

# Have You Heard The One? Gender, E-mail, and Jokes

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## Abstract

This paper surveys the communications process in the context of e-mail. It suggests that we, as receivers, are routinely compromised via humour to accept and reinforce negative gender stereotypes—both male and female—thus undermining the potential for partnership roles between those we define as “female” and those we define as “male.”

*Keywords:* communications, gender stereotypes.

## 1 Introduction

Have you noticed that blonde jokes are about blonde women? Have you wondered about the ratio of jokes which target women, as opposed to men? Have you ever *really* thought about the role played by gendered communications in undermining the potential for partnership roles between men and women? This paper examines the deeper gender dialogue that exists in topical humour—and especially the effects of e-mail as a communications channel.

Begun as a simple classroom exercise for a Women’s Studies paper (“Images of Women”), this paper grew into a project which revealed some surprising (or maybe, not so surprising) patterns of communications behaviours which reinforce culturally negative images of women while denying culturally negative images of men (Gamble and Gamble, 2003). In other words, contemporary humour reveals itself as a battleground in the “war of the sexes” which allows for the re-entrenchment of a blatantly masculinist cultural agenda. As Francois Tremblay (2004) states, humour is “an ‘acceptable way’ of saying those things that everybody thinks but cannot say. There is also a special case where no direct emotion is expressed, but humour is used more as a hostility transfer mechanism.” What cannot be said in public discourse is freely and openly declaimed in the form of jokes; thus, gendered humour provides an example of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, that the language we use shapes our lives (Gamble & Gamble, 2003). Because jokes generate laughter, and laughter must be shared—the end result it that we reinforce with each other concepts which we have learned to reject (Cardoso 2004).

## 2 Methodology

The methodologies for drawing my conclusions were content analysis and textual interpretation based in critical theory (Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin, primarily). A close reading of the verbal joke, “Finding hard to be politically correct . . . not anymore!” reveals a gender-based pattern of terminologies which can be sorted into eight image categories, each with positive/negative/multi-valent components relating to male and female subjects. The collection of jokes that used was the result of accidental sampling during the six-months between June and December, 2004.

## 3 E-mail Communications

To become aware of the impact of e-mail jokes, you have to come to grips, first of all, with the impact of e-mail communication. The mailing lists attached to the samples I received had as many as 20 recipients to whom the message has been sent. Doing the *simple* arithmetic, this means that for those 23 e-mails conveying jokes, as many as 460 people per week are being influenced by the content. And these only represent what I receive. Some of the e-mail distribution lists are 100% in-house—sent only to members of the institution where I work. Others are far more global—including one from the American singer, Johnny Tillotson. To take the numbers further: if each of the mailing list recipients from this e-mail distribution list with 20 recipients sends the e-mail to only 10 people, then 2000 readers, male and female, have been influenced by the humour.

The use of e-mail as the communications channel, is in itself, a problematic issue when used to convey humour. As I mentioned earlier, jokes generate laughter, and laughter must be shared. As researched by Shammi, and Stuss (1999) “Humour plays a powerful and unique role in human life, with wide ranging effects on many aspects of functioning. Humour is a basic ingredient of binding in society; it provides an effective means of communicating a wide range of ideas, feelings, and opinions (Browell and Gardner, 1988). It is such a key element in the human behavioural repertoire that it is considered to be a defining human attribute (Namehow, 1986). So, what do you do with a good e-mail joke? You pass it on! The nature of humour is to be shared in the context of defining community and identity; hence, the significance of the exponential reinforcement of the images conveyed by the joke.

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FINDING IT HARD TO BE POLITICALLY CORRECT  
... NOT ANYMORE!

**How to speak about Women and be politically correct:**

1. She is not a BABE or a CHICK – She is a BREASTED CITIZEN
2. She is not EASY—She is HORIZONTALLY ACCESSIBLE.
3. She is not BLONDE—She is a DETOUR OFF THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY
4. She has not BEEN Around –She is a PREVIOUSLY ENJOYED COMPANION
5. She is not an AIRHEAD – SHE is REALITY IMPAIRED
6. She does not get DRUNK or TIPSY—She is CHEMICALLY INCONVENIENCED
7. She is not HORNY – She is SEXUALLY FOCUSED
8. She does not have BREAST IMPLANTS –She is MEDICALLY ENHANCED
9. She does not NAG YOU – She is VERBALLY REPTITIVE
10. She is not a SLUT – She is SEXUALLY EXTROVERTED.
11. She does not have PREMIER LEAGUE HOOTERS – She is PECTORALLY SUPERIOR.
12. She is not a TWO-BIT SLAPPER – She is a LOW-COST SERVICE PROVIDER

**How to speak about Men and be politically correct:**

1. He does not have a BEER GUT – He has developed a LIQUID STORAGE CAPACITY
2. He is not a BAD DANCER – He is OVERLY CAUCASIAN
3. He does not GET LOST – HE INVESTIGATES ALTERNATIVE DESTINATIONS
4. He is not BALDING – He has FOLLICLE REGRESSION
5. He is not a CRADLE SNATCHER – He is GENERATIONALLY DIFFERENTIAL
6. He does not get FALLING DOWN DRUNK – He becomes ACCIDENTALLY HORIZONTAL.
7. He does not act like a TOTAL ASS – He develops RECTAL CRANIAL INVERSION
8. He is not a MALE CHAUVINIST PIG -- He has SWINE EMPATHY
9. He is not AFRAID OF COMMITMENT -- He is MONOGAMOUSLY CHALLENGED
10. He is not a WANKER -- He is an OWNER-OPERATOR.

E-mail, however, has a subtly dangerous quality: it allows no negotiation of the communications experience vis-à-vis the receiver. In face-to-face communications, the receiver can be provided with feedforward messaging which allows both joke-teller and potential joke-recipient to secure the boundaries of acceptability for the humour. For example, I have a great joke about nuns, so I say “Have you heard the one about the nun who . . . Oh, is anybody Catholic?” While often a formality, this provides the potential receiver with the opportunity to decline to participate. Further, the joke-teller has the opportunity to contextualize him or herself within negotiable boundaries. (“It’s ok, I’m Catholic, myself”). The boundaries of negotiation set within the following context:

- The receiver’s position relative to the topic—are you a member of the sub-group that is about to make the butt of the joke? Will it *offend* you because you are a member of the sub-group, or, will you *appreciate* the humour *because* you are a member of the sub-group?
- The teller’s position relative to the topic—“As a member of the subgroup, I find no offence in it; rather, the humour derives from my place inside the sub-group.”

Whether the joke is told and how it is received are thus mitigated by the presence of the feedforward messaging which provides both the opportunity for choice and forms the space for the negotiation of boundaries. The feedforward messaging, then, re-frames the joke-telling/joke-receiving event by surrounding it with the opportunity to de-select oneself from participation.

In addition to feedforward messaging, non-verbal signals can contextualize the delivery of a joke. These can be read and interpreted to provide the teller with signals indicating the likely reception by her/his recipient. Lack of eye contact, distancing, closed body postures can signal that the listener is not going to be receptive, thus the communication can be aborted.

### 3.1 Joke Analysis

The initial joke that launched this project is given in Figure 1.

Let’s first look at the ratio of female to male images and the nature of those images:

- a) There are 12 jokes about women (55%); 10 about men (45%). In itself, this may seem inconsequential; however, there is no apparent rationale for the difference. There could have been an even 10 of each. But the reality is that the author of the lists included more images of women than men.
- b) The images fall into 8 categories: physical attributes, dismemberment, psychological/intellectual, interpersonal behaviour, interpersonal behaviour, social behaviour, sexual behaviour, animal comparisons, diminutives/denigrations (complete analysis in Table 1).

Figure 1: Example emailed joke.

Table 1: Content analysis of sample emailed joke (Fig 1)

Image Category	Males	Females
Physical Attributes	<p><b>4--Negative:</b> beer gut , balding , total ass, rectal/cranial inversion</p> <p><b>2--Positive:</b> follicle regression , liquid storage capacity</p>	<p><b>7 --Negative:</b> breasted (multi-valent; dismemberment image), airhead (lacking a brain), blonde (mulit-valent: hair colour and low intelligence), breast, medically enhanced (implies natural state not good enough (breasts),) hooters,</p>
Dismemberment	<p><b>1--Negative:</b> Ass (multi-valent: buttocks, implied in “rectal-cranial inversion”)</p>	<p><b>4--Negative:</b> Breasted, hooters, airhead, blonde (hair, only)</p> <p><b>1--Positive:</b> pectorally superior(breasts)</p>
Psychological/Intellectual	0	<p><b>4--Negative--Airhead,</b> blonde (multi-valent-hair colour and low intelligence), detour off the info highway, reality impaired,</p>
Interpersonal Behaviour	<p><b>2--Negative:</b> Afraid of commitment, Male Chauvinist Pig,</p> <p><b>1--Positive:</b> monogamously challenged (removes responsibility)</p>	<p><b>2--Negative:</b> Nag you, verbally repetitive, (no removal of responsibility)</p>
Social Behaviour	<p><b>3--Negative:</b> Gets lost, bad dancer, falling down drunk</p> <p><b>1--Positive:</b> investigates alternative destinations, overly caucasian (oxymoronic with implications of racism; removes responsibility)</p> <p>accidentally horizontal (removes responsibility)</p>	<p><b>3--Negative:</b> Drunk, Tipsy,</p> <p><b>1--Positive:</b> Chemically inconvenienced</p>
Sexual Behaviour	<p><b>3--Negative:</b> Cradle snatcher, Generationally Differential (redeems implied deviance in earlier term); Wanker (masturbator)</p> <p><b>1 Positive:</b> Owner-operator (contrast this to “horizontally accessible” and “low-cost service provider”)</p>	<p><b>7--Negative:</b> Easy, Horizontally Accessible (access is assumed), Been Around, Previously Enjoyed Companion (i.e. previously owned vehicle), Horny (aggressive masculine descriptor for sexually aroused which must be denied to the female), Sexually Focused (she blocking out distractions to anything but the sexual encounter), Slut Two-bit Slapper; Low-cost service provider (sex is a service which should be provided)</p> <p><b>1--Positive:</b> Sexually Extroverted (sexual behaviour part of her psychological make up, so responsibility is removed),</p>
Animal comparisons	<p><b>3--Negative:</b> Ass (multi-valent—donkey, stubborn) Pig (dirty, mean, brutish), Swine empathy (identifying with the brutish in a sympathetic way.)</p>	<p><b>3--Negative:</b> Chick, Slut (multi-valent: can mean bitch dog), Nag</p>
Diminutives/denigrations		<p><b>1--Negative:</b> Babe (immature as well as a physical evaluation)</p>

There are nearly twice as many negative images of females as there are negative male images (31:16). The trend is similar for positive images, with five positive male images and three positive female images.

Multi-valent images—that is images convey multiple meanings simultaneously are twice as frequent for females as they are males. An explanation for this multi-valence of image may be found in Sara Halparin’s explanation in the introduction to her book, in *Look at My Ugly Face* (1995). She states that

*Both beauty and ugliness are problematic for us (women). We are endangered, raised on pedestals, and trivialized for being beautiful; on the other hand, we are insulted, ignored, and shunned for being ugly. White women are expected to follow a standard of white beauty that implies purity and chastity, whether or not we are interested in those qualities. Women of colour are judged according to white standards of beauty. Lesbians are judged by heterosexual standards of femininity. All women, as we age, must come to terms with a universal standard of youthful beauty, in a world that increasingly worships youth and denigrates age. (7)*

Thus the ubiquitous blonde resonates within our cultural framework as the “blonde bombshell,” “sex kitten,” “dumb blonde,” “Blessed Virgin,” and “Holy angel”—all at the same time. In addition, our concept of women’s behaviour is more likely to be multi-valent-- the goddess, Kali, is creator and destroyer; Medusa, who defied the goddesses with her beauty, now turns men to stone with her terrifying head of snakes; the Eve the Mother of All is also Eve, the Mother of Death. The most dramatic contemporary image of female multi-valence is Galadriel in the *LOTR, Fellowship of the Ring*. Her regal, yet fragile, blonde fairy queen character explodes into terrifying darkness and power when confronted with the power of the One Ring. As Camille Paglia (1991) observes, “Nature is a Darwinian spectacle of the eaters and the eaten. . . . Man (males) justifiably fears being devoured by women, who is nature’s proxy . . . .Man fears that his strength will be taken from him by a woman, dreads becoming infected with her femininity, and then proving himself a weakling.”

#### 4 Visual imagery

Now, let’s look at some of the “specimens” and see what we are laughing at.



Figure 2: Biratan’s tearful crocodile

In Figure 2, the tearful crocodile mourns and remembers both mother and father who ended their lives as a handbag and pair of shoes, respectively. In choosing the images, the cartoonist could have selected luggage, belts, or other items made from crocodile leather; however, the objects selected are clearly gender-specific. But what do they communicate to the viewer? First, the position in the “family album” is significant. The father-as-shoes image is placed in the masculine position of power: higher than the accompanying mother image (handbag), and on the right. The female/mother image is placed lower and on the left. Our Roman/Judeo-Christian heritage privileges right over left and high over low. In terms of temporal power, people “rise to the top” or are “cast down.” In terms of right/left, the Bible tells us that God places those he favours on his “right hand” and those he condemns on his left. Our language, too, expresses a similar relationship between left and right: the word “sinister” derives from the Latin “sinistre,” the word for “left”; “right” means “correct” as well as “entitled to.” Thus, placement in terms of right/left and high/low reinforces the position of male socio-cultural privilege while simultaneously reinforcing female debasement and disempowerment.

The objects which “mother” and “father” crocodile have been transformed into are also redolent with cultural significance. Initially, we see shoes as signifying the male parent, with a handbag signifying the female parent. This connection of gendered objects to gendered parents reinforces the cultural assumptions which place the male in the public sphere while restricting the female to the private sphere. Shoes take the male to marketplace where, through active participation, wealth and power are created by the energy and efforts of the male. The handbag, by contrast, reawakens one of the oldest fears characterizing our gendered culture: that the rapacious sexual appetite of the female consumes the energy and essence of the male.

By signifying the female’s passive consumption, the handbag reinforces the image of the female who devours the powers of the male. Further, shoes are a “public” image: there are no secrets with shoes—everyone knows what is inside them. Like the phallus, they “out there”—sometimes at risk, but always visible, always simply and straightforwardly what they are. By contrast, the handbag—like the vagina and womb—is a dark and private place, the realm of secrets and mysteries. (What, exactly, *does* the Queen carry in her handbag?) No one knows what is in a woman’s handbag (sometimes, even the woman isn’t sure)—and no one may look inside without the woman’s permission. Thus, while stepping on a person’s shoes can be either an accident or act of aggression, delving into a woman’s handbag is a violation.

The Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian foundations of Western European have as a cornerstone the belief the male has the right of ownership over the bodies and fertility of the female. Our past reveals numerous objective representations of this belief: chaperones, chastity belts, bridal veils, and wedding rings (until the

20<sup>th</sup> century, worn only by the woman). Even our Western practice of gendered toilet facilities probably has less to do with personal privacy than it does with protecting undressed and therefore accessible females from being in close proximity to other males.

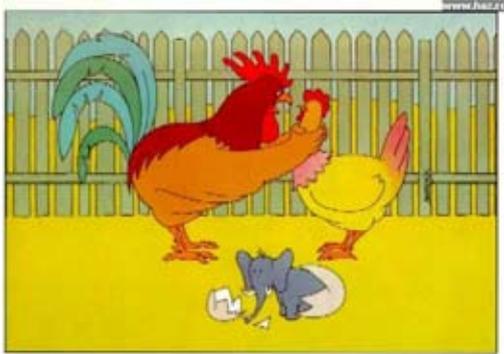


Figure 3: Trouble in the Coop

Figure 3 reflects a collection of problematic images derived from the ingrained cultural doctrine of male ownership of the female: the “justifiable” violence of male toward an unfaithful female, the imprisonment of the female within a bounded space, the male’s right to control female fertility, and male rights of ownership vis-à-vis the product of female fertility. This figure reflects a frightening scenario: the hen has been playing fast and loose with a partner who was obviously *not* the rooster—and the product of her activities proclaims her infidelity. Now, she must pay. In a world where honour killings are a real and present danger to millions of the planet’s women, this image is far from amusing. Yet, we laugh—and through our laughter, we become accomplices. But behind the laughter is serious unease, for within the image we recognize the reality of the many forms violence perpetrated on women.

The image of the rooster strangling the hen confronts us with the physical attacks, murders and mutilations of women by men. The pointed phallic imagery of the fence denotes yet another form of violence: the forcible segregation and separation of women from the mainstream of human activities through confinement to harems, women’s galleries, back rows, lower-paying jobs and the home.

Tragically, the product of the female’s fertility also becomes the victim of violence. The three characters in the cartoon occupy a two-way line of sight: the rooster is looking his hen and the hen, at the rooster; the baby elephant/chick, however, looks out at the world. In a culture which gave rise to complex inheritance laws based on “legitimate” paternity, the social and economic future of the “bastard” is an uncertain one—and the future of a bastard who is physiologically differentiated from her/his father is even more problematic. And still the hatchling looks at us . . . and still, we laugh.

The moral of the stories in Figures 4-6 is “Men are not to blame for their follies—women are.” In fact, women are deadly. This concept of “she made me do it,” firmly entrenched in Western culture and enthusiastically

supported by Biblical examples beginning with Eve, is visually represented by the photo-jokes in Figures 4-6.



Figure 4: Lethal Women: By the Sea



Figure 5 : Lethal Women: The barbershop



Figure 6: Lethal Women: Lawn mower

In Genesis, Eve is convinced by the Serpent (a creature revered in ancient Near-Eastern and European goddess religions as the symbol of wisdom and eternal life (Condren, 1989)) accepts and consumes the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. In her new enlightened state, she offers the fruit to Adam. Note: no one forced the fruit down Adam’s throat! In reality, he could have resisted—but he doesn’t. Of his own free will, he transgresses the one and only commandment given to him by God. But later, when God walks in the garden at evening and encounters Adam and Eve now wearing aprons of fig leaves to hid their nakedness (the image of their new self-awareness), he asks them why they are so attired—and Adam shifts the blame for his sin to Eve. Woman-as-alibi is born.

Women, however, are not merely a threat to the health and safety of a man—they cause men to do dastardly things to other men. The French have a word for it: “cherchez la femme.” In other words, find the woman and you will find the root of the problem. The landscape of Western literature is littered with the tragic hulks of happy male-to-male relationships which were wrecked by A Woman: it was Helen’s fault that Paris betrayed Menelaus and started the Trojan War; it was Guinevere’s fault that Lancelot betrayed Arthur and destroyed Camelot; it was Lady Macbeth’s fault that Macbeth murdered Duncan and caused death and destruction across the kingdom. And our enlightened position in the 20<sup>th</sup> century hasn’t had much effect, for after all, it was Wallis Simpson’s fault that King Edward VIII abdicated the throne and sent shockwaves throughout the British Empire.

In Figures 4-6, all it takes to create disaster is the presence of a beautiful—and sexually fetishized—woman. As early as the Babylonian Talmud, we learn that the glimpse of “merely a handbreadth” of a woman’s bare skin—even the sight of her little finger is enough to divert a man from his proper tasks (Eilberg-Schwartz & Doniger, 1995). Exercising their cultural prerogative of the Gaze, the men in the photos are seduced into to danger—perhaps, even death!—by the passive Object of their Gaze, the female. The women’s images feature poses which overdetermine sexual sites: buttocks, hips, and breasts. In two photographs, the women’s hair is wild and flowing, a traditional image suggesting uncontrolled sexuality (Levine in Eilberg-Schwartz & Doniger, 1995) The third image shows a woman with her hair bound suggesting controlled sexuality, but her body profile with its clearly defined waist and exaggerated hips and buttocks, denies this control and becomes even more tantalizing. The victims of these (unknowing) temptresses not only put themselves at risk by gazing (the man in the car) but risk harming other men.

The threat posed by women towards men has been addressed by various means, especially dress. Covering the female body not only protects the exclusivity of the male’s right to ownership of the female, it protects the vulnerable male from the female’s powerful sexuality. Long sleeves, long skirts or loose trousers, high necks, and head coverings have long been used from Europe to Asia to cloak, constrict, and confine the power of female sexuality. However, the uncovered female body continues to be a source of cultural anxiety, prompting a recent statement by a Muslim cleric in Australia to describe women who exposed their skin as “raw meat,” and declaring that they should expect to be violated. Further, only recently has the dress of a rape victim been deemed “irrelevant” during police investigations and subsequent legal proceedings.

## 5 Conclusion

And in case you think this is all a tempest in a teapot, let’s go back to the “blonde jokes” that I mentioned in the introduction: consider recent actions in Hungary to the

ubiquitous blonde jokes (Anaova 2005): “Blonde jokes are set to be banned in Hungary after blonde women staged an angry protest outside parliament. The protestors handed in a petition claiming they were being discriminated against in every walk of life by bad taste blonde jokes. And spokeswoman Zsuzsa Kovacs said: ‘Blondes face discrimination in the job market, in the workplace when they get a job, and even on the streets. People are banned from discriminating against Jews, or blacks, so why not grant blondes the same protection.’ The petition was handed to the equal opportunities minister Kinga Goncz asking her to investigate whether jokes about blondes fall into the same category as religious discrimination. The petition was just short of the 100,000 needed to force Parliament to debate the matter but Goncz’s deputy who spoke to the crowd pledged the government would act to stop any discrimination. Blondes - real and bleached - protested outside the ministry as the petition was handed in, waving banners with slogans like ‘We’re blonde, not stupid’ and ‘Love us for our minds.’”

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