It's Just a Joke:
Challenging Sexism through Counter-narrative Memes

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Abstract

Memes are a current visual cultural form that communicates ideas, emotions, and beliefs, usually by repurposing images from popular culture. In this study, we examined how bicycling memes depict women in stereotypical ways, further reinforcing ideas that are already prevalent in society. Specifically, we study memes about the culture of road cycling and racing, rather than commuter cycling. Applying critical visual methodology to analyze cycling memes that depict women on Instagram during a six-month time period (November 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021), our analysis examined how these memes buttress the social norms towards women in the cycling and broader community. From our research, we conclude this article with suggestions on how to counteract the negative narratives presented in memes within the classroom using examples from our data set.

Keywords: cycling culture, visual culture, social norms, critical visual methodology, feminism, Instagram, subversive humor

Introduction to Memes as Roadblocks to Participation in Road Bicycling Cultures

Utopian ideals of the potential of the Internet, as a decentralized network that everyone could access, contribute to, and benefit from has not materialized in the 21st century. Instead, Internet (Net) culture and its normative subject is coded as White, middle class, and male (Drakett et al., 2018). Many women and people of color have faced significant hostility as they attempted to create spaces for themselves on the Internet (Drakett et al., 2018). Given the virality of content on social media it is easy to spread messages that improve or dissuade participation in the networks of Internet cultures. In this study, we examined how memes within a specific subgroup, in this case road bicycling, encourages or discourages both in person and online participation in that group.

Cycling is a community that lacks diversity, and the normative road cyclist, those who ride bicycles for racing and exercise purposes rather than as a mode of transportation, is also assumed to be White, middle to upper class, and male. These overlapping White male spaces can lead to negative depictions of women and people of color. Both authors are cyclists who are interested in visual culture and cycling culture. As we shared cycling memes, we became aware that a small but significant number of memes contained sexist depictions of women. This study examines how cycling memes create a visual culture that depicts women in stereotypical ways, as sexual objects, nags, and less capable than men, which further reinforced ideas that are already prevalent in society and suggests how to counteract the negative narratives presented in memes within the classroom.

Humor is an excellent way of creating group solidarity (Khoury, 1985) and Internet memes are a way of creating an *in-group* (i.e., those who belong to a specific subculture based on shared interests and values). Sharing memes helps to develop social bonds and reinforce group values. This act of *sharing-to-belong* becomes problematic when the content shared by cyclists reinforces negative

stereotypes of women, who are already marginalized in the cycling community. This research asks how memes depict women and how these depictions may affect women and the attitudes of men towards them. Do memes reflect the larger culture of cycling and the attitudes contained within the broader society? Are there ways to counter negative depictions of women (and other marginalized groups) and establish spaces for them on the Internet?

In this article, we examine relationships between social norms and disparaging humor, which is humor that denigrates the value of a group or person. Specifically, we consider how social norms conveyed through memes about cycling affect the social dynamics of the group. Following a network of cycling meme creators, we analyzed their memes and how they create social norms through memes within the cycling community. Further, we present the emergence of counter-narrative memes in cycling as prototypes for possible pedagogical interventions that can change visual culture and we offer suggestions on how art educators may apply such interventions in a secondary school context. As social media is an important site of visual culture for many youth and young adults, it is crucial to think about how social media, such as memes, impacts them and how they can alter meaning through participatory actions.

Intertextuality and Virality of Macro Memes

The word meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) to describe units of cultural information that spread and replicated themselves. Originally used to describe cultural processes like religious ceremonies passed down and altered over time, the term "meme" has been applied to how information is circulated on the Internet. Due to the peer-to-peer nature of social media, images and ideas can be passed through networks and can become viral, spreading quickly (Brown 2013; Shifman, 2013). These units of cultural information are remixed, further contributing to their spread through the Internet (Shifman, 2013). Internet memes tend to rely on intertextuality, referencing other aspects of popular culture and other memes, which can create different layers of meaning (Wagener, 2021). The hyper-circulation of these images, which often leads to repeated viewings and various visual iterations of the same ideas, can help to reinforce their meaning (Wagener, 2021). Internet memes are extensions of larger cultural issues and stereotypes that persist in daily environments. Memes create a visual culture that

supports the dominant structures and forces in society. Art education scholar Karen Keifer-Boyd (2010) suggested that visual culture has an important role to play in the understanding of how gender is culturally constructed by allowing us to interrogate who is being addressed and for what purpose. The virality of Internet memes allow ideas regarding gender to be seen repetitively in different iterations and by viewing the same idea multiple times the message can become normalized.

In our study, we focused on a particular type of Internet meme, *Macros*, in which images are typically taken from popular culture and reused in multiple memes, with a caption, which is changed to create the new meme. This type of meme usually uses absurdist and/or parodying elements. Parody is an aspect that is particularly important to this study. It creates a distance between the creator of the meme and the content presented, which makes it difficult to refute the content itself (Drakett et al., 2018). Humorous statements are dismissed in ways that other sexist statements would not be tolerated (Isaac, 2018). When questioned, the author/artist often counters with "it's just a joke," implying that those who question them do not have a sense of humor and take the joke too seriously. Dismissals such as this counteracts the criticism and positions the one who criticizes as humorless, an insult that has often been lobbied against feminists. This type of "humor" creates a social norm for sexist attitudes that negatively affect women's daily lives (Ford, 2008; Mendiburo-Seguel & Ford, 2019). In the case of cycling memes, Macros create an overall culture that devalues women due to their negative portrayal within the visual culture of the cycling community.

Social Norm and Feminist Theoretical Frameworks of the Study

In our study, we use social norm theory (Ford et al., 2008; Drakett et al., 2018; Mendiburo-Seguel & Ford, 2019; Saucier et al., 2018;) and feminist theory (Collins, 2011; Drakett, Rickett, Day, & Milnes, 2018; Keifer-Boyd, 2010, Riquelme et al., 2021) to examine the importance of visual culture on the perception of gender and gender roles. Social norm theory argues that those who harbor prejudice towards certain groups will not express such discrimination if they feel that it is not socially acceptable. However, if they perceive that it is acceptable to express these prejudiced ideas, they will do so; this is particularly true of prejudice towards groups whose status is ambiguous, such as women or members of the LGBTQ2S+ communities (Mendiburo-Seguel & Ford, 2019).

Studies show that humor is an effective tool to create social norms that reinforce prejudiced ideas against a group, leading to negative actions against the prejudiced group (Drakett et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2008; Mendiburo-Seguel & Ford, 2019; Saucier et al., 2018). These findings suggested that jokes, and therefore memes, need to be considered seriously as a method of reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices in society.

There are two factors that further complicate the reading of Macros, trolling and post-feminism. Trolls intentionally provoke viewers with taboo content. Post-feminists, although a debated term, view women's bodies and sexuality as a tool to manipulate or control men (Gill, 2007). Both factors make it difficult to assess the position of the person who posts the meme. "Trolls don't mean, or don't have to mean, the abusive things they say" (Philips, 2015, p. 26). Trolls post content that intentionally baits and provokes others to be disruptive and to garner attention (Herring et al., 2002). For example, Figure 1, which references both incest and rape, may be a meme posted with the intent of trolling. Due to the anonymity of the Internet, it is difficult to determine the purpose of the meme creator. Moreover, norms regarding acknowledging the criminal offensiveness of human body violations of incest and rape are crossed by the proliferation of Macros, further obscuring the normative social intolerance of incest and rape and the reception of the meme. The meme in Figure 1 was liked 101 times, whereas the previously posted meme by the same person was liked 77 times and the one after 145 times. There does not appear to be any backlash from the followers of the meme poster regarding the meme in Figure 1 in relation to the other memes posted by the same person. Trolling uses the Internet's civil libertarian values of free expression (Herring et al., 2002) to avoid consequences for their provocative content.
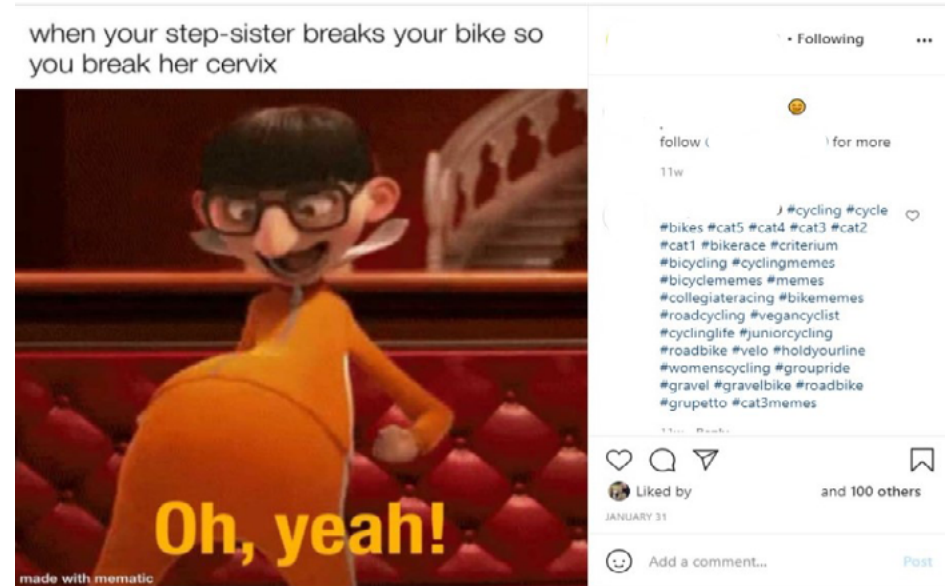

Figure 1. Meme illustrating incest and rape, courtesy of biggles_memes69

Post-feminism also confounds issues regarding the sexist nature of the memes. Post-feminism has characteristics that are both feminist and anti-feminist (Gill, 2007). In particular, the use of women's bodies and the "sexy body" as a source of women's power and as key to feminine identity. The sexualization of women is a common thread within many memes, and post-feminism obfuscates the sexism inherent in some of these images. We approach this study using a feminist framework, but it is important to note that post-feminism would not necessarily consider the sexualization of women as inherently sexist.

Impact of Humor on Social Norms

Social norms create social cohesion and define different groups, and humor can help to reinforce social solidarity and create a group identity. Sociologist Robert M. Khoury (1985) examined the social effect of humor on norm construction. Norms are rules of behavior that specify what is appropriate or inappropriate and are maintained by a particular social group. Norms allow for high levels of social cohesion and cause group conformity. Humor functions to create and reinforce social solidarity. In Khoury's experiment, undergraduate

students were asked to guess the number of coffee beans in a jar, participants posted their answers, and then they were given a chance to guess again. They were also asked to rate two jokes (earlier deemed equally funny), one before and one after seeing each other's rankings. Khoury hypothesized that seeing the rankings would cause greater group convergence in both cases but more robust convergence in the case of the jokes. The convergence was twice as much for the jokes as for the bean-counting. This study supports the conclusion that humor acts as a tool for social cohesion. Although social cohesion can lead to positive outcomes, it can also help to reinforce negative stereotypes within a group. In the case of cycling memes, the viewers are more likely to agree with the negative portrayal of women in memes, even though they are a small percent of overall memes, due to group solidarity. Group cohesion, however, also manifests with reception of counter-narrative memes.

Various studies show that disparaging humor can change the social norms towards marginalized groups (Collins, 2011; Ford et al., 2008; Mendiburo-Seguel & Ford, 2019; Romero-Sanchez et al., 2019; Saucier et al., 2018). When people have prejudice towards marginalized groups, the larger social norms prevent them from acting on that prejudice. If they think that there will be social consequences for expressing their prejudice, they will repress it. Humor that demeans a marginalized group can shift normative values to make people feel that it is appropriate to act negatively towards marginalized groups. This has consequences socially and can also affect the person's behavior towards the group. For example, Mendiburo-Seguel and Ford (2019) examined the effects of disparaging humor on the acceptability of discrimination against normative ambiguity groups. A normative ambiguity group is one where it is unclear to others whether it is or is not acceptable to be prejudiced against the group, such those characterized and categorized as women, because the societal view of the group is changing. The social norms allow or disallow prejudice to be expressed. Mendiburo-Seguel and Ford (2019)'s study suggested that humor has real world consequences on our behavior towards groups of people.

A prior study by Ford et al. (2008) hypothesized that sexist jokes change the perceived social norms and allow those with prejudice to express them more freely. To test their hypothesis, that those who hold sexist beliefs suppress them

due to social norms and to avoid negative social repercussions, they conducted two studies. The first study found that male undergraduate students who already had hostility towards women, as shown by the Sexism Inventory Test, donated less to a hypothetical women's organization after reading a sexist joke rather than a sexist comment or neutral joke. They completed a second study to address the limitations in the first, in which male students watched comedy skits in small groups and were asked to assign budget cuts to five student groups, one of which was a women's group. They were asked to rate how others in their small groups and the general student population would rate their budget allocations. The budget recommendations were presented as though they would have real impacts on the decisions made. Students who had high levels of hostile sexism and watched the sexist skits cut a significantly higher portion of the women's group budget than those who watched the neutral skits. They also rated a higher local perceived approval of the cuts, but not a higher general perceived support. Their finding suggested that the group norm is important to the expression of sexist behavior and that sexist humor promotes behavioral expression of prejudice against women amongst sexist men. Given the level of disparaging humor in some memes, this could have a significant impact on the culture of the Internet as a whole. People are more likely to act on their sexist beliefs if they believe that others also hold these beliefs. Trolling, therefore, is problematic because regardless of the creators' views, these memes can affect others' actions.

Negative depictions of women are not limited to Internet memes. Social scientist Rebecca Collins (2011)'s research showed that women are underrepresented in media generally (television, print, etc.). However, when they are portrayed, it is often in a negative light. The portrayals of women in media are often sexualized, subordinate, or perform stereotypical gender roles. Collins suggested that although the effect of underrepresentation is unclear in the literature, the negative portrayal of women has negative consequences for gender identity. These findings indicated that the ideas presented in the cycling memes are not specific to the culture of cycling but are reflected in views of women in the broader society as inferior to men. For example, in Figure 2, women are depicted as controlling and nagging, a common trope in other media as well, as discussed by Collins (2011).
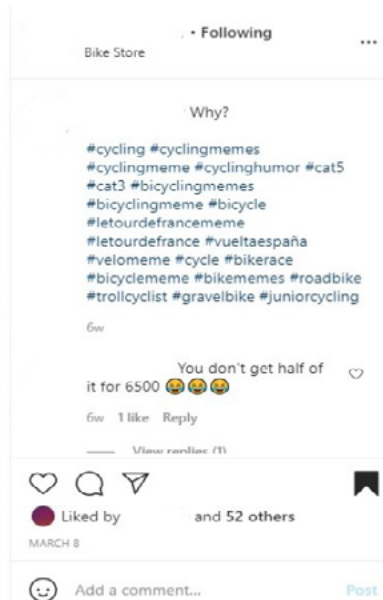
Figure 2. Meme illustrating woman as nagging, courtesy of [lafugamemes.](#)

Misinterpreted Subversive Humor in Counter-Narratives as Disparaging Humor

Memes can also present counter-narratives to prejudiced ideas which challenge patriarchal ideas and raise awareness of gender inequality (Riquelme et al., 2021). These memes tend to use subversive humor that points out the irrationality of gender stereotypes (Riquelme et al., 2019). It is important to note that there is a difference between subversive humor and male disparagement humor (Riquelme et al., 2019). Subversive humor, much like sexist humor, can impact participants' actions, in this case, their willingness to participate in collective action regardless of whether they held feminist beliefs. Those with low levels of feminist beliefs were more likely to be affected towards collective action by subversive humor; this suggests that subversive humor changes the social norms that belittle feminists' principles of equity to be more aware of gender inequities (Riquelme et al., 2021). It is important to note that because of humor's ambiguous nature, there is the potential to misread subversive humor as sexist humor, thereby erasing any positive effects. If the intended counter-narrative content is misread as negative towards women, sexist norms in the group are reinforced. The ambiguity of humor leads to an important finding in Saucier et al.'s (2018) study which uses racist rather than sexist humor as its subject. Saucier et al. (2018) found that more than a third of study participants misinterpreted subversive humor as disparaging humor. When they tried to replicate the results, they found that half of the participants misinterpreted the joke as offensive. If humor is seen as disparaging, it negatively changes social norms towards the group targeted in the humor. When using counter-narrative memes to combat prejudiced behavior, meme creators must consider the possibility of misinterpretation. Testing the interpretation of counter-narrative memes with several viewers is important to ensure that the message is clear. Although the meme in Figure 3 is mocking men who unwantedly flirt with women during training, it may also portray the idea that this is common and, therefore, acceptable behavior. It may also unintentionally discourage women from cycling due to the perception that this is common behavior.

Figure 3. A counter-narrative meme illustrating men making unwanted advances towards women, courtesy of [getzwifty.](#)

The proliferation of memes on the Internet is where social norms are created and perpetuated. Humorous memes replicate quickly over the Internet

and can spread these norms rapidly and efficiently. The meme in Figure 4 was shared through several accounts, and therefore was seen by more users. Despite its humorous delivery the man in this meme uses the woman as an object, which reinforces the idea that it is appropriate to use women for male gratification.

Figure 4. A meme about toys in the bedroom, courtesy of [foundcycling.](#)

Critical Visual Methodology

Our study used critical visual methodology and qualitative content analysis methods (Rose, 2016) to examine cycling memes on Instagram for six months, from November 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021. Gillian Rose, a professor of cultural geography, defined critical visual methodology as an approach to "interpreting visual images" that must consider three criteria: (a) to take images seriously; (b) to account for social conditions, effects of images, and their modes of distribution; (c) and to recognize the impact of positionality and situated knowledge of viewers (p. 22). Taking images seriously, according to Rose, emphasizes the form and content of images themselves, not only relying on contextual information to interpret. Yet context is also an essential part of critically analyzing images in conjunction with the image itself. All of this must be taken

reflexively, keeping in mind the interpretive frame of the researcher(s). Our study followed these three criteria by first utilizing qualitative content analysis using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. MAXQDA was an essential tool to organize, sort, code, and analyze image form and content. MAXQDA was also used to gather important contextual data such as comments, likes, dates of a post and assign authorship to each meme. Lastly, it is important to disclose our positionalities brought to the study. First author Stacey Cann identifies as a feminist White cis woman. The second author Juan Carlos Castro identifies as cis male and with the amalgam BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). We are both avid cyclists who have experienced marginalization in the form of sexism and racism both in and outside cycling culture. We selected cycling memes because, on the surface, most people assume cycling is an equitable and environmentally friendly form of transportation. Numerous cycling-oriented social justice non-profits use the bicycle to create opportunities for marginalized peoples through increased mobility. Our study is motivated by our experiences of sexist and marginalizing cycling memes witnessed on Instagram.

A critical visual methodology also considers four sites: production, image, circulation, and audience (Rose, 2016). Production is how an image is made. In the case of our study, memes were overwhelmingly appropriated images—either from previous memes or images from visual culture such as movie stills, sitcoms, pornography, and stock photography. The memes we studied followed a consistent pattern of production, an appropriated image that may or may not be cycling-related, overlaid with textual descriptions. Sometimes the memes we sampled contained follow-up comments to clarify or elaborate on the image/text presented. Meme creators always tagged their creations with #hashtags, words, or phrases used to identify content and make it more searchable online. All of the images analyzed were drawn from Instagram, a highly popular image-based social media platform. Social media, like Instagram, circulate images for viewing at a tremendous rate. In the early days of Instagram, image distribution was based on the time of posting an image. In 2016, Instagram changed how users experience images from chronological viewing to an algorithm that used a weighting system based on several factors, one of which being views and likes. An algorithm based on views and likes creates what is known as filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), meaning that a user teaches the algorithm to amplify and reinforce predispositions. The

phenomenon is known as a dynamic decentralized network, and in art education, it can create hegemonies of themes and styles which are difficult to disrupt (Castro, 2015). It is precisely what meme creators strive to manipulate in the algorithm and have their posts go "viral" and thus create more followers. These algorithms, coupled with themed hashtags, build communities of like-minded meme creators. Rose (2016) discussed where images are encountered and the sociality surrounding the experience of viewing an image as creating an audience and shared social group. Crucial to our study and the Instagram community of cycling members is the social interaction between viewers and other meme creators through the comments and reposts using the Instagram Stories feature. Instagram Stories is a less permanent way of sharing content displayed for a finite duration unless the user pins the story to their profile rendering it permanent. Critical Visual Methodology for our study is epistemologically aligned with our theoretical framework that frames the cycling memes we witnessed on Instagram as structural misogyny perpetuated by meme creators, the memes themselves, and the contextual and dynamic flows of images by an algorithm meant to reinforce biases. After months of viewing cycling memes, we intuitively assessed that misogynistic content ebbed and flowed culturally around specific dates and events. We approached the study by first delineating a temporal period to examine a kind of narrative arch. We then used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA to chronologically organize each of the 107 memes in our data set. We then used qualitative content analysis (Rose, 2016), a method for analyzing images and text to understand the cultural meaning of the selected memes.

Most famously used by anthropologist Catherine A. Lutz and sociologist Jane L. Collins in their work entitled *Reading National Geographic* (1993), the visual content analysis provided a statistical analysis of image trends in the magazine *National Geographic*. They identified patterns over time using visual content analysis. Rose (2016) cautioned that this kind of reduction of visual richness to frequency patterns erases important contextual information and notes that Lutz and Collins recognized this shortcoming as well by including other methods and theoretical framing of production, circulation, and audience. We took a similar approach using MAXQDA to code our selected memes and then conducted a frequency analysis to track the instances of certain sexist codes during our delineated temporal period. By doing so, we quickly identified thematic patterns that oriented us to use our theoretical frame to better contextualize the sites of production, circulation, and audience.

Ethics and Data Collection

Since the memes selected for our study are publicly available via Instagram, we were not required to apply for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. All of the meme accounts used self-generated pseudonyms that masked personal information about the creators or where they are located. Due to the way that memes are spread through sharing on social media platforms, as well as their use of stock images, it is difficult to attribute the creation of the meme. We have in this case linked the account of the user in which we first encountered each meme. To maintain the anonymity of the users their names have not been attributed to the images.

We collected the memes for this study from Instagram using two intersecting methods. The first was to find individuals creating cycling memes and look through all the posts they made for memes that referenced women. The second was to look through the hashtags #cyclingmeme, #cyclingmemes, #cyclinghumor, #cyclinghumour, #bicyclingmeme, #bicyclingmemes. If a meme used disparaging or subversive humor towards women, we included the meme creator in our database and examined their posts for similar memes. Due to the nature of memes, if different users posted the same meme several times, it was only collected once. We collected and uploaded into MAXQDA the date, account name, image of the post, and user description. In addition to selecting misogynist memes, we discovered a few of the meme accounts used the same set of hashtags to circulate counter-narratives during the study. As a result, we included these counter-narrative memes in our data set. Table 1 shows there were significantly fewer counter-narrative memes than sexist memes.

Table 1

Code Frequency

Code	Frequency
Sexist Memes	
Decisions regarding time or money	26
Critical or unsupportive wife	17
Relationship as a burden	6
Cycling is more important than a relationship	19
Women described as literal objects	5
Woman as weak/ incompetent	8
Non-consensual sexual activity	19
Women as nags	8
Total sexist memes	108
Counter-narratives	
Equality of payment/ coverage of women's racing	4
Calling out harassment and non-consensual contact	10
Diversity and equity	3
Calling out sexualization of women	2
Calling out mansplaining	4
Total counter-narrative memes	23

Note: Some memes are categorized under multiple categories

Cycling Meme Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this study, we categorized the memes with regard to ideas about gender. Using frequency, we selected the three most prevalent themes regarding women: women as sex objects, men and women in relationships, and counter-narratives regarding gender. The two disparaging categories match those that Collins (2011) identifies in the general media as broadly accepted social norms about gender and women.

There were several subcategories of the sexualization of memes, but they all reduced the women to sexual objects for the pleasure of the (male) viewer. These memes portrayed women as sex workers, objects of sexual conquest, and/or use images taken from pornography. The memes often showed women scantily clad or in sexually suggestive positions. These memes depict women as passive and as objects for the enjoyment of men (e.g., Figures 5 and 6). The women in these memes are not portrayed as having attributes beyond their bodies and sexuality.

Figure 5. A meme that is an illustration of a sexualized woman, courtesy of mediocrecat2.

Figure 6. A meme that suggests *pornography,* courtesy of fucksrammemes.

Figure 7. A cycling meme denoting sexual violence, courtesy of wheelsucker_ memes.

Many of the memes in our data set also have a problematic relationship with ideas of consent and depict non-consensual sexual activity and incest. Often issues around consent can be seen as an attempt to be edgy or trolling. However, regardless of the intent of the images, they can have a serious negative impact on women and men who view them. Behavioral sciences researchers Romero-Sánchez, Megías, and Carretero-Dios (2019) found that sexist humor empowers men to express sexually aggressive comments and actions towards women. Figure 7 depicts a male avatar in a suggestive position with a woman avatar who appears to be unconscious. Although this is likely intended to be trolling, it normalizes rape.
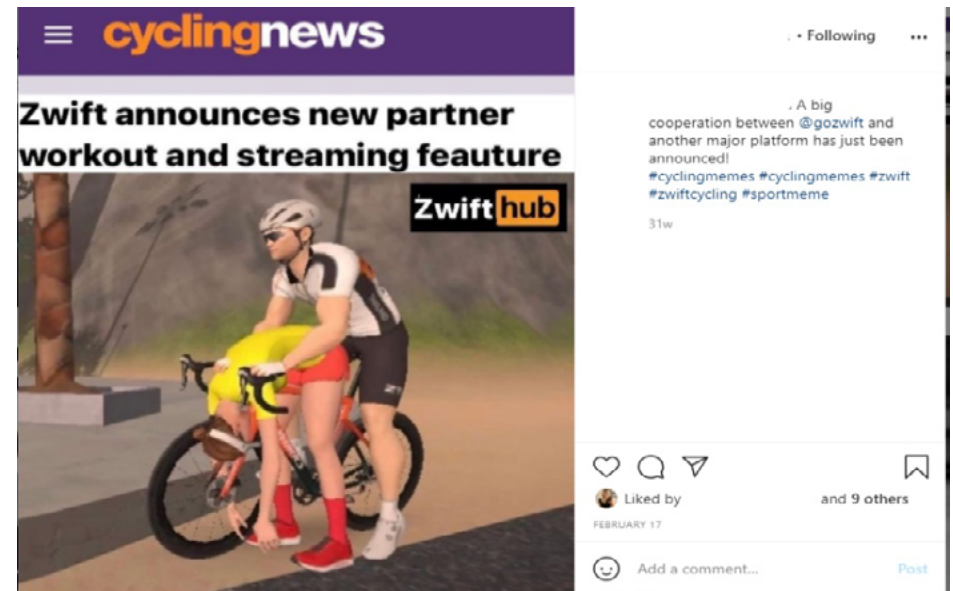
Whereas many of the memes collected in this study show women as sex objects, others depict a very different relationship between men and women. These memes portray women as nagging, overbearing, and unsupportive, mainly as a wife or domestic partner. Rather than the man being in control of women, as with memes that sexualize women, men are deceitful and avoid spending time with women. The memes suggest that women, and familial duties, are an inconvenience. These memes prioritize cycling and the male protagonist's interests over that of his partner and family. There is sometimes an overlap between sexualization and relationships. However, in this category, sexual relations with a spouse or long-term partner are portrayed as a chore. This depiction of women extends attitudes portrayed in other media (Drakett et al., 2018), and memes allow these ideas to spread quickly over the Internet.

Figure 8. A meme that illustrates deprioritizing relationships, courtesy of foundcycling.

Figure 9. A meme that illustrates prioritizing cycling over relationships, courtesy of cycling_memes_h24

Figure 10. A meme portraying deceiving women, courtesy of DHDwear.

Sexist memes tended to cluster together, with several circulating within days, followed by breaks where there were fewer memes. The period surrounding Valentine's Day had the highest frequency, with 20 memes clustered between February 7th and 21st. Similarly, as presented in Figure 11, counter-narrative memes clustered together, typically after a cluster of sexist memes. This pattern is consistent with social norms theory, which posits that those who are prejudiced suppress the expression of these prejudices due to social norms, but when they feel the norm shift, they express their prejudice. As sexist memes change the perceived acceptability of discrimination, we witnessed the proliferation of sexist memes. Apparently, more sexist memes beget more sexist memes.
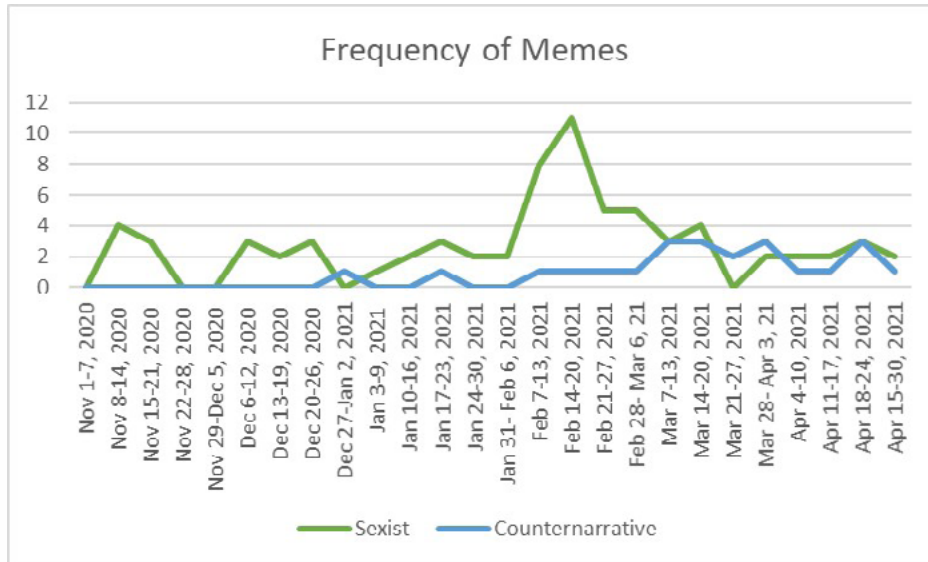
Figure 11. A graph showing the frequency of sexist and counter narrative memes over the period of November 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021.

Figure 12. A meme illustrating women setting boundaries, courtesy of burritocyclist.

Although the sexist memes outnumbered the counter-narrative memes, 83 versus 24, the frequency of counter-narrative memes increased as cyclists specifically created meme accounts to challenge depictions of women in cycling in March 2021. Counter-narrative memes use humor to counteract the narratives presented by the sexist memes. When sexist memes are challenged, it disrupts the social norms created by the memes on the Internet. Themes frequently addressed in counter-narrative memes are unequal pay and media coverage for women pro cyclists, non-consensual touching by male cyclists to "help" women up hills, sexual advances by male cyclists, and less experienced men "explaining" cycling to women riders. These memes use humor to expose sexism within the cycling community. One potential pitfall of many of these memes (e.g. see Figures 12, 13, 14) is that they also suggest that sexist behavior is commonplace within the cycling community and may discourage women from pursuing cycling.

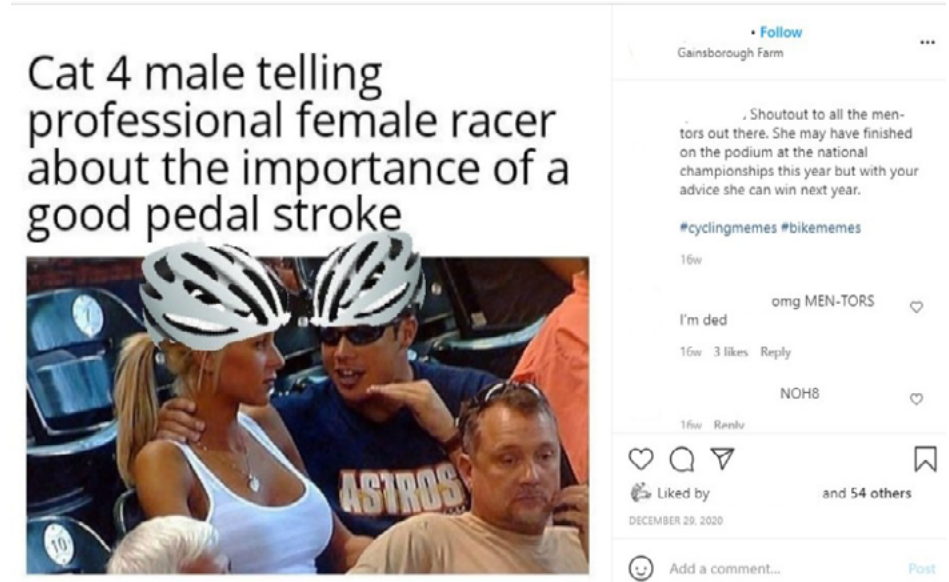Figure 13. A meme illustrating mansplaining, courtesy of quadchilla.

Figure 14. A meme illustrating lack of representation of women's cycling, courtesy of the gas station food cyclist.

Figure 15. A meme illustrating lack of equity for women cyclists, courtesy of fucksrammemes.

Some counter-narrative memes are also ambiguous and may be read as sexist memes. This potential for misinterpretation creates the potential for unintentionally creating a sexist norm. Rather than effectively counteracting sexism, their unclear position reinforces the viewer's prior sexist beliefs, such is possible in viewing Figure 15, intended as a counter-narrative to sexism meme.
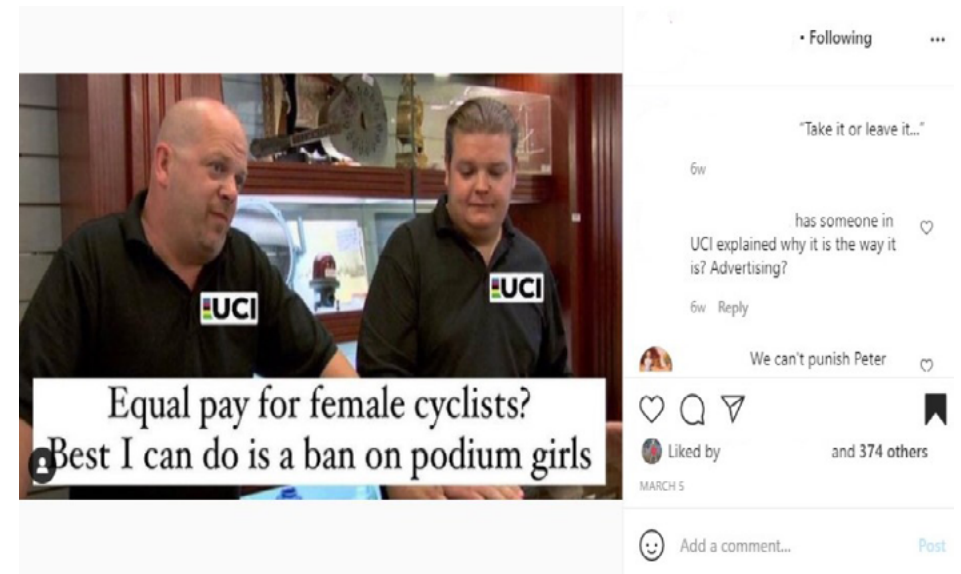
Pedagogical Interventions with Counter-narrative Memes

Our data suggested that although only a small percent of the overall memes, sexist memes are common within an otherwise benign subculture and can change the social norm within the group. Framed as jokes, memes are also difficult to critique directly, as those who do are accused of "not getting it" or "having no sense of humor." This study, as well as the existing literature on the subject (Riquelme et al. 2019; Riquelme et al. 2021; Saucier et al. 2018), suggested that counter-narratives can shift the social norm against discriminatory behavior. It is difficult to say whether the frequency of sexist memes has diminished as the counter-narrative memes increased, since their frequency also ebbs and flows during other times of the year. The emergence of counter-narrative memes by several actors suggests new social acceptability of content that challenges the sexist memes. Feminist theory suggests that challenging the stereotypes created by sexist memes can change the existing norms, and feminist humor can empower women to participate in collective action for gender equality (Riquelme

et al., 2021). Counter-narrative memes disrupt the social norms enabled by the circulation of sexist memes and culture in general. This disruption causes prejudiced ideas to be deemed unacceptable.

Keifer-Boyd (2010) argued that pedagogical art interventions in visual culture can be particularly adept at creating alternatives to gender stereotypes. Although this is true in some cases, the ambiguous nature and circulation of memes can counteract their original intention due to their humorous overtones. In the art classroom, we recommend that students deconstruct original sexist memes to understand how they create meaning and their connections to visual representations in the broader culture and consider how to make clear and compelling counter memes. Although counter-narrative memes offer a potential opening of the White heteronormative culture of the Internet, they also can be misread and further reinforce the misogynist message of sexist memes. Therefore, we recommend that students use design thinking (Dam & Siang, 2018; Razzouk & Shute, 2012), paying particular attention to creating multiple iterations of counter-narrative memes. By emphasizing iteration, design thinking in creating counter-narrative memes involves going through stages of empathizing with potential viewers of the meme, defining the problem, ideation, prototypes, piloting or testing with a focus group for interpretations, and implementation (Dam & Siang, 2018). Such an approach to creating counter-narrative memes, encourages and guides students to consider those who will view the memes, and how they might best communicate with them. During the testing phase they may solicit feedback from classmates or peers, and this will help them identify whether their intended message is being communicated, or the message is being misinterpreted by the viewer. The process of *design thinking* can guide students to think critically from social norm and feminist theoretical perspectives about what memes and other social media they create and consume might communicate. Given the prevalent use of social media by youth it is important for them to understand how memes may impact how they experience the world.

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