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Sexism and Jokes: a Case Study

CANDIDATO:

Giulia Sambati

RELATORE:

Prof.ssa Delia Carmela Chiaro

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Primo Appello

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# Sexism and jokes: a case study

## 1) Introduction

This project started with the aim of answering a question I have been asking myself for the last three years: *do we necessarily agree with what we laugh at?*

During the past three years I have often been encouraged to reflect upon the implications of humour in different areas and especially in linguistics and translation. This inevitably brought me to confront myself with the limits of humour, if there are any, and consider what it is that makes us laugh at jokes, if there is a line that should not be crossed in a joke or not.

Last year I worked on a paper on rape jokes, which sparked my interest for the matter: is there a relationship between what makes us laugh and what we are, as people? Do the jokes we tell give away our personality and our defining characteristics? I decided to continue this type of research by applying it to a broader theme: jokes on women. As a feminist, I have always been suspicious towards a type of humour that provokes laughter at women's expenses. This study helped me see that there can be a discrepancy in how people perceive two different ways of representing the same topic and that laughing at a sexist joke does not necessarily imply being sexist.

The aim of this study is to analyse the relationship between the respondents' opinion on a statement and on a joke and to compare the two answers in order to verify whether there is a discrepancy, and of what nature, between them. The study is articulated in three sections: in the first one I explain the methodology used to retrieve information, in the second one I examine the data obtained and in the third one I draw a conclusion based on the analysis of the answers given by the participants.

## **2) Methodology**

In order to establish if there is a connection between what makes us laugh and what we believe in, I decided to conduct a research on a group of 30 people. The research has been carried out in three phases: the preparation of the questionnaire, the submission of the questionnaire to the interviewees and lastly the analysis of the answers. In this section I examine the first and second phases, while the analysis of the answers will be part of the third section of the study.

### **2.1 Preparation and description of the questionnaire**

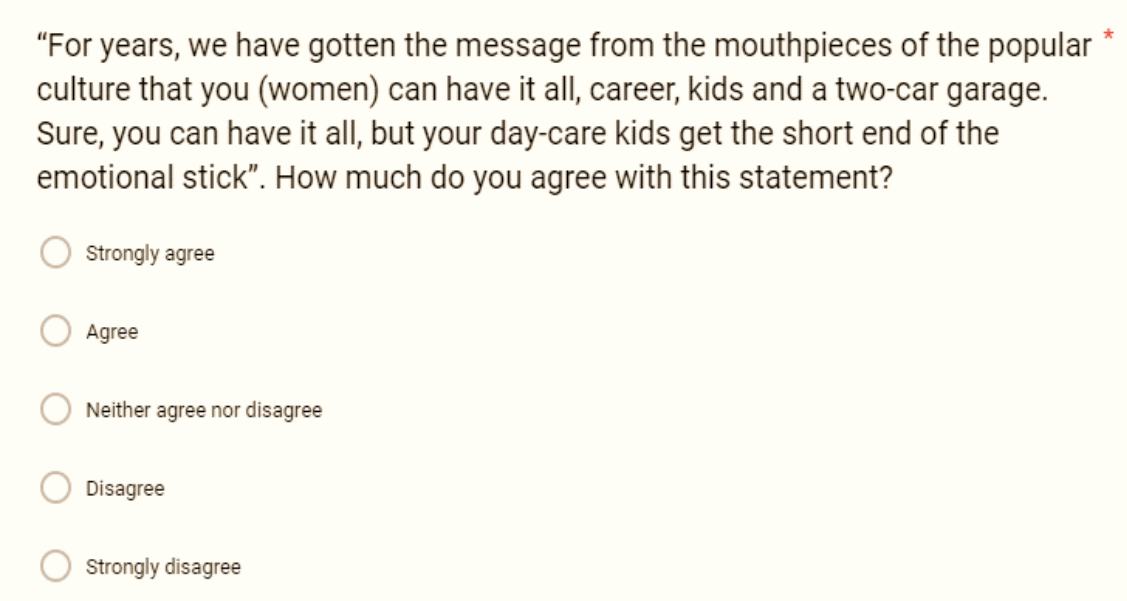
I firstly had the idea to prepare a questionnaire while working on a project based on data analysis carried out the previous year as I find it interesting to compare and analyse people's reactions and realize how different they can be from what we expected in the first place.

To prepare the questionnaire I had to look on the internet for suitable jokes and statement and create three pairs 'statement-joke', making them revolve around the same topic, in order to compare people's reaction to the first and the second one and see if their answers resulted in any discrepancy.

The questionnaire was created using Google Drive's "Forms" feature: I developed a three-section questionnaire that the respondents had to fill in online; the answers were recorded and automatically saved as soon as the form had been completely filled in and submitted. Although Google Forms provides with graphics elaborated from the responses for every question that has been asked in the questionnaire, I decided to develop new graphics in order to confront the results from one section of the questionnaire to the other, rather than simply analysing the answers to each question. All fields were marked as compulsory, therefore there are no blank answers.

Different types of questions have been used in order to retrieve as much useful information as possible from the questionnaire. Open answers questions, such as the very first one "What is your gender?" have been used for the demographic section, to give the respondent more freedom when answering. On

the other hand, two different types of structured questions have been used to develop the section on the statements and the jokes, both using an interval to measure the opinion of the respondent. The questions on the statements and the jokes were developed using a Likert response scale which was articulated on a bipolar scale going either from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (Figure 1) or from 'extremely likely' to 'extremely unlikely'.



"For years, we have gotten the message from the mouthpieces of the popular <sup>\*</sup> culture that you (women) can have it all, career, kids and a two-car garage. Sure, you can have it all, but your day-care kids get the short end of the emotional stick". How much do you agree with this statement?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

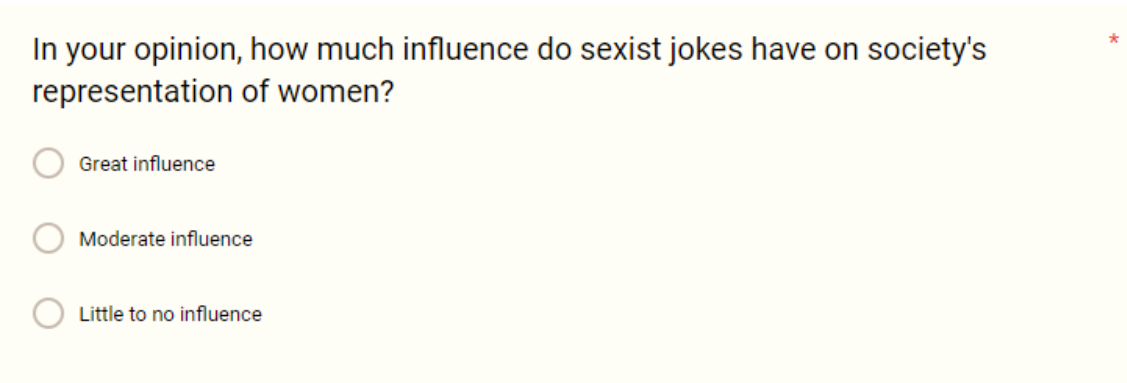
☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Figure 1. Example of a structured question made using the Likert scale

Other questions, such as the last one of the questionnaire, used a semantic differential approach, offering to the interviewee the possibility to choose from a scale of adjectives, as shown by Figure 2.



In your opinion, how much influence do sexist jokes have on society's <sup>\*</sup> representation of women?

☐ Great influence

☐ Moderate influence

☐ Little to no influence

Figure 2. Example of a question made using a semantic differential approach

## **2.2 Structure of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire is articulated in three sections. The first section is made of six questions: four demographic ones to assess the gender, age, level of education and nationality of the interviewee, and two introductory questions on the perception of the presence of sexism in jokes. Section two proposes three statements retrieved from the internet, which present different sexist remarks that can be associated with three of the main topics that inspire sexism in society: women in the working context, women's driving skills and women's role in the household and, more in general, in society. Lastly, section three proposes three jokes which have been retrieved from the internet as well, whose punchline is based on the three aforementioned topics. Section two and three are inevitably linked as the analysis compares the answers given to both the sections rather than considering them separately. An invite to add a personal comment closes the questionnaire.

## **2.3 Data collection**

The data were collected between January and March 2017. Potential respondents were firstly contacted by message or email, the questionnaire was then shared with them via email once they agreed with taking part to the study. Ten to fifteen minutes was the average time necessary to complete the questionnaire. In order to respect the privacy of the interviewees, and receive the most honest answers possible, the questionnaire was anonymous.

## **2.4 Description of the sample**

The questionnaire was submitted to 30 random people, 11 women and 19 men. The age of the interviewees ranged from 19 to 48, with a median of 26, the majority of them being in their late twenties. As Figure 3 shows, almost two third of the people interviewed have at least a bachelor degree, and eight of them have a master degree. One person indicated a Postgraduate Professional Diploma when

answering about his highest level of education while the remaining 10 interviewees' answer was secondary school. Apart from 4 cases where, due to the age of the respondents, it can be inferred that they have not proceeded to go to University after secondary school, the other 6 interviewees seem to be too young to have a bachelor degree as their age ranges from 19 to 23 and it is likely they are currently attending University.

Half of the people interviewed (15 out of 30) are British, while the others come from different nations, amongst which Australia, Malaysia, Italy and France.

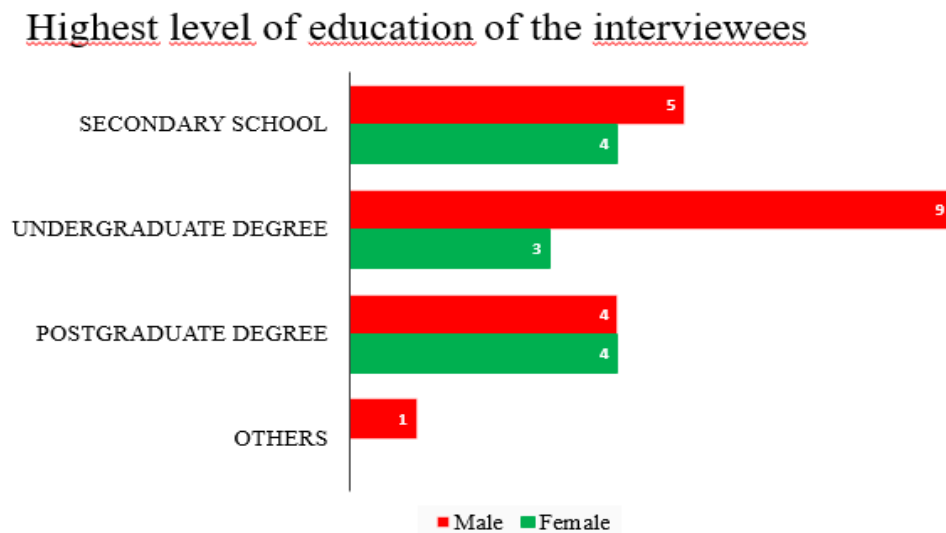


Figure 3. Highest level of education of the interviewees

For the purpose of the study, the interviewees were asked how aware they are of the presence of sexism in some jokes and if they have been told a sexist joke before. To the first question, 'How aware are you of the presence of sexism in some jokes?', 21 interviewees said they are very aware and the remaining 9 said they are aware to some extent of the presence of sexism in jokes. Women appeared to be chose the 'very aware' option more frequently than men, and often those who agreed with the statements also said to be very aware. The answers to the second question, 'to your knowledge, have you been told a sexist joke before?', show almost unanimity as only 2 people answered differently from all the other respondents: one of them, a man, said he had never been told a sexist joke before while another one, a woman, said she was not sure whether she had been or not.

## **2.5 Limitations of the study**

The study is based on online questionnaires which, despite giving the possibility to reach a wider audience, cannot offer the chance to see the respondent's facial expressions and take the involuntary reactions of the face and body into account while carrying out the analysis of the answers. The study is therefore based on responses that are hopefully honest and that reflect the real opinion of the interviewee. For this purpose, I decided to create an anonymous questionnaire to make the respondents feel at ease in answering as honestly as possible. Another limitation to consider is that the respondents come from different nations, which would make it impossible to analyse the answers from a cultural point of view.

## **3) Analysis of the data**

### **3.1 First pair – Statement and Joke**

The statement proposed was the following one:

"So here's a question: why are women such bad drivers? Really. I really want to know, because it's driving me nuts. You think I'm generalising too much? Every time there's a car travelling slowly in the outside lane, forcing everyone to overtake, not responding even to flashing headlights because the driver isn't looking in the mirror, it's a woman."

The joke proposed was the following one:

"We bumped into some old friends yesterday... my wife was driving."

#### **3.1.1 Introduction to the theme**

*"Female drivers outscored males not only in in-car tests but also when observed anonymously using one of the UK's busiest junctions - Hyde Park Corner"* – The Telegraph



For decades, women's ability to drive has been the butt of sexist jokes, although it seems there is no real reason for women's driving skills to have this reputation. According to the car test pass rates table made by the Department of Transport of the United Kingdom, women appear to be more likely than men to fail their practical driving test, with data showing that in the financial year 2014/2015 50,5% of men that conducted the test passed it, compared to 43,6% of women. Data collected on the theory test shows, on the other hand, that women performed better than men, 53,6% of them passing it as opposed to 48,7% of men.

Besides, before it became illegal to do so under European Union rules in 2013, women were offered cheaper car insurance than men, as statistics show women are more cautious when driving, and are less likely to take as much risks as men do, which results in less car accidents and, before 2013, in smaller insurance premiums. How can the stereotype that women drive worse than men be so widespread, when there is evidence that even supports the contrary? Jokes about women incapability to drive could be one of the reasons why this idea is so rooted in both women and men's mind.

### **3.1.2 Analysis of the answers**

Of the three pairs statement-joke that have been analysed, the one that has women's driving skills as subject is the one that showed more controversy.

The examination of this pair statement-joke will proceed with the analysis of the answers to the question to the statement and to the questions to the joke and a subsequent confrontation of the outcome, with particular attention to the gender of the respondent.

As shown in Figure 4, of the 30 interviewees who took part to the questionnaire, 7 showed agreement with the statement that affirms that women are not good drivers, 2 people neither agreed nor disagreed with it and the remaining 21 disagreed. Amongst those 7 interviewees who ticked either the 'agree' or the 'strongly agree' options, only one is a woman. She is a 22 years old postgraduate student, who says to be very aware of the presence of sexism in jokes and who,

despite showing agreement with 2 out of 3 statements, did not find any of the jokes likely to be laughed at.

Out of 21 interviewees who disagreed, 10 are women. Overall, out of 11 women who took part to the study, only one strongly agreed with the statement, while all the other ones showed some level of disagreement. This indicates that the stereotype of women driving worse than men is rooted in men’s opinion, while women seems to be aware of the fact that their driving skills are not inferior to the ones of the opposite sex.

HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT?



Figure 4. Answers given to the first statement

The joke “We bumped into some old friends yesterday... my wife was driving” plays on the different meanings of the verb ‘to bump into’ and works with the stereotype that women cannot drive and are more likely to cause accidents than men. Out of 30, 9 interviewees found the joke likely or extremely likely to laugh at. Of these 9, 6 had already shown some level of agreement with the statement, 2, a man and a woman, disagreed with the statement but found the joke likely to laugh at, although they respectively indicate it as unlikely and neither likely nor unlikely for them to tell it, and 1 man chose the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option for the statement but found the joke likely to laugh at. It is interesting to notice that, even though he found the joke funny, he thinks it is unlikely for him to tell the joke and

he remained coherent with his answer the question to the statement by answering once more with the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option to the question ‘How much do you agree with the joke’s representation of women’s driving skills?’.

Three of the remaining 21 respondents said it is neither likely nor unlikely for them to laugh at the joke and they all answered to the question to the statement by choosing the ‘disagree’ option.

As far as the majority of the interviewees is concerned, they did not find the joke likely to laugh at, they did not agree with the statement and when asked whether they thought the joke gave an accurate representation of women’s driving skills, they showed disagreement.



Figure 5. Answers given to the first joke

### 3.1.3 A look at the difference between sexes

In the statement section, 10 out of the 21 people that chose the ‘strongly disagree’ or the ‘disagree’ options are women. Only one woman, out of the 11 who took part to the questionnaire, agreed with the statement that women are not good drivers. In the joke section, 9 out of 18 people that chose the ‘extremely unlikely’ or the ‘unlikely’ options are women, while the remaining 2 found the joke to be likely to laugh at. Out of 11 women, 10 did not agree with the joke and 9 did not find it

funny, therefore one of them found the joke likely to be laugh at while still disagreeing with the statement.

In this pair statement-joke, this interesting discrepancy occurred another time: as the woman who was just mentioned, a male respondent disagreed with the statement and found himself likely to laugh at the joke.

### **3.2 Second pair – Statement and Joke**

The statement proposed was the following one:

"I notice more and more women that go around acting as if they are on the same level as Men. This is a disgrace. Women need to be put back in their place and get back into the kitchen where they ALL belong!".

The joke proposed was the following one:

"A man runs over his wife. Whose fault is it? The man, he shouldn't be driving in the kitchen."

#### **3.2.1 Introduction to the theme**

*"And how did I get elected? Nobody was, I didn't have anybody for me. We just got an army of people who, um, and many women, who left their kitchens to go out and go door-to-door and to put yard signs up for me" - Ohio Gov. John Kasich*

Historically women have been in charge of preparing the food, rather than bringing it home: from the Palaeolithic until the First World War women have spent a lot of time in the kitchen, whether they wanted to or not, they did not really have a choice. Before working became a choice that women made to realize themselves outside the household and not just because they needed to earn some money to help the family finances, the fact that women's place is in the kitchen became part of the culture of many societies. Many cultures, especially those which revolve for

an important part around food such as the Italian one, have imagined an ideal woman who is very good at cooking and who is the 'queen of the household'. It is not a coincidence if there is a stereotype, often true, of Italian grandmothers being worried about their nieces cooking skills, that need to be improved if they want to find a husband and live a happy marital life.

Sexism gets along well with the stereotype that women's place is the kitchen, as it is the excuse to reduce women to a context that men can have a control on. From television advertisements to remarks made by politicians, the idea that women belong to the kitchen is still going strong and the many jokes about it prove it.

### **3.2.2 Analysis of the answers**

Of the three pairs of statements and jokes, this one has found almost all participants to agree on the same answers, with a very few, but noteworthy exceptions. The analysis of this pair will proceed by examining the entirety of the answers to both the statement and the joke, focusing in particular on the answers of 7 participants.

Of the 30 interviewees who took part to the questionnaire, 26 completely disagreed with the statement, 3 of them disagreed and only 1 agreed. This overwhelmingly unanimity can only find explanation in the aforementioned considerations on the role in society attributed to women and that has been fought for more than two centuries. The only participant who chose the 'agree' option is a 24 years old man, who says to be aware to some extent of the presence of sexism in jokes; to the questions about the joke he answered saying that it is extremely unlikely for him to both laugh at the it and tell it himself and he also chose the option 'strongly disagree' when asked if he agreed with the representation offered by the joke of women's role in society, in contrast with what he said before about the statement, to which he agreed.

Of the 3 people who disagreed only 1 is a woman: unlike the other two interviewees who disagreed, she did not find the joke funny nor she thought she would tell it herself. One of the two men that chose the 'disagree' option said that he would find the joke neither likely nor unlikely to laugh at but that it would be

likely for him to tell it; he still disagreed with how women are portrayed in this joke. The other man's answers are even more interesting: while disagreeing with the statement, he found the joke to be extremely likely to laugh at and likely for him to tell it, adding that he agrees with the how women's role in society is represented in the joke, the opposite to what he said about the statement, to which he disagreed. Like him, 4 of the 26 people that chose the 'strongly disagree' showed a discrepancy between what they said about the statement and what they said about the joke: these 4 interviewees, all men, found the joke either extremely likely or likely to be laughed at, likely for them to tell it, except for one interviewee who said it to be neither likely nor unlikely. Three of them disagree with how this joke portrays women, while one of them says to neither agree nor disagree with it.

HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT YOU LAUGH AT THE JOKE?



Figure 6. Answers given to the second joke

### 3.3 Third pair – Statement and Joke

The statement proposed was the following one:

“For years, we have gotten the message from the mouthpieces of the popular culture that you (women) can have it all, career, kids and a two-car garage. Sure, you can have it all, but your day-care kids get the short end of the emotional stick”.

The joke proposed was the following one:

“–Why haven’t we sent women to the moon?

– Because it doesn’t need cleaning yet! - ”

### **3.3.1 Introduction to the theme**

*"Comedy and satire are based on aggressiveness and not being nice...Until the 1960s, it was seen as unladylike to be funny. But, even now, women tend to prefer telling jokes at their own expense and men tend to prefer telling jokes at other people's expense."* – Helga Kotthoff

Many steps have been taken towards equality between men and women, yet gender equality at work seems still far away from happening. As for centuries women have been holding a central position in the household and a marginal one outside their own homes, it is only natural that humour has found in this situation a fertile ground upon which it thrived. In this case, besides reinforcing a stereotype, humour plays a crucial role since it has the power to ridicule the efforts made by working women and confine them to a role and position in society they may not want to belong to. In particular, the statement here taken into consideration stresses the idea that women should not be more than housewives and mothers, as they cannot possibly juggle everything in the daily life and still be able to take care of their children. The joke, on the other end, plays on the idea that women’s job is to clean, whether that is at home or at work, while reinforcing the status men have in the workplace.

Moreover, the contrast between the target of the joke chosen by women and men, as underlined by Kotthoff, is significant in terms of the relationships that can be established in the workplace: if women are always the butt of the joke, whether it is their joke or a man’s joke, there will be only unequal power relationships between the two sexes and will reinforce men’s privileged position at work. This shows to which extent humour is a powerful tool in this context, as jokes that revolve only around stressing women’s inabilities outside the household can

prevent the development of an inclusive workplace and can slow down the process of breaching the differences of gender at work.

3.3.2 Analysis of the answers

This pair of statement – joke shows both variety in the responses and contrast between the answers given to the second section and the answers given to the third one. The analysis of this pair will proceed with the examination of the answers given to the statement and joke, focusing on the discrepancies that have appeared from the responses.

Of the 30 interviewees, 2 strongly agreed with the statement, 6 agreed with it, 1 neither agreed nor disagreed, 12 disagreed and 9 strongly disagreed. This statement is therefore the one that offers the most varied spectrum of answers compared to the other 2, as shown by Figure 7. Out of the 8 people that showed some degree of agreement, 2 are women; the interviewee that neither agreed nor disagreed is also a woman. Even though they did not disagree with the statement, they all found the joke not funny and not likely for them to tell it. When asked whether the joke gave an accurate representation of women in the work environment, 2 of them neither agreed nor disagreed and 1 of them disagreed.

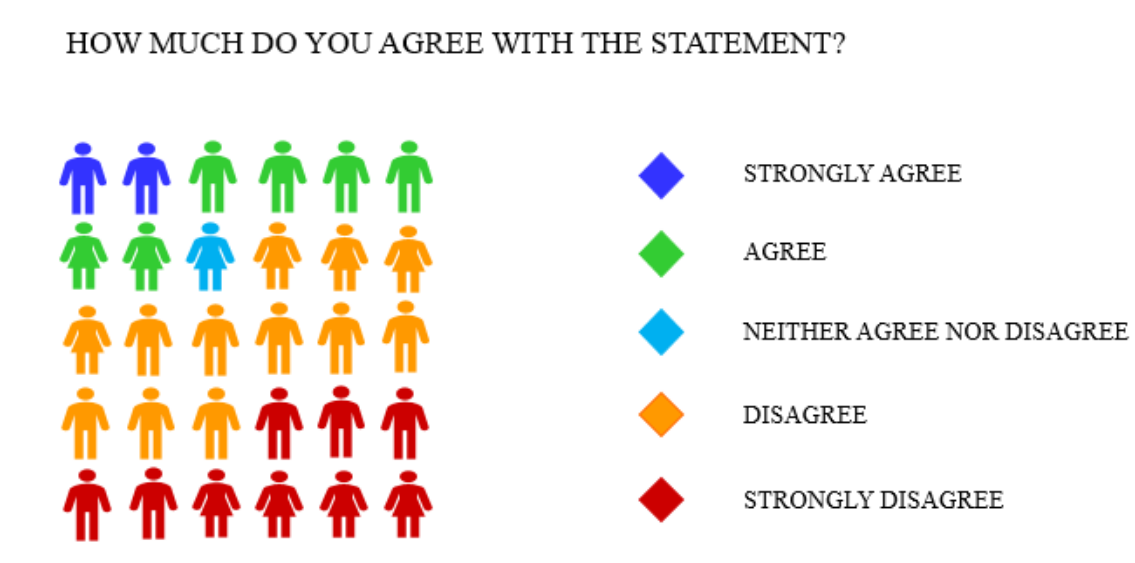


Figure 7. Answers given to the third statement



The joke, on the other hand, did not inspire a similar variety of answers in the interviewees. Only 5 people, 4 men and 1 woman, found it likely to laugh at, 4 people, 2 men and 2 women, found it neither likely nor unlikely to laugh at, and the rest of the interviewees found it unlikely or extremely unlikely for them to laugh at the joke. Only one person, a man who said to strongly agree with the statement, reinforced his view by agreeing as well with the representation the joke gives of women in the working environment. Three people, 2 women and 1 man, neither agreed nor disagreed with it, while all the others disagreed or strongly disagreed, most of them in accordance with the opinion they have already expressed about the statement.

#### HOW LIKELY IS IT THAT YOU LAUGH AT THE JOKE?

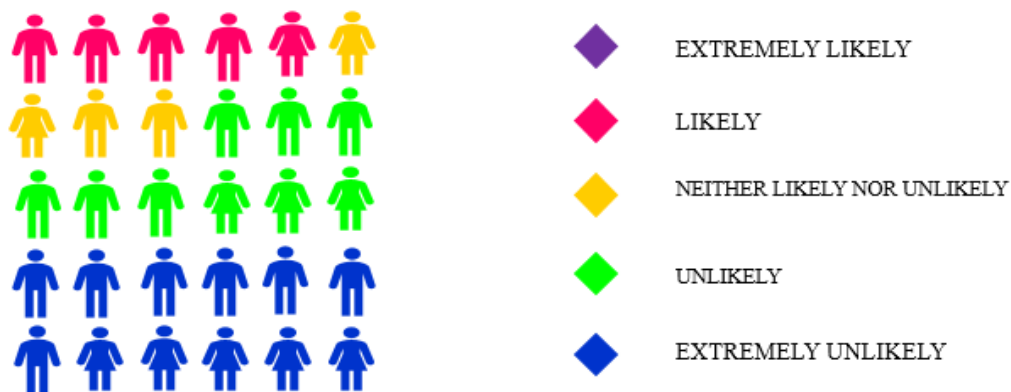


Figure 8. Answers to the third joke

#### 4) The results of the study

Two main tendencies have emerged from the analysis of the answers that were given to the questionnaire by the thirty interviewees. In the majority of the cases the respondents gave a coherent answer to the statement and to the joke: if they showed disagreement with the statement, they also found the joke unlikely to laugh at and unlikely for them to tell it. On the other hand, there have been a few cases

in which the respondent disagreed with the statement but found the joke likely to laugh at or likely for them to tell, and vice versa there were cases in which the respondent agreed with the statement and disagreed with the joke. While the latter is not interesting for the purpose of this study, the first case is the perfect example of the theory that you can joke about anything and that humour does not work as every other communication tool does, as these cases have shown that even if you do not agree with the opinion that women cannot drive, you may find a joke on women's driving skills funny. For some people and in some cases then, humour seems to be detached from their perception of life and their ideas.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from this study is that women showed unanimity in most of the cases in disagreeing with the statement and in not finding the related joke funny as well. Do women have no sense of humour, as some (men) claim, or they are simply more sensitive to jokes made at their expenses? This second option seems in contrast with what I have just stated about the discrepancy between statement and joke expressed by some people, but it is worth underlining here that those cases were mostly represented by men. Women then appear not at ease with being the butt of the joke: we could say that women do not like this type of humour, rather than that they do not have sense of humour.

To the question "In your opinion, how much influence do sexist jokes have on society's representation of women?", 7 interviewees answered great influence, 12 answered moderate influence and 11 little to no influence. Most of those who answered little to no influence had previously agreed with the statements and had found the joke likely to laugh at. The participants were also asked to leave a comment if they wanted to, and those who did confirm the two tendencies that have been mentioned above: an opposition against sexist jokes, or an acceptance of sexist jokes because they are not perceived as a mean through which sexism is spread and reinforced. Here there are some of the most significant comments left by the interviewees:

I believe humour is a context where everything should be viewed as separate from serious discussion. Humour can be used inappropriately but nothing in humour is inappropriate. My favourite comedy shows all tend to be satirical and un-Pc South Park, Jim Jeffries, Chris Rock.

I think the jokes are funny cause they are obviously playing on untrue stereotypes. I don't think sexist jokes are a problem and I do think the silly stereotypes go both ways -e.g. many men would better identify themselves with a caring role, but a typical stereotype is that of a sexist slightly chauvinist man.

Jokes show an individual's real point of view. A rape joke shows an individual who thinks rape is funny and perpetuates rape culture.

Sexism won't be overcome until people stop laughing at jokes like these. They do more harm than good. If an insecure woman is hoping to learn to drive, but hears jokes about how bad women are at driving, will she still want to drive? If a woman wants to be a scientist but her dad says women should stay in the kitchen, will she ever become a scientist?

These four answers show a completely different attitude towards sexist jokes and common ground appears not easy to be found as these people have a contrasting perspective of what the role of humour in society is. Those who see humour as a mean to convey a message that is to be taken seriously will never agree with jokes that laugh at someone else's expenses, whether the 'other' is a woman, a Muslim rather than a Christian, a homosexual or a disabled.

## 5) Conclusion

*"If you can't joke about the most horrendous things in the world, what's the point of jokes? What's the point in having humor? Humor is to get us over terrible things." Ricky Gervais*

The study was carried out on 30 people with the aid of a questionnaire. The analysis of the answers the participants gave to the questionnaire reveals that there are some discrepancies between their reactions to a statement that is perceived as serious and therefore debatable and a joke on the same topic. The interviewees that expressed different opinions on the statement and the related joke show that they perceive humour as detached from the broader topic the joke is using as target to provoke laughter. The answers those participants gave highlight that you can

disagree with the stereotype that women are not good drivers, but you can still have a laugh at a joke that makes fun of women's terrible driving skills.

Differently from those who coherently agreed with the statement and found the related joke funny, the interviewees that provided contrasting answers to the statement and the joke allow me to think that their perception of humour is the one that the comedian and actor Ricky Gervais portrays as well: humour is a mean of communication, detached from the implications a statement or opinion may convey, but only intended to provoke laughter and make some events easier to cope with. In conclusion, this study proved that, without necessarily agreeing with an idea, a joke on that very idea can make us laugh: our spontaneous reaction to a joke cannot define us, as we may not act in compliance to the idea that has been conveyed through the joke.

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