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# Stereotypes of Women in E-mail Humour

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## Abstract

**This study is concerned with the degree to which stereotypical images of women are (re)produced and reinforced by humourous texts sent and received through electronic mail.**
**Our aim is to collect and analyse a corpus of e-mail jokes on women and to explore this resource with a view to identifying and characterising stereotypes and looking for a common idea in their diversity. We have found that this kind of communication circulates and perpetuates stereotypes of women, and suggest that this may have a powerful impact on shared understandings of womanhood.**

## Background

The development of communications technologies has led to a rapid increase in international interconnection and to the development of new expressions of shared identity and culture. Looking at how culture works, and how the internet works to *make* culture, it is possible to gain insight into how cultural representations emerge and circulate.

## Stereotypes, technology and humour

This research understands culture as socially determined and constructed through everyday actions and interactions (Fiske, 2002), and stereotyping as a process of social categorisation which emerges from the natural human tendency to classify and generalise about groups of people, regardless of the individual characteristics of its members. Hall (1997) explored stereotyping as a representational practice which involves "the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things" (p.15), involving processes of "essentialisation, reductionism, naturalisation, and binary oppositions" (p. 277). In effect, although cultural stereotypes have been defined in different ways (e.g. Pickering, 2001; McGarty, 2002; Stangor, 2000) and need not be confined to negative characterisations of individuals or groups, they nevertheless report simplified meanings and are often used in a negative or prejudicial sense, frequently to justify discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

Taking stereotypes of women in humour as an object of study represents a challenge since the apparently banal nature of this type of text camouflages the complexity of the processes involved and of the stereotypes created and recreated. On the other hand, while the concept of gender humour is nothing new, technological advancements have provided a new and extensive platform for social communication of all kinds, including that which takes as its object globalised images and a globalised sense of the humourous.

Technology, and more precisely the Internet, has allowed both speedy access to information and the possibility for everyone to publish *on-line*. What's more, communication through the World Wide Web is rapid and relies on multi-modal texts that combine written text with visual image (such as comics, videos, Power Point presentations). Authors, especially those communicating through humour, may resort to stereotypes in an effort to reach a wider range of readers, representing and reproducing familiar ideas and images. The humour that comes through our e-mail often fits this description, reproducing commonplace stereotypes which may be secondary or even irrelevant to the communication purpose itself.

## Studying representations of women in e-mail humour

Images of gender in e-mail humour contribute to the *making* of women. Thus a critical understanding of gender representations and their circulation is necessary if we wish to counter the tendency of the electronic media to consolidate and reinforce social stereotyping and discrimination.

The aim of our research project – *Stereotypes of Women in E-mail Humour* – is to identify and explore stereotypes embedded in humour, focusing on the role of the electronic mail as a means of strengthening the humorous intention and of perpetuating stereotypes. The methodological approach was based on the collection and analysis of a corpus of multi-modal, humorous texts on women received through e-mail. Content analysis was used to analyse this corpus, revealing and classifying, in a first instance, the cultural representations encoded in the humorous texts.

Fig 1 Clothing Label

Fig 2 *"Can you spot the problem the blondes are having?"*

Fig 3 "*Mission: going to the C&A to buy some pants"*

Fig 4 *Chances of man winning an argument*

Fig 5 *Which button to press?*

Fig 6 *"Well this just about sums it up really, women are in charge now"*

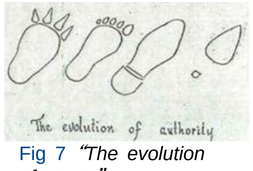


Fig 7 *"The evolution of power"*

## Examples

***Desperate Housewife -*** One of the most prominent stereotypes presents women as housewives. The example of a clothing label (Fig 1), which, in addition to the usual information, adds that washing the dirty linen of the children and husband is part of the duties of motherhood.

***Blondie –*** The representation of blonde women as ignorant or very stupid, on the one hand, and physically attractive, or promiscuous, on the other, is recurrent (e.g. Fig 2). What's more, blonde and desirable is incompatible with capable and intelligent.

***Bad Driver –*** The generalisation of women as inferior gender behind the wheel is commonplace, feeding on shared and gendered preconceptions. There are expected patterns of behaviour associated to each specific stereotype, so, when group members act according to a stereotypical pattern, their behaviour justifies and perpetuates the stereotype.

***Shopaholic –*** This stereotype explores the idea that women like to shop and spend money, spending hours in a shopping centre looking for a bargain, in opposition to the efficient shopping methods employed by men (Fig 3).

***Manipulative*** – Another common image characterises women as liars or manipulators in order to get what they want or convince others to think and act the same way they do. In Fig 4 the goal of women appears to be the entrapment of the opposite sex in marriage.

***Complex and emotional -*** Women are often characterised as highly complex and emotional. The difficulty men have in understanding women is well expressed in Fig. 5, an attempt to represent what goes on in the mind of a woman. The complexity associated with women is also sometimes expressed in terms of satisfaction, or better yet, of dissatisfaction.

***Taking over -*** In many instances of humour, the subject of humour is a group perceived as inferior or that has less power and social prestige. If, on the one hand, stereotypes remain that convey the image of women as obedient and limited to raising her family and to being a good housewife, on the other hand, there are texts exploiting the humorous stereotype of women as someone who has power in several areas, be it social or professional status, financial independence, reasoning ability or awareness of their sexuality. The latter stereotype comes associated with evolution over time, maybe not a real evolution in terms of mentality, but at least an evolution in terms of acquired civil rights and of greater power of decision and initiative. Within this context, the humorous texts focus and reinforce this reversal of power (in terms of sexuality and authority) between men and women.

## Conclusion

Stereotyping may be a natural, human tendency to classify and generalise about many aspects of our lives, but these common and persistent stereotypes, reproduced, translated, sent and resent by e-mail from computer to computer around the globe show little sign of evolution despite the rapidly changing world in which we live. The binary opposition – women/men – in which woman is only viewed through the eyes of man is overwhelming in this type of communication. Although gender stereotypes have been found to vary according to culture and historical context (e.g. Maccoby, 1988), the immediacy and flatness of global communications media appear to trap such representations in a timeless and repetitive cycle
Such humour about women, which comes to us, uninvited and often anonymous, through our e-mail addresses, constitutes a rich resource of images, ideas and ideologies and their study promises to shed light, not only on the transmission and assimilation of gender stereotypes, but on the nature of the communication medium itself.

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