

“Man Law”: Perpetuation of Stereotypes Online

Audience Analysis: This paper is an academic response to the Facebook group “Man Law” and the consequences of the group’s existence on a website that many college students use. The paper is directed at an audience which should be concerned about the group’s rhetoric, specifically university students of both genders. This audience also includes adults who have an interest in cultural studies and may or may not be aware of how Facebook works—perhaps adults who subscribe to academic journals about sociology, women’s studies, or gay and lesbian studies. While I am aware that university women and the older audience will be likely to open to my analysis, I am also aware that my criticism of the “Man Law” group will be met with hostility and dismissal from most college age men. By maintaining an objective tone, including a big-picture focus, addressing a counterclaim, and drawing on a range of material to support my critique of this group and its existence in cyberspace, I aim to convince college age men that participation in this group is ultimately not helpful to either gender in real life and cyber-society.

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Facebook.com is a social networking site, a virtual version of the facebook that some colleges give incoming freshmen. The site allows users to create online profiles that list their personal information such as age, gender, birthday, hometown, e-mail address, class schedules, interests, musical tastes, and political and religious views. Site users can view others' online profiles, and interact in a variety of ways including joining common interest groups and posting photos, links, and videos. Facebook was originally created for college students, and college students continue to make up the majority of its users. More than ten million people now use the site, and they make it the seventh most-trafficked site on the internet (Zuckerberg). One of the features of the site is the ability to create and join "common interest" groups. Groups range from the serious like Gay-Straight Alliance and Cancer Awareness groups to the silly "I Will Go Slightly Out of My Way To Step on That Crunchy Looking Leaf." Especially at large universities, this allows students to stake out a niche in their university community and network with people who share their interests. Although many of these groups are intended to be fun or silly, other groups like "Man Law" reflect the fact that cyberspace still exists within the limits of societal norms and stereotypes.

Based in part off the "Man Law" commercials for Coors Light beer, the Facebook group "Man Law" takes parody a step further by writing a set of rules designed to govern the social behavior of college age men. These "Man Laws" rely on stereotypes to define and limit the ways in which men can behave, interact with each other, and interact with women. "Man Law" rules then define a masculinity that reduces men to sexist, homophobic, and "boys will be boys" stereotypes. In other words, these rules not only perpetuate stereotypes about women and homosexuals, but also stereotype the men who believe in and follow "Man Law." As a "common interest" group that has over three hundred thousand online members, most of whom are college

age males, this Facebook group allows and encourages interactive participation among its members in writing and proposing new “Man Laws.” The stereotypes that “Man Law” members rely upon to define the behavior of men in society fail to imagine the virtual world and the real world as democratic and equal.

“Man Law’s” most egregious promotion of inequality is their creation of rules that deal with the treatment of women. In creating rules that reduce women to the position of domestic servants and sexual objects, the “Man Law” rules argue for the treatment of women as inferior to men. There are several “Man Laws” that perpetuate these stereotypes about the position and purpose of women. For instance, Law 33 states,

If a woman is present whether family or friend no man under any circumstances shall make their own food or pour their own drinks unless it is a special holiday such as, Mother's day, Birthday's, or St. Patrick's day or if the woman cannot keep up with the pace you want your drink poured. Law is void if significant grilling is involved.

(Baxter)

This clearly argues that women are responsible for serving food and drinks to men, reducing them to an inferior position as domestic servants who are responsible for serving men. “Man Law” also argues that women are only valuable as objects of sexual desire. They include laws such as 44, “Sex is more important than talking,” and 90, “No man should talk on a telephone to a girl longer than he will have sex with her” (Baxter). Law 98 says that men should only wait ten minutes for “every point of hotness she scores on the classic 1-10 scale” (Baxter). In other words, these “Man Laws” argue that a woman’s value is directly proportional to one of two things: how much sex she is willing to have or how good-looking she is. They argue that men should not give women any attention that does not involve sex. “Man Law” also argues in favor of the idea that men should disregard women, except in their traditional, stereotypical roles as domestic servants and objects of sexual desire.

“Man Law’s” perpetuation of age-old stereotypes dismisses the idea that women have equality, putting them in places where they are subservient to men, and creating the idea that those places are where they belong and should be. Because it says that women should be subservient to men, then men have power and are in control. “Man Law,” then, argues that men and women have unequal roles in society. This inequality limits women’s ability to be seen as successful in non-stereotypical roles. In other words, the women who do not fit these stereotypes can be viewed as abnormal, failures, and not “real” women, forcing women to choose between subservience and being viewed as unsuccessful. When women are put into positions of subservience, it is easy for men to disregard their rights as equal members of society. The women who choose non-stereotypical roles are viewed as abnormal, and can be summarily dismissed as equals, leaving women in a no-win situation. That “Man Law” fails to treat women as equals is damaging to women’s ability to succeed in non-traditional fields of work. Additionally, “Man Law’s” underlying message is that the traditional, stereotypical roles of women as domestic servants and sexual objects are where women belong and should be, enforcing a norm that excludes women with non-traditional goals and occupations. “Man Law” ignores the damage done to women by subjugating them to men’s desires, and it perpetuates stereotypes that impair women in society.

In fact, the only law that might be praised for its treatment of women is equally problematic to the above treatment of women because it still argues that women are inferior and are victims. “Man Law” 32 attempts to pacify site opponents by opposing physical violence against women. It begins, “Under no circumstances shall any man lay a hand on a female or a child in violence” (Baxter). “Man Law” 32 continues by setting out specific rules for how “real men” are responsible for dealing with various kinds of offenses, including woman-beating and

rape. While women tend to be biologically smaller and physically weaker than men, there are still a number of ways in which women can compensate for their size. If the authors of this law wanted to empower or liberate women from men's protection, they could decree that all men have a responsibility to encourage their girlfriends, daughters, and wives to learn self-defense or carry pepper spray. Instead, they have created a law that makes men responsible for women's safety. The law doesn't encourage men to help women learn how to defend themselves; it encourages men to defend women, arguing for greater dependence of women on men and an inferior position for women in society.

In addition to arguing that women are not equal to men, "Man Law" argues that not all men are equal to each other, especially when it comes to homosexual men. "Man Law" promotes the stereotype of homosexual men as effeminate, womanly, wimpy, in other words not "real" men. "Real" men are not allowed to carry purses, as Law 61 states, "A man purse is still a purse" (Baxter). Another stereotypically feminine activity, watching soap operas, could bring about the punishment of "the questioning of the liking of opposite gendered relationships," according to Law 34 (Baxter). These laws stereotype homosexual men as engaging in feminine, womanly behaviors. In effect, they equate effeminacy with homosexuality. Law 34 also states that an appropriate punishment for men engaging in such stereotypically womanly activities is to question their sexuality. The idea that an accusation of homosexuality is a fit punishment for "real" men argues that having homosexual preferences does not fit the definition of masculinity. Overall, "Man Law" conflates femininity and homosexuality, making laws that argue that heterosexual men they should seek to avoid feminine behaviors because homosexuality is aberrant, non-normative and wrong. In other words, not only does "Man Law" stereotype homosexual men as being effeminate, it also makes clear that heterosexual men should not

engage in behaviors that have the potential to be queer. “Man Law” does this by making laws such as 69 which states, “No man shall ever, under an[y] circumstance, share an umbrella with another man” (Baxter). Law 87 also deals with the issue of public showers, decreeing, “When in a public shower, no man will look below the shoulders” (Baxter). This promotes homophobia by making heterosexual men wary of engaging in these so-called “homosexual,” queer, and non-normative behaviors. In other words, “Man Law’s” rules regarding potentially queer behaviors create a fear of being labeled homosexual in heterosexual men, further advancing the notion that homosexuality is obscene and abnormal.

“Man Law’s” promotion of homophobia and stereotypes is damaging to the possibility of “coming out” on Facebook, by creating barriers for homosexual men (Kim). By demoting homosexual men to an inferior, less masculine position, the men of “Man Law” can disregard the rights and value of homosexual men. The laws directly oppose the idea that cyberspace is a democratic place and fail to uphold the idea that cyberspace is a place without discrimination or inequality. In practice, the men in the group who admit to being homosexual on the discussion boards often get called derogatory names, or are told that they have no business being in a group whose intent is to promote a narrow, limited, and practically useless definition of masculinity. Both in its ideals and in their online application, “Man Law” and its rules seek to stereotype homosexual men, excluding them as less than masculine and therefore inferior and less than “real” men.

“Man Law” does not limit its stereotypes to women and homosexual men; it stereotypes the very men who take part in it. In defining masculinity, “Man Law” argues for and perpetuates stereotypical masculine behaviors, reducing men to creatures that are obsessed with beer, sex, and sports. Approximately one fifth of “Man Law” rules deal with beer and the conduct of men

while drinking. One fifth of the rules deal with how men should behave during sex and attempts “at getting some tang” (Baxter). The sheer number of rules regarding beer and sex argue that these should be very important to men, stereotyping and limiting the definition of masculinity to drinking beer and having sex with women. Furthermore, “Man Law” 31 decrees, “Every man should watch [S]portscenter at least once a day,” and recommends “multiple viewings” (Baxter). Law 105 is a little bit more direct, “When stumbling upon other guys watching a sporting event, you may always ask the score of the game in progress, but you may never ask who’s playing. You should know such things” (Baxter). These laws place a high degree of importance on sports, representing a stereotype that all men should like sports and know about sports. In defining masculinity with these stereotypes, “Man Law” promotes the stereotyping of men themselves. It limits the definition of masculine behavior to stereotypical male behaviors.

The stereotypes that “Man Law” creates for its members are powerful enough to have created several opposition groups, including, “Girls Who Refuse to Ever Have Sex with Any Boy in ‘Man Law.’” The women in this group feel that the men of “Man Law” are “misogynistic idiot[s]” and object to the stereotypes “Man Law” uses to define masculinity (Quirk). This group believes that the members of “Man Law” are sexist, a stereotype they have made about men based on the laws. The very fact that this group has stereotyped the men of “Man Law” as misogynistic shows us that “Man Law” stereotypes are limiting to both men and women. Limitations create inequality, and “Man Law” is representative of society’s inability to consider both genders completely equal. “Man Law” does nothing to help promote gender equality. Instead, its stereotypes limit both genders and undermine equality and democracy in the guise of humor.

While some men would prefer not to analyze so deeply what they term “parody,” this group and its ideas fail to meet the definition of parody. Parody is imitative and it usually imitates “in order to ridicule” another thing (“Parody”). These “Man Laws” cannot be called parody because they do not appear to think the laws are ridiculous, but rather appear intent upon following them in the real world. “Man Law” 48 declares, “Men will invite other men to Man Law.” Not only are men responsible for the spread of “Man Law” ideas, but Law 74 also rules that men may rebuke each other for violations of laws. According to Law 37, a violator of a “Man Law” can regain his status as a “real man” by giving “a case of beer to all his offended peers as a token of respect to what is manly...and what is not” (Baxter). These laws show they are not simply writing rules for men based on stereotypes, but are also setting out punishments for rule violations. They want men to follow these rules outside of the site, in the real world.

It is still possible that “Man Law” was intended as humor, but because it perpetuates destructive stereotypes without offering anything constructive, in the end, it fails to be funny. One member of the group, Joseph Carmichael Bryant, concludes on a discussion board, that “women aren’t equal” and have responsibilities to “cook, clean, and suck my dick.” If “Man Law” was intended as humor, it would not tolerate this kind of harmful and offensive discourse. These destructive ideas negate any kind of humor that may be found in “Man Law,” and they summarize and perpetuate societal problems instead of offering solutions. The group rehashes age-old stereotypes, seeking to use them to promote inequality in society. Between their serious appearance and because these “Man Laws” are not constructive, they fail to be parody.

The members of this group appear quite serious upon applying “Man Laws” in the real world. The serious appearance is furthered when the author of the site invokes the First Amendment to defend the mission of the “Man Law” group, to “positively” change the lives of

“Man Law” group members (Baxter). “Man Law” believes it is exercising its First Amendment right to freedom of speech. In actuality, it is violating the terms of use agreement that all site users are subject to, whether they are registered members or not. The terms of use prohibit anything which is

“harmful, threatening, unlawful, defamatory, infringing, abusive, inflammatory, harassing, vulgar, obscene, fraudulent, invasive of privacy or publicity rights, hateful, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable.”

(“Terms of Use”)

Facebook reserves the right to arbitrarily decide what constitutes a violation of the agreement. Clearly, Joseph Carmichael Bryant’s comments are objectionable and vulgar, if not downright abusive. The laws, as already demonstrated, promote harmful stereotypes and ideas, even if they are not as blatantly offensive as some of the discussion board topics. The fact that “Man Law” uses its “freedom of speech” to seek the social limitation of those who do not fit its stereotypes should be enough for Facebook to deem it harmful. The fact that Facebook has not taken down the site is a symptom of a larger, more overarching problem in society, one that is not limited to cyberspace.

If a Facebook administrator had deemed “Man Law” harmful or objectionable, that person would have dismantled the site. Because the site still exists, it can be assumed that the site is not considered harmful or objectionable by those who maintain Facebook. Perhaps these authorities do not realize the damage done by “Man Law’s” stereotypes. Or perhaps they are in favor of allowing those stereotypes to be perpetuated for the purpose of maintaining the current societal power structures. Kandi Tayebi and Judy A. Johnson argue in their essay “Feminism’s Final Frontier: Cyberspace” that “it is important to recognize that cyberspace exists within a social framework, which is still deeply sexist.” This Facebook group, instead of trying to change that social framework, seeks to maintain the status quo and keep power in the hands of

heterosexual men. When a homosexual man or a woman attempts to participate in the site's discussion board discourse, they are frequently denounced as not being qualified to discuss "Man Laws." This shows us that the men who have created and participate in "Man Law" are only interested in asserting their own superiority, and are not interested in promoting equality in online discourse, proving Tayebi and Johnson's theory that the "social framework" of cyberspace is still sexist and homophobic and still exists within society's limitations.

Furthermore, because the group functions as a kind of contract—if you join the group, you agree to abide by the rules—this "Man Law" group argues for the extension of its destructive stereotypes from the virtual world to the real world. From the desire of "Man Law" to govern real world behavior from the Web, this group seeks to promote inequality in the real world and in cyberspace, based solely on age-old stereotypes. By relying on such stereotypes, "Man Law" sums up and perpetuates the problems of sexism and homophobia in society, instead of seeking to change them or allow the stereotypes to fade. Because cyberspace and the Web are such an integral part of today's society, the things that take place online have real world consequences, especially in the university setting (Calareso). "Man Law," through cyberspace, condones harmful stereotypes and undermines the seriousness of sexism and homophobia. In the real world, the consequences of these stereotypes range from elementary school bullying to blatant discrimination and hate crimes. According to Tayebi and Johnson, cyberspace also reflects the patterns of real world society. "Man Law," as an artifact of cyberspace, shows us that equality is still a work-in-progress. Unfortunately, it chooses to perpetuate the societal problems of sexism and homophobia, instead of trying to find solutions for societal inequalities. Until society solves these problems, "Man Law" and cyberspace will continue to reflect them and

perpetuate them, limiting the ability of minority groups such as women and queer men to be viewed as equally valuable members of society.

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