Men and women on air: gender stereotypes in humour sequences in a Malaysian radio phone-in programme

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Abstract

This paper investigates the use of humour in a Malaysian radio phone-in programme to reinforce or challenge stereotypical conceptualisations of men and women. It is argued that these acts of humour uphold gender hierarchies and inequalities in a few ways. Traditional stereotypical portrayals of women still prevail, and these characteristics are naturalised by appealing to assumed shared common sense. Although both sexes are mocked in some instances of humour, when analysing why men and women are ridiculed, it was found that the men were targeted for two conflicting reasons: for exhibiting stereotypical feminine characteristics and for attempting to produce a hegemonic masculine identity. On the other hand, women were mocked for embodying traits culturally ascribed to masculinity. It is concluded that this works to legitimate men's social dominance over women.

Keywords: gender stereotypes; postfeminism; humour; media talk; malaysia

Introduction

The United Nations Secretary-General (2010) claimed that stereotypical representations of women in the media continue to be a serious issue in many countries, with women often being depicted as 'victims, sex objects, economically and emotionally dependent, and weak, passive and unprofessional'. In a report jointly written by Malaysian women's organisations in 2005, gender stereotyping in the media was specified as a critical area of concern (NGO Shadow Report Group 2005). Little progress has been made since then – in a 2012 report by a coalition of twenty-two NGOs, the proliferation of gender stereotypes in the media was identified as one of the significant forms of discrimination faced by Malaysian women that have been largely ignored in government policies (Malaysian NGO CEDAW Alternative Report Group 2012).

This paper explores the use of humour in a postfeminist Malaysian radio phone-in programme, 'He Says, She Says', to reinforce and resist stereotypical conceptualisations of women and men. It will be argued that these acts of humour sustain gender hegemony in subtle and sophisticated ways. While there is a lack of consensus on the specific definition of 'postfeminism', the term, in this paper, refers to a sensibility which both invokes and rejects feminism with an emphasis on consumerism, individualism, choice, empowerment, and the notion of natural sex differences (Gill and Scharff 2011).

As a response to feminist pressure, overt sexism has been stigmatized within public discourse (Pauwels 2003), and in the media, sexism is now more indirect, occurring, for instance, at the level of the proposition or presupposition, or in the form of androcentrism in texts (Mills 2008). For example, Cameron (2006) observed that many sexist advertisements in the British media rely on inferencing, which allows advertisers to deny any charges of intentional sexism. In an earlier study, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) found that representations of rape cases in newspapers were written from an androcentric perspective, downplaying male responsibility while emphasising female responsibility. Mills (2008) argued that one common form of indirect sexism is the use of humour that draws on stereotypes for comic effect, pointing out the ironised and stereotypical representations of women and men within several examples across a range of media platforms, such as Chris Moyles's show on BBC Radio 1 and Burger King's TV advertisements. Sunderland (2007) proposed a few ways to respond to sexist humour, including adopting a resistant reading position that examines and challenges the presuppositions of the jokes. This is the stance taken in this study.

Despite the high levels of sexism in media content, it has been argued that contemporary media culture is postfeminist, not antifeminist, due to the double entanglement of feminist and antifeminist ideas (Gill 2007) where women are offered selected freedoms and choices in place of feminist politics and social change (McRobbie 2009). For example, Lazar (2009), in her linguistic analysis of beauty advertisements in Singaporean media, distinguished an emerging postfeminist identity that she labelled as 'entitled femininity', which, as with other postfeminist identities, is complex and contradictory. The female entitlement to consume is supported through implicit references to the success of feminism, yet this feminine identity is positioned in direct contrast not only with the 'popular (mis)conception of feminists as dour and mannish' (Lazar 2009:390) but also with heteromasculinity, reinforcing a gender dichotomy.

The notion of natural biological sexual differences between men and women, partly popularised by Gray's (1991) bestseller Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus, is a key feature of postfeminism (Shifman and Lemish 2011) and can be seen across all media (Gill 2007). Benwell (2006) and Mills (2008), for instance, found that the assumption of natural differences between the sexes underlies a great deal of the sexism in British men's magazines and the stereotypical ways men and women are represented. The chosen talk radio show, 'He Says, She Says', can be classified as postfeminist as it was based on '"Mars 'n' Venus" thinking' (Gill 2007:35). Every morning, a new topic was introduced and listeners of both sexes were invited to call in to discuss their opinions. As implied by the name of the programme, it was assumed that the male and female participants would have differing views due to essentialised sexual differences, and the show's humour was often derived from ridiculing stereotypical feminine and masculine customs and cultures.

Radio phone-ins are a particularly important and interesting area of study as they offer 'one of the few media environments in which ordinary members of the public are given the opportunity to speak on issues and events in their own voices' (Hutchby 2006:81), thereby providing insights into the gender stereotypes and ideologies subscribed by members of the populace. Social ideologies, when couched as common sense, can be easily fed to the public, and audiences do not often critically reflect on the linguistic choices imposed on them, especially if the interlocutors appear funny and friendly. Nevertheless, the media's audience may not passively accept the sexist views perpetuated, as ideologies can be resisted, challenged and changed (Milestone and Meyer 2012). Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the ideological effects of the media, attention must be given to the audience's response (Santhakumaran 2002). However, while there have been several studies on gender representations in television commercials in Malaysia (e.g. Wee, Choong and Tambyah 1995; Bresnahan, Inoue, Liu and Nishida 2001; Tan, Ling and Theng 2010), there is a lack of research on how the categories of 'woman' and 'man' are co-constructed by media producers and the public on Malaysian radio. This paper aims to address this.

The gender equality myth in Malaysia

McRobbie (2004) argued that postfeminism positively invokes feminism, but only to suggest that it has accomplished its goal of achieving gender equality. Postfeminism universalises third wave discourses that highlight certain advances made by women in some societies in order to construct the postfeminist narrative of self-determination and self-efficacy, and uses them to reject the political aspects of feminism that direct attention to gender inequality for the reason that this positions women as victims and hinders them from embracing their empowerment (Budgeon 2011). Due to the depoliticising effects of postfeminism, researchers such as Cameron (2006), Lazar (2005a), and Mills and Mullany (2011) have drawn attention to the need for more critique of postfeminism.

This political apathy can be perceived in Malaysia where feminism has entered a 'market-driven phase' in which a 'collective delusion is being cultivated that freedom of the market and an unfettered mass-consumer culture are good enough measures to exact personal autonomy and power' (Ng, Mohamad and Tan 2006:39). In fact, during the Women's Day 2012 celebrations, the Prime Minister claimed that women's rights groups are not needed in Malaysia because the nation is progressive in terms of gender equality and Malaysian women are so successful that men are now 'an endangered species' (Hassan 2012). On the contrary, several measures show that Malaysia has a long way to go to achieving gender equality. For example, Malaysia's ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index fell from 72 in 2006 to 97 out of 134 countries in 2011 (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality 2012), before dropping further to 106 in 2016 (World Economic Forum 2016). One key factor behind Malaysia's low ranking is the lack of female

political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2016). Ranked 134th in terms of political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2016), women hold only three ministerial posts (8.6%) while parliamentary membership stands at 10.4 per cent, far short of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) requirement of 30 per cent (Office of the Prime Minister 2016; Martin 2013; Redfern and Aune 2010).

Since one of the recurring topics in the data analysed in this paper relates to gendered power within marriage, the reality of women's economic dependence on their husbands needs to be highlighted here. Female participation in the Malaysian workforce during the data collection period (2008) – at 46 per cent – was lower than most countries at or above Malaysia's income level and the lowest in East Asia (World Bank 2012). While more than half of entry level professionals are female, Malaysian women tend not to return to the workforce after marriage and child birth due to difficulties in balancing work and family obligations (Merican 2013). Implicit within this is the cultural expectation that the mother should be the primary caregiver. In fact, Malaysia does not grant fathers any paternity leave (World Economic Forum 2016).

In addition to the lack of economic power within marriage, domestic violence is another significant issue for women. Although the women's rights movement successfully pressured the government to establish the Domestic Violence Act (Hassan 2012) in 1994 after a seven-year wait for the bill to be passed (Sta Maria 2013), the law only offers protection to women who show physical signs of abuse, and marital rape is not criminalized (Ng, Mohamad and Tan 2006). Furthermore, the implementation and enforcement of the law have been severely criticised (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality 2013; Women's Aid Organisation 2013) – there has been an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence against women (Asiaone 2013), with more than 3000 cases being reported annually (Joint Action Group for Gender Equality 2013), but the conviction rate was merely 8 per cent between 2010 and 2012 (Sim 2013).

Approaches

Theorising gender

This paper adopts a third wave approach to gender. As with many third wave feminist studies, it is influenced by Judith Butler's concept of performativity (Butler 1990, 1993, 1997) and supports a social constructionist, rather than essentialist, view of gender, where gender is not fixed but produced within social interactions (Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003) and consequently, a potential site of struggle over what the individual hypothesises to be possible within the interaction (Crawford 1995). These social resources that are available to the individual are informed by wider ideological forces (Mills 2008). Therefore, alongside an analysis of how masculinity and femininity are conceptualised within the local context, these representations will also be related back to the ideologies of gender that impacted the interaction.

This paper builds on the growing body of language and gender research on masculinities (e.g. Benwell 2005) resulting from 'feminism's sustained interrogation and critique of masculinity' and the perception of men as a gendered group (Gill 2007:29) as well as the need for 'a more nuanced account of how contemporary men understand themselves as gendered beings' (Cameron 2009:12). The notion of hegemonic masculinity, which is repeatedly drawn on in this study, is one of the key concepts of masculinity that has developed from the recognition of the plurality of masculinities (Gill 2007). Schippers (2007:94) defined hegemonic masculinity as 'the *qualities defined as manly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to femininity* and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. This includes traits such as heterosexual desire for women, physical strength, and authority. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the idealised features of masculinity and femininity that ensure male dominance in society vary by context (Dellinger 2004).

Schippers's notion of hegemonic masculinity being in a complementary and hierarchical relationship to femininity is important in this study. In fact, Coates (2003) and Gill (2007) argued that masculinity in general is only meaningful when constructed against femininity; hence, stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity in the data will be analysed in relation to each other.

Defining humour

Humour has been conceptualised as a distinct mode of discourse by many theorists (Crawford 2003). In this study, humour is defined as 'instances where participant(s) signal amusement to one another, based on the analyst's assessment of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues' (Mullany 2004:21). One of the 'clues' used to distinguish acts of humour in the data is laughter, as endorsed by Kotthoff (2000). Since humour can be a result of unintentional humorous behaviour from participants (Mullany 2004), the humorous acts identified will include instances where the listener laughs at an utterance that the speaker did not deliberately intend to be humorous. Another indicator of humour is a joking, teasing or 'smiling' tone of voice in the speaker's utterance or the listener's response.

Data

The data for this study was recorded from the radio phone-in programme 'He Says, She Says', which previously aired between 7.30 to 9.00 a.m. from Mondays to Fridays on the Malaysian entertainment station MixFM. This programme was selected primarily because humour was a prominent linguistic feature on the show.

The programme was recorded between 15 and 29 April 2008. After a period of eight days, almost 50 instances of humour had been collected and this was deemed sufficient. In between calls, songs would be aired and games pitting callers against each other would be played. However, only the phone-in discussion segments were recorded for this research. The recordings, totalling 27.7 minutes of talk time, contained a variety of linguistic devices and discursive modes, but for the purpose of this study, only humorous exchanges were analysed. This reduced the original corpus to 16.3 minutes of data containing 47 instances of humour and 16 callers (9 men and 7 women).

The programme had three regular presenters: one man (Pietro) and two women (Ika and Serena C). From 21 to 25 April, the three regular presenters were on vacation and replaced by Jay (female) and Sham (male). This expanded the data to include five radio hosts.

Analysis

Six examples have been selected to illustrate how gender stereotypes are exploited in subtle ways in the humour constructed on the radio show. The analysis will demonstrate how this reaffirms gender hegemony not only by keeping traditional framings of masculinity and femininity in play, but also by innovatively repackaging traditional stereotypes in sophisticated ways, entrenching them even further.

In the first two examples, women are represented in trivialising and disempowering ways. Although feminine stereotypes are invoked indirectly in both texts, it will be argued that the sexism in the second example is more insidious since the speakers do not explicitly orient to gender.

In the subsequent set of examples, on the other hand, it is men who are the brunt of jokes, at least superficially. Male callers who try to project a ‘macho’ image to others are challenged via the use of humour. However, a closer reading of the texts will show that they reinvoke the same sexist ideologies that they appear to be critical of at face value. In these examples, the gender order is reasserted through the sophisticated use of old and new conceptualisations of women as well as the stigmatisation of stereotypical masculine characteristics when embodied by women.

In Example 1, stereotypical assumptions of women are reinforced via gendered humour, that is humour where ‘the propositional content is explicitly concerned with gender, and exploits established gender stereotypes’ (Holmes 2008:487). Gender is a salient dimension in this example since it is directly indexed through the use of the gendered nouns ‘girls’ (lines 1 and 7) and ‘guy’ (line 2).

Example 1
Topic: The most common assumption people first make about you when they first meet you.

1	Jay:	Well you know how girls are (.) when
2		they meet a guy for the first time they
3		just wanna know if he actually (.) can be
4		the man uh to take care of them (.) that's
5		why they make those kinds of assumptions=
6	Sham:	=On a first (.) time (.) basis
7	Jay:	Well that's how girls are (.) you like
8		it you you ((smile voice)) gotta live with
9		it man

The stereotypes of 'the husband hungry woman', 'the dependent woman', and 'the materialistic woman' are simultaneously reinforced in Jay's first turn. However, these are never explicitly invoked and depend on inferencing. It can be argued that 'the man' (line 4) is synonymous with 'husband' due to the use of the definite article. When it is taken with the preceding dependent clause 'when they meet a guy for the first time' (lines 1–2), the underlying belief that women yearn for marriage and are constantly on the lookout for a husband can be perceived. While 'the man' is the subject in the noun clause 'the man … to take care of them' (line 4), women are positioned as the object in what appears to be implicitly constructed as an economic exchange. This conceptualisation of women as dependent on men is strengthened by the juvenile reference term 'girls' (line 1) which seems to infantilise women in this context, especially when contrasted with the adult male reference term 'man'.

The stereotype of dependent femininity serves hegemonic functions. As Mills (2008:130) points out, masculinity 'has often been posited as the direct opposite of femininity', so invoking this feminine stereotype symbolically constructs hegemonic features of idealised masculinity: economic power and control over the household.

In both turns, Jay seems to draw on the idea of natural and universal sex differences to provide a legitimating rationale for her portrayal of women. She makes sweeping statements that this is 'how girls are' (lines 1 and 7) without offering any further explanation. The implication that this is common sense serves to project the Mars and Venus myth as fact. The verb phrase 'gotta live with it' (lines 8–9) implies that these stereotypical feminine traits are unavoidable. She employs humour here, as indicated by her 'smiling' tone of voice.

As with Example 1, the sexist stereotypes in the next text are never spelled out. Moreover, the exchange below is an example of indirect sexism that amplifies and mocks stereotypical feminine traits without making explicit references to gender. Prior to this humour sequence, the

caller, Nazrin, gave an account of his friend's experience where he had offered his seat to a female passenger on a train under the assumption that she was pregnant, but she informed him that she was not.

Example 2
Topic: Random acts of kindness which backfired.

1	Nazrin:	… and he never sat down till he
2		got off the the train
3	Ika:	Mm hmm=
4	Nazrin:	=And neither did she
5	Serena C:	((squeal))
6	Ika:	((smile voice)) Oh my [god]
7	Serena C:	[Un][be-]
8	Nazrin:	[For]
9		for about forty-five minutes
10	Serena C:	[O::h my]
11	Ika:	[((laugh))That ain't]
12	Nazrin:	[The seat was] empty
13	Ika:	More [than awkward]
14	Nazrin:	[And everybo]dy knew (.)
15		everybody who who was on the
16		train knew why it was empty
17	Ika:	Uh-huh
18	Nazrin:	And nobody sat down
19	Ika:	((laugh))
20	Serena C:	And and you know the compartments
21		in the LRT[1] are ((smile voice)) really
22		small so every[one's] in the compartment
23	Nazrin:	[Yeah]
24	Serena C:	are like (.) [okay okay]
25	Nazrin:	Yeah [the way the way] he
26		tells it (.) the way he tells it it
27		was really packed but nobody ((smile voice))
28		wanted to sit down because
29		[nobody wanted to acknowledge what had just]
30	Serena C:	[((laugh))]
31	Nazrin:	happened

The connection between the woman's clarification that she was not pregnant and Nazrin's propositions in lines 1–2 and 4 is left implicit as it was likely presupposed as culturally understood that the woman would have been deeply offended by the indirect accusation of being fat. For the propositions to make sense, it is necessary for the listeners to draw on the well-known stereotypes of 'the vain woman' and 'the emotional/irrational woman'. Built into Nazrin's presupposition and negative evaluation of being fat is the hegemonic view that women should be slim, which the overhearing audience are also required to take on board. Ika and Serena's laughter and minimal responses (lines 3, 5 and 6) serve to support these sexist notions.

The participants continue to work on the assumption that everyone listening has access to the stereotypes invoked, as can be perceived by the missing or vague complements in the independent clauses 'everybody knew' (line 14), 'everybody who who was on the train knew' (lines 15–16), 'so everyone's in the compartment are like okay okay' (lines 22 and 24), and 'nobody wanted to acknowledge what had just happened' (lines 29 and 31). Some significance can also be inferred from the repetition of the indefinite pronouns 'everybody' (lines 14 and 15) and 'nobody' (lines 18, 27 and 29) as this sets up the stereotypes as shared wisdom within the wider society.

The sexism in this example is arguably insidious not only because sexist ideas are indirectly presented as commonly shared by all, but also for the reason that gender is never explicitly referenced, which makes the sexism difficult to identify and address.

The next four examples are taken from two calls in which the male callers are mocked for exhibiting characteristics that have stereotypical associations with femininity, and therefore stigmatised when embodied by men. In the first example, the man is depicted as fearful, while in the other examples, the men are presented as dominated by their spouses. Their wives, on the other hand, are represented as strong and smart, which are hegemonic masculine traits. However, as Shifman and Lemish (2010:886) found in their own research on humour, 'while on the face of it, the supposedly 'clever' women may be understood to represent feminist progress and recognition, a closer reading of these jokes reveals that this woman is similar to the older stereotype of the 'manipulative bitch''. By constructing men as weak for displaying traditional feminine characteristics, and ridiculing women who enact hegemonic masculinity, stereotypes of appropriate behaviour for men and women are indirectly kept active.

In Example 3, Nat reveals that before taking his wife to watch a horror movie, The Frighteners, he had watched it first to prepare himself for the scary scenes. This confession leads one of the female presenters to ridicule him by 'feminising' him.

Example 3
Topic: The dumbest lie you've told to impress someone on a first date.

1	Nat:	So then (.) after that (.) then the
2		following week uh then I date her lah[2]
3	Ika:	I [see]
4	Nat:	[Uh] and the movie is (.) the
5		frightener [uh]
6	Serena C:	((smile voice)) [That's] like a
7		comedy dude (.) that's not even scary
8	Nat:	Yeah but there's some:: scene which
9		actually scary [right (.) (#)]
10	Pietro:	[Yeah yeah yeah]
11	Nat:	Less scary one lah so I can tahan[3] lah
12		that one
13	Serena C:	((smile voice)) So you're like the
14		girl in the relationship
15	Nat:	((laugh))

The implicature that arises from Serena's representation of the movie as a comedy (lines 6–7) is that Nat is easily frightened, insinuating that he is not sufficiently masculine. When Nat indirectly defends his masculinity by insisting that several scenes were frightening (lines 8–9) and that he would not have been afraid of those that were 'less scary' (lines 11–12), Serena attacks his masculinity again, this time through the use of the simile 'like the girl in the relationship' (line 14). The can only be understood by drawing on the traditional stereotype of 'the vulnerable and fearful woman' in need of male protection. The semantic effect of this contrastive device is strengthened by the use of the juvenile reference term 'girl' rather than 'woman'. In this context, to be compared to a 'girl' acts as an insult, and Nat's laughter (line 15) could be interpreted not just as participation in self-deprecating humour, but, moreover, as affiliation with the notion that stereotypical feminine characteristics are inferior qualities.

Example 4 below continues from Example 3. While Nat had earlier unsuccessfully attempted to reassert his masculinity, it can be argued that here, he makes a joke at his own expense to regain control of the exchange and construct humour on his own terms.

Example 4
Topic: The dumbest lie you've told to impress someone on a first date.

1	Ika:	[So did your wife] ever found out
2	Nat:	[(#)]

3	Ika:	[that (#) she ever] find out
4	Nat:	[Er not yet lah]
5	Ika:	Until today she didn't she didn't=
6	Nat:	=er not yet if she heard this
7	Ika:	Uh
8	Nat:	Uh (.) I think er she will ground me
9		I think (.) [for the rest of my life]
10	Serena C:	[((laugh))]

On the surface, Nat seems to reject the social norm that the man is the head of the household by claiming that his wife has the power to 'ground' him (line 8). The verb 'ground' connotes a parent-child relationship, subverting traditional gendered power in marriages. This is emphasised by the exaggerated rhetoric in the dependent clause 'for the rest of my life' (line 9). While this use of humour to trouble hegemonic marital relations may appear to be seemingly progressive, in actual fact, it invokes and mocks the image of the stereotypic controlling wife as well as the figure of 'the castrated husband', thereby indirectly articulating what the relationship between husbands and wives 'should be' and implicitly authorising male dominance in relationships.

As with Example 3, the male caller in Example 5 below attempts to produce himself as a masculine subject, but is challenged by the radio presenters. These exemplify how conflict can occur if assumptions about appropriate gender behaviour are not shared by the interactants. Prior to the exchange below, the caller, Jerry, had earlier stated that he did not need to ask his wife how much she earned, arguing that he was sure he had a higher salary because he often bought her things. In the example, it can be perceived that he resorts to the stereotype of 'the male provider' to construct his masculine identity, but the values of the stereotype are rejected by the others.

Example 5
Topic: It's not okay for a man to ask how much a woman earns.

1	Jerry:	… because I spend her (.) I buy
2		her things (.) I take her
3		shoppi::ng=
4	Pietro:	=That doesn't mean you earn more
5		(.) that means she's queen control
6		((laugh))

Pietro refutes Jerry's reasoning (line 4), thereby indirectly challenging Jerry's stereotypical and hegemonic construction of himself, by offering an alternative reason that Jerry financially supports his wife, which is he is unconsciously being controlled by her (line 5). Therefore,

humour is employed to simultaneously mock hegemonic masculinity and invoke the old feminine stereotype of the controlling wife, this time through the use of the Malaysian slang ‘queen control’ (line 5).

Whereas Examples 4 and 5 draw on the old stereotype of the domineering shrew, Example 6, which carries on from Example 5, repackages this into a new sexist image of the clever, wily woman.

Example 6
Topic: It’s not okay for a man to ask how much a woman earns.

1	Jerry:	I told you (.) I was born (.) to
2		know (.) that I earn more than my
3		wife (.) I take her shoppi::ng (.)
4		I let her buy things (.) I buy her
5		food I buy her supper
6	Serena C:	((smile voice)) So you
7		[never ever] ever ask her
8	Jerry:	[(#)]
9	Serena C:	how much she earns right
10	Jerry:	((laugh)) (.) Okay I never ask
11	Ika:	[You never (-)]
12	Pietro:	[[((laugh))]
13	Ika:	[so you don’t know lah basically]
14	Pietro:	[[((laugh))]
15		So join us tomorrow when we
16		interview Jerry’s wife to find out
17		[how][you can get your husband]
18	Ika:	[((laugh))]
19	Serena C:	[((laugh))]
20	Pietro:	(.) to buy you all sorts of stuff
21		and make him think like he’s the
22		ma[::n ((laugh))]
23	Ika:	[((laugh)) Way to go Jerry]

When Jerry continues to produce a hegemonic masculine identity for himself by listing examples of how he provides for his wife (lines 1–5), Serena responds with a question (lines 6–7 and 9) that functions as an indirect speech act that posits that until he actually hears it from his wife, Jerry cannot be completely sure that he earns more than her, deconstructing the stereotypical masculine identity he created for himself. Jerry responds by laughing, thereby mocking his own

attempts. This ridicule is jointly taken up by the other radio presenters (lines 11–14). However, even as he resists the conservative values implicit in Jerry's constructed identity, Pietro draws on the sexist stereotype of the manipulative woman. The clause 'when we interview Jerry's wife' (lines 15–16) entails that Jerry's wife would be able to answer the 'interview questions', and therefore presupposes that she is consciously manipulating her gullible husband for her material gain.

This is another example where humour is used to express sexist beliefs while seemingly criticising it. Although he may be the target of the joke at face value, 'naive and generous' Jerry is ultimately represented in a more positive light than his 'cunning and materialistic' wife. As the propositional content of the humour sequence grew more explicitly gendered and sexist, the women laughed (lines 18, 19 and 23), signalling their acceptance of the stereotypical beliefs and values implicit in Pietro's contributions rather than contesting them.

Discussion and conclusion

The previous section examined how gender stereotypes were invoked and challenged through the use of humour in the Malaysian talk radio show 'He Says, She Says'. This paper will now discuss how humour sequences that exploit stereotypes, whether in an affirmative or subversive way, can uphold gender hegemony.

As Milestone and Meyer (2012) argued, representations in the media can create meanings and belief systems that sustain gender hierarchies and inequalities. In the texts analysed, what emerges from the reinforcement as well as ridicule of a range of stereotypical representations of men and women is the ascendancy of hegemonic masculinity over femininities and other masculinities which, as Schippers (2007:94) stated, serves 'the interests of the gender order and male domination'. In Examples 1 and 2, women are portrayed as dependent on men and irrational. If masculinity and femininity are viewed as two sides of the same coin (Mills and Mullany 2011), features of masculinity would then include being self-reliant and logical, which are more socially valued. The undesirable characteristics that are culturally ascribed to women are couched in such a way so as to 'assign assumed shared experiences and commonsense attitudes' (Bergvall 1999:285), thereby defining a naturalised femininity as inferior in relation to masculinity.

Besides women, men were also mocked and occasionally participated in self-directed humour. In Examples 3 and 4, the male caller is ridiculed for exhibiting stereotypical feminine characteristics such as fearfulness and submissiveness within marriage, indirectly reinforcing the notion that men should embody hegemonic masculine qualities. It can be argued that this is because 'possession of one [stereotypically feminine] characteristic by a man is culturally

defined as contaminating [to the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity because] weak, ineffectual, and compliant men dislodge physical strength and authority from the social position "man"' (Schippers 2007:96).

Because hegemonic ideologies are fragile and constantly being challenged by alternative ideologies (Milestone and Meyer 2012), they need to adapt and incorporate elements of new or opposing ideologies in order to maintain their hegemonic position, widen their appeal, and reduce social resistance (Macdonald 2003). It could be argued that postfeminism, with its incorporation of selected feminist discourses, has been important in preserving patriarchal ideologies after the second wave of feminism, masking the force of sexism through a conflicting and sophisticated use of a blend of both sexist and feminist tropes. In order to project a more modern and updated image to their audience, the postfeminist mass media appropriated feminist values, though these did not include feminism's more political concerns and criticisms of male domination in society (McRobbie 2009). This can be perceived in the talk radio show 'He Says, She Says' where men were mocked for attempting to produce a hegemonic masculine identity. The participants were prepared to use humour to challenge what they perceived as male chauvinistic behaviour and overturn hegemonic discourse (cf. Examples 5 and 6). The ambiguous nature of humour gave the participants the latitude to criticise the male caller for his conservative gender views without appearing too offensive or impolite. Ironically, it is the ambiguous nature of humour that prevents these expressions of feelings and questions regarding the justice of the power hierarchy from having lasting social effects after the conversation ends (Crawford 2003).

Nevertheless, although there were instances when the presenters and male callers rejected stereotypical masculine ideals, this was done by attaching these traits, such as control over the household (cf. Examples 4–5), to women and then mocking them for it. Similar to Shifman and Lemish's (2011:260–61) findings, the marriage-oriented texts drew on 'the stereotypic Terrible Wife', portraying marriage as 'men's ultimate prison' and characterising wives as 'dominant, ultimately castrating' women. Furthermore:

> If hegemonic gender relations depend on the symbolic construction of … physical strength, and authority as the characteristics that differentiate men from women and define and legitimate their superiority and social dominance over women, then these characteristics must remain unavailable to women … These characteristics that, when embodied by women, constitute a refusal to complement hegemonic masculinity in a relation of subordination and therefore are threatening to male dominance. For this reason, they must be contained … so by having the one characteristic, an individual becomes a kind of person [such as] a shrew [or] a bitch … When a woman is authoritative, she is not masculine; she is a bitch – both feminine and undesirable. (Schippers 2007:94–5)

In the final example in the analysis, the Terrible Wife is repackaged as clever but manipulative and materialistic. As with the image of the Terrible Wife, this representation of women is constructed from an androcentric perspective stemming from men's dreads. It is very much part of the trend of 'post-feminist infantilization and castration of men by strong "bitchy" women [that] seems to be reinforced in other popular genres, such as in … advertising and situation comedies' (Shifman and Lemish 2011:266, citing Gill 2007:106–8).

These reinforcement and rejection of stereotypical assumptions of women and men are never made explicit in the texts, but rely on the listeners to do inferential work and take on board the ideology encoded in the talk in order to make sense of the exchange. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:192) noted, it is often the implication of what is said that conveys sexist meaning: 'Covert or hidden messages … do more to create and sustain gender ideologies than the explicit messages that are overtly conveyed'. In fact, being able to communicate implicit meaning is one of the main advantages of employing humour since 'behavioral standards can be implicitly communicated without having to seriously and explicitly address these topics' (Kotthoff 2006:14). However, when sexist notions are not foregrounded, this makes them difficult to identify and contest. Sexism is even more pernicious when gender is never explicitly referenced (cf. Example 2). Not everyone critically interrogates and unpicks what they listen or read, particularly due to the institutionalised aspect of sexism (Mills and Mullany 2011). Just as Butler's (1997) work on racism shows that discriminatory language seems 'authorised' by institutions that fail to denounce it, sexist stereotypes perpetuated by institutions such as the media can also seem affirmed at an institutional level (Mills 2008). Since sexist perspectives and meanings are established, accessible, and generally accepted by society, they are easier to draw on compared to alternative meanings that problematise conventional notions of gender (Christie 2000). Due to their continual reinforcement through language, sexist ideas and assumptions are normalised and taken for granted (Cameron 1998), which makes them difficult to challenge. As Lazar (2005b:7) pointed out, 'Gender ideology is hegemonic in that it often does not appear as domination at all; instead it seems largely consensual and acceptable to most in a community'. It is partly for this reason that even though Malaysia has a Communications and Multimedia Content Code against 'biased portrayals on the basis of gender' (Communications and Multimedia Content Forum of Malaysia 2004:18), sexist views are still produced and perpetuated in the Malaysian media, including by the audience.

Nevertheless, the agency of media consumers cannot be discounted as they do play an active role in negotiating meaning when interacting with media texts (Milestone and Meyer 2012). Mills and Mullany (2011) observed that despite the dominance of postfeminist discourses, there is evidence of a 'backlash' against postfeminism in popular culture publications, which gests the possibility of a feminist resurgence in the West and other parts of the world. The Internet has helped to create a 'call-out' culture (Munro undated) where the continued existence of patriarchal attitudes towards women in society, which has been denied in postfeminist ideology,

is brought to light as evidence, and personal experiences of sexism are shared, recorded, and conveyed to a larger audience than before, providing those outside of academia with access to the discussion (Hayes 2013) and equipping them with a good grasp of feminist language and concepts (Cochrane 2013). This could empower media consumers to expose and contest indirect sexism as a collective as we continue to push for reform.

Notes

[1] Kuala Lumpur's Light Rail Transit system, which connects the city's key districts.
[2] Malaysian English particle used to add emphasis to a word or phrase.
[3] Malay word which means 'bear it'.

Appendix: transcription conventions

(.) pause of up to a second
(-) pause of more than a second
[point of overlap onset
] point at which overlap stops
= latching (one speaker follows the previous one with no break)
- a halting or abrupt cut-off
:: lengthened syllable; multiple colons represent prolonged syllable
(#) inaudible speech
(( )) non-verbal activity, such as laughing or coughing
bold stressed word

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