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## **Examining Gender Stereotypes in Sexist Humor: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Pakistani Print Media**

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Aqib, <sup>2</sup>Hooras Subzal, <sup>3</sup>Usman Ghani

1. Lecturer Riphah Institute of Language & Literature Riphah International University,  
Lahore, Pakistan [muhammad.aqib@fulbrightmail.org](mailto:muhammad.aqib@fulbrightmail.org)

2. Lecturer Government Girls Degree College, Turbat, Pakistan  
[hooras.sabzal@gmail.com](mailto:hooras.sabzal@gmail.com)

3. MPhil Scholar Institute of Social and Cultural Studies University of the Punjab,  
Lahore, Pakistan [ghani.usman4466@gmail.com](mailto:ghani.usman4466@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This study examined the language used in sexist jokes within Pakistani print media, focusing on how these jokes contribute to gender-based stereotypes. While jokes are often seen as mere entertainment, many convey negative messages. Magazines like *Akhbar-e-Jahan*, *Khawateen*, and *Shua Digest* include humor that can sometimes be offensive, especially toward women. Through a qualitative analysis grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional model, along with the General Theory of Verbal Humor, the researcher explored 20 jokes, most of which targeted women. Findings reveal these jokes commonly portray women as talkative, unintelligent, materialistic, and quarrelsome, reinforcing stereotypes about women's nature and interests. By presenting women in negative ways, these jokes shape and perpetuate social realities, influencing public perceptions about gender. The study underscores that humor is not only reflective of cultural attitudes but also plays an active role in reinforcing social biases. Raising awareness of language's impact in humor can help reduce gender biases and negative stereotypes against women.

### **Introduction**

Humor in the form of jokes is generally regarded as lighthearted entertainment. However, not all humor produces positive effects; some, such as sexist, ethnic and racist jokes, can

reinforce damaging stereotypes and foster negative cultural trends (Pasaribu & Kadarisman, 2016; Billig, 2020). This study examines the linguistic features of sexist jokes in Pakistani print media, exploring how these jokes propagate gender stereotypes, particularly targeting women. Stereotypes are broad generalizations within a culture that often lack truth but gain strength through social acceptance and repeated use. Media, as a powerful societal institution, plays a significant role in reinforcing such stereotypes, especially through language, which shapes both perception and societal norms (Renzetti & Curran, 2002; Gill, 2016; Ott & Mack, 2020).

Gender stereotyping is amplified by the rapid dissemination capabilities of modern media. Pakistani print media, for example, often normalizes stereotypical portrayals of women, portraying them as confined to domestic roles or reliant on male figures. Such representations, pervasive in print and electronic media, mold societal attitudes and embed patriarchal norms deeply into the social fabric. This portrayal is seen in recurring images of women as homemakers or secondary figures, reinforcing notions of submissiveness and obedience, while men are depicted in roles of authority and higher social standing (Wykes & Gunter, 2012; Gill, 2016; Ross & Padovani, 2017). These portrayals resonate strongly within the larger patriarchal context of Pakistani society (Zia, 2009; Shah, 2021).

Language is more than a communication tool; it is instrumental in constructing social reality. Media language, whether in newspapers, magazines, or broadcast content, shapes and reflects beliefs about gender and plays a crucial role in the socialization of cultural values (Siddique, 2014; Durham & Kellner, 2018; Gill, 2016). By analyzing the language of sexist jokes, this research highlights the ways in which stereotypes are perpetuated, normalizing specific ideologies about gender and influencing public perceptions of gender roles. This study underscores the need for critical awareness of language's sociocultural impact and its role in either resisting or perpetuating negative gender stereotyping.

### **Problem Statement**

This study focuses on the pervasive issue of gender stereotyping within sexist jokes featured in Pakistani print media. Media plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of gender, deeply influencing societal attitudes and daily interactions. By examining how media

language contributes to gendered stereotypes in humor, this research seeks to highlight ways to challenge and resist the negative portrayals of women often normalized through sexist jokes.

### **Research Questions**

- How do linguistic elements contribute to constructing gender stereotypes within sexist jokes in print media?
- What specific gender stereotypes are reinforced through sexist jokes in print media?
- To what extent does the language of sexist jokes in print media shape social perceptions of gender?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in highlighting the role of language in shaping social realities and reinforcing gender stereotypes through humor in print media. Jokes, as a form of humor, hold considerable power in constructing and normalizing gender biases, particularly stereotypes about women. By analyzing the linguistic elements of sexist jokes, this research uncovers how language in media subtly reinforces negative stereotypes, often without being questioned. Raising awareness of these patterns can help reduce gender bias and negative stereotypes about women, prompting a deeper understanding of language as a tool that shapes social perceptions rather than simply conveying information. The insights from this study may also inspire further discussions and critical analyses of gender representation in other areas of Pakistani media, contributing to broader societal change.

### **Literature Review**

### **Discourse Analysis**

Discourse refers not only to spoken or written language but also to the broader meanings conveyed through language, messages, and images. Fairclough (2013) describes discourses as frameworks for organizing subjects and processes that not only represent but also actively shape social dynamics. He proposes a three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, viewing any discursive event as a combination of text, practice, and social context Fairclough, 2013;

Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017). This approach highlights the importance of language in constructing social realities and emphasizes that educational materials must avoid perpetuating distorted views of society to positively influence students' behavior and identity.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**

CDA is a significant approach to discourse analysis that gained prominence in the late 1970s and was further developed through the work of scholars like Roger Fowler at the University of East Anglia. CDA emphasizes the critical examination of the relationship between language and social implications, particularly within print media, where ideologies and assumptions are often embedded (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Gee, 2018). Scholars have utilized Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to create analytical tools based on transitivity, nominalization, and lexical choices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Thompson, 2013). CDA aims to reveal how discourse shapes power relations and social identities (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 2021). It serves as a vital tool for analyzing social inequalities and understanding how discourse operates within various societal contexts (Gee, 2014; van Dijk, 2019).

### **Media and Discourse**

Waisbord (2018) argues that print media serves not only as a means of information dissemination but also shapes readers' ideological perspectives. The language used in media reflects dominant worldviews, as Fowler (1991) suggests that the media presents a skewed version of reality tailored to its audience (Machin & Mayr, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2018). This selective representation limits public engagement with broader societal issues. Access to media discourse varies among different social groups, often privileging elites who shape language and public opinion, while ordinary individuals have minimal influence over media narratives (Cottle, 2017; Couldry, 2019). Thus, the media plays a crucial role in shaping and reproducing societal attitudes.

### **Approaches to Media Discourse**

Media discourse analysis can be approached through three primary methodologies: (1) discourse analysis, (2) sociolinguistic analysis, and (3) nonlinguistic approaches. Although discourse analysis serves as the focal point of this discussion, researchers often blend elements from all three methods. Discourse analysis encompasses various techniques, including pragmatics, conversation analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics, while also addressing broader issues such as social impact and political economy (Gee, 2014; Tannen, 2018). Sociolinguistic approaches specifically examine language variation and style within media contexts, distinguishing them from discourse analysis, which focuses on larger text structures and themes. Meanwhile, nonlinguistic research includes political and media studies, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of media discourse (Waisbord, 2018; Bell, 2020).

### **Gender as a Tool of Analysis**

Feminist theories emphasize the significance of gender as a social construct that influences economic, political, and social realms (Nicholson, 1998; Tong, 2020). Gender encompasses societal expectations of behavior, competence, and status associated with biological sex, categorized as "masculine" or "feminine" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004; Risman, 2018). Feminist perspectives argue that gender, rather than being a mere reflection of biological differences, is a critical factor shaping social dynamics and identities (Lorber, 2010). Scholars such as Shulamith Firestone (1970) assert that women's liberation requires breaking free from the constraints of biological determinism, while others argue for the interconnectedness of sex and gender (Kessler & McKenna, 2008). Despite advancements in feminist thought, the term "sex" often retains essentialist connotations in contemporary discourse (Scott, 2016), highlighting the ongoing struggle over the meanings of gender in feminist politics.

### **Gender Stereotyping**

Prentice and Carranza (2002) assert that gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in societal norms that dictate masculine and feminine roles. Women are often seen as nurturing and caring, while men are expected to be strong and assertive (Heilman & Cohn, 2016). Historically, women have been relegated to domestic roles, particularly after the Industrial Revolution, where they became associated with homemaking and child-rearing (Brannon, 2011). Media representations

frequently depict women in familial contexts, reinforcing the idea that they are incomplete without a family (Londo, 2006; Ruddock, 2017). Additionally, women are often portrayed as sexual objects focused on appearance (Kilbourne, 2010). Other stereotypes depict women as dependent, materialistic, and more talkative than men, despite evidence suggesting men and women speak a similar number of words daily (Mehl et al., 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2014).

## **Humor and Jokes**

Jokes, as a crucial element of humor, are integral to everyday life, found across various media, including television, books, and advertisements (Martin, 2020). While humor encompasses a broad range of expressions, jokes represent one specific form (Banas et al., 2011). Engaging with humor can foster positive emotions and enhance overall well-being, contributing to physical health by improving respiration, circulation, and stress relief (Goebel, 2011; Lutz, 2020). However, not all humor is beneficial; certain types, such as ethnic, political, or gender-based jokes, can be harmful and offensive, targeting specific groups (Dinçer et al., 2021). For instance, a joke about a minority may entertain some but deeply offend members of that community (Kuipers, 2015). Despite their negative potential, such jokes remain prevalent, especially online, where platforms often categorize them for audiences (Vartabedian et al., 2022).

## **Jokes Published in Print Media**

According to Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; 1995; 2002; Yus, 1997; 1998; 2000; 2010), individuals instinctively seek relevance and connection in incoming information, including jokes. This theory posits that the humorist's intent and the audience's interpretive processes significantly influence how jokes are perceived (Sperber & Wilson, 2019; Yus, 2022). A study categorizes jokes based on the interpretive steps required for understanding their humor, emphasizing that jokes are crafted to elicit a specific response from the audience (Yus, 2023). Jokes serve a deliberate purpose, often aiming to evoke laughter, but they can also carry political or competitive undertones. The listener engages in a process of inference, seeking meaning while exerting minimal cognitive effort, illustrating the complex mental activities involved in everyday interactions and information processing.

## **Pakistani Print Media**

Over the past decade, Pakistan's print media landscape has undergone significant transformations. The total number of daily, monthly, and minor publications dropped from 4,455 in 1997 to just 945 by 2003, while daily circulation increased to 6.2 million (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies recognizes 142 legitimate newspapers, with circulation estimates varying; Zaffar Abbas of Dawn claims around 4 million (Abbas, 2022). The print media publishes in 11 languages, with Urdu and Sindhi being predominant. Urdu newspapers, more widely read in rural areas, have a folkloristic and conservative approach, while English publications cater to urban elites, focusing on liberal perspectives (Hussain, 2020). Key players include the Jang Group, Dawn Group, and Nawa-i-Waqt, each representing distinct editorial stances (Khan, 2023). The All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) advocates for media owners' interests and regulates industry practices (APNS, 2022). Research indicates that media, including humor, influences societal gender realities, often reinforcing stereotypes, prompting scrutiny of language in sexist jokes (Rahman, 2021).

## **Methodology and Framework**

This research employs qualitative methods to analyze sexist jokes, focusing on understanding the social and cultural dimensions of gender stereotypes. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring human thoughts and feelings, allowing for an in-depth inquiry into social interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its framework to examine the language used in gender jokes, highlighting how language constructs social identities and relationships (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Berger, 2016). CDA is particularly relevant for understanding gender stereotyping and biases as discursive practices (Weatherall, 2002). Emerging in the late 1980s through scholars like Teun van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, CDA analyzes the interplay between linguistic choices and socio-cultural contexts, focusing on how power and dominance are enacted in discourse (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). The researcher utilized Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore sexist jokes, comprising three stages: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 2003). The first stage focuses on linguistic features of the text, utilizing the Generalized Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) to analyze the jokes'

content and targets. The interpretation stage connects the text's structure to the reproduction of gender stereotypes. Finally, the explanation stage examines the relationship between the jokes' content and societal gender stereotypes, highlighting how language shapes gender realities. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH), proposed by Attardo (1994), provides a linguistic framework for analyzing various genres of humorous texts. It integrates areas like narrativity, pragmatics, and textual linguistics (Hempelmann & Ruch, 2005; Cendra, 2016). GTVH has been applied in studies examining cyber humor (Pasaribu & Kadarisman, 2016) and the interplay of language and imagery in cartoons (Tsakona, 2009). Attardo identifies six key knowledge resources: Script Opposition, Logical Mechanism, Situation, Target, Narrative Strategy, and Language, essential for analyzing jokes effectively.

## Findings

**Table 1.1 Summary of Jokes' Analysis on Six Parameters of GTVH**

<b>Parameters</b>	<b>Analysis of Jokes</b>
<b>Script Opposition</b>	Possible/impossible, Husbands in Newspaper/husbands at home, Loving wife/gold digger, Brainless/Being smart, Men's lies/women's belief, etc.
<b>Logical Mechanism</b>	Faulty logic, False reasoning, Absurd interpretation, Juxtaposition, Pun, Connection of scripts
<b>Situation</b>	Various everyday interactions and misunderstandings, including a husband reading a newspaper, wife persuading husband, traffic stops, post office complaints, and love confessions
<b>Target</b>	Mostly female, with some targeting male
<b>Narrative Strategy</b>	Simple narrative, Dialogue, Question and answer
<b>Language</b>	<i>Set-Up</i> : Usually a straightforward scenario or question involving the characters
<b>Punchline</b>	Unexpected twist or exaggeration, often revealing absurd logic, faulty reasoning, or social stereotypes



The analysis of sexist jokes using the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) reveals patterns in humor construction through script opposition, language mechanisms (e.g., false reasoning, faulty logic), and narrative forms like simple narratives, question-answer, and dialogue. In jokes targeting women, common themes include oppositions such as possible/impossible and brainless/smart, often implying stereotypes about women's intelligence and behavior. Out of 20 jokes, 19 target women, reinforcing gender stereotypes. This widespread transmission perpetuates biased views, especially in today's digital age. The study aims to explore these stereotypes further using Fairclough's three-dimensional model to analyze the social implications of such humor. Each joke uses humor based on familiar scenarios, where the punchline typically subverts expectations through a character's ironic, exaggerated, or literal response to a mundane situation.

### **Gender Stereotyping**

In the first section, analysis was done at first two stages of Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model that presents the description and interpretation of the content (language) of the jokes by using GTVH. The analysis at these stages reveals that there are many gender stereotypes propagated by the content of the sexist jokes under study. Table 1.2 presents a summary of occurrences of stereotypes in these jokes. Starting from the most frequent occurrence, the researcher analyzed each kind of gender stereotypes found in these jokes.

**Table 1.2 Summary of Stereotype Occurrences**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Stereotype</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
Female	Brainless	4
	Talkative	3
	Gold diggers	3
	Women are skeptical	3
	Desire for admiration	2

	Greedy	2
	Age conscious	1
	Quarrelsome	1
Male	Disloyal	1

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### **Women as Brainless Beings**

The stereotype of women as brainless is prevalent in the examined jokes, with four instances illustrating their portrayal as irrational and foolish. For example, in joke 4, a woman blames her car's brakes for her reckless driving, suggesting that women lack cognitive abilities compared to men. Joke 9 depicts a woman at a restaurant who asks the waiter to adjust the nonexistent air conditioning, reinforcing the idea that men can easily deceive women. Similarly, joke 6 shows a woman misplacing blame on a postman for teasing her dog, highlighting her inability to comprehend simple situations. Overall, these jokes portray women as weak-minded and less intelligent than men.

### **Women as Talkative**

The stereotype of women as excessively talkative is highlighted in the analyzed jokes, portraying them as irritating and disruptive. Mehl et al. (2007) note this generalization of women's garrulity, which is exemplified in joke 8, where a husband expresses frustration over his wife's chatter on their wedding night, ultimately wishing for her silence. Similarly, joke 1 features two women under a tree, with a mango humorously suggesting it has ripened from overhearing their conversation, exaggerating the idea that women's talkativeness is so excessive it affects even inanimate objects. These jokes reinforce the notion that women's verbosity is a source of annoyance.

### **Women are Skeptical**

Women are frequently depicted as skeptical in jokes, reinforcing the stereotype of their doubtfulness. For example, in joke 15, a woman cites her jealousy of an attractive neighbor as a

reason for divorce, implying that women are inherently suspicious and insecure about other women. Joke 13 illustrates this further, featuring a woman who searches her husband for evidence of infidelity, concluding that his lack of hair on his shirt means he is befriending bald women. This punchline highlights her baseless skepticism. Overall, these jokes suggest that women's trust issues and jealousy can lead to the deterioration of relationships, perpetuating negative stereotypes.

### **Women as Gold Digger**

The analysis reveals a prevalent stereotype of women as gold diggers, defined as those who prioritize material and economic benefits over genuine relationships. In joke 10, a woman explains her preference for an older, wealthy man over a younger, unemployed suitor, reinforcing the idea that women are motivated by financial security. Similarly, joke 12 suggests that women exploit men for their money, implying that men could achieve wealth if they were free from women's influence. Joke 3 further illustrates this stereotype by depicting a woman who encourages her husband to continue living for financial reasons, highlighting her perceived lack of emotional investment in the relationship.

### **Women's Desire for Admiration**

The analyzed jokes depict women as overly eager for compliments regarding their beauty, suggesting that their primary purpose is to seek validation from men. In joke 11, a girl asks a boy how she looks after visiting a beauty salon, only to be insulted by his remark about the salon being closed, implying she still lacks beauty. This highlights women's desire for admiration. Similarly, joke 5 features an old woman who believes a notorious liar after he flatters her with compliments about her charm, demonstrating that women are portrayed as willing to overlook dishonesty if it serves to enhance their self-esteem.

### **Women are Greedy**

The analysis highlights stereotypes of women as greedy and selfish, evident in two jokes. Joke 16 portrays women as valuing material goods over love, suggesting that a simple offer of mobile balance can make them happy. In joke 14, a conversation between two women reveals

the stereotype of materialism in marriage proposals. One woman defends her desire for her daughter to have property and ornaments, asserting that she isn't greedy for money but still prioritizes material wealth in potential suitors. These jokes perpetuate the notion that women are primarily motivated by financial gain and material possessions, reinforcing negative gender stereotypes.

### **Women are Age Conscious and Quarrelsome**

The analysis reveals stereotypes surrounding women's consciousness of age and their quarrelsome nature. In joke 18, two women argue over a bus seat, both refusing to sit after being identified as older, highlighting their sensitivity to age and willingness to sacrifice comfort to avoid the label. Joke 19 exemplifies the stereotype of women as inherently quarrelsome; it suggests that women wear half sleeves to avoid wasting time rolling them up before engaging in fights. This portrayal implies that women are quick to instigate conflict, further reinforcing negative perceptions about their behavior and priorities in social situations.

### **Men are Disloyal**

Men are less frequently the targets of negative stereotypes in sexist jokes compared to women, as evidenced by the analysis. Only one joke specifically depicts men negatively, suggesting disloyalty. In joke 20, a man claims his love for his wife remains strong after 15 years but admits he must hide his personal engagements, portraying men as diplomatic yet unfaithful. This contrasts with the more frequent targeting of women in humor. The analysis reveals that these jokes utilize script oppositions, absurd interpretations, and faulty logic to provoke laughter, often employing situations that reinforce stereotypes about both genders.

**Table 1.3 Connotations Lost in Translation:**

<b>Urdu word</b>	<b>Pun in Urdu</b>	<b>English translation</b>
Pkk gya	Ripened/fed up	Ripened
Zaati masroofiayat	Love affairs/ personal engagements	Personal engagements

Dua

Name of the girl/prayer

Prayer

Cultural themes and specific words often lack perfect translations between languages, making the translation of humor particularly challenging. For instance, in joke 1, the Urdu pun “pkk gya” translates to “ripened,” but also conveys being “fed up,” which is lost in English. Similarly, “zaati msroofiyaat” in joke 20 translates to “personal engagements” but misses the implication of “love affairs.” Other terms like “dua” and “shaamt a jati” lose their nuance when translated literally, demonstrating the complexities involved in maintaining the comic essence during translation.

## Discussion

Analyzing twenty jokes, the study categorizes them into nine stereotypes, notably depicting women as brainless, skeptical, gold diggers, greedy, talkative, quarrelsome, and age-conscious, while only one joke stereotypes men as disloyal. The language used in these jokes constructs social realities that marginalize women, often presenting them as silly and irrational, particularly in public settings. This perpetuates the idea that women belong in domestic roles. Jokes highlight women’s talkativeness, reinforcing public beliefs about their garrulity (Mehl et al., 2007). The stereotypes reflect societal standards where women's worth is tied to beauty and external validation, promoting the notion of women as needy for admiration (Stephens & Phillips, 2014). The study finds that these jokes, while amusing, serve to normalize and internalize negative representations of women, ultimately conditioning societal perceptions (Hodge & Kress, 1993; Fowler, 1991). The prevalence of such humor in women's digests indicates an internalization of these stereotypes, suggesting that women often accept and perpetuate their own negative portrayals without challenge, highlighting the significant impact of humor in shaping societal views on gender.

Furthermore, women are portrayed as seeking admiration, reinforcing societal beauty standards and their dependency on male approval. As noted by Hodge and Kress (1993), media representations shape perceptions of reality, leading to the internalization of these stereotypes by both men and women. The study highlights that the media's role in legitimizing these stereotypes

solidifies their impact on society, making them seem normal (Fowler, 1991). Overall, this research provides new insights into the relationship between language, humor, and gender stereotypes in Pakistani print media, filling a gap in existing literature.

## **Conclusion**

This research underscores the profound impact of sexist jokes on the sociocultural landscape of contemporary Pakistani society, revealing how language perpetuates gender stereotypes. Through a detailed analysis, it becomes evident that these jokes are not merely sources of humor; they serve as instruments for reinforcing societal norms that portray women as inferior, irrational, and objects of ridicule. The frequent repetition of these stereotypes in various media, including women's digests, demonstrates the internalization of negative portrayals by women themselves, hindering resistance to such representations. By exposing the underlying ideologies in humor and the linguistic mechanisms employed in these jokes, the study illustrates the necessity of challenging these narratives to reshape perceptions of gender. Ultimately, the findings highlight the crucial role of discourse in shaping social realities, advocating for a critical examination of humor's influence on societal attitudes toward women and the urgent need for greater awareness and change in representation.

## **Limitations**

This study acknowledges several limitations that may affect the scope and applicability of its findings. Firstly, the analysis is based on a limited sample of sexist jokes, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. The focus was specifically on jokes that perpetuate stereotypes about men and women, excluding other gender identities and their associated stereotypes. While the study aimed to elucidate the stereotypes targeting women, it is important to note that some jokes may encapsulate multiple stereotypes related to both the target group (women) and the initiators of the humor (men). For instance, jokes that depict women as gold diggers simultaneously portray men as generous and extravagant. Despite these constraints, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the sociolinguistic dimensions of sexist jokes and their role in reinforcing gender stereotypes within Pakistani print media.



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