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Just a joke? Gendered power and humour in Indian meme cultures on Reddit

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ABSTRACT

Memes are among the most pervasive forms of digital vernacular culture, circulating rapidly across networked spaces and shaping how gendered meanings are negotiated online. This study examines gendered discourse in two Indian subreddits, *r/DesiMemeTemplates* and *r/Whysooserious*, through a Critical Discourse Analysis of 60 purposively sampled posts. Using a qualitative coding framework adapted from Brooke (2019), the analysis identifies five recurring strategies: Othering, Invisibility, Sexualization, Ridicule of Feminist Identity, and Humour as Discrediting Strategy. Drawing on poststructuralist feminist theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the study situates these strategies within broader debates on ironic misogyny, symbolic annihilation, and the sexual economy of power. Findings indicate that while both subreddits differ in tone with *r/DesiMemeTemplates* often relying on playful irony and *r/Whysooserious* on overt hostility, they converge in their reliance on familiar cultural codes like Hinglish captions, and popular media tropes to naturalize regressive gender politics. In making misogynistic claims appear self-evident and socially shared through humour, these meme spaces function as active sites of ideological reproduction. The study contributes to feminist media scholarship by highlighting how regionally inflected meme cultures participate in the everyday maintenance of gender hierarchies. In doing so, it extends analyses of digital misogyny beyond predominantly Anglophone research contexts.

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of networked communication technologies has reshaped how individuals interact, articulate identity, and negotiate power within digital cultures. Among the various expressive forms emerging from this ecosystem, internet memes have become a particularly influential site of cultural meaning-making, simultaneously trivialized as entertainment and recognized as a potent mode of discourse. Their brevity, humour, and replicability enable them to circulate widely across platforms, shaping public sensibilities around politics, social norms, and embodied identities. As scholarship increasingly acknowledges the ideological work performed through everyday digital humour

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