

## The Dad Joke Syndrome: How Shifting Power Dynamics are affecting the Subversiveness of Feminist Humor

### Le syndrome de la plaisanterie du père : comment l'évolution de la dynamique du pouvoir affecte la capacité de l'humour féministe à renverser la réalité

متلازمة نكتة الأب: كيف يؤثر تغير ديناميكيات القوة على قدرة الفكاهة النسوية على قلب

الواقع

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#### Abstract:

Humor's subaltern power to subvert hierarchies has been utilized by several marginalized groups to target unjust power structures. However, contemporary feminist calls to reshape this art form into their own image might hinder its efficacy. This study aims to investigate the extent to which the political and ideological incentives to combat negative stereotypes and to develop an original theory of comedy is diminishing the quality and the subversiveness of feminist humor. To test this hypothesis a thematic analysis of several lists of feminist jokes was employed. These lists were divided into two major categories: jokes that were labeled as inclusive by feminist standards and the other category involved jokes with ridicule and self-deprecation content. The results show that lists that fit the description of inclusivity for feminists fail to meet the characteristics of subversive humor because they are only enjoyed by feminist themselves and their sympathizers. When the creators of these

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jokes resorted to traditionally male comedic tactics such as ridicule and self-deprecation they succeeded in meeting those characteristics. These results suggest that feminist humor's diminishing subversiveness is due to a combination of a shift in social and political power dynamics in favor of feminism and the over stressing on inferring ideological messages at the expense of the aesthetics of humor.

**Keywords:** Feminism- Humor- Stereotype- Subversive- Power Dynamics.

**- Abstract in French:**

Le pouvoir subalterne de l'humour pour renverser les hiérarchies a été utilisé par plusieurs groupes marginalisés pour cibler des structures de pouvoir injustes. Cependant, les appels féministes contemporains à remodeler cette forme d'art à leur image pourraient entraver son efficacité. Cette étude vise à déterminer dans quelle mesure les incitations politiques et idéologiques à combattre les stéréotypes négatifs et à développer une théorie originale de la comédie diminuent la qualité et la subversivité de l'humour féministe. Pour tester cette hypothèse, une analyse thématique de plusieurs listes de blagues féministes a été utilisée. Ces listes ont été divisées en deux grandes catégories: les blagues qualifiées d'inclusives selon les normes féministes et l'autre catégorie impliquait des blagues avec un contenu ridicule et d'autodérision. Les résultats montrent que les listes qui correspondent à la description de l'inclusivité pour les féministes ne répondent pas aux caractéristiques de l'humour subversif parce qu'elles ne sont appréciées que par les féministes elles-mêmes et leurs sympathisantes. Lorsque les créateurs de ces blagues ont eu recours à des tactiques comiques traditionnellement masculines telles que le ridicule et l'autodérision, ils ont réussi à respecter ces caractéristiques. Ces résultats suggèrent que la diminution de la subversivité de l'humour féministe est due à une combinaison d'un changement dans la dynamique du pouvoir social et politique en faveur du féminisme et d'une insistance excessive sur la déduction de messages idéologiques au détriment de l'esthétique de l'humour.

**Mots clés :** Féminisme- Humor- Stéréotype- Subversif- Dynamique du pouvoir.

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## - Abstract in Arabic:

تم استخدام سلطة الفكاهة التابعة لتقويض التسلسلات الهرمية من قبل العديد من المجموعات المهمشة لاستهداف هياكل السلطة الظالمة. ومع ذلك ، فإن الدعوات النسوية المعاصرة لإعادة تشكيل هذا الشكل الفني إلى صورتها الخاصة قد تعيق فعاليته. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقق من مدى تأثير الحوافز السياسية والأيدولوجية على مكافحة الصور النمطية السلبية وتطوير نظرية أصلية للكوميديا في تقليل جودة وتدمير الفكاهة النسوية. لاختبار هذه الفرضية تم استخدام تحليل موضوعي لعدة قوائم من النكات النسوية. تم تقسيم هذه القوائم إلى فئتين رئيسيتين: النكات التي تم تصنيفها على أنها شاملة من قبل المعايير النسوية والفئة الأخرى تضمنت النكات التي تحتوي على السخرية والاستنكار الذاتي. تظهر النتائج أن القوائم التي تناسب وصف الشمولية للنسويات تفشل في تلبية خصائص الفكاهة التخريبية لأنها لا تتمتع بها سوى النسويات أنفسهن والمتعاطفين معهن. عندما لجأ مبتكرو هذه النكات إلى الأساليب الكوميديا الذكورية التقليدية مثل السخرية والاستخفاف بالنفس ، نجحوا في تلبية تلك الخصائص. تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن تضاؤل الفكاهة النسوية يرجع إلى مزيج من التحول في ديناميكيات السلطة الاجتماعية والسياسية لصالح النسوية والتشديد المفرط على استنتاج الرسائل الأيدولوجية على حساب جماليات الدعاية.

-كلمات مفتاحية: فكاهة-نسوية- صورة نمطية - تخريبية - ديناميات القوة

## - Introduction

"Feminist humor is serious." (Barreca, 1996, p. 147).

This seemingly paradoxical statement was not intended to be an oxymoron, but rather to showcase the supposed efficacy of feminist humor to subvert social realities and change hearts and minds. Subversive humor and its subaltern power to address thorny issues were of paramount importance to the feminist movement during its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. However, recently many voices even within the feminist camp started to question and seek a post feminist model of humor. This new model has to maintain its subversive nature yet at the same time celebrate feminist values and traditions chief among them is inclusivity. (Reilly, 2019; Tomsett, 2017) Some have suggested restructuring jokes in

order to not make marginalized and victimized groups the punch line of the joke. (West, 2013) Others have alluded to the need to a new theory of humor that takes into account the power dynamics of different identities. (Willett & Willett, 2019)

Radical voices within feminism even went on to say that in order to create a new model of humor present models need to be destroyed. (Gadsby, 2019) Modern idealist calls to change the structure of humor come at a time when feminists have made tremendous political and socio-economic gains. That was nevertheless accompanied by a backlash against the left-leaning group from rising voices coming from the right.(Reed, 2016) While the formerly mentioned efforts on the part of feminists to mitigate the rising negative stereotypes against women are commendable, yet unintended overcharging of humor with ideology and politics might hinder their quests and even be counterproductive. In this paper I examine the extent to which feminist humor is using inferring tactics rather than hints and subliminal messages to subvert the negative stereotypes.

## **1- Literature Review**

Several attempts have been made to reconstruct and remake humor into the modern feminist image. These attempts had to take into consideration the idealistic principles of the feminist tradition; chief among them is the tradition of inclusivity and the tendency to subvert the negative stereotypes. The resort to this unorthodox social tool, which is humor, is due to its ability to reinforce systems and stereotypes (Ziv, 1983; Pizzini, 1991) and more importantly subvert them. (Holmes & Marra, 2002) The way this subversiveness works and had worked historically in favor of marginalized groups was through exploiting the state of mirth and play that audiences feel when subjected do this type of humor to challenge some of their fundamental beliefs and ideas. (Ziv, 1983) The main purpose of this new “customized” version of humor would be to put an end to the negative stereotypes that historically stigmatized women and impeded their advancement in all spheres of life. The self-deprecating and angry tactics employed by most successful male humorists had worked

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wonders for earlier feminist humorists such as and Roseanne Barr and Wanda Sykes and even recent ones such as Amy Schumer. (Willett & Willett, 2019)

However, these tactics have been deemed inadequate to address the ending of stereotypes and the backlash against the strides made by feminism in the political and legal arenas. One of the humor models presented to accommodate these aspirations was by Lisa Merrill. Merrill argued that humor does not have to be divisive, angry or self-deprecating to individual or group identities in order to be efficacious as a subversive social tool. (Merrill, 1988) Embodying the liberal feminist spirit of hope that states if only men understood they would change, Merrill argued that the new model for humor should seek to attack inequitable patriarchal systems and behaviors rather than oppressors themselves, ideas and beliefs rather than people. (Merrill, 1988).

More radical approaches were laid out by Cynthia and Julie Willett regarding what the new model of humor should look like, suggesting a humor based on the "Theory of Intersectionality," where punches only go up. (Willett & Willett, 2019) Voices within feminism even called for: "a humor of connection where comedy as we know it needs to be broken in order to be remade" (Gadsby, 2019). The prospects of success for "the new type" of feminist humor seem grim according to a landmark study conducted in the halls of Western California University by Scholars Stillion and White entitled "Feminist Humor: Who Appreciates it and Why?" The findings of this study concluded that gender and sympathy towards feminism were key indicators in determining whether feminist humor is funny. (Stillion & White, 1987) This is the opposite of the intended goals, which is not to create a humor of echo chambers but rather, a humor that is converting, persuasive and subversive. One of the rare and more importantly courageous attempts to reshape humor was proposed by Danielle Bobker in an essay written in 2015 entitled "Towards Humor Positive Feminism." The wording of the title was inspired from the offshoot movement of feminism that deviated

from the antagonistic position towards sex in the 1970s and 1960s. Her position was welcomed by most humorists and frowned upon by many in her own feminist camp, especially when she came to the defense of a controversial joke (Bobker, 2017). Her take on making jokes about issues such as sexual violence was that one *can* make that joke; however they should not make the victims of rape the butt of the joke. (West, 2013) Even though West and Willett managed to ask really pertinent questions regarding the theories of humor and its subversive power dynamics, the narrow ideological lens through which they view humor might jeopardize and even be counterproductive to their quests. Resenting the “game” and seeking its destruction would only create ineffective players.

Therefore, instead of offering new or competing models of humor I present an argument of two folds; the first pertaining to the nature of humor itself and the second is related to the nature and origins of the stereotypes that feminists wish to get rid of. Obviously this would be a critique of feminist attitudes. Consequently, to what extent are the ideological and the political motives overshadowing the aesthetic nature of feminist humor? To what extent are the new emerging themes of feminist humorists helping in subverting old and emerging stereotypes? To answer these questions I used the following methods and procedures.

## **2- Methods and Procedures**

In order to deal with these questions and address the underlying issues of this paper I used a thematic analysis of a list of feminist jokes organized by a group of researchers between 2013 and 2019. These jokes were delivered via a variety of different media and were collected from various sources as well. The lists were published in magazines such as Elle Fashion and BuzzFeed among others and were delivered in the formats of memes, tweets, GIF (Graphic Interchange Format), film, text and video clips. (Reilly, 2019) The workload and effort that was put in order to categorize and organize these jokes were commendable and it

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facilitated and paved the way for many researchers including myself. One of the beneficiaries of this carefully accumulated data stated in appreciation that:

The small sample encouraged close reading techniques, textual analysis and manual data coding to better illuminate specific patterns of use that would be difficult to ascertain with a more automated method (Reilly, 2019, 19).

The total number of jokes collected was 350 jokes and they were made into 20 lists, with codes and themes such as “knock-knock” jokes, period jokes, and anti sexist jokes...etc. (Reilly, 2019) The themes and codes that I organized these lists into were divided into two major categories: Jokes that were enjoyed exclusively by feminists and feminism sympathizers and were categorized as inclusive jokes. The second category included self-deprecation and ridicule. Examples of the first category contained lists like “17 Jokes you'll only find Hilarious if you are a Feminist,” “43 Funny Tweets that will make Feminists laugh,” “24 Tweets that prove Feminists are Hilarious,” and last but not least, “Safe, Legal and Hilarious: Five actually Funny Jokes about Abortion.” (Reilly, 2019) Examples of the second category contained joke lists with titles such as “35 Cheeky Jokes that are Pretty Bloody Funny,” and “21 Mansplaining Jokes that will make you Piss Yourself Laughing.”

The definition of what a feminist joke is in this research work was taken from the works of Janet Bing, when she wrote that: “feminist humor is created by a feminist that assumes the shared values of most feminists.” (2004, 22) It was also based on the theorizing of Joanne Gallivan (1992) when she stated that feminist humor “reveals and ridicules the absurdity of gender stereotypes and gender-based inequalities.” (373) In order to analyze this data and the lists of jokes at hand I used a model that is a combination of Morreall's Theory of Incongruity and Tamar Gandler's mental model of Thought Experiment. The latter, as the name suggests, is a thought process through which we can be taught new things about

our surroundings regardless of whether that are actually new information introduced, rather one relies on approving or disapproving is a hypothetical scenario through imaginary contemplations. (Kramer, 2020) This is a very persuasive and more importantly subversive mental game. The reason why I used the game label is due to the similarities that thought experiments share with subversive humor in terms of the surprising emotional and intellectual shifts. This view was also articulated in the humor theory put forth by Morreall, which was called Incongruity (Morreall, 1994). Morreall argued that the subversive humor and thought experiment, which is a philosophical principle, have a lot in common. The most relevant shared characteristic is that “both are counterfactually, mentally manipulating possibilities as easily as most people think about realities” (Kramer, 2020, p. 15). The data was then curated through subjecting these lists to the rigorous characteristics to see which ones qualify as subversive humor. The characteristics were organized and collected through several sources and they included:

- Subversive humor has to be done on adversarial audiences.
- Messages have to be subliminal in good humor in order to be received and not confronted.
- It must inspire sympathy from neutral people (Kramer, 2020, p. 24.)

### **3- Findings and Discussion**

Reddit, which is a microcosm of the unfiltered world of the internet where there is supposedly a free and capitalistic market of ideas, there was very little compatibility with subversive qualities garnered by feminists' jokes that were enjoyed by and intended for feminists. One of the very few feminists' sympathizer accounts that fit the description was called Troll X and its content essentially included women self-deprecating jokes and ruthless ridicule of men. (Massanari, 2017) An example of one of the jokes analyzed was the following: “I want to see a reality show where straight dudes have to read the s\*\*\*y messages they send to women to their mothers” (Rensin, 2015). The subversiveness in this

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counterintuitive thought experiment is that it created an imaginary scenario which represented a mental image of exaggerated reality. In this show some men, who are the adversarial audience in this joke, send bad messages usually in a derogatory way to their own mothers. The message here is clear yet subliminal while the hilarity of the joke is still unblemished. The mental image that this joke draws inspires sympathy from all gentlemen and even encourages some of those sending degrading messages to women to contemplate and even change behavior. Another example of a feminist that fits the subversive characteristics was found in the list "37 Cheeky Jokes that are Pretty Bloody Funny." The joke stated that: "Periods help you learn how to get blood off things... which is probably why you hear more stories of men caught for murder" (Team Scarry Mommy, 2019). This joke and most of the jokes on the list were very subversive of the stereotype and the stigma around menstruation, which is a very sensitive topic to women. The subversiveness lies in the removal of the stigmatization of natural phenomena that impeded women's advancements in the public sphere for a very long time. The joke rendered this issue humorous by ridiculing men for the lack of experience when it comes to dealing with blood. The playing on semantics gave the subliminal messages of woman empowerment an aesthetic twist. The "mansplaining" theme in the second category echoed many of the subversive tactics in the first list. The "mansplaining" list was called "21 Mansplaining Jokes that will make you Piss Yourself Laughing." One of the jokes analyzed was in the form of a dialogue between a woman who kept being interrupted and a stereotype of a man unwilling to listen:

**Men:** women are so read.

**Women:** actually we just want....

**Men:** such complex creatures

**Women:** if you just list..

**Men:** so mysterious (Mitchell, 2020).

The joke immediately delivers on this subversiveness because it makes men, the adversarial audience here, self-conscious about their own experiences when having conversation with women. However, a recurring theme was discovered in almost all modern feminist jokes regardless of category, which is the relentless self-perception and self depiction as victims in all spheres of life. Being regarded otherwise is antithetical to the foundations of subversive humor as it has been established in the literature reviewed. Subversiveness relies on a particular power dynamic. This dynamic has to be directed from the bottom of a hierarchy to the top. Given the tremendous strides that women in general and feminists in particular have made in the last few decades socio-economically and especially politically, the power dynamics have shifted dramatically. Feminists, unlike some historically marginalized minorities in the West, are no longer subjected to systemic discrimination, except for minor transgressions that their systemic nature is heavily debated. Therefore, feminist jokes are no longer as subversive as they used to because they do not *need* to be anymore, due to shifting power dynamics in their favor.

### **-Conclusion**

As new challenges face the advancement of women and old negative stereotypes re-emerge, the feminist movement has to use every tool at its disposal to combat these problems. Subversive feminist humor was indeed very efficacious yet it wishes to maintain that status, it has to be faithful to the art itself. It has to be funny to work. This paper examined the thin line that feminist humorists have to walk in order to achieve what this study considered as the untenable place of having considerable social and political power and yet seeking to identify with a tool used by marginalized and victimized groups.

The evidence is clear: the rules of what audiences will consider as funny and subversive of their core assumptions and beliefs have to combine aesthetics with thought experiments, and the playfulness of mirth with the seriousness of subliminal messages. Following these dichotomies will incentivize feminist humorists and adversarial and allied

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audiences alike to partake in the truly subversive humor experience where they, the audiences, are not being inferred to, but rather invited to participate actively.

Although this approach might ruffle the feathers of the schoolmarm-ish factions of feminism and even some in the progressive wings as well, who are more idealistic, however in the long-term perspective it will represent a significant step towards a rejuvenated version of feminist humor. Future research on feminist humor should be focused more on building positive attitudes towards the art form and encourage more female perspectives rather than demonizing its structure and alienating possible talents and potential allies at the same time.

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