A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Representation in "Men vs. Women Memes"

Iman Mahfouz

Associate Professor, College of Language and Communication (CLC), the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (AASTMT), Egypt.

Abstract

The ubiquity of the Internet has given rise to a plethora of new genres thus posing a problem for linguistic analysis which has long been focusing on verbal content. Internet memes are an emerging genre currently prevalent in computer mediated discourse (CMD). They constitute a new medium not only to deliver messages but also to create humor. A prototypical form of memes is the image macro meme, which typically consists of a still image with text superimposed so that their juxtaposition creates a humorous effect. These are usually used to portray a variety of cultural relations, such as political ideologies, ethnic stereotypes as well as gender representation. In the present study, a sample of memes was collected from Pinterest website using the search terms "men vs. women memes", with special focus on memes related to health and relationships in particular. Drawing upon Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) Theory of Visual Grammar, in addition to Critical Discourse Analysis respectively the researcher analyzes the visual and textual elements of the selected memes. The study seeks to examine how the memes depict gender identity using the interplay between both text and image. Despite a few exceptions, the findings point out that memes are used discursively to reproduce stereotypical images of the two genders and create binary oppositions between them in several ways. The study highlights the role played by memes as a recent form of discursive communication enabling the viral dissemination of cultural representation and ideological content.

Keywords: Computer-mediate discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), gender representation, gender stereotypes, Internet memes, Theory of Visual Grammar

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Introduction

The online medium serves as a space for participants to construct identities through digital technology. With the advent of the Internet, many people believed in 'cyberutopia'; they were optimistic about its egalitarian potential in achieving equality and granting freedom of expression to all participants equally. Similarly, 'cyberfeminists' regarded the online medium as an opportunity for women's liberation. However, recent years have witnessed a counter-movement of 'cybersexism' exemplified in the growth of an online antifeminist culture. In fact, Nagle (2015) argues that "expressions of misogyny previously unthinkable in the public sphere now appear anonymously on popular social media platforms" (p. 6). According to Drakett et al. (2018), "feminist research has found that instances of online sexism and harassment are often reframed as 'acceptable' by constructing them as a form of humour" (p. 1).

The ubiquity of the Internet has given rise to a plethora of new genres thus posing a problem for linguistic analysis which has long been focusing on verbal content. Internet memes are an emerging genre currently prevalent in computer mediated discourse (CMD). Dawkins (1976) was the first to introduce the term 'meme' to describe gene-like infectious units of culture that spread from person to another. In this initial conceptualization, memes were analogous to the biological concept of gene, in the sense that they were seen as self-replicating and being communicated from person to another.

More recently, a meme has come to refer to "an idea, behavior or style that spreads from one person to another in a culture" (Gumilang & Unikom, 2018, p.135). Memes constitute a new medium not only to deliver messages but also to create humor. They have started spreading rapidly across different social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. According to Lugea (2019), "the last two decades of the 20th Century saw the emergence of Memetics as a field dedicated to understand the spread of information and culture through memes" (p. 2). They have spurred the interest of scholars from different disciplines, such as culture studies, political science, media studies and computer science, thus rendering them a highly interdisciplinary issue. They are thus thought to be highly influential cultural units as they can be used to portray political ideologies, ethnic stereotypes as well as gender representation. Despite the seemingly superficial content they may present, some argue that they provide deep insights into popular culture and discursive ideologies (Shifman, 2013a).

The source of meme images could be a movie, video game, celebrity or political image and it may consist of a standalone image, or an image accompanied by text (Börzsei, 2013). A prototypical form of memes is the image macro meme, which typically consists of a still image with text superimposed so that their juxtaposition creates a humorous effect. The image macro meme has gained popularity among millions of social media users ranging from teenagers to celebrities. Meme generating websites provide images for users to add text on the given memes and then disseminate them online which is a practice based on imitation.

Because adding text onto an image is becoming easier to do on digital devices, this memetic form has proliferated significantly online.

Although studies on multimodality have been published for over thirty years, multimodality is gaining more importance at the present time due to the diffusion of discourses on the Internet that combine different modes of communication (text, picture, audio, video, etc.). Multimodal texts have got a central role in our daily life, as we constantly deal with them while we read newspapers, watch TV, surf the Internet, etc. Multimodal discourse analysis combines two main aspects in the process of text analysis: verbal mode and image mode. The former encompasses words, phrases and sentences, whether spoken or written, whereas the latter is concerned with visual elements of communication involved in art, typography, graphic design, color, etc.

The present study investigates the role played by memes as an emerging form of discursive communication contributing to the viral dissemination of cultural representation and ideological content. Using a sample of "men vs. women" memes from Pinterest website, with special focus on memes related to health and relationships, the present study thus seeks to examine how the memes depict gender identity using the interplay between both text and image. The theoretical framework draws upon Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996; 2006) Theory of Visual Grammar as well as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) respectively in order to analyze the visual and textual elements of the selected memes.

2. Literature Review

In this section, the main theoretical concepts underlying this research are reviewed, including multimodality, CDA and memes as a genre, in addition to a brief survey of previous similar studies. Special focus is given to gender representation and stereotyping in multimodal discourse.

2.1 Multimodality

Until recently, language study had focused on the verbal components of texts. Images and other visual elements play an undeniably important role in newspaper, magazine, advertisements, books, etc. Van Leeuwen (2007) suggests that the verbal mode and the visual mode work in cooperation, with one mode either extending or elaborating on the meaning of the other mode. In the 1970s, theorists started to decipher meaning through an interaction between linguistic analysis and the analysis of the image. Multimodality has developed into a full-fledged discipline in its own right owing to the endeavors of scholars such as Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2006) and Machin and Mayr (2012). Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) takes into consideration elements previously neglected in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), primarily the semiotic modes that make up a social context, in order to reveal ideologies conveyed by texts. According to Kress (2010) all modes of representation can be harnessed for meaning-making. Machin et al. (2016) state that "it is through multimodal CDA that we, as linguists and semioticians, must help to reveal problematic gendered discourses as well as highlight important moments of resistance to them" (p. 307).

The Theory of Visual Grammar is a visual social semiotic system that analyzes images based on Halliday's (1994) framework for Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Devised by Kress and van Leewuan (1996), Visual Grammar has set the tone of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). The theory comprises meta-functions that are parallel to those of Hallidy (1994).

Multimodality is responsible for reproducing ideological implications, values and contributing to the overall meaning of texts. It traces how the organization and the interplay between these different modes contribute in making meaning in respect to social context, culture, and available resources. For van Leeuwen (2015), the term multimodality "indicates that different semiotic modes (for instance language and picture) are combined and integrated in a given instance of discourse or kind of discourse" (p. 447). Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), proposed by (Machin & Myer, 2012) is interested in showing how other semiotic resources along with language work together in creating the meaning-making process. Therefore, MCDA is much concerned with describing what these resources are, the meaning potentials they carry, and the way they are used to represent specific goals in social settings. MDA has thus been utilized to analyze a wide range of genres, including advertisements, movies, magazine covers, various types of books, leaflets, in addition to websites.

In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) model, visual structures are treated as linguistic structures. It devotes more attention to other modes of communication such as the visual mode, gesture, gaze, posture, color, typography, composition etc. (van Leeuwen, 2007; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin, 2007) since these elements are said to generate meaning, particularly in relation to each other. According to Machin et al. (2016), "the very aim of critical multimodal analysis should be to show how different semiotic materials are deployed by communicators precisely for the unique way they work" (p. 306). The goal is to find out "how different semiotic material have affordances that can be deployed for ideological purposes" (Machin et al, 2016, p. 306).

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Although the most prominent part of memes are the images, it is necessary to refer to the verbal characteristics found in the figures since they complement and enhance the visual aspect of the message. To address the verbal aspect of the selected memes, the study draws upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Defined by Fairclough et al. (2011) as a "problem-oriented interdisciplinary research movement, subsuming a variety of approaches, each with different theoretical models, research methods and agenda" (p. 357), CDA is a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities. It thus aims to determine how language is employed to discursively emphasize ideologies and power relations including domination, discrimination and naturalization (Fairclough, 1995).

According to critical discourse analysts, in order to examine a given text, one has to refer to its social context. It is essential to study textual elements thoroughly in order to track their various effects on a larger scale. Fairclough (2003) states that discourses can be analyzed at the textual (micro-level), discursive level (text production and interpretation), in addition to social practice (situational context). CDA scholars also stress the use of intertextuality; they regard a text as part of a larger discursive discourse. CDA approaches may thus be said to rely on integrating methods of linguistic analysis with social theories (Fairclough, 2005).

2.3 Studying Memes

"Internet memes showcase a new kind of understanding of the world, and a new kind of creative and social outlet" (Börzsei, 2013, p. 24). Scholarship on memes was

initiated by researchers from disciplines such as computing, networking and mathematics, who were mainly concerned with the duration a meme survives. Ferreira and Vasconcelos (2015) argue that "thinking about memes is a useful way of thinking about society", since memes have been "incorporated into the daily life of our culture, becoming a massive tool for disseminating ideas" (p. 48). They can be used to disseminate negative concepts such as prejudice, intolerance, hate speech, or gender domination. "The role of internet meme in the production of collective identities may go definitely behind the mere entertainment" (Ciorli, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, according to Shifman (2013b), memes "serve as valuable keys for understanding broader dimensions of digital culture" (p. 340).

Though still an emerging field, a number of recent studies have tackled memes from a multimodal perspective, highlighting the significance and currency of exploring such phenomenon. Drakett et al. (2018) suggests that "Internet memes in the form of image macros utilise textual and visual elements simultaneously in order to create humour, and as such any attempt to separate these properties would be unwise" (pp. 14-15).

In her pioneering study Shifman (2013a) emphasized intertextuality and the convergence of various media platforms as key characteristics of Internet memes. She explored memes as a form of digital culture and distinguished three main characteristics of memes: they spread at the micro level but shape the macro structure of society; they reproduce by various means of imitation; and they follow the rules of competitive selection. She also pointed out the importance of examining three different components in a meme: form, content and stance. Shifman (2013a) argues that memes can act to

persuade or advocate, powerfully transmitting loaded messages under the guise of humour or jokes. Milner (2013) also recognizes the role played by memes in participatory media and popular culture, especially in political commentary.

Lou (2017) analyzed the "when" meme and found that it makes use of selective mapping between verbal and visual elements to produce a multimodal simile. Heiskanen (2017), on the other hand, investigated the political role played by memes in the 2016 US presidential campaign which has been described as "the most-memed election in U.S. history" (p. 1). She maintains that memes represent a mode of politico-cultural discourse that would not have been achieved solely by traditional political analysis. Gumilang and Unikom (2018) also discussed the meaning of the meme at 9GAG Official Instagram account.

A cyberpragmatic analysis of memes was conducted by Yus (2018) in order to distinguish different categories based on the relationship existing between picture and text. He proposed a taxonomy of memes based on the relationship between text and image and the cognitive processes involved in interpreting memes. From the cyberpragmatic approach he adopted, the meaning of the meme cannot be interpreted from the individual meaning of text isolated from image. Image macro memes (such as the ones analyzed by the present study) are meant to communicate information by combining the partial meanings provided by text and picture into a slightly or radically different interpretation. The texts acquire prominence in the eventual interpretation and pictures either illustrate what the text communicates, amplify or elaborate the textual meaning, or aid in radically altering the textual meaning (Yus, 2018).

Ciorli (2017) points out that the interpretation of memes requires a

participant's performativity; understanding a meme involves active meaning construction by drawing upon proximity and shared experience. Börzsei (2013) also argues that memes rely heavily on intertextuality and need participants to perform non-linear thinking to fill in the gaps; understanding a meme requires knowledge and higher order intellectual skills.

According to Yus (2018), interpreting a meme entails a "division of labor" between the processing of the text, the processing of the picture, and the identification of possible connotative meanings for text, picture, and text-picture combinations (p. 2). This process involves different strategies. The first is to decode and inferentially enrich the verbal content of the meme in order to obtain the explicit interpretation of the text or explicature. The second is to derive implicatures from verbal content. The third is to decode and inferentially enrich the picture to yield a visual explicature. The fourth is to derive implicatures or implications from the picture in the meme. The fifth and last strategy is to infer possible combinations of text and picture to yield interpretations that are only possible from the combination of these sources of information and not from either of them separately. The salience of some discursive element in the meme will lead the researcher to focus his/her attention there before other parts of the meme are processed (Yus, 2018, p. 4).

2.4 Gender Representation and Multimodal Discourse

Gender is defined by relationships infused with assumed differences between the sexes (Machin et al, 2016). "These assumptions are ideological, and can be shown to be constructed in language, other forms of representation, and in social practices and institutions" (Machin et al, 2016, p. 306).

Analyzing gender representation reveals stereotyping and ideologies related to men and women. Stereotyping may entail negative depiction in the sense that the establishing of stereotyping is associated with the dominant group in the society over the powerless one (Lakoff, 1975). Most gender studies tend to focus on how communication is used to show power, inequalities, or feminist perspective (Baker, 2011). Binary oppositions are usually created between the two genders, cultural stereotypes, discursively constructed in various forms of communication, both verbal and visual. These dichotomies reflect the ideological assumptions about their respective subjects.

Gender issues have long been the focus of attention and sparked a lot of research in social and linguistic studies. Several studies have tackled gender representation from a multimodal perspective in different genres, including English language textbooks (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Marefata & Marzban, 2014), TV commercials (Rubio, 2018), cinematic content (Guha et al, 2015) and young children's popular culture (Lindstrand et al., 2016). In these studies, the issue of how image representation and the combination of different participants contribute to constructing gender roles for men and women was examined.

Advertising discourse is one of the discourses where multimodal analysis of gender representation has been frequently examined. For instance, de Gregorio-Godeo (2009) integrated Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) and Fairclough's (1995) CDA to study the discursive construction of masculinity in male perfume advertisements. Using CDA, Baykal (2016) also investigated how makeup advertisements are used to portray the image of idealized female beauty.

2.5 Gender Representation in Memes

Drakett et al. (2018) argues that "whilst online sexism and harassment are on the increase, scholarly research addressing this appears to have decreased or often relies on dated literature" (p. 3) and that "the need for a critical feminist approach to the study of humour in online spaces starts to become clear" (p. 4).

A number of studies have recently addressed gender representation as portrayed in memes. Shifman (2013b) discussed the use of hypersignification in image macro memes. She found that they usually portray extreme stereotypes by associating a certain (negative) feature with a specific social category. Cases in point are memes containing women and ethnic minorities. "The constant flow of derogatory texts that relate to one specific photo of a group representative forefronts the very idea (and print-based etymology) of stereotyping as molding perceptions about groups into readymade 'templates'" (Shifman, 2013b, p. 348).

Ferreira and Vasconcelos (2015) also conducted a multimodal analysis of antifeminist memes to investigate how they can be exploited to maintain relations of gender domination. They concluded that antifeminist memes portray feminists as unfriendly and irrational characters primarily driven by anger, hate, hostility, and parental deprivation.

Rentschler and Thrift (2015) examined memes from a humorous perspective. They investigated how feminist meme production is utilized for humorous political commentary using the 2012 case of "Binder Full of Women" meme. Their findings reveal that "feminist memes create online spaces of consciousness raising and community building" (p. 1). They thus that

"the meme thus not only represents an innovative form of feminist Internet content, as we think it most certainly is; it also reveals participants' construction of, and location within, a larger feminist-identified network connected through laughter" (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015, p. 3).

Drakett et al. (2018), on the other hand, used thematic analysis to analyze a sample of image macro memes. They suggest that these memes contribute to the troubling construction of gendered online identity through humour and irony with particular focus on women's technological incompetence/ignorance resulting in their exclusion from the online medium. They conclude that "whilst the image macros analysed reproduce many well-worn discourses concerning gender, they mobilise these discourses in a new medium" (p. 35). Drakett et al. (2018) particularly cite the example of 'women demonization', in which memes typically portrary female characters as "jealous, vengeful and potentially threatening" (p. 25). Additionally, men are often shown playing video games, whereas women are depicted as intellectually-superficial. They eventually suggest that counter-memes must be constructed to combat these stereotypically images.

3. Data and Methodology

A sample of memes was collected from Pinterest website using the search terms "men vs. women memes". Pinterest is a social media platform and mobile application that enables saving and searching for information on the Internet particularly using images. Established in 2009, it reached over 450 million monthly active users in 2020 (West, 2021). As an image-based social network, it is said to function as a catalogue of ideas inspiring its users. The researcher has decided to narrow down the sample by focusing on memes related to health and relationships in particular. These two aspects

were chosen as they were salient in the preliminary meme search that the researcher performed on Pinterest website. For a more accurate categorization of the sample memes and the analysis thereof, two different subthemes were distinguished under each of the two above main themes as shown in table 1. Three different memes will be examined under each subtheme amounting to a total of 12 memes that constitute the sample for this study.

Table 1
Themes and subthemes in the sample memes

Main Theme	Subthemes
I. Health	1. Hygiene
	2. Well-being
II. Relationships	1. Friendship and socializing
	2. Romance

The analysis of the selected memes draws upon Kress and van Leewuan's (1996) Theory of Visual Grammar which distinguishes three main functions of language. The first is the representational metafunction. It visually encodes our experiences in the world and unfolds actions or events, as well as the relation between represented participants in the image. There are two processes under this dimension: Narrative processes and conceptual processes. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) describe narrative patterns as dynamic and serving to "present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements," whereas conceptual patterns are static and "represent participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning" (p. 59).

The interaction between the producer and the viewer of the image (interactive participants) is the second dimension presented by the Theory of Visual Grammar. Forming meaning through the interactive function is realized via three factors: image act, social distance and perspective. According to Kress and van Leewuan's (1996), producers visually encode social meanings into images through the gaze of the represented participant, the distance of the participant from the viewer and the angle from which the participant is seen by the viewer.

The third dimension of the framework is the compositional metafunction. Composition combines the interactive and representational acts together via three systems: information value, salience and framing. Information Value relates the participants to each other and to the viewers in accordance with the various zones of the image. Differences in salience can be realized by foregrounding or by differences in size, boldness, tonal contrast, or color. By doing this, certain elements stand out. Elements which create frame and dividing lines, empty space or discontinuity of shapes showing connectedness as a unit or separation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2015).

The choice of the theoretical framework was made considering the selected genre which combines both images and text. The selected memes are thus analyzed on the representational, interactive and compositional levels in order to show the representation of gender by considering salient components, including contact, social distance, attitude, and narrative representation.

To analyze the verbal aspect of the selected memes the study draws upon CDA. As an approach, CDA assumes that ideologies, whether social or political, are constructed and reflected in discourse. Discourse can thus produce and reproduce unequal power relations between different social classes, genders, or ethnic groups (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). CDA is thus centered on three salient concepts: *critique*, *ideology* and *power*. As a proponent of CDA, Fairlough (1995) regards language use as a

form of social practice which enables people to act upon the world and also upon each other. He thus argues that discourse contributes to shaping social identities and social relationships between people and helps construct our beliefs. CDA, therefore, examines the form, structure and content of discourse, from the grammar and wording employed in its creation to its reception and interpretation by the audience. This encompasses the use of verbs, pronouns and nouns within discourse, in addition to the content and tone (Fairclough et al., 2011).

After analyzing the data, the researcher makes observations about the ideological content encoded by the visual and textual content of the memes. By identifying the binary oppositions between the sample memes and to shed light on how various semiotic elements can be employed to reinforce certain ideologies or stereotypes. The underlying assumption is that through MDA, linguists can help draw attention to gendered discourses.

The study thus seeks to answer the following two main research questions:

1. What are the gender representations displayed in visual and verbal discourse of men vs. women memes?

2. How does visual and verbal discourse interact to reflect gender representations in these memes?

4. Data Analysis

In the following section, the selected memes will be analyzed from a multimodal perspective with view to shedding light on the ideology underlying the gender stereotypes negotiated via this means of communication. The sample memes will be divided into two groups based on the topic they tackle: health and relationships. Memes will also be grouped into smaller sets based on the subtopic involved.

4.1 Health

The selected memes related to health depict male and female health habits, including personal hygiene and well-being. The first group of memes tackle personal hygiene. Several memes were found in this respect. In general, women are associated with multiple items as opposed to males who are usually associated with a single item. In figure 1, a woman and a man are shown picking shampoo from a shelf at a supermarket. The women's shampoo is for a specific hair type, namely 'dry damaged hair', whereas the man's is a '6 in 1 shampoo' that can be used, not only for body parts but also for domestic items, such as carpets and dishes, in addition to cars. The woman is carrying two bottles one in each hand, implying that she is reluctant which one to choose, as emphasized by her facial expression. The man, on the other hand, is carrying only one bottle and looks quite satisfied with his choice.

Figure 1. Shampoo

Figure 2. How do you look so young

Figure 3. Beauty industry

A middle-aged lady and a man in figure 2 are having a conversation where they both reply to the question 'how do you look so young?' The lady lists six different types of skin care products: 'moisturizer, exfoliating, charcoal masks, eye cream, serums'. The terminology she uses to describe these products is highly specific and uncommon, e.g., 'exfoliating'. She also designates a particular kind of masks (charcoal) and cream (moisturizer and eye cream). The man in the meme, on the other hand, says that he washes his face with 'shampoo', which is unusual, suggesting an improper use of products. The paradox is that whereas the woman exerts a lot of effort and probably spends a lot of money to buy these sophisticated skin care products in order to look young, the man uses an unsuitable and probably much cheaper product on his face and still manages to look young.

In figure 3, a muscular man is shown in the shower with the text indicating that the beauty industry for men offers products that can be employed for seven different uses, including 'sunscreen', and even 'engine degreaser'. This is contrasted to the beauty industry for women which has especially manufactured a moisturizer for women's 'left eyebrow', a highly specific phrase. It is not only a cream, but a moisturizer, and not just for face, eye region, or even eyebrows but for left eyebrows in particular. The humour in this meme stems from the high specificity of the phrase 'left eyebrow', since both eye brows are supposed to be similar. It is also worth remarking here that vehicles are referred to in both figure 1 and 3, suggesting that they usually come at the top of the male list of priorities even when discussing skin care products.

Overlexicalization is employed using multiple coordinate noun phrases to describe the different uses of skin care products by men as opposed to the highly specific uses for women. This opposition underlines the extra attention given by females to personal hygiene as opposed to males. That is,

whereas males tend to buy only one product for many uses, females often buy specific products for specific uses.

The second set of memes related to health tackles personal well-being, exemplified by sickness and injuries. In figure 4, a man who has a flu is shown being carried on a stretcher into an ambulance while almost completely covered and unconscious. In contrast, a lady is sitting at her desk and working on some papers while looking straight to the camera and smiling. She looks perfectly healthy and happy, although the text says that she is 'on her deathbed'. The image of the man displays rather dark colours and is a medium long shot, while the lady's image displays bright colours and is a medium close up to highlight the different postures. This representation implies much more tolerance for pain and endurance on the part of women.

Figure 4. Flu vs. deathbed

Figure 6. Sports injury

Figure 5. Woman with flu vs. man with cold

Similarly, figure 5 shows 'a man with a cold' bed-ridden in hospital with a medical ventilator on his face and his eyes closed. The tubes are attached to his face and the medical equipment on his chest are so salient in the image that he looks seriously ill. On the left

hand side, the woman 'with a flu', in contrast, is carrying a little baby with one hand and cooking with her other hand while also talking over the phone in a perfect visual representation of multitasking. Her eyes are open and she is smiling. It is also worth noting that 'a flu' is a more severe infection than just a common 'cold'.

Figure 6 juxtaposes men and women on sport fields. A group of girls are shown gathered around one of them whose face is covered in blood apparently due to injury during a sports competition. Despite her immense bleeding and the pain revealed by her facial expression, she still tells her teammates that she can go on. The same meme shows a male football player lying on his back with his knees bent towards his chest while crying in pain 'I'm dying!!!' The footballer is facing the sky with his eyes shut and his body muscles are contracted due to his agony. The expressive lengthening used for the interjection 'ahhhhhhh' indicates that he is screaming loudly in severe pain.

Male and female postures are significantly juxtaposed in the three above memes. It can be noticed that all the men in figures 4, 5 and 6 are shown lying down almost unconscious, as opposed to women who are all facing the camera while standing or sitting upright.

It can be concluded from this section that the three memes dealing with personal well-being suggest that women can endure much more physical pain than men, while also carrying out their responsibilities efficiently and contently. Men, on the contrary, seize to lead a normal life at the slightest infection or injury and give in. This is underlined by the participants' representation in the images by visual choices including gaze, posture and colours, as well as by verbal choices.

4.2 Relationships

The memes selected for this theme depict men and women's relationships in relation to friendship and socializing, as well as romance.

The first two memes are concerned with friendship among men and women and their peers. Figure 7 compares 'girl friendship' to 'guy friendship'. It shows three ladies happily having a meal together while chatting cheerfully. One of them says 'Oh my god. I love you guys'. However, the text below the image reads that this friendship 'lasts only for 2-3 years'. As for guy friendships, two young men are shown exchanging insults, while at the same time laughing delightedly while playing a video game. Surprisingly, the text below the image indicates that this friendship 'lasts forever'. This meme highlights the use of emotional language among females as opposed to males' common use of offensive language. However, it also suggests that friendship among males is much more long-lasting and sincere than that among females.

Figure 7. Friendship

Figure 8. Socializing

Likewise, figure 8 reiterates the same concept by stating that 'men socialize by insulting each other', whereas 'women socialize by complementing each other'. It adds that neither of them 'really mean it', implying that men use insults in an endearing playful way, while women complement each other hypocritically or just out of courtesy. Again the two men in the meme are shown playing a video game while the group of ladies are taking a walk.

The direction of participants' glances in the last two memes differs from males to females. The ladies are shown in three- or four-shots while looking at each other creating bidirectional transactional vectors. That is, they are looking at each other. As for males, in contrast, in both cases they are shown in two-shots, and they are looking away from each other outside the picture frame, thus yielding what we call non-transactional vectors.

Figure 9 compares men's fights to women's fights. Two young men are first seen confronting each other rather aggressively but silently. They are then shown 'after 5 minutes' sitting together on a car hood, eating and chatting. As for women fight, two girls are shown grabbing each other in a violent scene which attracts the attention of the surrounding bystanders. Their facial expressions are angry and their body language vividly aggressive. Ironically, the second picture also shows the two ladies 'after 2 year' still fighting in the same exact way in the same setting. The vectors as well as the gestures of the two ladies in both images convey obvious physical aggression and immense hostility which is absent the men's meme. This implies that reconciliation is much easier and faster on the part of men, whereas women are hostile and lack tolerance and forgiveness.

Figure 9. Fighting

The two following memes are concerned with what men and women think on different occasions regarding relationships. In figure 10, a man and a woman are lying next to each other looking in opposite directions. The woman is worried about her relationship to her partner. She is thinking if he still loves her, whether he is cheating on her and is wondering what has happened to their relationship after they used to be happy. The man, on the other hand, is thinking about purely political issues, including the fact that 'illegals are pouring in', 'China is ripping US off in trade' and that they 'gotta build that wall'. Whereas the woman is preoccupied with her relationship, the man is totally oblivious of these personal issues and focuses on national economic and political problems. The discrepancy between the type of lexical items used on each side of the meme highlights the vast difference between the woman's and man's thoughts and concerns. While she is thinking of 'love', 'cheating', 'happiness' and 'relationship', he is thinking of 'illegals', 'trade' and building the 'wall'.

The discrepancy between the type of lexical items used on each side of the meme highlights the vast difference between the woman's and man's thoughts and concerns. While she is thinking of 'love', 'cheating', 'happiness' and 'relationship', he is thinking of 'illegals', 'trade' and building the 'wall'. The use of several interrogatives by the woman also implies her skepticism and confusion.

This mental separation is further emphasized by their posture lying in opposite directions and looking away from each other. The vectors in the image are non-transactional since they are looking outside the picture frame, being carried away in their thoughts in two opposite directions. The image perspective also emphasizes their detachment and separation.

Figure 10. Worries vs. actual thinking

Figure 11. Alone on Valentine's Day

Figure 11, contrasts a woman's feeling to a man's feeling being alone on Valentine's Day. It is worth mentioning that the two images in this meme have gone viral in meme culture and have been used in countless memes online. On the left hand side we have the *First World Problems* meme which displays a lady with her eyes shut in sadness while hiding part of her face with her hand indicating her pain. Tears are running down her cheek. The woman's head and gaze are directed slightly downwards showing that she's emotionally distressed.

The right hand side of the meme, in contrast, shows the *Success Kid* image macro meme, in which a young kid appears to be celebrating that he does not 'have to spend any money' on Valentine's Day since he is alone. The difference in feelings of sadness versus victory is made clear through the visual elements of the meme as well as through the language used. The meme suggests that while girls hate being lonely on Valentine's Day, guys are much better off being alone on that day to save money. It is thus suggested that the first priority for girls is relationships and emotions, as opposed to guys who are primarily concerned with financial rather than romantic issues.

To achieve the narrative metafunction in the last two memes, notice that the participants' thoughts are shown emanating from them on the image to indicate their mental process of thinking and highlight the different ways in which males and females think.

Finally, figure 12 contrasts a woman's reaction while reading a love letter to a man's reaction reading the same type of letter. The lady is shown in a white bridal dress and veil. She is shown in three subsequent images in chronological sequence. In the first she is smiling, then she starts to get emotional in the second until she bursts into tears in the third picture and places her hand on her face. The three pictures of the man, on the other hand, are identical. He is holding the letter with one hand, not showing any distinct facial expression. The meme implies that while the woman gets touched while reading the letter and starts crying emotionally, the man is totally indifferent and unchanged, thus emphasizing the stereotypical representation of females as romantic and emotional.

How women read love letters:

How men read love letters:
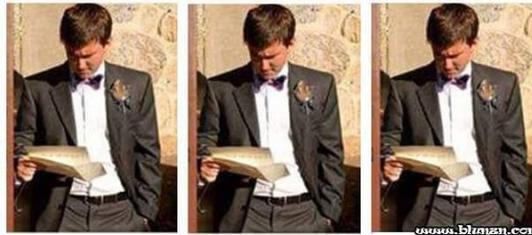
Figure 12. Reading love letters

5. Findings and Discussion

Every kind of signs can be used ideologically to represent specific meanings and power relations (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The present study has attempted to investigate how gender identity is realized in Internet memes taken from Pinterest website with particular focus on those related to health and relationships. The analysis has drawn upon Kress and van Leewuan's (1996) Theory of Visual Grammar as well as CDA in order to investigate how the visual and verbal elements of the memes combine to create gender representation. The findings reveal some significant gender stereotypes emerging from the memes which create several binary oppositions between males and female. These are highlighted both by the visual and verbal elements of the memes.

5.1 Representational Metafunction

Regarding the representational metafunction, which reflects the ways participants, events, and their associated circumstances are realized, on the narrative level, both men and women are portrayed as the participants in each of the memes in similar circumstances but contrasting their actions and thoughts. The circumstances and settings in the memes align with common male and female interests (e.g. playing video games vs. socializing and chatting). Women exist in the memes in groups of three or more, whereas only two men are present in each meme at most. This may imply that women prefer to stick together and like to socialize in large groups, whereas men value one-to-one relationships more. This is underlined by the direction of vectors in the images. Women are often shown with multiple transactional vectors connecting several participants thus emphasizing female bonding and solidarity. Men, on the other hand, are predominantly depicted with non-transactional vectors. They are looking outside the picture frame to reflect different ways of socializing for the two genders. Diverging vectors were also used to show separation and lack of

connection. Participants' thoughts were sometimes shown emanating from them on the image to indicate the mental process of thinking and again contrast the way of thinking for the two genders.

On the Conceptual level, the memes show both men and women in a covert taxonomy as subordinates symmetrically organized. The superordinate 'human being' or 'person' can of course be visually inferred. It has also been noticed that females are usually associated in the meme sample with multiplicity (many to many), whereas males are usually associated with many to one, whether in relation to products, emotions or reactions.

5.2 Interactive Metafunction

As for the interactive mefacuntion, which refers to the relationship existing between represented and interactive participants (viewers), concerning contact, most of the images are offers, because none of the participants represented in them look directly at the viewers, except for two images which are demands because the participants look directly at the viewers to achieve more involvement or perhaps sympathy.

The camera angle reflecting the power view between the participants and the viewers is mostly equal. None of the represented participants are dominant on the viewers. Moreover, the majority of the images are captured by a horizontal frontal angle, so that the viewers are involved with the represented participants in order to get the message through. When representing individual participants, the camera angles used were mainly close and far personal, but when showing participants in groups, medium long and long shots were employed in order to highlight the social aspect and the relationship between participants, with males

shown mostly in two-shots and females in three- or four-shots.

Facial expressions, postures and gestures also serve to reiterate the message expressed in the verbal content and strengthen the distinction between the two genders. The participants whether males or females are foregrounded as the centre of attention in the images, with no clear details in the background. This decontextualization serves to represent the participants as general and stereotypical rather than as specific or in definite contexts.

5.3 Compositional Metafunction

Concerning the compositional metafunction, which is concerned with the modes of organization and the layout of the text, men and women are represented in separate frames in all the memes. The dividing lines in the memes indicate discontinuity and separation between them and serve to visually reinforce the gender divide. Most of the selected memes represent men and women in two vertically arranged frames. There no consistency in placing men and women whether on top or at the bottom of the meme. Only two of the memes were horizontally aligned from left to right. In both of them, the woman was placed on the left (as given information) and the man on the right (as new information), which may serve to place more focus on male characters.

It was noticed that females are generally dressed in brighter colors than males such as white, pink and baby blue perhaps as a symbol of femininity. No significant difference in salience was noticed between males and females in the pictures, which means that men are not represented as powerful or dominant.

5.4 Verbal Component

Though the memes contain very limited verbal content, the language used in

them combines with visual elements to reinforce gender representation. Linguistic features such as overlexicalization using multiple coordinate phrases, generic vs. specific lexical items, offensive terms or insults, lexical items related to stereotypical male interests (vehicles, politics) vs. female interests (love, appearance), antonymy relations and semantic juxtaposition serve to strengthen the discrepancy and create binary opposition.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the selected memes serve to reinforce a number of gender stereotypes. On the female side, women are portrayed as being primarily concerned with their physical appearance and almost obsessed with self-care. They exert a lot of effort and pay attention to details in order to look good. Moreover, the memes point out women's high tolerance for physical pain, as opposed to men who collapse at the slightest fever. Females are also depicted as romantic and emotional creatures who devote a lot of attention to relationships and value bonding and solidarity, especially with their peers. Even though they are sociable talkative sweet talkers, some of their relationships are short-lived, lack forgiveness and genuineness.

In contrast, men in the memes are generally depicted as practical and rather emotionally indifferent. Although they cannot endure physical pain and do not devote much attention to their appearance, they still manage to act in an easygoing and confident manner. They also tend to use offensive language and are more interested in vehicles, video games, in addition to political and financial issues than in relationships. They do not tend to display their emotions and are less talkative than women, yet they manage to sustain their friendships and reconcile with ease. However, none of the metafunctions or verbal elements of the sample memes were employed were found to portray males as dominant or powerful figures.

It has also been found that females are usually associated in the meme sample with multiplicity (one to many), whereas men are usually associated with many to one, whether in relation to products, emotions or reactions. Whereas females are thoroughly concerned with hygiene for different body parts, men are depicted to care for vehicles and pets. Moreover, men's products are referred to using generic names, while very specific terms are used to refer to women's products suggesting high self-care meticulousness.

6. Conclusion

Internet memes have become an integral part of digital culture in the past few years, attracting both popular and academic attention. As a widely accepted means of online communication, memes have come to be recognized as a medium capable of delivering both ideas and entertainment through the combination of both text and image. Being agents of participatory media, memes can shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups; they become especially powerful in framing the online identity of the user.

In conclusion, far from being representative due to its limited scope, the present study may point out that the Theory of Visual Grammar has proved helpful in analyzing Internet memes as cultural units used discursively to reproduce stereotypical images of the two genders and create binary oppositions between them in several ways. The findings reveal that visual and verbal discourses integrate with each other to depict gender representation in the selected memes. The analysis has also revealed the explicit and implicit messages about gender representation through the utilization of various communicative modes and the employment of the notion of choice in

multimodality. From a broader perspective, this paper can serve to underline the wealth of online resources that linguists can mine to discover innovative forms of communication.

It is also recommended to use the integration of multimodal critical discourse analysis approaches for further exploring explicit and implicit meanings in multimodal texts whether printed or digital ones. It would be advisable to investigate memes on a wider scale and on other social networks in order to reveal the ideologies and messages disseminated in this type of multimodal discourse in relation to other social, political or ideological issues.

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