

# PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN THROUGH ZAMBIAN MEMES

**Munalula Imbuwa**

University of Zambia

Email: imbuwamunalula@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

*Among internet content produced by internet users, are memes. Facebook and WhatsApp have become an integral part of society in this age of social media where the young generation and older adults engage in social interaction. These memes, sometimes, carry wrong perceptions and messages that can create false consciousness among the people. The notion of gender is culturally and socially constructed. Social media sites have reinforced the concept of gender stereotyping through its content. These sites are invisibly controlling people's lives by transferring the stereotyped ideology. Stereotypes have been a central theme in memes on social media. Some Facebook and WhatsApp memes are portraying women in the way gender roles have been represented. The study adopted a disparagement or superiority theory and social constructionism theory to examine the content of Zambian memes. Data for this article was drawn from general scanning of Facebook and WhatsApp. This study analyses how women are portrayed in Zambian memes on social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp. In this regard, this study used purposive sampling and selected 100 Facebook and WhatsApp memes as samples but only thirty were analysed in this study. Using thematic analysis of the sample, the representations of women in the Zambian memes sampled exhibited negative constructions of women and womanhood. Further, the findings showed that the language used in Zambian memes not only imparts joy and laughter, but also some statements that convey hatred, sarcasm, viciousness, and vulgarity to women.*

**Keywords:** *Internet Meme, Disparagement, Social Constructionism, Stereotype*

## **Introduction**

Social media and the internet have been the latest preferred platforms for obtaining and sharing information. This is because they are faster, easier and have a bigger coverage of the audience. In Zambia, the most common social networks used are Facebook and WhatsApp. Facebook is but one of the many messaging and social networking applications, that overallly dominates the rankings for most used applications on mobile devices (Church *et al.*, 2015). With the advent of Facebook and WhatsApp, a revolution of news intake was presented to current youth and middle-aged generation who are

common internet users. Individuals now have access to many forms of media at any time and place; mobile devices have enabled accessibility of media like never before through unprecedented connectedness. Rouse and Dean (2014) state that Facebook is a popular free social networking website that allows users to create profiles, upload photos and videos, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues. WhatsApp is a pun on ‘what’s up?’ Metz and Cade (2015) described WhatsApp as a ‘freeware and cross-platform instant messaging service for smartphones.’ Idle and Nunns (2011) state that WhatsApp is where information is spread to multitudes of people in an instant and then shared between friends.

Internet memes are among the content shared on Facebook and WhatsApp. Internet users refer to jokes transmitted online as internet memes. While not all internet memes are jokes, comparing them to offline jokes makes it clear what makes internet memes unique: the speed of their transmission and the fidelity of their form. A spoken joke, for instance, can only be transmitted as quickly as those individuals who know it can move from place to place, and its form must be preserved by memory. A printed joke, in contrast, can be transmitted by moving paper and can be preserved by a physical arrangement of ink. The movement of individuals no longer limits the speed of transmission, this form of a joke is preserved by a medium, not memory.

Meme is a metaphor in Biology whose roots can be traced back to the works of Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene* and Blackmore (2000) in *The Meme Machine*. He proposed the term ‘meme’ (based on the ancient Greek word ‘mimema’ which means ‘something imitated’). By this term, Dawkins (1976) meant a unit of cultural transmission that may represent an aspect of culture such as fashion, language, religion, songs, and sports. These can evolve, change and spread. The idea of a meme has itself mutated and evolved in a new direction. An internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea (Dynel, 2016:662). The original definition of the word meme has undergone many variations in concept over the years and humans have largely driven these variations (Dawkins, 1976).

Knobel and Lankshear (2005: 205-206), state that ‘what is vital is the fact that there is particular content on the internet that people explicitly perceive as memes and associate certain practices with them’. Many other digital scholars address the cultural and social aspect of memes in line with Limor Shifman (2013: 367) who thinks memes should be ‘units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience’. Patrick Davison (2009) condenses online meme as ‘a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission’ (quoted in Mandiberg 2012: 122). Other scholars have also given their definitions of the word meme. Dynel (2016: 662) focuses on the digital in her definition. She defines meme as ‘an idea, style, or action that spreads via internet in form of mimicry, which may be variously expressed (e.g. by planking in public places, dancing to the Harlem Shake, or creating a picture-based joke).’ These definitions are straight to the point in addressing aspects of internet memes by stating that internet memes are a product of online culture. The second definition, is that a meme is a social phenomenon whose common purpose is to entertain. Thirdly, the environment of operation of a meme is the cyberspace or the internet.

Social networks have furthered the propagation of memes tremendously and there has been a boom in the popularity of thematic websites. It can be argued today that, there is no single internet user that has not stumbled upon an internet meme of some kind. Countless new memes are being generated on a myriad of social networks, platforms, and content sharing communities every day. Internet users especially those who are internet savvy have gone a step further in creating simple tools for the generation of memes, such as *Meme generator* (2009) and *Quick meme* (2010). Constantly updated encyclopaedia of memes called *Know Your Meme* has also been around since 2008.

By *Zambian memes*, therefore, this study refers to the jokes created by Zambians or adapted in the Zambian context and transmitted online by Zambian authors. It is through these Zambian memes that the writer wishes to analyse how women are portrayed on social media. However, as already mentioned, this article will narrow its concentration on two social networks, Facebook and WhatsApp.

## Literature Review

Studies on how women have been portrayed in novels, magazines, films, songs, proverbs and other forms of media have been carried out. Zambian and non-Zambian scholars in their studies have shown that generally, both women and men have been stereotyped either positively or negatively.

*The Portrayal of Women in Facebook Memes* (2020) is a study by Nowshin Jahan Etee where he stated that Facebook memes not only impart joy and laughter, but also sometimes some statements that convey hatred, sarcasm, viciousness, and vulgarity to women. Further, he found that some memes make indecent remarks and unpleasant comments about female bodies and the clothes worn by them in the disguise of humor. In addition, he found that Facebook memes portray women within some specific frames. However, those frames are not applicable to entire women folks. For example, he stated that not all women are very complicated to understand, they may not be jealous of other women, they may not dominate their partners, and they may not present themselves as commodity or sex objects. These memes are establishing myths that are misleading and fabricated. Memes are using humor to conceal the disrespectful portrayal of women.

Mutunda in his study, *Portrayal of African Women in Folklore: A Case Study of Proverbs among the Lunda in the North-Western part of Zambia* (2016) argued that the selected Lunda proverbs illustrate both negative and positive attitudes of Lunda people towards women. Available evidence shows that Lunda proverbs are unbalanced in that women are portrayed more negatively than men. The majority analysed proverbs indicated that women are evil, dangerous, unfaithful or morally loose, unreliable, untrustworthy; thus, intellectually inferior. In other instances, very few, women are represented positively and in complementary terms such as carers or nurturers, and homemakers or caretakers.

Nasrina Siddiqi *et al.*, (2018) in a study titled *Analyzing Threads of Sexism in New Age Humour: A Content Analysis of Internet Memes*, postulated that it is clearly evident that memes are more than simple jokes. Therefore, they should not be taken in a light-hearted fashion, as that essentially encourages and promotes tolerance towards casual

sexism by making it seem less harmful, derogatory or offensive. Furthermore, the recurrent creation and distribution of such memes at a global level, with open access to virtually all internet users can, eventually, stimulate sexist attitudes among the masses. The fact that such memes are widely accepted supports Brodie's (1996) assumption that 'a meme that spreads successfully is often harmful'.

In Jessica Drakett, Brigette Rickett, Katy Day and Kate Milnes' article titled: *Old Jokes, New Media – Online Sexism and Constructions of Gender and Internet Memes* (2018), the feminist research found that instances of online sexism and harassment are often reframed as 'acceptable' by constructing them as a form of humour.

## **Method**

The research design was a qualitative approach using a desk research in data collection. This method of data collection was employed to yield empirical data to complement the qualitative data. The researcher used purposive sampling to obtain meme samples from Facebook and WhatsApp. Only memes with an element of women portrayal were sampled. In addition, the memes had to be authored or shared by Zambians in form of print text, template memes, image macros or cartoons. No audio or video memes were used.

The researcher did a general visual scanning of Facebook and WhatsApp where she is a member. Facebook pages such as Love and Living in Zambia, Zambian Weddings and Kitchen Parties, Barotse Memes, Zambian Memes and many others were scanned. WhatsApp pages were also scanned. It was observed that the memes appeared on Facebook before users imported them to WhatsApp. What featured in each meme was downloaded before importing it into the gallery page while those written as print text only were typed and saved in a folder created for data storage.

A photo gallery was opened for analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen for data analysis due to its compatibility with large data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and its compatible with various theoretical standpoints, allowing for superiority and social constructionism approach to be taken. With a final sample of one hundred (100) memes shared as template memes, print text, cartoons, and image macros, analysis was done manually.

Analysis was done in six stages. The first step was to familiarise oneself with the data. This was followed by categorisation of units. In addition, searching for themes was done in the third stage. This phase involved sorting and collating coded data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were later examined with the aim of searching for broader themes. Reviewing of the themes, defining and then naming of the themes followed. Broad themes such as gender stereotypes and patriarchal messages finally came up. Gender stereotype theme was further broken into sub-themes such as women as prostitutes, cheats, gossips, sex objects, materialistic, gold diggers, liars, pretenders and many more. Some themes with similar connotations were merged to form one category. For example, themes such as women as lovers of money, women as gold diggers, and women as materialistic were merged to form one theme: 'Women as lovers of money'. The researcher wrote a detailed report based on each theme.

## Discussion

This research formed part of a larger project exploring humour and how women are portrayed in the Zambian memes shared on social media platforms Facebook and WhatsApp. Through our thematic analysis of the one hundred Zambian memes shared as image macros, cartoons, template memes and print text (word), we identified two overarching themes. The first is gender stereotypes. This sees the construction of ten emergent categories from the one hundred memes. Ninety-six (96) memes point at different qualities seen in women with negative connotations such as women as lovers of money, dependent on men, prostitutes, cheats, gossips, talkative, problems, liars, dangerous, and sexual objects. However, four (4) other sub-themes had positive connotations portraying women as good, supporters, helpers and respectful.

The second theme is dominance of patriarchal messages. Seventy-nine (79) out of the one hundred (100) memes have patriarchal messages. Although it is difficult to tell the gender of the people who share the memes on Facebook and WhatsApp, these patriarchal messages imply that men play an active role in the creation and sharing of memes on social media.

The memes in the present study fall under the category of sexist humour. Sexist humour is humour that demeans, insults, stereotypes, victimises, or objectifies a person based on his or her gender (LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). A point to note is that some memes have more than one portrayal of women. Additionally, there is a thin line between the emergent categories with women portrayals because they are related to one another. Another important aspect to note is that the memes are copied and discussed the same way they are shared on social media with either slang, colloquial language, wrong punctuations and spellings, or grammatical errors.

The following analysis presents the manner in which women are portrayed in the memes. Throughout the sample, analysis by the researcher identified a clear reproduction of memes with constructions of negative stereotypes and gendered relations using humour. The memes have remarks on the things women are said to be.

**Table Showing the Frequency of the Women Portrayals**

S/N	Type of Portrayal	Frequency
1.	Lovers of money	31
2.	Dependant on men	24
3.	Cheats	8
4.	Prostitutes	7
5.	Gossips	6
6.	Talkative	5
7.	Dangerous	5
8.	Liars	5
9.	Sex objects	5
10.	Good, helpful, helpers, supportive	4



## Women as Lovers of Money

Facebook and WhatsApp memes portray women in many ways. Among them is that women are lovers of money. The constructions of women as ‘lovers of money’ discourse occurred across a variety of meme types. It was the largest category with thirty-one memes. This image of a woman is captured in the following: meme 1 reads, ‘My ATM.’ ATM is an abbreviation for Automated Teller Machine. An ATM allows for convenient banking. Customers are able to use Automated Teller Machines to withdraw money from their nearest machine at any time using personalised cards. The man in the picture is being referred to as the ATM. Interestingly, the picture appears to have been taken on a wedding day. This implies that the wife does not see a ‘husband’ in the man on the first day of their marriage. Instead, she sees an ATM in him, setting the tone for her motivation to get married to him. The picture seems to show how rocky or turbulent the marriage will be when the husband has no money. It also seems to suggest that the growth of their love in marriage will depend on the steady supply of money in the house.

### Meme 1



Source: WhatsApp on 24 September 2018

### Meme 2



Source: WhatsApp on 14 September 2019

Meme 2 is a cartoon. In this meme, the woman tells the man that she wants a man who can give her 50 per cent of his salary. The man replies, ‘My dear, even God collects 10 per cent.’ He further asks her a question, ‘Are you God’s mother?’ This meme seems to suggest that the woman in question wants to get half of a man’s earnings. She is using manipulative language and her inner power. This seems to reveal that she is not content with anything below 50 per cent. Secondly, she is very greedy to want to get 50 per cent of what a man has worked for. This meme suggests that women are greedy, manipulative gold diggers that are never content with what they have. This further reveals that women have an insatiable and unreasonable appetite for material and financial gain.

### Meme 3

*We have yet another set of armyworms preparing to attack men’s wallets and bank accounts on the 14<sup>th</sup> [Valentine’s Day]. Advice from the Office of the Vice President Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit is for Men to use the strongest pesticide i.e. switch off your phones and change location 😂😂😂.* Source: FB on 12 February 2019

Allusions are a common sight in the memes. One can only understand this meme from the Zambian context because it alludes to the Office of the Vice President Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit. Women here are being equated to a pest more specifically destructive armyworms. This seems to suggest how ruthless and destructive women can be on men's pockets.

These memes promote male hegemony. The face of poverty is with women as they are portrayed as incapable of providing for themselves. The men seem to have it all, money, good jobs, houses, and other luxuries. From the social constructionist view, the language used in the three memes portraying women as lovers of money seems to play a role of marginalising them as it puts the man at the centre as a hard worker and provider while the woman is seen as peripheral, lazy and only wanting to benefit from the man's hard work. While from the superiority view, they suggest that women are inferior to men in terms of economic status.

### Women as Dependent on Men

This category is closely related to the first one portraying women as lovers of money because, in both portrayals, men stand out as providers and women as receivers. This category had twenty-four memes. Meme 4 emanating from Facebook is captioned: 'When you ask a girl mu club what beer you should buy for her, then she says "nigullileni chabe ka 25kg kah unga boss"', 'just buy a 25kg of mealie meal for me, boss'. This meme suggests the dependency of women on men. The woman in question does not have the capacity to provide even basic needs such as mealie meal for herself. The two are said to be in a club, this venue suggests that the woman is a prostitute.

**Meme 4**

**Meme 5**

**Meme 6**



Source: FB on 6 June 2019

Source: WhatsApp on 27 August 2019.

Source: FB on 18 August 2019

Additionally, meme 5, with a caption reading, 'It is disrespectful to ask your girl if she needs money. She is a girl; she's always broke' also shows a construct of a woman who is dependent on a man as she is being referred to as being broke always. The verb 'always' suggests that there is no time that this girl has money. Therefore, a person who is broke always has no capacity of taking care of herself. To make the memes more fecund, images of Edgar Lungu the President of Zambia and Jacob Zuma former president of South African have been used.

Another example is meme 6, which reads: ‘Dating a Zambian lady is like dating an orphan’. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> Edition* defines an orphan as ‘a child whose parents have died’ (2010:1038). An orphan is usually helpless, and dependent on the guardian who is taking care of him or her at that particular time. The meme equates a woman to an orphan. By nature, children are helpless, dependent, homeless, directionless, visionless, naive, voiceless and more importantly, they cannot think for themselves. The three examples given from the category of women being portrayed as dependent on men are a true reflection of ridicule and feelings of the relative superiority of men as essential components of humour from the superiority perspective. Mockery or derision is seen from the sentiments comparing a woman as to ‘orphan’. The memes seem to speak through the male perspective indicating that men are a better and superior gender compared to women.

Millett (1970) states that women must revolt against the power centre of culture which is male-dominated by breaking down existing structures that tend to see women as passive, meek and weak. The memes under this category directly degrade women and emphasise the worth of men in Zambian society. The patriarchal ideology that a man is the head of the house, breadwinner, and hard worker continues to thrive, drawing a boundary showing the superiority of men and the inferiority of women in society. From the social constructionist view, the memes build on what society thinks about women not what is obtaining on the ground. This way, society creates reality because what society comes to believe is termed as a ‘fact’.

### Women as Cheats

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> Edition* defines a cheat as ‘somebody who is married or has a regular sexual partner to have a secret sexual relationship with somebody else’ (2010:238). There were eight memes portraying women as cheats. One of them is Meme 7 captioned: ‘Ladies please stop cheating back, it hurts more. We are not strong like you’. The facial expression shows that the man is hurt. Gestures and facial expressions are a common sight in the memes. This meme suggests that men can cheat but women should not cheat back because men get more hurt when cheated upon, as they are not as strong as women. This relates to cultural beliefs that support the cheating of men. A Bemba proverb says, ‘*Ubuchende bwa mwaume tabu toba ng’anda*’ (Bwembya, 2013). The literal meaning is that ‘a man’s infidelity does not break a home.’ As seen from the proverb, if a man cheats, that will not cause a divorce between two married people, but if a woman cheats on the husband that guarantees a divorce.

### Meme 7



Source: WhatsApp on 26 April 2019

### Meme 8



Source: FB on 21 August 2019



Meme 8 reads, ‘If girls can cheat on soldiers with guns and bombs, what about you *na ka* laptop bag.’ The meme has two portrayals one depicting women as cheats and the other shows an element of bravery in women as they have the courage to cheat on soldiers who carry guns. The use of emojis on the memes also shows how hurt the man is in meme 7 and how funny it is that women can cheat on soldiers who carry guns in meme 8. Drawing on the evidence from the memes sampled for this category, there is an indication that women are stronger when cheated upon than men. The memes also signify that women are strong cheaters. This is evident from meme 7. This also suggests that both men and women cheat as a woman cannot cheat alone.

**Women as Prostitutes**

Cheating and prostitution are closely related. Prostitution goes with the desire for money and the ability to cheat on someone. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> Edition* defines a prostitute as ‘A person who has sex for money’ (2010:1178). Seven memes portrayed women as prostitutes. The woman’s image is presented in form of a dog in meme 9. This is interesting because a dog cannot reason nor does it have morals. This implies that this woman has the characteristics of a dog.

Meme 10 reads, ‘I’m looking for an investor’ This meme depicts a woman as a prostitute who wants to use her body for monetary gain. She is also portrayed as a gold digger or lover of money. The woman is half-naked. There seems to be interest on the nudity of women in the meme. From the social constructionist perspective, some Zambians may not appreciate this meme because a woman is expected to cover her nakedness. This kind of dressing shows a lack of respect and dignity for one’s self.

**Meme 9**

**Meme 10**

**Meme 11**



Source FB on 2 May 2019

Source: WhatsApp on 14 August 2018

Source FB on 2 May 2019

Meme 11 reads, ‘*Bana chinyenga ba guy for free obvious nopowelamo virus elo iwe nau innocence wako, ubwele ukwatile sure.* Her parents even charge you bride price over second hand pussy.’ The meaning is that men have had sex with the woman and obviously infected her with the virus, then in his innocence, he wants to marry that woman.... Code-switching has been used in the meme. The speaker was using town Njanja and

then switched to English. The gesture used by the man in the meme seems to emphasise a point. The gestures in memes are purposeful, they reflect, clarify and support what is being said. There is also emotive use of language in meme 11.

From the superiority view, the language used in meme 11 has negative, demeaning and offensive connotations. It is also sarcastic and promotes both hegemony and misogynistic behaviour to further downgrade the integrity of women. Due to the negligence in examining the derogatory expressions of such contents, misogynistic humour becomes one of the most 'acceptable' forms of sexism (Ford & Gray, 2013). Accusatory stones are cast on the woman. These memes epitomise the entrenched patriarchy and the structural challenges that women face everyday. A point to note is that the speakers in meme 9 and 11 speak from the male perspective.

Vashist (2016) states that numerous forms of media exhibit misogynistic content widely. Meme 11 is the best example of derogatory expressions of such content and misogynistic humour that pose a threat to the very notion of gender equality. This kind of sexist humour gives a direct boost to male chauvinism and prejudice against women. The frequent use of demeaning language such as '*Hule*' used in some memes can eventually, lead to the 'internalisation of oppressive language' or what Althusser (1971) calls 'Interpellation'. Explaining the role of language in creating a disabled identity, Galvin (2003) argues that 'the language we use and the labels we identify with become so taken for granted that we eventually, feel that we actually, inherently are what we have been named'. Hence, repeated use of such words or negative and belittling phrases can lead to the internalisation of such traits in women, which in the end contaminates their own self-perception. This creates reality from a social constructionist perspective.

### **Women as Gossips**

This negative stereotype has been perceived as real by society over the years as women have continued being addressed as gossips. Six memes portrayed women as gossips. In meme 12, the caption reads, 'All guys that gossip should start dressing like this.' The picture then shows a man wearing a dress. This implies that gossiping is the speciality of women and if a man gossips then he is as good or as bad as a woman. Images of people with a celebrity status are manipulated for humorous effects, as the man in a dress is a Nigerian actor.

Meme 13 shows a group of women. This picture is appropriated as the one in which women are gossiping. There is no man in the picture. The caption: 'This is the original GOSSIP uniform,' is interesting as the women are still dressed in their morning gowns. It also suggests that the women are idle or lazy – that instead of dealing with house chores when they wake up, they are busy gossiping. The word gossip is written in capital letters as a way of placing emphasis on the activity. A lot of laughing emojis and the word 100% FACT are included on the meme to confirm the message.

In meme 14, a woman is referred to as a gossip machine at rest. The image is appropriated judging from the woman's lips to qualify her as a gossip. A machine has the ability to work continuously until it breaks down or is switched off. This suggests that a woman has the ability to gossip until she sleeps. This social construct is demeaning to women. From the social constructionist view, stereotypes often reflect the viewers' observation of what people do in everyday life. If viewers often observe a group of people

engaging in a particular activity, they are likely to believe that way. In other words, gender stereotypes like other social stereotypes are a reflection of the perceivers' constant observation (Eagly & Steffan, 2000). These gender-based generalisations can also produce an unrealistically negative picture of the female gender thereby fostering gender-related prejudice and biases. The following are examples of memes portraying women as gossips:

**Meme 12**

All guys that gossip should start dressing like this



**Meme 13**

This is the ORIGINAL GOSSIP uniform



**Meme 14**



Source: WhatsApp on 19 Nov 2018

Source: WhatsApp on 29 May 2019

Source: Facebook 18 September 2019

These memes resonate with one of the proverbs of the Luvale people of North-Western Province as stated by Mutunda (2017), says: *Phwevo lya ndumba wutama lunga lyove akwate nyama, pwevo lya mwata hola mukanwa lunga lyove atunge limbo.* This is translated as ‘lion’s wife, be calm so that your husband catches game; chief’s or headman’s wife hold your mouth so that your husband builds a village.’ Gossip and lies are detrimental to the peace, harmony, and unity of a village. In this case, society believes that gossiping is a woman’s activity. The woman is warned as she is seen as the one who is capable of gossiping and bringing disharmony to the community. If ever a man is seen gossiping, he is considered as having female traits. The message is patriarchal.

**Women as Talkative Beings**

Talkativeness is related to gossiping as both involve talking. It is also seen as a feminine trait. Five memes portrayed women as talkative. In meme 15, there are five (5) birds but four (4) are said to be female and one (1) is male. Based on this assertion, the male bird has its mouth closed while the four (4) other birds have opened their mouths wide open. This suggests that talkativeness is associated with women. It is not a male characteristic. Further, meme 16 shows a baby holding its mother’s mouth so that she does not open it. Written in capital letters, the caption reads, ‘**MUMMY, MY FATHER LOVES YOU BUT THIS IS YOUR PROBLEM AND I KNOW YOU ARE STILL TALKING INSIDE.**’ One would argue that the baby in the picture is not the person saying the words but rather his image has been appropriated to match the caption of the image. Micro holding the mouth also implies that once the child removes the hand, the woman will start talking.

## Meme 16



Source: WhatsApp on 22 Jan 2019

## Meme 17



Source: FB on 28 Feb 2019

## Women as Dangerous

Women are also perceived as the femme fatale archetype. Barthes (1977:13) defines femme fatale as any irresistibly attractive woman, especially one who leads men into danger or disaster. This category also included portrayals of women as evil, devilish, cruel, vengeful and potentially threatening. There were five memes in this category but two are discussed here. In meme 18, the woman is included on the list of the most dangerous animals. According to this meme, all dangerous animals have an attacking system. The attacking system for women has sexual connotations, suggesting that women use sex to destroy men's dreams, visions and goals. In addition, meme 19, suggests that a woman has the power to distract a man from reaching his life goals by using the vagina.

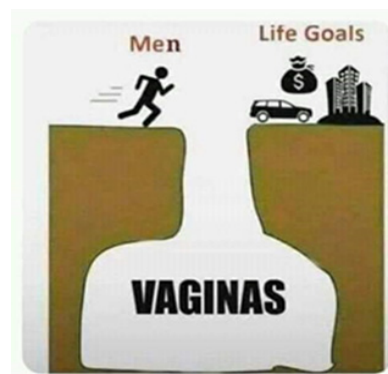
The vagina is perceived as a ditch where a man falls, in their quest to achieve their goals. What is interesting about the ditch is that it is smaller on top but wider at the bottom. This suggests many men have failed to achieve their goals because of women. This is a misconception because not every failure should be attributed to a woman. Some men fail out of their own doing.

## Meme 18



Source: WhatsApp on 29 May 2019

## Meme 19



Source: WhatsApp on 8 February 2019



Another observation made from this meme is that lesbians are exempted from falling into this trap. This suggests that women destroy only men. This relates to findings by other scholars such as Chilala (2006) who stated that women in history such as Helen of Troy, Lady Macbeth and Clytemnestra the schemer (Homer 151) destroyed great men and kingdoms (See also other writings by Chilala: 2003, 2013). Other femme fatales such as Delilah and Jezebel are found in the Bible. These women are also portrayed as great witches and dangerous schemers who have the power to destroy kingdoms.

The demonisation of women is continually reproduced as female characters are portrayed as dangerous or destroyers. Through this exaggerated and monstrous construction of undesirable femininity (McRobbie, 2008), negative stereotypes of women continue to thrive. Therefore, it is evident that sexist humour often oversimplifies certain information and eventually propagates gender stereotypes. This lends support to what Brodie (1996:16) opines when he says: ‘the most interesting thing about memes is not whether they are true or false, it is that they are the building blocks of your mind.’ To some extent, these portrayals simply show society’s misconception about women.

### **Women as Liars**

According to *Macmillan English Dictionary New Edition*, a liar is someone who tells lies (2011: 866). Five memes portrayed women as liars. Meme 21 shows an old woman drinking beer but saying that she is in church. Even in old age, women are portrayed as liars such that they can even lie about things that are considered sacred. Additionally, in meme 20 women are said to have long hair because they lie a lot. Those who do not lie have no hair. Grandpa is an example of someone who does not lie. Sadly, even a small child refers to women as people that lie a lot.

Meme 22 shows a woman who claims that she has never had sex. This meme seems to question the virginity claim. Two points are worth noting: First, the ‘vagina’ in the picture is OPEN, meaning the hymen is not there as evidence of virginity. There is a clear view of the picture in the background. The second, is that the vagina is bigger than the penis, suggesting that it has been penetrated so many times that it has even lost its tightness. Freud (1960:96 - 100) states that there are tendentious or hostile jokes that serve the purpose of doing harm. From the superiority perspective, such a meme would fall in that category of hostile jokes, as it is an example of the total ridicule of a woman. It displays a very offensive scene where the woman’s vagina is presented as a dam. The emojis used on meme 22 portray feelings of shame and sadness.

### **Meme 20**

Child: Mummy why grandpa has no hair on his head.

Mummy: Because he speaks only the truth.

Child: Now I understand why girls have long hair...kkkkkkkkkkkk

*Source: WhatsApp on 6 November 2019*



## Meme 21



Source: Whatsapp on 2 May 2019

## Meme 22



Source: Whatsapp on 6 August 2019

## Women as Sex Objects

Women were portrayed as sexual objects to be admired, owned and used by men. Five memes portrayed women as sex objects. In addition, the tendency to describe the anatomical parts of the female characters in sensual terms as Chilala (2006) puts it, is also common in Zambian memes on social media. Lemish (2008) states that 'a woman has long been regarded as a sexual being who can only be evaluated on the basis of her appearance.' Men, the world over, have traditionally viewed women as sex objects that are there for their sexual gratification. For example, meme 23 has a caption, 'What is your favourite part?' 1, 2, 3, 4. 1 is for the cheeks, 2 for the breasts, 3 for the hips and 4 for the vagina. The woman's body is fragmented. The woman was displayed and evaluated based on her appearance as is done on an object for sale. These memes manifest the dominance of patriarchy, with reflections of misogyny, male chauvinism and objectification of women.

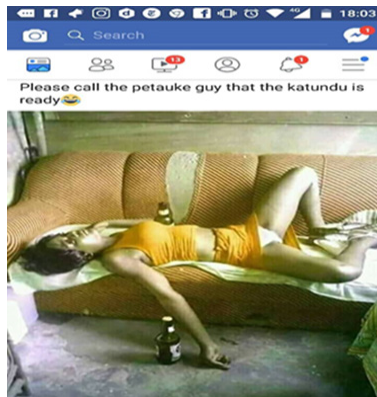
In meme 24, the woman was being referred to as 'Katundu'. The word Katundu means luggage. The caption reads, 'Please call the Petauke guy that the katundu is ready.' The picture shows that the woman is very drunk. This meme also portrays women as careless. The meme is based on the power of allusion as it alludes to an earlier incident, which only Zambians are aware of and understand. From this incident, the term *Katundu* has been used with sexual connotations in Zambia. From the social constructionist view, this is a purely Zambian constructed joke. It is a joke only to Zambian eyes and others can only grasp it when the backstory is given and the term *Katundu* is explained. In the meme, the woman is displayed as an object to be enjoyed. The caption also gives the same suggestion.

### Meme 23



Source: WhatsApp on 13 May 2019

### Meme 24



Source: FB on 19 September 2018

### Meme 25



Source: WhatsApp on 4 December 2018

Sexist humour tends to build on sexual objectification of women (Bergman 1986). Memes such as 24 place women as victims of patriarchy. The tendency by men to condemn women, to cast accusatory stones at them, while ignoring the wrongs committed by men as is the case in John 8: 1 - 7. Importantly, women are more prone to be the target of aggressive humour and the object of sexist humour than men (Cantor & Zillmann, 1973). Meme 25 speaks of marriage being a sweet thing because the woman cooks for the husband, and then she is expected to satisfy the sexual desires of her husband. The meme reads, ‘Marriage is a sweet thing you come home....then you eat the person who has cooked’ (implying sex). In this meme, a woman is portrayed as a thing to be enjoyed by men just as we saw in meme 22.

The man carries the tag of a hard worker and provider who comes home to a wife whose job is to cook food for him. The woman is presented in complementary terms as a homemaker or caretaker. Such memes work together to construct the ideal woman’s place as in the home, while references to domesticity and incompatibility with employment can be read constructing women as lazy, and unfit for work outside the home. It positions domesticity as an ‘easy’ job and present a ‘no-win’ situation for women.

#### Women are Portrayed as Problematic

A problem is a thing that is difficult to deal with or understand (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*, 2010:1167). Five memes portrayed women as problematic. The image of a woman portrayed as a problem can be seen in meme 26 captioned: ‘The Pastor Ask them to Bring Their Problems to Church so this Man Brought his Wife,’ The woman is problematic in this case and the man tries to help himself by finding a solution to the problem. She is the cause of problems to a man just like mosquitoes cause malaria to people.

## Meme 26



Source WhatsApp on 3 April 2019

## Meme 27

*People ask me why husbands do not share their problems with their wives.*

*My reply: Do you discuss malaria with mosquitoes? 😄😄😄😄*

Source: WhatsApp on 21 February 2019

## Memes Portray Women Positively

Although ninety-six out of one hundred (100) memes portray women negatively as lovers of money, dependent on men, cheats, talkative, failures, prostitutes, liars, naive and manipulative to mention a few, some memes portray images of women positively. Four (4) out of one hundred (100) memes were sampled in the study. In these memes, women were viewed as good, helpful, bringing out the best in men, and supportive.

The first meme in the category with positive portrayals places a woman on a good platform. Meme 29 reads, 'Some women are not for sex. Some women come to heal, repair, uplift, upgrade, restore, and bring out the best in men.' This meme explains how helpful women can be to men. It shows that women play a positive role in men's lives. Meme 30 states that every woman is wife material. The problem is that some materials end up in the hands of the wrong tailors. The wrong tailors being referred to are men. This meme does not condemn women. However, it creates a balance suggesting that women are good but sometimes, they are married to wrong or bad men. Additionally, it suggests that men can also be bad or wrong. Therefore, the blame or accusatory fingers is not pointed at the woman in this meme.

Memes 29, 30 and 31 show a positive image of women as it shows that they also have the ability not just to excel as individuals but also to help others such as men to excel to high levels of power, wealth and influence. In addition, they are core partners with men in development. The memes praise women.

## Meme 27



Source: WhatsApp 19 January 2019

## Meme 28



Every woman is a wife material. The problem is that, some materials end up in the hands of wrong tailors...Is my volume ok?

Source: WhatsApp 10 April 2019

## Meme 29

I asked a millionaire how he did it, he said 'forget about the Girls and focus on one Woman. She'll help you achieve everything.'



Source: FB on 29 June 2019

It is worth noting that celebrities are used in the memes. In meme 28, the picture of Nollywood actor Yul Edochie is used and in meme 29 an American actor's image has been used. These celebrities have a large number of followers who love, adore or even hate them, using their images will make the memes go viral.

## Conclusion

This work looked at the analysis of how women are portrayed in Zambian memes sampled as image macros, cartoons, template memes and print text (word). The analysis has demonstrated that although the intention of sharing memes on social media is to entertain people, gender stereotypes were created. The analysis established that internet memes treat males and females differently. The differences were seen in the categories that have been discussed above. These categories were not exhaustive and they were interwoven. The imagery that is used in these memes is heavily tilted in favour of the males who are shown as dominant and superior, making them 'different' from their female counterparts. The females, on the other hand, were portrayed negatively and in a manner that does not make them appreciate their uniqueness as women. The memes present males positively and as breadwinners and providers.

On the positive side, women were portrayed as helpful, supportive and good. These positive portrayals suggested that women are partners in development and that they help men to excel in life. There is a pressing need for internet users to avoid this misogynistic abuse perpetuated in and through technology. As Shifman and Maapil Varsano (2007) point out, sexist jokes that depreciate women through general, indirect stereotypes are often regarded as 'clean' jokes suitable for all audiences without any censorship: cleanliness is only a socially accepted screen that hides the inherent contradictions of these texts. The memes do not convey any clearly inappropriate or aggressive views sometimes, but at the same time, they do embed sexist stereotypes (sometimes of both sexes) that familiarise the listeners with those stereotypes in a permissive context.

It may also be argued, from another perspective, that although internet memes are largely to entertain the consumer, they also influence the consumer's understanding of the relationship between males and females and their attitudes towards each other. Internet memes have not only affected conventional education in terms of dissemination of

information, a lot of which is misleading and misplaced, but have further driven traditional education into near-oblivion. Traditionally, for example, folktales were used to educate African children about many social issues as well as to impart values on them (Chilala, 2011). However, African children, particularly Zambian children, now have greater access to internet sources of information such as memes than they do to platforms or sources that help enhance traditional values.

## References

- Blackmore, S. (2000). *The Meme Machine*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, Vol. 25.
- Boghossian, P. (2001). *What is Social Construction?*, in: *Times Literary Supplement*, February 23, pp. 6-8.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Cantor et al. (1973). Resentment Toward Victimized Protagonists and Severity of Misfortunes they Suffer as Factors in Humor Appreciation. *Journal of Experimental Research in Personality* 6, 321–329.
- Chilala, C. (2006). *An Analysis of Gender Issues in Zambian Literature in English*. University of Zambia.
- Chilala, C. (2003), 'Marriage, Gender and Freedom in Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House: A Zambian Perspective,' in: *Proceedings of The Relevance of A Doll's House – Translation and Adaptation, International Ibsen Conference*, Dhaka, Centre for Asian Theatre, 101-108.
- Chilala, C. (2011), 'The African Narrative Tale as a Tool of Education,' in: Shifra Schonmann (Ed.). *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education*, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 159-162.
- Chilala, C. (2013). 'Through the Males Eyes: Gendered Styles in Contemporary Zambian Fiction,' in: Reuben M. Chirambo and J.K.S. Makokha. *Reading Contemporary African Literature*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 91-108
- Croteau, D., and Hoynes, W. (2003). *Media/Society: Industries, Images and Audiences*. London: Pine Forges Press. 14. Print.
- Davison, P. (2012). 'The Language of Internet Memes,' in Michael Mandiberg (ed.) *The Social Media Reader*, pp. 120-134., New York University Press, New York.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dynel, M. (2016). 'I Had Seen Image Macros!' Advice Animal Memes as Visual – Verbal Jokes. *International Journal of Communication* (19328036), 10, 660 – 668.
- Eagly, A.H., and Steffen, V.J. (2000). Gender Stereotypes Stem from the Distribution of Women and Men into Social Roles. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 46 (4). 735-754.



- Ferguson, M.A., and Ford, T.E. (2008). Disparagement Humor: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Psychoanalytic, Superiority, and Social Identity Theories. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 21, 283-312.
- Ford, T.E. (2000). Effects of Sexist Humor on Tolerance of Sexist Events. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, 1094–1107.
- Ford, T.E., and Gray, J. (2013). The Role of Social Context in the Interpretation of Sexist Humour. *Humour: International Journal of Humour Research*, 26(2), 277-93.
- Freud, S. (1960). *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Galvin, R. (2003). The Making of the Disabled Identity: A Linguistic Analysis of Marginalisation. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 23(2), 149-78.
- Gergen, K.J., and Davis, K.E. eds. (1985). *The Social Construction of the Person*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Hobbes, T. (1996). [1951] *Leviathan*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Canada: South End Press.
- Hornby, A.S. (2010). *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*.
- Idle, N., and Nunns, A., (2011). Tweets from Tahrir. *Egypt's revolution As It*.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press. Print
- Jessica et al. (2018). Old Jokes, New Media Online Sexism and Constructions of Gender in Internet Memes. *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol. 28(1) 109–127.
- Keith-Spiegel, P. (1972). Early Conceptions of Humour: Varieties and Issues: in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (eds.), *The Psychology of Humour: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues*, 4-39. New York: Academic Press.
- Knobel, M., and Lankshear, C. (2005). 'Memes and Affinities: Cultural Replication and Literacy Education.' *Paper Presented to the Annual NRC*, Miami, November 30.
- Krohn, F. (2014). A Generational Approach to Using Emoticons as Non-verbal Communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 43, 321 – 328.
- LaFrance, M., and Woodzicka, J.A. (1998). No Laughing Matter: Woman's Verbal and Non-verbal Reactions to Sexist Humour, in J. Swim and C. Stagnor (Eds.), *Prejudice: The Target's Perspective* (pp. 61-80). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Lemish, D. (2008). 'Gender Representations in the Media,' *International Encyclopedia of Communication* (Vol. V). Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, pp. 1945-1951.
- McRobbie, A. (1994). *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Metz and Cade (2016). 'Forget Apple vs The FBI: WhatsApp Just Switched on Encryption for a Billion People.' *Wired*. Conde Nast.
- Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday and Company.

- Mutunda, S. (2016). Portrayal of African Women in Folklore: A Case Study of Proverbs among the Lunda in the Northwestern Part of Zambia. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*. Vol. 4, Issue 2. Pages 508-527.
- Mutunda, S. (2017). Through a Social Linguistic Lens: An Analysis of Luvale Proverbs, *International Journal of Investigations*. Vol. 4 No.5: 54 – 73.
- Nasrina, S. et al. (2018). Analysing Threads of Sexism in New Age Humour: A Content Analysis of Internet Memes. *Indian Journal of Social Research* Vol. 59 (3) (355-367).
- Nowshin, J.E. (2020). *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: C Sociology & Culture*. Vol. 20 Issue 7 Version 1.0 Year
- Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* (2010). Oxford University Press.
- Rouse, M., and Dean, A. (2014). FACEBOOK: More than just a Social Networking Site. Retrieved 5 October 2017 from internet technologies glossary :<http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/facebook>.
- Santaella, L. (1996). *A Cultura Das Mídias*. São Paulo: Experimento.
- Shifman, L. (2007). 'Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Continuity and Change in Internet-Based Comic Texts,' *International Journal of Communication*. Vol. 1, pp. 187-209.