

Framing Masculinity in Memes: Digital Discourses on Gender Norms in Social Media

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Abstract:- Internet memes have become a pervasive cultural phenomenon, shaping and reflecting public discourses on various societal issues, including gender norms. This paper explores how memes on social media construct, challenge, and reinforce conceptions of masculinity, providing insights into their role as digital artifacts in gender discourse. Drawing on qualitative methods, the study analyzes memes from platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, employing thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to masculinity, including "toxic masculinity," "vulnerable masculinity," and "satirical masculinity."

Anchored in theories of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the analysis reveals how memes function as sites of both reinforcement and resistance to traditional masculine ideals. Memes often amplify hegemonic notions of masculinity—characterized by strength, stoicism, and dominance—while simultaneously providing spaces for critique and counter-narratives that challenge these norms. Furthermore, the study highlights the intersectional dimensions of masculinity in memes, examining how race, class, and sexuality intersect with digital portrayals of manhood.

The findings underscore the dual role of memes in perpetuating and subverting gendered expectations, emphasizing their significance as informal tools of socialization and identity formation. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender in digital media, offering recommendations for fostering inclusive and diverse portrayals of masculinity in online spaces.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, internet memes have emerged as a popular cultural phenomenon and a powerful tool for social commentary, often reflecting and shaping public perceptions on various issues, including gender. Memes, with their quick consumption and shareable nature, play a role in framing concepts of masculinity in ways that influence both individual identities and broader societal norms. This study seeks to investigate how masculinity is constructed and represented within memes on social media, examining the ways in which

these digital artifacts portray, challenge, or reinforce traditional gender norms.

Understanding masculinity through memes is critical within the field of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies, as it allows for an analysis of the underlying themes of gender performance, expectations, and stereotypes perpetuated through humor, satire, and relatable content. Traditional masculinity has often been associated with strength, stoicism, and dominance, but social media has facilitated a broadening of this narrative, capturing both reinforcing and subversive portrayals. This paper analyzes these portrayals, focusing on how memes may amplify, undermine, or satirize established notions of masculinity.

By analyzing memes as both reflections and constructs of masculinity, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender performativity and the evolution of masculine norms. It fills a critical gap by offering insights into the complex digital landscapes where contemporary masculinity is discussed and reshaped, engaging with intersectional aspects such as race, sexuality, and socioeconomic background.

Jackson's (2021) in "Gender Norms and digital identity: How Social media memes construct gender." analyzed how social media's shapes gender norms and that memes play a significant role in constructing digital identities. He found out that memes are an important medium of expressing and negotiating gender identities. Through memes, individuals often perform and explore gendered behaviors, sometimes playing with stereotypes or subverting them to create new identities. However, Jackson's paper did not specifically look at the construction of masculinity. This paper goes further into specifically analyzing gender construction of masculinity and subversion through memes in the digital space.

Shifman (2014) in "Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual trouble" explores memes as units of culture that shape and spread collective ideas, he highlights how memes often reflect and amplify societal values, ideologies or sentiments and are used to communicate shared cultural experiences. Shifman suggests that memes have a role to play in shaping public discourses and in influencing social and political conversations while Limor's

(2019) work focuses on their role in shaping societal values. Research is sparse, however, on how these memes influence masculinity, presenting a gap for exploration.

Nguyen(2020) in his paper “ intersectionality in digital media: Gender Representation and social media’s prioritization of femininity and queer identities” notes that Related studies in gender representation on social media highlight intersectional portrayals but often prioritize femininity or queer identities over masculinity. This trend is particularly visible in spaces where gender fluidity, non-binary and queer identities are being celebrated and explored. The study suggests that femininity, particularly in its intersection with queerness, is often more visible and celebrated in digital platforms than traditional masculine representations. Examining how masculinity is constructed in this space will add an intersectional perspective, focusing on race and socioeconomic factors.

This paper addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on the representations of masculinity within memes, analyzing their influence on gender normativity, as well as how diverse masculinities are portrayed.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in a dual theoretical framework comprising Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality, both of which provide critical lenses for analyzing masculinity in digital memes. Butler’s theory emphasizes that gender is not an inherent identity but a repeated performance of socially constructed norms. Memes, as cultural artifacts, often contain these performances, portraying masculinity through visual and textual cues that reinforce, challenge, or parody hegemonic norms. Through the repetitive use of humor, symbolism, and narrative tropes, memes both reflect and shape societal expectations of masculine behavior. Crenshaw’s intersectionality complements this analysis by unpacking how masculinity is constructed at the crossroads of race, class, sexuality, and other axes of identity. Memes often encode these intersections, presenting portrayals of masculinity that resonate differently across different audiences. For instance, a meme may simultaneously project racialized stereotypes while reinforcing class-specific notions of manhood, revealing how digital spaces replicate offline inequalities. Together, these frameworks enable a critical examination of how masculinity is framed, performed, and contested within the meme culture of social media. By analyzing the intersectional dynamics and performative dimensions embedded in memes, the study illuminates how these digital texts contribute to broader discourses on gender norms, power structures, and identity politics in contemporary society. This theoretical approach ensures a nuanced and intersectional analysis, capturing the complexities of masculinity as both a social construct and a digital performance.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study utilizing thematic analysis to uncover dominant patterns and themes related to masculinity in memes. I acknowledge the demand for a critical analysis of memes to determine their thematic preoccupation. The findings and conclusion of this paper are subjective as they are deductive. Memes are drawn from the digital space, having been purposively sampled for this paper. Data was collected from popular social media platforms which include whatsapp statuses, Tiktok, Instagram, facebook and twitter. Memes were sourced using targeted hashtags (e.g., #masculinity, #manlymemes) and specific meme pages, focusing on posts with significant reach and engagement metrics. The critical analysis will be guided by the feminist theory specifically strands identified by Judith Butler’s gender performativity and intersectionality as propounded by Kimberline Crenshaw. To reinforce the arguments in this paper, reference has also been made to works of other scholars whose ideas are relevant to the analysis and discussion. The focus of the paper is on how memes frame masculinity in the digital space.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A significant portion of the memes analyzed in the study reinforce traditional, hegemonic ideals of masculinity, often depicting men as stoic, aggressive and emotionally distant. These memes align with Sociologist R.W Connell’s concept of masculinity which posits that certain forms of masculinity are culturally dominant particularly those that emphasize toughness, dominance and emotional restraint (Connell, 1995) Memes function as vehicles for normalizing gender roles and expectations, framing masculinity as an essentialist trait that must align with socially constructed ideals. One such meme reads, “Men, still on conflicts with a woman, Don’t abuse or insult a woman, that is lowering yourself to her level of miser, she is miserable, looking for a wall to rescue her misery, you are a man with a Framed Wall, her opinion of you is useless.” The above meme infers that men should be emotionally distant from conflict with women, he should stay stoic and avoid responding to women because they are “Emotional and chaotic.” While man is supposed to remain composed and distant from chaos because he has a framed wall to protect him against the misery of women. The meme assumes men as the rational type, who do no wrong while women are considered as irrational and unreasonable. De Beauvoir notes in the second sex that “She is the other; he is the one. The two are regarded as opposites. The distinction between them is so absolute that it is impossible for her to attain the same status as he.” Beauvoir goes ahead to discuss how women are seen as irrational while men being different from them are stoic and rational. According to De Beauvoir the dichotomy that women are emotional and chaotic is socially constructed in order to justify their oppression and subjugation. In the meme above, the construction is that women are emotional , miserable and chaotic is used to justify why women should not be party to

dispute resolution because they will cause more chaos. The men sideline and marginalize women based on this assumption.

Memes may also crusade for toxic masculinity by presenting feminism as the enemy of men. Stoicism in memes is believed to be the one that changes boys into men with Boys being considered as being weak while men are stoic and unemotional. One meme highlights this, it reads, “Stoicism turns a boy into a man, but feminists wants you to stop being stoic. Don’t fall for it. Remember this. Embrace toxic masculinity, it is the only cure to male depression.” In this scheme emotional men are presented as being a let down to masculinity because they are considered as spiteful, weak and abusive while stoic masculine men are seen as protective and loving. The us versus them narrative is created in this because as noted, emotional men are thought to lean towards feminine traits while toxic masculinity and stoic men are seen as the default of the real man. Any behavior that highlights emotions is considered to belong to the other which is the female.

Memes as Sites of Gender Performance: The paper highlights how memes provide a space for performing and negotiating masculinity. Drawing from Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), the study contends that memes allow individuals to both enact and subvert gender norms. For instance, some memes humorously exaggerate traditional masculine behaviors—such as reluctance to express vulnerability or a preference for aggression—which both critique and reassert the expectations placed on men. Memes like "alpha male" or "boys don't cry" can be seen as a critique of the rigidity of gender norms, but they can also perpetuate them. Through satire some of the most held views about masculinity are put to question in a laughable way. Humor in memes often satirizes masculinity, as shown in Boren and Voss’s work (2018), where exaggerated or ironic portrayals encourage viewers to question the validity of these hyper masculine ideals. Through the use of humor and irony, the memes create spaces for critical reflection on gender norm, particularly related to masculinity. Memes therefore also play a subversive role against the traditional portrayal of masculinity by satirizing their depiction. In the Alpha Male memes for example you can find memes such as, “An Alpha male doesn’t ask for help. He just picks up the entire car by himself to change the tire.” Such a meme often features a man trying to carrying a whole car up in order to change the tire. This is likely to hurt him because a car is too heavy. This meme therefore puts to question the idea that men are super strong and they don’t cry out for help. The meme appears to say that as a man, you should always ask for help when you need it and that won’t make you less of a man. Irony and exaggeration such memes often critique the traditional, hyper masculine ideals often promoted in the society.

Race, class, and sexuality intersect with portrayals of masculinity in memes (Crenshaw, 1989). Memes can reflect different intersections of identity, with representations of Black or queer masculinities sometimes being framed in oppositional terms to the mainstream (cisgender, heterosexual) male. The study found that some memes featuring minority masculinities provide spaces for counter-narratives that resist the mainstream gendered discourses, challenging the monolithic portrayals of manhood that dominate popular culture. For example, intersectionality plays out in the way masculinity is portrayed differently for men depending on their race, class or sexual orientation. Black men, Latino men or queer men may be portrayed in ways that critique or exaggerate the expectations placed on them by society- these expectations are often shaped by both their gender and social identity. One such meme features a black man in a high fashion setting with the caption, “Real men wear suits but don’t forget to keep your hustle and grind mentality. The juxtaposition of high fashion with the idea of working class toughness satirizes the tension between mainstream depictions of masculinity and the reality of how men of color navigate masculinity in relation to their class and race. It critiques how black men are often expected to balance toughness with professional success while rejecting the notion that one has to fit into the narrow, mainstream ideal of success.

The intersectionality between sexuality and masculinity may come out in one meme featuring a tough man in the gym portrayed as a traditionally masculine man with the caption, “Real men don’t cry. They fight, they conquer.” With another image showing a well-groomed, fashionable man with a stylish look with the caption “Real men know how to cry. They also wear fabulous outfits and love who they want.” By pointing out that mainstream, heteronormative masculinity often dictates that men should suppress their emotions, while also implying that queer men can still embrace and express their masculinity in ways that don’t conform to these narrow definitions. It subverts the idea that emotional vulnerability is “unmasculine” and shows that masculinity can be multi-faceted even for gay or bisexual men. The meme illustrates how sexuality directly influences the way masculinity is performed. It shows that queer men can still embody masculinity but may choose to challenge traditional norms by expressing vulnerability, emotional depth or embracing fashion in ways that might be dismissed in more rigid, heterosexual masculine spaces.

Memes as Tools of Socialization and Identity Formation: The study argues that memes serve as informal sites of socialization, particularly among younger, digital-native audiences. Following the work of digital theorists such as Sherry Turkle (2011), the paper notes that memes not only reflect existing gender norms but also play a role in shaping new ones.

Memes create communities of practice, where shared understandings of masculinity are negotiated and reinforced. This process helps individuals navigate their identities within digital spaces, often balancing between normative and counter-normative gender performances. For example a meme can feature a group of boys playing video games with the caption, “Real men don’t talk about their feelings. They talk about the game score.” And another meme featuring the same group of boys with one of them setting apart from the rest with the caption, “Real mean don’t talk about their feelings...unless it’s with their friends on Tiktok.”

These memes reflects the idea of memes as tools of socialization and identity formation particularly in the digital age. The first image portrays a common stereotype of masculinity where emotions are suppressed and discussions revolve around traditionally masculine activities like video games, sports, or physical competition. This aligns with existing gender norms that emphasize stoic and emotional aloofness while the second mean subverts the traditional form of masculinity by highlighting vulnerability and openness in masculinity. The question of masculinity as unmoving and static is put to question. Masculinity, in the second meme is brought out as always negotiating new dynamics.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that memes are a double-edged sword in the discourse on masculinity. While they often reinforce traditional, hegemonic notions of manhood, they simultaneously offer opportunities for resistance and the reimagining of gender norms. Memes, as a form of digital culture, thus provide a unique lens through which we can examine the ongoing negotiations of gender in the digital age. As social media continues to evolve, these platforms will likely continue to serve as arenas for both the reinforcement and deconstruction of gendered expectations.

While this study has provided valuable insights into the ways in which memes both reinforce and challenge traditional notions of masculinity, several key areas warrant further exploration to expand the impact of the research. First, a deeper examination of the mechanisms by which memes are created, shared, and modified on different platforms (such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter) would provide a richer understanding of how digital culture contributes to gender normativity. Exploring how different communities interact with and reframe memes across platforms could reveal significant variations in the interpretation of masculinity based on factors like age, geographic location, or social class.

Additionally, future research could expand the theoretical scope of the analysis by incorporating other gender theories or queer theory perspectives, particularly in relation to how non-binary, trans, or queer masculinities are represented and contested within meme culture. Given the increasing

visibility of these identities in digital spaces, examining how memes participate in the construction of masculinities beyond cisgender, heterosexual norms would contribute a more inclusive view of gender performance in the digital age.

It would also be valuable for future studies to explore the impact of memes in shaping real-world behaviors and attitudes toward masculinity. This could be done through surveys or interviews to assess how individuals internalize meme-based portrayals of gender and whether these digital discourses have tangible effects on identity formation and socialization, especially among younger, digital-native generations.

Lastly, researchers could explore the potential of memes as a tool for social change, examining how memes are used to foster more inclusive, diverse, and progressive portrayals of masculinity. Could memes be actively harnessed to challenge harmful, hegemonic gender norms or offer empowering representations of masculinity? Investigating this potential would be important for understanding how digital culture can actively contribute to the transformation of gendered expectations.

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