to a large extent, on traditional and well-known gender stereotypes.

In-depth examination of the explicit texts facilitated elucidating findings related to RQ3 - the degree to which the texts are dealing with gender differences or inequalities. 23 of 57 gender explicit texts (40.4%) focus on gender differences. Masculinity is the main theme of 19 texts (33.3%), 14 (24.6%) focus on femininity, and only one (1.8%) deals with gender inequalities.

As explained in the methods section, we also created a ‘Web-popularity index’ of the individual texts that estimated the number of copies of a text on the World-Wide-Web. We found that comic texts about gender differences score highly in Web popularity: Six of the top ten texts in our sample were coded as dealing with gender differences. Thus, gender differences emerge from our data as a highly prominent theme of contemporary online humor. In the light of the popularity of gender difference humor, the marginality of texts focusing explicitly on gender inequalities is striking. As discussed above, this theme reflects what we see as an important component of feminist humor – criticism of socially constructed, unjustified, inequalities between men and women.

Finally, we asked how are men and women featured in gender humor and how these traits relate to sexist, feminist, and or postfeminist positioning (RQ4)? We found that most of the attributes ascribed to men and women reflect traditional stereotypes and fall in line with conservative media representations discussed above. As illustrated in Figure 2, men and women are depicted as familiar comic opposites: Women talk too much, men refuse to communicate; women lack confidence, men are too confident; women complicate everything, men have one-track minds. These dichotomies also resonate with our conceptualization of postfeminist humor in two ways: First, many traits focus on attributes related to communication and emotional needs; and, second, the hierarchical tagging

attached to them is unclear. For example, the evaluation of whether ‘talking too much’ is a better or worse attribute than ‘uncommunicative’ depends on the interpreter.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

What we did not find, however, is evidence for changes described in postfeminist literature in the ways that men and women are perceived in relation to sexuality. For example, men continue to be portrayed in jokes as seeking sex constantly (n=32), significantly more than women (n=10) ( $P=0.00094$ ; *exact binomial test*). The few jokes that deal with under-sexuality (n=6) all ascribe this to women. This was also evident when we analyzed the results for the variable ‘sex/body’: women are presented (n=51) more than men (n=30) in relation to physical attractiveness and sexual organs ( $P=0.026$ ; *exact binomial test*). Women are also more likely to ‘trade’ their sexuality: women perform sex for material reward in six jokes, a feature that does not appear at all in relation to men ( $P = 0.031$ ; *exact binomial test*).

We also did not find evidence for a change in relation to independence, indeed it continues to be portrayed in traditional terms typical to sexist humor; men are described more frequently as independent (n=25) than women (n=12) ( $P = 0.047$ ; *exact binomial test*), while women are portrayed significantly times as dependant (n=24, vs. n=1 for men) ( $P = 1.56 \times 10^{-5}$ ; *exact binomial test*).

Whereas most of our findings in this section reflect either sexist or postfeminist perceptions of femininity and masculinity, the findings regarding one dichotomous pair of features – cleverness/canniness versus stupidity – seem to reflect, at least partly, feminist tendencies. In all pairs discussed above, one feature has been ascribed more to women and its opposite to men. However, in the stupidity/cleverness pair, women scored higher on both sides of the dichotomy: they are portrayed as both smarter and more stupid than men. Out of 35 comic texts featuring stupidity, 25 are about women and only 10 attribute this trait to men ( $P = 0.017$ ; *exact binomial test*). As mentioned above, feminine stupidity is a major feature in sexist humor. However, we find in our data that women are also assessed to be as clever as men: 24 texts feature clever women in contrast to 21 texts about clever men, a non-significant difference in statistical terms ( $P = 0.77$ ; *exact binomial test*). While we present initial thoughts about this issue in the discussion, we suggest that a closer, qualitative examination is needed in order to understand whether such cleverness is indeed reflective of new feminist tendencies.

The conservative depiction of men and women is also reflected in their habits and hobbies. The two main activities ascribed to men are drinking (n=22) and sports (n=25). These characteristics appear in only a few instances in comic texts about women (n=4; n=3, respectively) ( $P = 0.00053$ ,  $P = 2.7 \times 10^{-5}$ , respectively, *exact binomial test*). These two habits co-reside with the feature of ‘over-sexuality’ in many of the texts resulting in the portrayal of men as driven by the ‘SBS trinity’ – sex, booze and sports. Thus, the most prominent contemporary masculine types echoed in the texts are the English ‘new lad’ (Gill 2003; Whelehan 2000) and his American cousin – the ‘couch potato’ (Ott 2003). American and English types differ in some respects, yet share a passion for drinking beer and watching sporting matches, as well as for treating woman as sexual objects.

The only hobby ascribed to women in the texts is shopping (n=14). This activity is mentioned much less in relation to men (n=3) ( $P = 0.013$ ; *exact binomial test*). This result is strongly related to the conception of postfeminism as a form of middle-high class ‘lifestyle’, as discussed above. This theme of humor serves to reduce women to shoppers and to exclude them from both the private and the public spheres, and is highly oblivious to the social-economic inequalities of real women.

## **Discussion**

In meeting the two-fold aims of this exploratory study, we examined, first, the content of contemporary online humor about gender in relation to the theoretical framework for distinguishing between sexist, feminist and postfeminist forms of humor. And, second, we developed a novel protocol for sampling and coding online humor about gender.

Our primary research question sought to determine the extent to which contemporary popular online humor is sexist, feminist, or postfeminist. The various indicators used to evaluate the findings in relation to this question yielded mixed results. On the one hand, men and women are mocked equally in the texts. This finding seems to corroborate claims about the decline of sexist humor in contemporary society. On the other hand, when examining *why* men and women are targeted, namely, evaluating their characteristics, we found that old stereotypes prevail: women in comic texts are portrayed as more dependent, emotional, needy, talkative and nagging than are men. They also are more concerned with self-beatification and shopping. These traits represent a blend of sexist and postfeminist stereotypes, yet they are clearly – at least according to the criteria we set – not feminist.

The only pair of traits that did not present men and women as complete stereotypical opposites is the stupidity/cleverness duality. Women scored higher in both sides of the dichotomy, namely they are portrayed as both smarter and stupider than men. A closer

look at stupidity jokes revealed that the vast majority of them are about blondes (see Davies [1998] and Greenwood & Isbell [2002] for contradictory analyses of the ‘blonde joke’ phenomenon). Thus, dumbness is ‘ghettoized’ in contemporary humor to refer to a very specific feminine stereotype – the dumb, promiscuous blonde. Furthermore, the close examination of cleverness jokes revealed that although some portray a smart woman who takes revenge on a man who treats her badly, others project women who are manipulative and exploit their sexuality to get their way, often by tricking men (See appendix B for an illustration). Thus, while on the face of it, the supposedly ‘clever’ women may be understood to represent feminist progress and recognition, a closer reading of these jokes reveals that this woman is similar to the older stereotype of the ‘manipulative bitch’.

Triangulating the results regarding targets and traits leads us to assert that, along with maintaining the conservative forms of humor, the main shift represented in Internet humor is not linked to feminine stereotypes, but to masculine ones. Nowadays, in addition to traditional mockery of women, men are being mocked and stereotyped as well. This mockery tends to focus on the portrayal of men as childish Neanderthals, driven by the SBS (sex, booze, and sports) trinity. A similar trend has also been identified in contemporary representations of men in advertising, where they have become a target of ridicule and put downs, seemingly, as an effort at equal (bad) treatment of both genders (Lemish and Lahav 2004).

The portrayal of men and women as ‘different but equally defective’ is evident strongly in ‘Mars and Venus’ postfeminist humor that highlights gender differences. The theme of gender difference emerged from our data as highly prominent in Internet humor. In contrast, reference to gender inequalities – a main theme in feminist humor – is marginal (as it is in most other mediated genres, such as news around the world, [Gallager 2006]). Mars and Venus comic texts tend to mock both sexes, conveying the message that both are defective (for different reasons). Thus, such humor can be seen as the popular yet over-simplified incarnation of the shift in feminist discourse from the liberal-feminist focus on equality to focusing on difference. French scholars, such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous claimed that women’s ‘otherness’ enables them to rebel against patriarchal norms using their unique voice and language (Tong 1998). This shift in feminist thinking is best represented by the slogan ‘Different but equal.’ Yet rather than balance the two parts of the scale – Internet gender humor focuses on the ‘different’ while totally ignoring the ‘equal.’ Thus, in regard to our main research question, we assert that contemporary popular Internet humor imbeds both sexist and postfeminist attributes, and to a much less extent – feminist ones.

By way of conclusion, we claim that our findings support the interpretation of postfeminism as a form of backlash where feminist discourse is recruited and manipulated against itself (Faludi 1992). Out of four possible attributes of postfeminist humor, we found only the first three in our sample – gender difference humor, targeting both sexes, and focusing on shopping. The fourth feature – independent and sexually assertive women – was not found. Thus, Internet gender humor can be understood to be part of the current postfeminist culture in which fun(ny)mism is favored over feminism. In this fun(ny)mist world, ‘old’ debates about gender inequalities are superseded by fun(ny), celebratory texts about differences between man and women, depicted as essentialist: natural, unavoidable, universal, and therefore assumedly eternal. So while on the face of it such humor may seem to have a liberating effect and provide pleasure to unassuming women surfers who pass these texts among themselves, it may in fact be a new way to maintain a conservative view of what is framed as the irresolvable ‘battle of the sexes.’ We argue, then, that this type of humor serves to naturalize and justify differences between men and women and thus contributes to the internalization of this ideology.

Our findings suggest that user-generated content is not inherently more subversive or liberating than content produced by mass media. Furthermore, it appears that people are actively engaged in the diffusion of sexiest content over the Web's 2.0/‘participatory-culture’-oriented environment, when they forward such jokes by email or post them on blogs. Thus, contrary to Web 2.0 propo

nents prognosis (or perhaps wishful thinking) that liberatory agency will lead to greater equity in the public sphere, the study's findings suggest that greater participation by Internet users may involve them, unknowingly, in acting as agents of the hegemonic structure through the sharing of such forms of humor.

The second aim of this study was to develop an appropriate method for studying online humor. The results of this study affirm that the challenges presented by the new medium also offer new opportunities, such as using the novel tools imbedded in the medium itself – in our case, utilizing search engines for sampling the Internet. The use of such tools provided us with valuable information about the popularity of individual jokes – data almost impossible to obtain before the Internet era. Thus, the sampling method developed in this paper – and in particular the use of recurring texts in a small sample of popular websites – may be of use not only to those studying humor, but also to researchers examining other types of widely distributed online texts. In addition, our study provides a first attempt to develop a codebook that can systematically analyze gender representations in contemporary media. Although it was developed mainly for evaluating online content,



we believe that the codebook can be applied – with some modifications – for exploring gender-oriented humor in other media.

Finally, we hope that this work will facilitate follow-up studies about this topic that will address the following limitations of the current study. First, our analysis was based on popular humor, not on online arenas that may convey more subversive humor – such as feminist websites or forums. Second, we focused on humor in English. Future studies may look into the global diffusion and appeal of online gender jokes. Finally, while we looked only at the texts and not on their readers, future reception-oriented studies may examine the ways in which such humor is interpreted and used to build and support gendered social networks. Our own studies seek to build upon this quantitative analysis through in-depth qualitative analyses of these humorous texts in order to gain deeper understandings of how such humor gives voice to trends in post-feminist thought (Shifman and Lemish, under review). Meanwhile, we can provisionally recommend in the closing words of one of the jokes in our sample, ‘Now send this to all the remarkable women you know, as well as to any understanding good-natured, fun kinda’ guys you might be lucky enough to know!’

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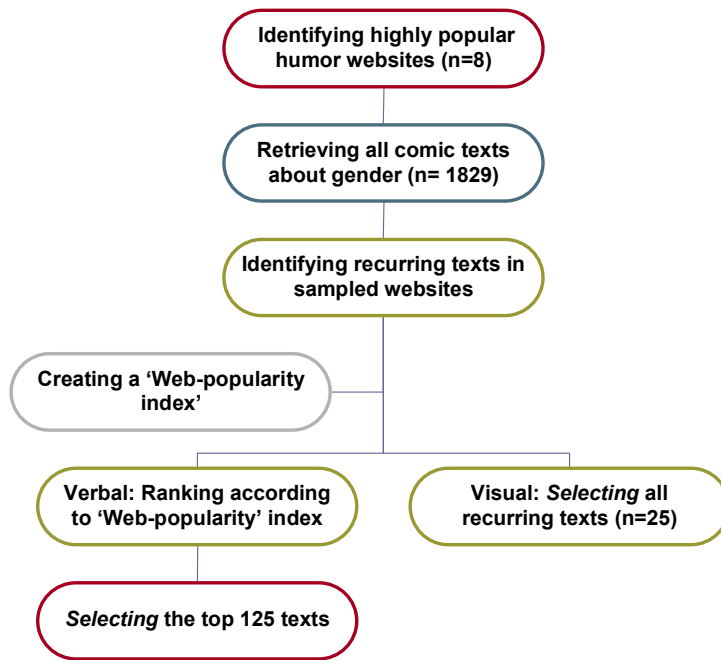
**Table I:  
Variables, values and definitions**

Variable	Values	Selected definitions
Explicitness	Explicit Non explicit	<i>Explicit</i> : a text that deals with gender and gender roles explicitly, usually by using the words <i>men</i> , <i>women</i> , <i>male</i> , <i>female</i> or by describing in length gendered patterns of behavior. <i>Non explicit</i> : it is not clear from the text that it deals with men/women in general rather than a specific man/woman.
Topic: Gender <sup>a</sup>	Femininity, masculinity, gender differences, gender blurring, gender inequalities, other.	<i>Gender differences</i> : The text's main theme is the description of men and women as essentially different, and this may cause problems in their relationships. <i>Gender inequalities</i> : The text's main theme is social/cultural inequalities between men and women in the domestic or public sphere.
Target of Mockery	A man/men, a woman/women, both men and women, unable to determine	
Sex/Body <sup>b</sup>	Body/sexual organs, homo/lesbian, infidelity, scatological, sexual performance, sex for material reward	<i>Body/sexual organs</i> : Expressions which deal with the male/female body in relation to physical attractiveness (e.g. fatness, hair, wrinkles) and/or sexual organs. <i>Sex for material reward-man</i> : Expressions signifying that a man/woman is having sex in return for gifts, money, promotion or other material goods
Traits <sup>b</sup>	Under-sexual/frigid, over-sexual/lusting, highly emotional, unemotional, over-talkative, uncommunicative, nagging/ needy, needs space, seeks commitment, avoids commitment, dependent, independent, diffident, overconfident, polite, bad manners, stupid, clever, using double talk, straightforward, complicates everything, too simple, bonds with members of the same sex, hates members of same sex, constantly unsatisfied, easy to satisfy, mature, childish, bossy, submissive, non-violent, violent, self-beautification, insufficient hygiene, neglect	<i>Under sexual</i> : Tries to avoid/minimize sexual contact, is not interested in sex or does not enjoy sex. <i>Over sexual</i> : Constantly seeks sexual activity and is very interested in sex/ perceives sex as one the most important factor in life/preoccupied by sex. <i>Highly emotional</i> : Readily affected with or stirred by emotion, easily moved, demonstrates emotional over- reactions such as crying unnecessarily. <i>Unemotional</i> : Not affected by or not showing any emotion even in situations that call for it and/or is not sensitive to other people's feelings.
Habits/ hobbies <sup>b</sup>	Shopping, sports, drinking, smoking, gossiping, zapping.	<i>Shopping</i> : Enjoys shopping/ seeks to accumulate material goods (shopping 'for fun' – i.e. buying food not included) <i>Sports</i> : enjoys playing/watching sports

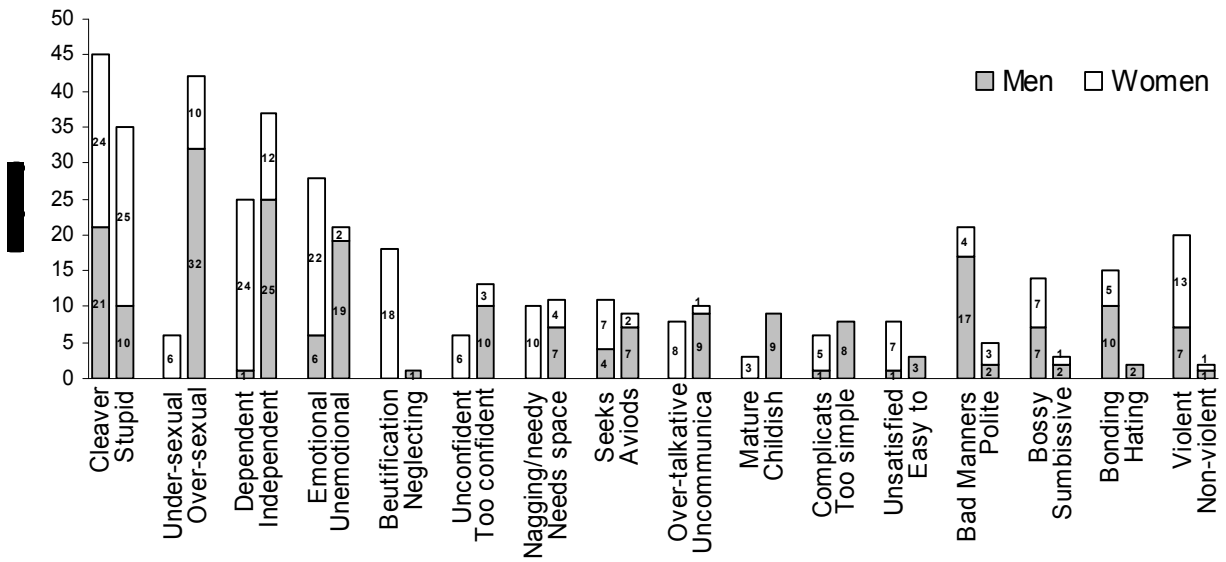
<sup>a</sup> This variable has been coded only for 'explicit' texts, as it has been proven to be very difficult to code for implicit ones.

<sup>b</sup> The coders chose all the values relevant to a specific text, separately for males and females (e.g. a text could be coded both for unemotional-man and unemotional-women).

**Figure 1: Sampling procedure**



**Figure 2:**  
**Traits of men and women in the comic texts**



**Appendix A:  
Implicit sexist humor**

Two nuns are ordered to paint a room in the convent, and the last instruction of the Mother Superior is that they must not get even a drop of paint on their habits. After conferring about this for a while, the two nuns decide to lock the door of the room, strip off their habits, and paint in the nude.

Someone knocks on the door mid-way into the project. 'Who is it?', calls one of the nuns. 'Blind man,' replies a voice from the other side of the door. The two nuns look at each other and shrug, and, deciding that no harm can come from letting a blind man into the room, they open the door.

'Nice tits,' says the man, 'where do you want these blinds?'

**Appendix B:  
Feminine cleverness as manipulation**

A woman and a man are involved in a bad car accident. Both of their cars are totally demolished, but amazingly neither are hurt.

After they crawl out of their cars, the woman says, 'So you're a man. That's interesting. I'm a woman. Wow, just look at our cars! There's nothing left, but we're unhurt. This must be a sign from God that we should meet and be friends and live together in peace for the rest of our days.'

Flattered, the man replies, 'Oh yes, I agree with you completely, this must be a sign from God!' The woman continues, 'and look at this, here's another miracle. My car is completely demolished but this bottle of wine didn't break. Surely God wants us to drink this wine and celebrate our good fortune.' Then she hands the bottle to the man.

The man nods his head in agreement, opens it, drinks half the bottle, and then hands it back to the woman. The woman takes the bottle and immediately puts the cap back on, and hands it back to the man. The man asks, 'Aren't you having any?' The woman replies, 'No. I think I'll just wait for the police....'

**MORALE OF THE STORY:** Women are clever, evil bitches. Don't mess with them!