

## The Sociolinguistic Impact of Sexist Hate Speech in Gender Discriminatory Pictorial Memes on Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

*There is a border-line difference between free speech and hate speech. Any racist, violence based, and discriminatory speech is called hate speech. Now a days, internet has converted the concept of distance and social networking sites (SNS) has made it possible to spread any kind of hate-speech. Pictorial memes are a common way of spreading something on SNS like Facebook. Most of the memes which are spreading based on sexist speech that is gender discriminatory. The analysis was based on three-layered communication process. Five pictorial memes along with the comments were selected from SNS platform. The reason of adding comments in the discussion was necessary because it can show the societal impact of gender discrimination which were spread through the memes. For the current study only the linguistic and social impacts of sexist hate speech are analysed in the study without any regional portfolio. The results of the study shows that most of the time female gender is targeted through sexist hate-speech, because male consider themselves superior, experienced, and intelligent, hence they create sexist remarks on the memes..*

**Keywords:** SNS, Sexist, Hate-speech, Facebook, Pictorial memes

**To cite this article:** Hussain, Z., Azim, M, U., Bhatti, A, M, & Gulfam, G, K. (2021). The Sociolinguistic Impact of Sexist Hate Speech in Gender Discriminatory Pictorial Memes on Facebook. Competitive Social Science Research Journal (CSSRJ), 2(4), 212-222.

### INTRODUCTION

Free speech is the right of every individual around the globe to share the ideas and opinions but when it by passes the limits, it becomes the Hate Speech. Hate speech is a subjective term and hard to define as it deals with the emotions which vary from person to person. Sambuli et al. (2013) stated that any expression in the form of words, pictures or videos which provoke either prejudice or violence against any group of people is called hate speech. Further, hateful statement against any person is not a hate speech until it targets that person as the part of an ethnic group or gender or faction (Sambuli et al., 2013). We can say that the speech which instigates discrimination or violence based on racism, gender

and other types of intolerance in society is called hate speech. Such speeches generate prejudice and intolerance which leads to hostility and discrimination (Gagliardone et al., 2015). This leads to the idea that hate speech has one broader connotation and the other is narrow. In broad sense, it promotes racism, religious upheaval, gender discrimination, disability, etc. The narrow sense of the term means particular contexts of instability which promotes violence against some group or faction.

In the last ten years, internet has provided the easy and efficient platform to the world for spreading the hate speech. The Social Networking Services (SNS) on internet contributed in the misuse of social media to share hate speech globally within no time. This massive spread of hate speech is due to easy and quick access, affordability of internet and online anonymity (Cohen-Almagor, 2011). Before the advent of internet, messages and opinions were restricted to privacy and the spread was to a small circle but now there are no bounds and within a short span of time the speech or idea spreads around the world due to snowball sharing of such post, which is generally called “viral”. Moreover, pseudonyms and fake identities of accounts motivate the hate speech (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

Hate speech regarding gender discrimination is a common phenomenon on social media like Facebook and Twitter. The sharing of jokes, pictures, videos, memes, pictorial memes, etc. are posted to either tease, humiliate or make fun of female or male genders. It leads to arousal of negative emotions among the masses and they react onto such post violently. Both the genders pass sarcastic comments to each other and a verbal war leads to blaming, chiding and social turmoil. If the meme is against females, then males either endorse that or applaud and if the meme is against the males then females do the same. This tug of war scenario results in distrust, hate, emotional imbalance, anger, anxiety, fear, etc. among the female and male genders. Most of the time, universal stereotypes against females are shared in the form of pictorial memes and sometimes these are against either male chauvinism or henpecking or disloyalty.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Gender discriminatory sexist hate speech is a common feature of social media which is not taken seriously as it gets on the nerves of the people sometimes. The pictorial memes are a very popular tool to aggravate the gender discrimination among the females and males. These pictorial memes urge the public to comment freely either in favour or against, which leads to online scuffles and exchange of hot words. This study is going to examine the linguistics use in sexist hate speech and its social impact on the genders in general.

### **Research Objectives**

- To examine the linguistics use in generating sexist hate speech on gender discrimination in pictorial memes on Facebook
- To find out the social impact of gender discriminatory sexist hate speech on females and males in society

### **Research Questions**

- How the language is manipulated in generating sexist hate speech on gender discrimination in pictorial memes on Facebook?
- What is the social impact of gender discriminatory sexist hate speech on females and males in the society?

## **Delimitation**

As hate speech is related to race, religion, sexual orientation, immigrants, gender, nationalism, this study deals with only sexist hate speech on gender discrimination. Secondly, only the pictorial memes on Facebook are the source contents which will be analyzed. Thirdly, only five pictorial memes are selected from the Facebook and a few public comments are chosen for the analysis instead of all under each pictorial meme.

## **Literature Review**

The distinction between hate speech and free expression is a confusing and vague phenomenon because the response from the receivers is varied. Sometimes a post appears to be very objectionable but receives light responses and sometimes the post is mild but receives a severe response of public. That is why the true definition of hate speech is not found in any research rather all accept the vagueness of the term. To get a perspective of different sources upon hate speech, we can go through the difficult aspects of the term.

According to Facebook Community Standards:

*“We define hate speech as a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics i.e. race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability. We also provide some protections for immigration status. We define attack as violent or dehumanizing speech, statement of inferiority, or calls for exclusion or segregation.” (Facebook Community Standards)*

The Twitter Hatefull Conduct Policy states,

*“You may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease.” (Hateful Conduct Policy)*

The hateful language which intends to be humiliating, derogatory or insulting towards a group or its members is called hate speech (Davidson et al, 2017). Hate speech provokes hate or violence against a group or groups by pointing out gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physical appearance, etc. Such speech uses different linguistic styles like subtle language use or humour (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018). In the light of this definition, the language use plays an important role in producing hate speech, specifically for satirical, humiliating or derogatory memes or statements. To check either some speech is hate speech or not, we need to evaluate whether it is a factual statement or a sweeping statement or abusive statement or derogatory statement. It also invites us to verify that which type of vocabulary is used, whether some absolute number is used to attack or generalized to all members of the group or gender or nation.

No message is completely comprehensible without the context and hate speech has no exception in terms of this phenomenon. Either the socio-cultural context or the situational context, both define the meaning accordingly. The socio-cultural context primarily and situational context secondarily help to interpret the intended meaning of the speech. Due to the complexity of communication it is rare that intended meaning will reside with interpreted meaning (Gabriella, 2018). This means that hate speech is linked with society and culture and incomprehensible without the context. So, just with the help of linguistic

analysis hate speech cannot be analyzed rather it is attached with linguistic perspective as well as some functional dimension of communication (Gabriella, 2018).

In the last fifty years, the researches in applied linguistics introduced many models and analytical frameworks with reference to sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, conversation analysis, etc. but hate speech or hate communication is not addressed. That is why Cozien (2015) said, “An accurate and detailed understanding of the construction of racial stereotypes and implicit biases in society demands a multidisciplinary approach to research.” Any type of communication including hate communication or hate speech is the outcome of power relations, ideologies and some stereotypes. The words remain the primary source of hate speech but until the socio-cultural aspect is not attached with them, the intended meaning are compromised. As the word “negro” is derogatory in Europe and America but if a black singer uses this word in a song it will not be offensive for the black community there. Niehr (2015) says,

*“We assume that there is no good, reasonable, bad or inappropriate language par excellence. This must be determined only on the basis of the topic, the situation and the public, and indeed at all linguistic levels.”*

A step further in the domain of hate speech is sexist hate speech, which denotes that either of the gender is offended or attacked or denounced. This term “sexist hate speech” is also mentioned as “sexualized hate speech”, “cybersexism”, or “cyber gender harassment”. Around the world females are the primary targets of sexist hate speech and the basic objective is to humiliate and objectify them, to terrify them, making them vulnerable and even to destroy their reputation. Through this type of social shaming they are portrayed as some low standard creature or a human being (Levmore & Martha, 2012). Gender based hate speech develops fear and “creates, reinforces and perpetuates gender hierarchy in public places” (Nielsen, 2014). The sexist hate speech based on gender discrimination has three basic components i.e. the victims are mostly females and males are less targeted, the harassment is aimed at specific females, and the abusive language is used to target the gender in degrading and sexually threatening ways (Citron, 2009).

## **Methodology**

The study in hand is related to qualitative paradigm in which the pictorial memes were analyzed with reference to the linguistics and socio-cultural aspects of hate speech in gender discrimination. The content data were the pictorial memes shared on Facebook by the people and selected through purposive sampling as only those pictorial memes were analyzed which depicted sexist hate speech to an extreme. Five pictorial memes along with the comments of the public were analyzed descriptively. These pictorial memes were international and the comments onto them were from different people around the world. All five pictorial memes are having the Hollywood female film stars and the memes are either the stereotypes or derogatory or humiliating.

## **Method of Analysis**

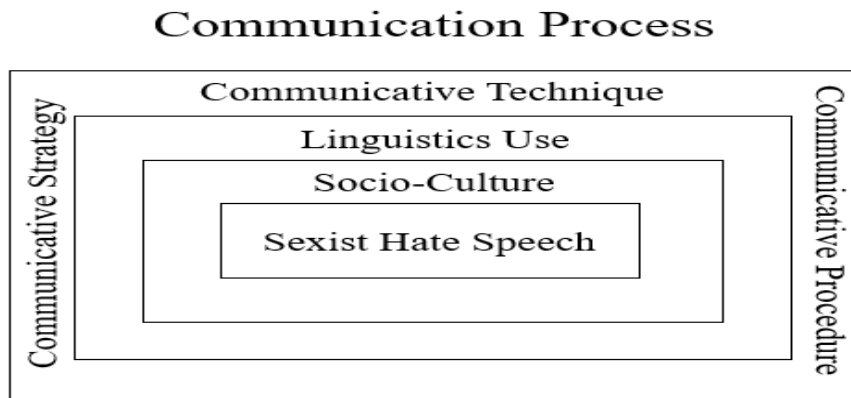
The analysis was done under a communication process (Gabriella, 2018) which was based on three components, which are as followed:

- **Communication Technique** means what is the form of the post e.g. a sentence, a gaze, a picture, an image, a symbol, a gesture, etc.

- **Communication Procedure** means when, where and how the technique is used in terms of context and sequence
- **Communication Strategy** means why the technique is used i.e. what is the method of achieving the purpose of communication

Further the linguistics use in the pictorial memes will be analyzed that how the language is used to generate sexist hate speech and through the comments of the public, socio-cultural impact of such pictorial memes will be evaluated that how these pictorial memes aggravate the gender discrimination and disturb the social set up.

### Conceptual Framework



### Content Analysis

The analysis is based on pictorial meme as well as the public comments so that the linguistics use in the pictorial meme and the social impact of the pictorial meme can be examined. All of the pictorial memes are the suitable examples of sexist hate speech which provoke gender discrimination around the world. The comments are vital to analyze as those reflect the social and cultural bent of minds of females and males regarding gender discrimination among all of us.

### Pictorial Meme 1

Which is the most dangerous animal in the world?

A smiling women sitting in silence

**Hoan Thanh Truong** I'm a woman but I still don't understand what they are thinking in their minds.  
Jan 30 at 21:23 • Like • 1 • Reply

**Amit Bijay Biswal** Then What About Brain.  
Feb 06 at 18:51 • Like • 1 • Reply

**Muzeeb Sayyed** They will do it while doing CT SCAN  
Feb 06 at 18:34 • Like • 3 • Reply

**Marian Valverde** Kenzye Cuadra I'm not one of those, I'm a bitch... And I know it  
Feb 07 at 07:58 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Tahmid KH** save yourself who is understanding this.. very few left  
Feb 06 at 15:30 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Madiha Nour El-Houda Gam** I don't get why everyone always assume that the guy is the jerk, girls Can be real bitches too.  
Feb 06 at 18:04 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Jay-b Evale Cab** But that's very impossible to find that kind of human being.  
Feb 06 at 18:22 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Stanley Wong** Or you can do what she wants, and then get her a brew, or a small gift that she wants.  
Jan 30 at 14:37 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Crestel Cullen** Hahahaha...it's because women wants men to read their minds...  
Jan 31 at 06:50 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Nagsen Khotkar** Ha ha ha true  
Dec 22 at 15:47 • Like • 1 • Reply

**Kohei Kurihara** I disagree because I think that both genders are treated equally and they still should be treated equally  
Jan 22 at 09:17 • Like • 0 • Reply

**Danyal Rashid Hunny Bee** don't you agree? ??  
Dec 22 at 05:19 • Like • 1 • Reply

The communicative techniques of this post is based on an image and two sentences, one is the question form and the other is the supposed answer. The communicative procedure is the image of some Hollywood movie scene in which a female film star is looking at something in a quiet way. The communicative strategy is, the image is attached with the question, which has animalizing, humiliating and derogatory symbolism “the most dangerous animal”. The quiet woman is denoting that she is the most dangerous animal and the males have to save their souls, which makes this post sexist hate speech.

The linguistics use is very disturbing as the phrase in the question “the most dangerous animal” is depicting that females are not at the level of human being rather they are the animals. In the answer, the phrase “smiling women” represents sarcasm that if a woman is silent and she is smiling then beware of her as she can harm anybody, specifically, the male members of the society.

The post is based on a stereotype that if a woman is silent then she is plotting against a man. The comments on this pictorial meme are mixed in nature. Some females are making fun of feminine nature and some are showing aggression. Like one girl said, “*I am not one of those, I’m a bitch...and I know it.*” Similar to that a girl said, “*Why everyone assumes that the guy is the jerk, girls can be real bitches too.*” Out of such comments the male also become daring and the females become depressed because their own gender is approving such sexist hate speech. One male said, “*Save yourself who is understanding this.... very few left*” and another commented, “*Ha ha ha true*”. This reflects the poignancy of males that they are affirming that females are dangerous animals, which is very perturbing for the female gender.

## Pictorial Meme 2



The communicative techniques of this post is based on an image and one sentence, which is broken into two phrases. The communicative procedure is that the image is of a Hollywood female film star who is posing towards her left side. The communicative strategy is, the image is attached with the statement, which has satire, victimization and denigration. It is suggested that whatsoever is the mood of a woman or even she is dead, never get into an argument with her because in all situations it is impossible to convince any woman.

The linguistics use is suggestive and advising from the male gender. The first word “never” suggests that there is no chance of it, which means it is a kind of universal truth. In the second phrase after four types of moods and then there is a scathing satire that even if the females are breathing which means you are sure they are not dead, do not argue with them. In other words, you cannot convince any alive woman. The four moods suggest that whatever the mood of a woman is, she will not be convinced, so, do not argue with her.

On this pictorial meme, males are enjoying and passing sexist comments. One said, “Do it with pre-determined mind that you are wrong and she is right. In addition, you have to apologize after the argument.” The other goes a step ahead and says, “To be on the safer side, do not try to argue even if she is not breathing, who knows.....” A male responded “Generalization against women”. A couple of females retaliate and one of them said directly, “Why am I still surprised every time you share a sexist joke” and the other exclaimed “What a research on women”. Some other guys are laughing and acknowledging the post. Through the post, females are denigrated and victimized, and the males approved the meme by their sexist hate speech as well.

### Pictorial Meme 3



The communicative techniques of this post is based on an image and two sentence. The communicative procedure is that the image is of a Hollywood film scene and the hero and heroine are thinking about something and not looking at each other. The communicative strategy is, the image is attached with the statement, which has derogation, victimization and condemnation. It is depicted that the quietness of both, female and the male, has different meanings. If a male is silent then he is thinking but if a female is silent she is not a sensible person.

The linguistic use is parallel statements, out which one is in favour of males and the other is a sexist hate speech against the female gender. The first sentence is having a positive attribute of males but in the second sentence there is a derogatory term “mad” is used for the females. This specific word has a lot of negativity in it and the females are offended severely.

As compare to previous pictorial memes, this one got a strong reaction from the females. All the females commented against and all the males commented in favour of this pictorial meme. Males comments are “*In Japan the word woman has the same character than insane*”, “*Girls are always mad now she is quiet or unquiet it doesn’t matter*”, “*Moral of the story? Make her mad so you could think in peace*”, and “*About women, it is very difficult to say which is mad*”. This is clear from the males’ comments that this post ignited their negative emotions and very openly they are talking ill about the females. On the other hand, the females’ comments are less in number. One said, “*What u mean...all women r talkative nd if they r not then all r mad...its wrong huuuhh*”. Another female did a counter attack and said, “*If a quiet man is thinking then he must be mad while talking*”. The last comment suggests that if one gender generates a sexist hate speech then other gender will do the same which leads to chaos in society.

#### Pictorial Meme 4



The communicative techniques of this post is based on an image and three sentences. The communicative procedure is that the image is of a Hollywood female film star who is posing towards her left side. The communicative strategy is, the image is attached with the statement, which has satire and irony. It is suggested that pay attention to the females’ conversation and if being males you have said something objectionable and the female says “what” then change your stance, otherwise you have to face some bitter circumstances.

In the first sentence the word “woman” points out that it is against them. In the second sentence there is explanation and in the last sentence there is a proposition. From the language of the meme, it denotes that females are pertinent about the selection of topic or the vocabulary in conversation, whereas the males are careless. That is why females use the interrogation for suggesting the males to rephrase their speech.

From the socio-cultural perspective, this pictorial meme is sexist hate speech for both the genders. On one hand, it is against male gender that they have to be careful while talking to females otherwise they will face anger or some other negative reaction from the female. One female commented, “*So true...I’ve done it more than a million times*”. Another said, “*And of course sometimes it means just shut up your mouth*”. The males’ comments are either making fun of females or justify in their own favour. Like one said, “*When you answer exactly the same way cause you are right and she is wrong*”. Another said,



“Actually she’s giving a chance to say sorry”. One male has given threatening and offensive statement like, “When a man says “what”, it doesn’t mean he haven’t heard you...He is just giving an opportunity to save yourself from his slap”. So, from the comments it is evident that this pictorial meme is sexist hate speech against both genders.

### Pictorial Meme 5



The communicative techniques of this post is based on an image and two sentence. The communicative procedure is that the image is of a Hollywood film scene and the hero and heroine are having an argument. The female is walking away in irritation and anger and in the background the male is confused about the scenario. The communicative strategy is, the image is attached with the statement, which has satire. It is depicted that the females get angry because of the males whereas males are always unaware of their mistake. It suggests the fickleness of females that they always blame the males for their wrong doings which infuriate the females.

From the language point of view, firstly, this meme is parallel to a famous maxim that “behind every successful man there is a woman”. Secondly, there is the use of dramatic irony that the male is responsible but he has done nothing wrong and still he is blamed.

From the socio-cultural perspective, it is considered that females never take the responsibility of the wrong things and blame the males. Satirically it is mentioned that females are clever and the males are innocent. The mixed opinion of both the genders clarifies that there is no consensus and the blame game is on. One female commented, “And that was the exact reason why she is so mad at him in the 1<sup>st</sup> place for not realizing things he has done wrong”. The other female comments are, “They always have the idea what they did wrong but prefer to behave as if they were idiots”, “Because they are stupid”, “They know but acting like idiots”, and “They know but they just don’t care about it”. All the males are in favour of the meme as they exonerate the male gender from any wrongdoing and commented like, “Agree”, “That’s true”, “Uhhh yeaaaa”, and “because she starts saying things had happens 10 years ago”. The reaction of the females ensures that it is a sexist hate speech against the female gender.

## **Discussion**

From the above analyzed pictorial memes based on sexist hate speech in gender discrimination, it was found out that mostly the female gender was the victim and the males were the trouble and disturbance mongers. The language of all the pictorial memes was quite offensive and belittled. One big reason of such sexist hate speech is due to easy and quick access, affordability of internet and online anonymity (Cohen-Almagor, 2011). Those people who share such pictorial memes or other posts like these have no check on them. There are fake and pseudonyms accounts in a great number, which are out of reach of law most of the times (Gagliardone et al., 2015), (Cohen-Almagor, 2011).

As far as the comments of the females and males, it was evident that both the genders reacted to such posts according to their sensibility, as females retaliate and denounce such sexist comments on them and the males make fun of the females to prove such sexist hate speech justified and universal. It goes without saying that such speeches generate prejudice and intolerance which leads to hostility and discrimination (Gagliardone et al., 2015).

The language use was subtle and sarcastic in such sexist hate speech pictorial memes and derogatory, humiliating, poignant statements were passed against females by using the words like “most dangerous animal” or “mad”. Mostly the second part of the meme was the punch line of discrimination and derogation (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018). To create the worst impact of the pictorial memes, exaggeration and sweeping statements were produced and the whole female gender is defamed rather tortured. For example, in pictorial meme 1 “the most dangerous animal”, in pictorial meme 2 “emotional, happy, sad, angry or breathing”, in pictorial meme 3 “a quite woman is usually mad” and in pictorial meme 4 “behind every angry woman stands a man”. All these examples were enough to aggravate the gender discrimination as these target the female genders’ feelings and emotions and make them fearful and depressed (Citron, 2009). Such phrases belittle the stature of females as they are performing their roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, colleagues, etc. in the best possible way and making the lives of the males comfortable. Through this type of social shaming, the females are portrayed as some low standard creature or a human being (Levmore & Martha, 2012).

Throughout the history, the females are degraded in male dominant society and given a second-grade citizenship in society. They are considered less practical and less competent as compare to males. By such sexist hate speech on Facebook, the males reiterate the notion of frailty, stubbornness, ill mentality, etc. and through such gender discriminatory sexist hate speech develops fear and “creates, reinforces and perpetuates gender hierarchy in public places” (Nielsen, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The sexist hate speech related to gender discrimination is a common phenomenon on Facebook through different pages and profiles. Primarily, the female gender is the victim of sexist hate speech because of having less authority and influence on males. Males prove themselves experienced, sharp, intelligent, and strong and they either humiliate or satirize the females due to their habits, reactions, ideologies, superstitions, and different nature. Such sexist hate speech definitely creates disturbance and upheaval in society and the balance is compromised. Mostly, the husband and wife relationship is targeted and ironically the role of mother or sister or daughter is not discussed within this framework.

Males consider themselves superior over the females and take an undue advantage over them. On the other hand, females also shun off their grudge and frustration in their comments on sexist hate speech pictorial memes and resultantly the animosity and hostility soars high. Both the genders forget that the life is incomplete without each other and cooperation and relationship is the base of a society. This sexist hate speech should be checked conscientiously to mar the effects of gender discrimination.

The limitation of the study is, it deals with the linguistics and social impacts of pictorial memes of sexist hate speech against female gender around the world. The future researches may focus the regional frequency or impact of such sexist hate speech whether some specific region is promoting gender discrimination more than the other regions or not.

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