

Comic Memes and Sexist Humor in India: Tools for Reinforcement of Female Body-Image Stereotypes

Deepali Mallya M¹ & Riya Dennis²

¹Assistant Professor (Department of English and Cultural Studies), Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, INDIA. ORCID ID 0000-0002-7760-3593.

Email: deepali.mallya@christuniversity.in

²Teacher, Oasis International School, Bengaluru, Karnataka, INDIA.

Email: riya.dennis@eng.christuniversity.in

Abstract

Memes have been described as communicative and aesthetic practices that serve cultural, social, political purpose on a digital platform. Several studies, in the last decade, have attempted to study this digital aesthetic knowledge production as a powerful tool for political, racial, and gender-related discourses. Most often this knowledge is produced through comic multi-media texts. Many theorists believe that, digital media reinforces inequality, marginalization and such other social issues through the audio-visual-textual medium as much as it establishes the counter-discourses for equality, body activism, racial activism and the like. Speed and lack of censorship can be the cardinal reasons for the popularity of these memes. Among the mass-influencing gender-related memes are those encouraging fat-talk and body-image stereotypes. In the Indian context, 'Tag a Friend' memes is one such widely circulated meme which communicates body-shaming messages through sexist humor. It mainly targets the fat/colored/transgender women. The current study examines these memes using multimodal discourse analysis methodology. The paper attempts to investigate the revival/reproduction potential of color-shaming and body-shaming stereotypes via comic memes through Shiffman's memetic dimensions. The analysis establishes that memes can be a prominent site for the re-production of the problematic ideology of body/color shaming even in the 21st century.

Keywords: Body-shaming, comic-meme, female-body, ideology, interpellation, Tag a Friend.

Introduction:

The 21st century has heralded humongous amount of studies in the domain of gender, body studies and its relationship with the new-media. Memes have been described as communicative and aesthetic practices that serve cultural, social, political purposes on a digital platform. It is often comprised of "images, videos or short pieces of text, often humorous, designed for rapid dissemination online" (Lupton, 2017, p.120). Some theorists do examine it as "this new thing-in-the-world, multi-, or better yet unmediated, ever-mutating matrices of meaning" with a fun element added in them (Lunenfeld, 2014, p.256). About half a century ago, British ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976) coined the word

'Mimeme' which is a blend of the words 'mimesis' and 'gene' (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014). Dawkins introduced the term meme as a:

“unit of cultural transmission, a self-perpetuating cultural phenomenon analogous to the gene as a replicator of biological data.” (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014, pp.248-249)

Several studies, in the last decade, have attempted to study memes and new-media tools as a powerful tool for disseminating political, racial, and gender-related discourses. In this lieu, many theorists examine the gravity of enormous power in the digital media tools to reinforce dominant ideology such as, inequality, marginalization and such other social issues through the audio-visual-textual medium (Nakamura, 2014; Petray & Collin 2017; Dickerson, 2015) as much as it establishes the counter-ideology (Mallya & Susanti, 2021; Moreno-Almeida, 2021). At the global level, “BBQ Becky” and “Karen” memes (Williams, 2020) as well as Scambaiting trophy images (Nakamura, 2014) have exercised racial insensitivity even in this century. Nakamura adds:

“memetic image of the savage has proven extremely durable, even in our current ‘post-racial’ moment, characterized by the denial of racism.” (Nakamura, 2014, p. 271)

In the domain of gender, memes encouraging body-objectification, fat-talk and body-image stereotypes are among the potentially circulated and discussed memes. These new-media tools “configure and reproduce dominant norms, moral values, tacit assumptions and practices concerning the weight, size, and shape of human bodies” (Lupton, 2017, p.121). In India, ‘Tag a Friend’ memes are one such widely circulated multi-media texts which communicates body-shaming messages and specifically targets women. Several studies in India have reported correlations between new-media tools and body-dissatisfaction among the female college students (Rashmi et al., 2016; Priya, 2010). This study focuses on understanding the correlations between comic memes in India, their sexist humor and their power for interpellation and knowledge production in the purview of female body-shaming.

Methodology:

The current study is an attempt to understand the role of comic memes as a medium of interpellation to establish body-image stereotypes specifically against plus-size/colored transgender women in India. Given the swiftness in the flow and the simultaneous popularity of memes, this paper aims to discern the impact of these discursive texts on the production of ideological power-play and body-image stereotyping of women. The focus of the study is on ‘Tag a friend’ memes. Generally, “Social Network Analysis (SNA), content analysis, Discourse Analysis (DA), and participant observation” are the most preferred methods of research in new-media studies (Allen, 2017, p. 100). However, the current study will not adopt SNA/content analysis/participant observation because these methods are limited to quantitative analysis and the data outlined for this study aims at qualitative analysis of select memetic texts.

The current study examines these memes using rhetorical method of textual analysis and multimodal discourse analysis. Textual analysis examines how any text can “influence, reflect, or reject” social-political perspectives (Allen, 2017, p.1753). In a rhetorical method of textual analysis the text is analysed for its apposition into:

"larger social or political or historical or economic framework, to unpack meaning, and to give context to the text." (Allen, 2017, p. 1503)

The analysis deciphers the "persuasive" power of a text "in a particular situation and with a particular audience" (Allen, 2017, p. 1503). In doing so, it critically examines, "the rhetor, the audience, the digital text or discourse, and the contexts" (Eyman, 2015, p. 99). A discourse analysis of "gesture, speech, image (still or moving), writing, music (on a website or in a film)" can be justified through Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) (Kress, 2011, p. 36). Theoretically, these elements are commonly referred as "textual threads" in MMDA (Kress, 2011, p. 36). The analysis of these texts in MMDA considers "coherence" as a key factor and it is presumed to be "social" in nature (Kress, 2011, p.36). Further:

"Power is involved in the making, recognition and attribution of coherence in a text...being social, they point to meanings about social order... [and the society] uses them as a resource for establishing and maintaining cohesion and coherence in the community. In texts, these social principles appear as semiotic principles, made material, manifest, visible, tangible." (Kress, 2011, p.36)

Memes, therefore qualify as a "text" for MMDA. The paper attempts to achieve this through Shifman's memetic dimensions as a theoretical tool for analysis.

This study aims to examine and establish the following hypothesis: i) Internet-memes play a profound role in establishing socio-political discourses related to body-image stereotyping. ii) 'Tag a Friend,' as a popular comic-meme in India, is an active site for revival/reproduction of the ideal female body standards iii) 'Tag a Friend' memes revive the ideal beauty standards for 'thinness' and 'fairness' through interpellation of marginalized subjects via comic memes.

Discussion:

The ability of Web 2.0 (which includes YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, and other similar application) to propagate/diffuse the content "of users by users for users" on an "express paths" where "content spread by individuals can scale up to mass levels within hours" creates a pressing need for this study (Shifman, 2013, p.365). Among them, internet memes are a predominant unit of popular culture that is gaining momentum in the 21st century by establishing "a shared cultural experience" through their circulation, imitation and transformation (Shifman, 2013, p.365). Their user-driven reproductive power deserves a closer examination. "Flow" overpowers "origin" in a memetic culture and recently, memes have become vital "digitally mediated interaction" with powerful outcomes (Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014, p. 249). In support of this, Shifman (2013) argues the memes with their "user-driven imitation and remix" attributes can expand the range of communication from "naïve copying to scornful imitation" (p. 365). Humor in content (themes, topic, targets) or in form (textual-visual-audio, interactive, non-interactive) qualifies as the underlining element of majority of memes. This humorous/ironical imitation is "relational and context-specific, and ... relies as much on what is not said as what is" (Petray & Collin, 2017, p.4). In the context of gender, there can be sexist humor which reinforces conventional gender roles and there is feminist humor which challenges these traditional gender roles and criticizes the sexist societal assumptions (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009).

In India, 'Tag a Friend' meme, is one such memetic text that gained momentum between the years 2017-18 on Facebook. The content of the meme includes a marginalized/colored/transgender woman as the target, who falls under the anomalies of ideal social body-standard. The content strongly suggests body-shaming on the pretext of color, size, shape and the like. Sometimes, colored celebrities such as, Gabourey Sidibe are also used as a stock character macro for this meme template. The stock character macro is a muted subject or a passive object in the comic meme. The text and/or the stock character in the image is often stripped away from the original photograph intent so as to transform it into a meme. Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014) also emphasize the passive role of the "creator of an object" as they state that "the conditions in which [the meme] was made often remain unknown to the legions of users who remix it and pass it on" (p. p.249). Thus, "flow" blurs or manipulates the original intent of any meme. The form of these memes is visual-textual-interactive and instigates a tagging spree among the users; here, the user has to tag the friend mentioned in that meme; hence the name 'Tag a Friend'. This call to action intended an instant uptick in the users (who are both influencers/taggers and the tagged/influenced). Concurrently, this meme evolves into a digitally mediated interaction with a mass diffusion capacity. This massive diffusive nature calls for an urgent need for critical analysis. The process involves crude humor (specifically sexist humor) by ridiculing the person who is tagged through pairing him with the colored woman in the meme. The process of forced public pairing by the tagger, and the consequent response of revulsion by the tagged blanketed in humor qualifies 'Tag a Friend' meme as an active site for production and/or reproduction of appreciating the ideal body standards and snarking the non-ideal body through repetitive interpellation. Thus, this study undertakes a discursive analysis of 'Tag a Friend' memes and their role in female body-shaming in the Indian social set-up.

Analysis:

To critique the 'Tag a Friend' meme as a discursive text on body-shaming, 4 memes out of a sample of 40 memes from 5 Facebook meme pages were critiqued. The common attributes of the content in all these select memes were marginalized/colored/transgender/women, plus-size women, body-shaming, crude and sexist humor, ridiculing the tagged-person for being the romantic interest of the plus-size colored/transgender/woman. All these memes had millions of followers (For instance, Tag a friend- 9.4K, Motu Patlu Jokes- 5.4M, PDT Stories- 1.2M, Indian Memes- 3.5K). Following connotes participation. Participation through liking, sharing, and commenting also connotes the formation of a common belief and a sense of "communal belonging" (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 485). As Lupton argues, these multimodal texts:

"configure and reproduce dominant norms, moral values, tacit assumptions and practices concerning the weight, size, and shape of human bodies." (Lupton, 2017, p.121)

This study attempts to trace these features of the multimodal texts for plus-size/colored transgender/women in India.

In this study, the 'Tag a friend' memes are critiqued through Shifman's memetic dimensions. Based on Dawkins' understanding of memes as a unit of imitation, the three memetic

dimensions include: content, form, and stance (Shifman, 2013, p.367). Content, here, refers to “the ideas and the ideologies conveyed by it” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Form includes:

“the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses...includes...visual/audible dimensions specific to certain texts.” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367)

Stance includes:

“information about the communicative positioning of the addresser in relation to the text/message, the context, and other potential speakers...[sub-dimensions include] participation structures, keying, communication functions.”(Shifman, 2013, p.369)

Participation structures connote, “who is entitled to participate and how” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Keying denotes “the tone and style of communication” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Communication functions include:

“(a) Referential communication, which is oriented toward the context, or the “outside world”; (b) emotive, oriented toward the addresser and his/her emotions; (c) conative, oriented toward the addressee and available paths of actions (e.g. imperatives); (d) phatic, which serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication; (e) metalingual, which is used to establish mutual agreement on the code (for example, a definition); and (f) poetic, focusing on the aesthetic or artistic beauty of the construction of the message itself.” (Shifman, 2013, p.367)

The analysis of stance helps examine the latent intent and connotations of the text. This analysis further enables to critique the propagation, re-production and interpellation of the ideal-body norms in the Indian society. The following are the examples of select memes for this study.



Figure 1: GaboureySidibe, colored-woman in 'Tag a friend' meme (2017). Retrieved from Facebook Page Motu Patlu Jokes on 5 July, 2021. URL: https://www.facebook.com/theMpj.Pi/photos/bc.AbpTGcp36SJFsq3kI6PwZwoly_dsiGZrWg-

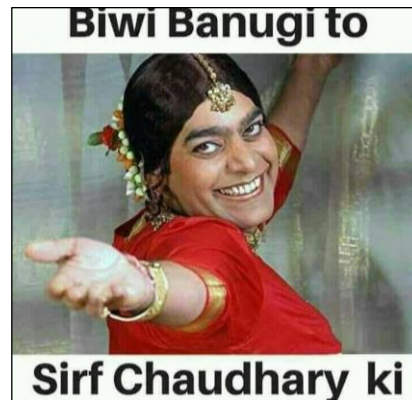


Figure 2: Transgender female-body in Tag a friend meme (2017). Retrieved from Facebook Page Motu Patlu Jokes on 5 July, 2021. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/theMpj.Pi/photos/bc.AbqPW1QU>



Figure 3: White-body and colored-body in 'Tag a friend' meme (2017). Retrieved from Facebook Page PDT Stories on 5 July, 2021. URL: https://scontent-bom1-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.6435-9/59606515_2111924578884961_1222743722786029568_40



Figure 4: Fat-body, colored-body, female-body in 'Tag a Friend' meme (2017). Retrieved from Facebook Page Tag a Friend on 5 July, 2021. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/Tagafrend/photos/1841970849213670>

Table 1: Shifman's Memetic Dimensions and their manifestations in 'Tag a friend' meme

The following is the detailed analysis of the memetic dimension as described by Shifman (2013)

| | |
|-----------|---|
| Dimension | Demonstration of 'Tag a friend' meme |
| Content | Body-shaming, color-shaming, fat-shaming, colored woman, transgender woman, ridiculing the person tagged in the meme. |
| | Derivatives: Body-snarking through colored, fat women, transgender woman, Female standardisation of beauty and body-ideal. |
| Form | Still image of a colored/fat/transgender woman, a random Indian male's name as a written text |
| | Derivatives: Mocking fat-female-body, transgender-female-body, colored-female-body, mockingly suggesting romantic-pairing of the Indian male with the woman in image. |
| Stance | Participation structure: Colored/transgender/fat woman and Indian male; Keying: Cynical; Communication function: Referential communication, conative, phatic. |
| | Derivatives: Cynical/ironic keying. Referential communication regarding body-ideal standards and phatic functions using cynical/ironical texts, sexist humor. Conative function with positioning the non-ideal female as a femme fatale and the call to action is with the male, wherein the male mocks and ridicules the female fatale in question latently through sexist humor. |

Shifman's (2013) memetic dimension reveals the content of 'Tag a friend' meme and it includes colored/fat transgender/woman. It propagates the ideology of body-ideal standards for the female body. In doing so, the meme crudely ridicules fat-body, colored-body and/or transgender-body. Also, the person (addressed as Rahul/Ankit/Manish/Abhishek and the like) are also mocked through 'Tagging' in the pretext of being desired by these women. The tagging ends with a call to action by the tagged and the chain for tagging a friend continues. Hence, in a linear fashion, the fat/colored transgender/female body is subjected to body-shaming at each stage. The form of 'Tag a friend' meme includes a still image of a colored/fat transgender/woman most often smiling wide at a camera, and a written text suggesting the female desire for a romantic relationship with a random Indian male (For example, in Fig 1, the written text, originally in Hindi language, translates to, *If I ever marry, it will only be with Abhishek*). The tagging issues a call to action for the tagged male. The stance in 'Tag a Friend' meme reveals the colored/fat transgender/woman positioned as an object of mockery for her non-ideal body. Her position also suggests her femme fatale nature as she expresses her desire to engage in a romantic relationship with the Indian male who is called out in the meme (such as Rahul/Abhishek and the like). In lieu of Nooney and Portwood-Stacer's (2014) observations regarding a meme stripping its original intent, it is important to note the passive position of the colored/fat transgender/woman whose attribution of femme fatale nature is not her real intention but a created intention of the creator/influencer/tagger of the meme.

In the Althusserian sense, this tagging can be termed as 'Interpellation.' Interpellation is the process of hailing or addressing a person in a certain way. In interpellation, "the hailed individual will turn round...[and become] the subject" (Althusser, 1971, p.173). He further adds, "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" (Althusser, 1971, p.175). The object (who is mostly colored/fat transgender/woman) in the image, in 'Tag a Friend' meme is hailed with all the negative connotations achieved through sexist humor. Further, the attribution of femme fatale nature and the consequent rejection by the Indian male who is hailed in this image reinforces the body-ideal standards and the muted position of the colored/fat transgender/woman. The suggested ideology in 'Tag a friend' meme could be identified as colored/fat transgender/female body shaming and establishment of the thin-fair body-ideal. All this is communicated in a cynical and humorous manner. In the digital space, interpellation and subjection into an ideology can be realized through interactivity. For internet users, interactivity, encompasses the potential of being both, "sources and recipients of content and interaction" (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003, p. 32). Interactivity is key to critique the "social implication" associated with the internet use (Shifman, 2007, p. 190). In this lieu, this study presumes liking, sharing and commenting as interactivity too. Flisfeder describes liking, and sharing as:

"'Liking' is the operation of demonstrating—through the simple click of the mouse—something about one's taste. 'Sharing' similarly presents something about one's taste but can also add detail about an opinion on anything from humor to politics." (Flisfeder, 2014, p.237)

Memes are cultural materials in the digital space for establishing the ideological norms and the ideology itself. Gender theorist Butler argues, norm-formation primarily requires a realization of a communicative act of compliance or subversion (Butler, 1997). While the act of 'Liking' 'Tag a friend' meme can qualify as compliance and/or subversion to the body-ideal standards, the act of 'Sharing' can traverse beyond compliance and/or subversion. Sharing can be inferred as the reproduction of the dominant norm regarding body-shaming and body-ideal standards. Thus, each time a user interacts with the meme, he/she would begin to negotiate with the ideology through compliance or subversion. Liking and sharing of memes is not only a display of "existing social cultural norms, it is also a social tool for negotiating them" (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016, p.3). Digital space, through comic memes, become active sites for the revival of issues related to race, gender and the like through an "ironic and distancing discursive modes" (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016, p. 4). Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) further remark that, this type of memetic expression most often leads to "'whitewashing' racism and misogyny by framing them as 'only joking'" (p.4). A closer examination of the users further reveals that victimization is strongly focused on the fat/colored/transgender woman whose image is explicitly printed in the content. The male whose name is printed in the verbal text is not laughed at or ridiculed. Thus, the male audience members conveniently establish "an attitude of bigotry, superiority, and prejudice" (Kien, 2013, p.557). In contrast, female/transgender audience members can possibly develop inferiority and internalize the body-ideal standards. Ideologies are a common set of beliefs owned by none, but shared by many. Memes can also qualify as ideologies on similar lines. Memes are also common beliefs, owned by none but shared and believed by many. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) strengthen this idea and remark:

"Internet memes are 'performative acts' [each meme] contributes to the ongoing negotiation over norms. In this process, obedience to the norm strengthens collective boundaries and enhances their transparency as 'natural.'" (p.3)


This study has further supported earlier Indian research in the context of fat-shaming that "social media exposure, weight gain memes, and peer conversations" play a vital role in causing body-dissatisfaction among Indian women (Ahuja, Khandelwal & Banerjee, 2021, p. 1). The research also suggests that comic memes, broadcasted on new-media platforms such as Facebook, have the potential to reinforce the stereotypical form of interpellation and ideological dissemination of dominant norms, social-political values, prejudices and practices concerning the weight, size, and shape of female bodies.

Conclusions:

Memes are vital narratives that have the power to produce knowledge. These texts, in the audio-visual-textual form can weave a certain knowledge that can either revive or reinforce a dominant ideology. The liking, sharing and commenting can act like the medium of reinforcement or revival of certain social norms. Concurrently, this paper has examined how tagging a friend can 'hail/interpellate' a male to call for action. The male who is called to act further ridicules or shuns the fat/colored transgender/women in the image. This ridiculing is carried out by treating the idea as a joke. In this process, the woman/transgender body is assigned the role of a passive and muted subject who is at the receiving end of ridiculing and reinforcement of body-ideal standards. Thus, the comic meme, with its sexist humor has, succeeded in establishing the 'thin and/or fair is beautiful' and 'fat and/or colored is ugly' norm. Also, the propaganda for body shaming and whitewashing colorism goes unpunished and is ignored overtly as 'just a joke.'

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Dr Deepali Mallya M is an assistant professor at Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore, Karnataka, INDIA. Her areas of research interest include gender and cultural studies, marginalized literature, psycho-literary studies, body studies and disability studies. She has published few papers in SCOPUS indexed journals. Her doctoral thesis explored the identity-fragmentation and neurotic mental health in fictional female characters through a feminist psychoanalytical lens. ORCID ID 0000-0002-7760-3593

Ms Riya Dennis is a researcher and a scholar, graduated from Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore, Karnataka, INDIA. She did her Masters and her Bachelors in the field of Literature and is deeply interested in popular cultural, visual medium and gender studies. She is currently working as an English Teacher at Oasis International School, Bengaluru. She has published and presented research papers in the field of partition literature in India.
