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Fail videos and related video comments on YouTube: a case of sexualization of women and gendered hate speech?

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Fail videos showing mishaps/accidents are very popular on YouTube. But is this genre affected by sexism, that is, are women portrayed more often than men in an objectifying, sexualized manner in the video clips (H1), and are women more likely than men to be the target of gendered online hate speech in the video comments (H2)? Quantitative content analyses of 500 video clips (derived from 50 videos) and of 1,000 video comments (derived from 5 “male” and 5 “female” videos) from YouTube’s most popular fail video channel FailArmy were conducted. Women in fail videos were portrayed in an objectifying, sexualized manner twice as often (H1), and were the target of gendered hate comments nearly five times more often (H2) compared to men. Future research could analyze videos and comments from additional fail channels and investigate the reasons for the sexualized portrayals as well as for the audience’s hateful reactions.

Keywords: Fail Videos; Online Hate Speech; Sexism; Sexualization; YouTube

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A female athlete takes part in a hurdle race, stumbles, and falls face down into a puddle. Video recordings of such occurrences are referred to as *fail videos*, that is, videos that show people inadvertently failing to do something, ranging from harmless mishaps to serious accidents. Fail videos are a popular entertainment format that has become well known on television (e.g., “America’s Funniest Home Videos”). Watching other people’s mishaps in different contexts (sports, traffic, everyday life, etc.) can appeal to the viewer’s curiosity, to sensation seeking, and last but not least to aggressive humor in the form of *schadenfreude* (aka: gloating; malicious glee; cf. Ben-Ze’ev, 2014), which can enhance one’s self-esteem at the expense of others. All these factors and more might explain the entertainment value of fail videos.

Fail videos are very common on *YouTube*, the widest-reaching social media platform (Alexa Traffic Ranks, 2018), where searching for “fail” provides more than a hundred million fail videos. The most popular channel is *FailArmy* with more than 14.6 million subscribers as of May 2019. The audience can submit fail video clips that are merged into compilation videos and then published on *FailArmy*’s *YouTube* channel. A typical fail video consists of 20 to 40 short fail video clips of single mishaps, hence portraying dozens of failing people.

An initial exploration of the fail video genre on *YouTube* revealed that fail videos seem to be affected by sexism in the form of objectifying, sexualized portrayals (e.g., portraying women in bikinis while portraying men fully clothed) and gendered hate speech (i.e., women receiving more hateful and sexualized comments than men). Numerous “Girls Fails” videos exist displaying half-naked women on their thumbnail pictures, while “Boys Fails” videos are neither common nor sexualized. However, despite their popularity, there has been relatively little research on fail videos on *YouTube*, or on other social media platforms, so far.

A search for studies on fail videos within scientific literature databases delivered no results. Until now, there exist no studies on sexism and fail videos. The current study represents an initial attempt to fill this gap by investigating fail videos from the *YouTube* channel *FailArmy* in the context of aggressive humor from a gender perspective, focusing on two aspects of sexism, that is, *objectifying, sexualized portrayals* in the fail video clips and *gendered online hate speech* in the fail video comments.

Aggressive humor in fail videos

Fail videos can be investigated from different perspectives such as empathy, ethics, or humor. From a psychological point of view, *schadenfreude* is an important entertainment factor when watching the mishaps of others. *Schadenfreude* means taking pleasure in another person’s misfortune (Ben-Ze’ev, 2014). The type of *schadenfreude* that intentionally funny fail videos elicit can be understood as aggressive humor (Ben-Ze’ev, 2014; Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). *Aggressive humor* is defined as humor that enhances the self at the expense of others (laughing at

somebody rather than laughing *with* somebody; Martin et al., 2003). Likewise, schadenfreude can enhance the self at the expense of others (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Smith, & Cikara, 2015). People watching fail videos and laughing at fail victims might think better of themselves because they believe they are not as “clumsy”, “dumb”, or “pathetic” as the fail victims.

The self-enhancing effect of schadenfreude may be in relation to the particular individuals in the fail videos or to the social groups to which the individuals belong. Most of the time, the individuals seen in fail videos are anonymous. It can be assumed that the self-enhancing comparison with an anonymous individual in terms of *interpersonal schadenfreude* (e.g., laughing at one particular obese individual that suffers a fail) will be generalized to the social group to which the individual belongs, leading to *intergroup schadenfreude* (e.g., laughing at “fat people” who are depicted and perceived as especially clumsy). In fact, “[p]eople who identify strongly with their social groups often experience intergroup [s]chadenfreude—pleasure in response to threatening out-group members’ misfortunes” (Cikara, 2015, p. 12).

Fail videos, as an entertainment format that includes aggressive humor, can therefore be considered in the context of social identities and *group-based aggression* (Cikara, 2015). Group-based aggression can be expressed in different ways, for example, through physical aggression or through aggressive humor. Theories such as the *Social Dominance Theory* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) or the *Group-Focused Enmity Theory* (Zick et al., 2008) attempt to explain group-based aggression. The theories state that individuals enhance their social in-group at the expense of out-groups they perceive as inferior. *Sexism*, that is, the derogatory attitude towards women as a social group, is one method often employed by boys and men to achieve gender-based in-group enhancement (Zick et al., 2008). Sexism can be expressed as group-related aggression through different forms of aggression (e.g., sexualized physical violence) including aggressive humor (e.g., sexist or sexually aggressive humor).

Rationale and hypotheses

Research has shown that in entertainment media formats women are more likely than men to be portrayed in an objectifying, sexualized way, both in traditional mass media and in social media (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Ramsey & Horan, 2018; Ward, 2016; Wright, 2009). Objectifying, *sexualized portrayal* means women “being treated as a *body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use (or consumption) by others” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 2016, p. 174), for instance, portraying women in bikinis (while men, by contrast, are portrayed fully clothed). A sexualized portrayal of women in fail video clips (that are by definition neither pre-planned nor staged) could be the result of habitual self-sexualization of women (e.g., women generally wearing more revealing clothing), of purposeful selection by the video creators submitting clips to FailArmy, and of the FailArmy channel selecting clips for publication. The latter selection processes could

be biased towards clips depicting women in a sexualized manner. We have reason to assume that the channel's video selection strategy is biased towards sexualized portrayals of women because the channel creators almost always use sexualized thumbnails for their "Girls Fails" videos (typically a woman in a bikini with focus on her breasts), while they don't use thumbnails with sexualized portrayals of men.

H1: In fail video clips on YouTube, failing women are portrayed more often than failing men in an objectifying, sexualized manner.

Sexual objectification can be considered a form of aggression as it can cause unwanted harm in the form of denigration and dehumanization (Puvia & Vaes, 2013). We assume that not only do the fail video clips' contents reflect this aggression but also the fail videos' comments. The aggression in the comments can be specified as online hate speech.

Online hate speech is defined as an aggressive verbal expression on the Internet that is "abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, and/or incites to violence, hatred, or discrimination" (Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012, p. 904). The *Online Disinhibition Effect* hypothesis (Suler, 2004) predicts that hate speech is more likely to occur in online environments because factors like anonymity allow individuals to express hate without the fear of retribution. Research has revealed that online hate speech is common in YouTube comments (Burgess & Green, 2018; Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010). Previous research has also shown that in the case of famous broadcasters (Burgess & Green, 2018), popular videos (Burgess & Green, 2018), or sexualized content (Döring & Mohseni, *in press*), online hate speech is more likely to target women than men, and thus occurs as *gendered online hate speech* (Döring & Mohseni, 2019, *in press*; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). For instance, the most popular female U.S. comedy YouTuber receives about four times more negative (including sexist, sexual and sexually aggressive) video comments than a comparable male counterpart (Wotanis & McMillan, 2014). This effect was successfully directly replicated for the same pair of YouTubers (Döring & Mohseni, 2019), and systematically replicated for four pairs of German YouTubers within the popular genres Comedy, Gaming, HowTo & Style, and Sports (Döring & Mohseni, *in press*). Although the absolute number of studies on online hate speech on YouTube is still small, and none of the studies investigated the fail video genre, we nevertheless expect aggressive video comments to be directed more often towards the failing women than the failing men portrayed in fail videos.

H2: In video comments on fail videos on YouTube, the portrayed failing women are more likely than the portrayed failing men to be the target of online hate speech (especially of sexist, sexual and sexually aggressive hate speech).

Materials and methods

Sample and procedure

All videos and video comments were sampled and coded in 2016. Codebooks and data analysis files are available online at <https://osf.io/afdkq>.

To answer H1, *addressing the content of the fail video clips*, a two-step sampling strategy was used: First, we selected the 50 most popular videos from the most popular fail video YouTube channel FailArmy to ensure the coverage of relevant videos with high popularity. Second, from each of those 50 videos (each consisting of many different fail video clips), we sampled the first 10 clips to restrict the video material to $N = 500$ clips. A clip was only skipped (and thus omitted from analysis) if the victim's gender was indiscernible, if multiple protagonists were displayed, or if the victim was not human. The resulting clips consisted of $n = 350$ clips with male fail victims and $n = 150$ clips with female fail victims because fail clips generally display male fail victims more often.

To answer H2, *addressing the content of fail video comments specifically targeting female versus male fail victims*, another two-step sampling strategy was necessary to ensure both the coverage of comments targeting one specific gender and an equal number of comments targeting female and male fail victims. The most popular videos selected to test H1 could not be used for this. They depicted more male fail victims, and they usually merged female and male fail clips into one video resulting in video comments with unclear gender targets. Therefore, to test H2, we searched for fail videos that (a) contained either clips with female fail victims only or clips with male fail victims only and that (b) were comparably popular in terms of video views. Five videos for each gender were selected in the first selection step. The 100 most recent video comments for each video were selected in the second selection step, resulting in $N = 1,000$ video comments with $n = 500$ comments targeting female fail victims and $n = 500$ comments targeting male fail victims. Comments were coded as "omitted from analysis" if they did not refer to the fail victims. For each omission, a replacement was sampled to obtain exactly 1,000 comments.

Measures

For each hypothesis, a separate codebook was created and pretested with two independent coders (see Table 1). After the pretests, the coding was performed by a single coder.

In the case of sexualized portrayals of women and men in fail video clips (H1), the codebook consisted of three categories, namely "gender", "sexualized portrayal", and "omitted from analysis" (see Table 1). To pretest the codebook, two random videos were drawn from the channel FailArmy that were not part of the main sample. Per video, 25 fail clips were obtained, resulting in $N = 50$ clips. All of Gwet's AC1 values (Wongpakaran, Wongpakaran, Wedding, & Gwet, 2013) were "almost perfect"

Table 1 Categories, Examples, and Inter-Coder Reliabilities/Agreements of the Two Codebooks

| Category | Example Portrayal/ Example Comment | Cohen's Kappa | Gwet's AC1 | Percent Agreement |
|---|---|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Codebook 1: Sexualized Portrayal of Women and Men in Fail Videos | | | | |
| Gender of fail victim | Male, female, indiscernible | .92 | .95 | .96 |
| Sexualized portrayal | Sexualized context (e.g., pole dance) or revealing clothing (e.g., bare-chested man, woman in bikini) | .71 | .89 | .92 |
| Omitted from analysis | Victim's gender indiscernible or multiple protagonists or victim not human (e.g., animal) | .83 | .95 | .96 |
| Codebook 2: Online Hate Speech against Women and Men in Fail Video Comments | | | | |
| Sexist | Why are women stupider than men? | .73 | .95 | .96 |
| Sexual/Sexually aggressive | She wants the dildo real bad. | .53 | .94 | .95 |
| Derisive | Too bad that child in the beginning didn't break its neck;))) | -. ^a | -. ^a | -. ^a |
| Hostile | Stupid idiot | .52 | .89 | .91 |
| Omitted from analysis | Who is watching this in June | .55 | .60 | .78 |

Note. Codebook 1: N = 50 fail video clips within two fail videos from the YouTube channel "FailArmy". Codebook 2: N = 101 comments within two fail videos from the YouTube channel "FailArmy".

^aNo comments of this type were identified during the pretest.

(Landis & Koch, 1997, p. 165), and all of Cohen's Kappa values were at least "substantial". The first codebook can thus be regarded as reliable.

In the case of sexist and sexual/sexually aggressive video comments directed towards women and men (H2), the codebook was based on the positive/negative comments codebook by Wotanis and McMillan (2014), which was customized for fail videos (see Table 1). The category of positive comments was removed because it was not needed to test the hypothesis. The category of negative comments was limited to hate comments. Within the hate comments category, Wotanis and McMillan (2014) used a combined category for sexist and racist comments. This subcategory "racist/sexist" was reduced to sexist in order to resolve this confounder, and subcategories for derisive and generally hostile comments were added because these kinds of comments were expected to be frequent. The final second codebook contained the categories "sexist", "sexual/sexually aggressive", "derisive", "hostile", and "omitted from analysis".

For the pretest, two random videos were sampled that were not part of the main sample, and 50 comments and 51 comments were drawn per video, respectively, resulting in $N = 101$ comments. The Gwet's AC1 values for all contentual categories were "almost perfect". In comparison, the Cohen's Kappa values were "moderate" to "substantial" (Landis & Koch, 1997, p. 165), but this can be explained by the low total number of comments in the respective categories. In such cases, Gwet's AC1 should be preferred (Wongpakaran et al., 2013). Thus, the second codebook can also be described as reliable (see Table 1).

Results

For each category in each codebook, one-sided 2×2 chi-square tests with $\alpha = 5\%$ were calculated using SPSS 23. Since the chi-square distribution itself does not allow for one-sided testing, all one-sided p -values were based on Fisher's exact p -tests.

H1 was supported: Failing women were significantly *more often portrayed in an objectifying, sexualized manner* (32.0%) than failing men (14.6%), $\chi^2(1) = 20.1$, $p < .001$, $V = .20$ (see Table 2). A sensitivity analysis (with $\beta = 20\%$) revealed that the test can detect effects of $V \geq .13$.

H2 was mainly supported: Failing women were significantly *more often the target of hate comments* than their male counterparts, $\chi^2(1) = 10.5$, $p = .001$, $V = .10$ (see the "total" row in Table 2), especially regarding *sexist comments*, $\chi^2(1) = 29.4$, $p < .001$, $V = .17$, and *sexual/sexually aggressive comments*, $\chi^2(1) = 44.1$, $p < .001$, $V = .21$ (see Table 2). However, failing men were more often the target of *derisive comments* $\chi^2(1) = 4.5$, $p = .032$, $V = .07$, and *hostile comments* $\chi^2(1) = 14.1$, $p < .001$, $V = .12$. A sensitivity analysis (with $\beta = 20\%$) showed that the test can detect the effects of $V \geq .09$. For this reason, the finding regarding derisive comments could be underpowered.

Table 2 Prevalence of Sexualized Portrayals and Hate Comments

| Category | Failing Women | | Failing Men | | $\chi^2(1)$ | <i>p</i> | <i>V</i> |
|---|---------------|-------|-------------|-------|-------------|----------|----------|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | | | |
| Sexualized Portrayals in Fail Video Clips (<i>N</i> = 500 clips) | | | | | | | |
| Sexualized portrayal | 48 | 32.0 | 51 | 14.6 | 20.1 | <.001 | .20 |
| Non-sexualized portrayal | 102 | 68.0 | 299 | 85.4 | 20.1 | <.001 | .20 |
| Total | 150 | 100.0 | 350 | 100.0 | | | |
| Hate Comments on Fail Videos (<i>N</i> = 1,000 comments) | | | | | | | |
| Sexist comment | 53 | 10.6 | 11 | 2.2 | 29.4 | <.001 | .17 |
| Sexual/Sexually aggressive comment | 77 | 15.4 | 16 | 3.2 | 44.1 | <.001 | .21 |
| Derisive comment | 2 | 0.4 | 9 | 1.8 | 4.5 | .032 | .07 |
| Hostile comment | 60 | 12.0 | 104 | 20.8 | 14.1 | <.001 | .12 |
| Total | 173 | 34.6 | 126 | 25.2 | 10.5 | .001 | .10 |

Note. Sexualized Portrayals: *N* = 500 fail video clips (*n* = 150 clips of failing women; *n* = 350 clips of failing men) within the 50 most popular fail videos from the YouTube channel “FailArmy”. Hate Comments: *N* = 1,000 most recent comments within 10 popular fail videos from the YouTube channel “FailArmy”; the total frequencies are not the sum of the single frequencies because the categories were not disjunctive. All *p*-values are based on one-sided Fisher’s exact *p*-tests since the chi-square distribution does not allow for one-sided testing. Cramér’s *V* is a measure of association for two nominal variables that can be interpreted as a correlation coefficient and thus serves as a standardized effect size measure.

Discussion

The results of our pilot study suggest that failing women in YouTube fail video clips from the most popular fail video channel FailArmy were portrayed in an objectifying, sexualized manner *twice as often* (H1) and were *nearly five times more often* the target of sexist and sexual/sexually aggressive hate comments (H2) when compared with failing men. Men, however, received more hostile and derisive hate comments than women. In the case of hate comments, the mean effect size of *V* = .10 is roughly comparable to similar studies (*V* = .05 in Döring & Mohseni, *in press*; *V* = .18 in Wotanis & McMillan, 2014; *V* = .19 in Döring & Mohseni, 2019). However, the absolute percentage of 30% of all comments being hate comments is much higher in this study than in others (3% in Ernst et al., 2017; 4% in Döring & Mohseni, *in press*; 9% in Wotanis & McMillan, 2014; 13% in Döring & Mohseni, 2019), suggesting that hate comments are much more common in the fail video genre compared to other video genres. The large difference between the current study and the above-mentioned previous studies can possibly be explained by the fact that the other studies examined video bloggers, who might be more inclined to delete hate comments directed at them because these threaten their image and could result in a loss of viewers. Fail video comments addressing anonymous fail victims, on the other hand, might not be monitored and moderated as strictly.

The findings are also in line with previous research pointing to the prevalence of sexualized portrayals of women in entertainment media (Ivory, 2013; Ward, 2016; Wright, 2009). Seemingly, the popular entertainment format of fail videos, which elicits *schadenfreude* as an aggressive type of humor, is linked with sexism and hate speech. Fail videos specifically foster the sexual and sexist ridicule of failing women who are portrayed in an objectifying sexualized manner that both attracts male attention and caters to gender stereotypes like the “sexy, dumb blonde”, while men are ridiculed in a hostile and possibly derisive fashion.

The strength of this study lies in the generalizability of the findings on the level of the depicted people. Instead of analyzing video comments on a couple of video bloggers, as in previous studies, video comments on hundreds of depicted failing people (10 videos with around 430 clips covering around 260 female and 170 male fail victims) were analyzed. Unlike prior studies, this makes the results of our gendered hate speech analysis less likely to be idiosyncratic to individual depicted persons.

On the other hand, this study is limited insofar as only 10 videos and only 1,000 comments were sampled for the comments' analysis. Although these sample sizes are comparable to previous studies (e.g., Döring & Mohseni, 2019, *in press*; Wotanis & McMillan, 2014), their relative smallness reduces the generalizability of the results on the level of the videos and comments, meaning our conclusions can only be tentative. In addition, only the most popular fail channel on YouTube (“FailArmy”: 14.6 million subscribers as of May 2019) was investigated. Future research could replicate this study with larger samples and include additional, less popular fail channels.

Furthermore, future research could investigate the *reasons* for the sexualized portrayals of women in fail videos. Interviews or surveys with video clip providers and channel operators could help to test assumptions about selection and curation processes favoring fail video clips depicting women in an objectifying sexualized manner. Last but not least, audience and media effects research is needed to better understand the *reasons* for the audience's hateful reactions to gendered fail videos and the impact of these hateful reactions on haters, bystanders, and targets.

Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist. The sampling was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the research ethics committee of the American Psychological Association (2016). All the videos and video comments analyzed were publicly available; no commenter usernames were included in the analysis.

Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/afdkq/>

Open Scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open science badges for Open Data and Open Materials through Open Practices Disclosure. The materials are openly accessible at <https://osf.io/afdkq/>

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