

# Stylistic Humor Trends and Change in Gender Roles in Buenos Aires

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## Introduction

If the manner in which we speak with one another is a reflection of our culture, then shifts in speech patterns may indicate that cultural change is also taking place and that cultural values may be shifting. Taking this as its starting point, this study focuses on Argentine attitudes toward gender and how they may be changing as reflected in humor. Modern Argentina has a relatively short, yet rich history, and various factors affect the current speech community in Buenos Aires. Traditional Latin American gender roles, known as machismo and marianismo, have enforced the gender gap over time, even in more modern days, despite a narrowing in the machismo/marianismo gender dichotomy within Buenos Aires Porteño<sup>1</sup> culture over time. This gender gap, as well as historical background, provide a base from which Buenos Aires Porteño culture can be observed. One facet of the Argentine culture lies in the people's speech modalities, from their lunfardo, or Rioplatense subdialect of Spanish, to their joking and humor patterns. While Argentina's early history informs the prevalence of the traditional machismo/marianismo role, there are indicators in both media and informal comedic styles that imply that the more recent, post-Peronist years may have brought about a cultural shift, blurring the lines of Argentine gender roles—even if only slightly.

A small sample of interviews with Argentine men was conducted in Buenos Aires with questions concerning how men view women, the nature of their conversations between men and women, and their personal preference in terms of media outlets for humor. According to the informants, machismo seems to be fading, but still present. Humor in the media is, as a result of this fading machismo, becoming increasingly oriented towards material that includes female audiences. Women

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are now testing comedic waters by asserting more control over content in the media and speaking to issues pertinent to themselves—rendering them “feminist” by many of those in the male audience. Gender segregation and male dominance are still primary themes in much of Argentine culture today. However, the overall new and emerging comedic style amongst male comedians has become less overtly misogynist, and in turn more generalized and less critical of gender roles, allowing female comedians to step into a new role that enables them to express themselves both explicitly and comically.

### **PART I: History of Gender and Humor in the Argentine Media**

Due to early Spanish colonization, Buenos Aires remains a city under European influence, yet maintains a strong Latin base. Argentina is currently comprised of a heterogeneous population of about fourteen million with a dramatic political and economic history throughout the last century. From the ever-changing political parties and their accompanying tensions, to their more recent economic crisis in 2000, it is obvious that history would have had effect on the people’s sense of reality and, in turn, their speech. One way to observe the linguistic discourse of Argentine speech is through the study of gender roles as represented in speech.

To understand Argentine gender roles, it is important to first be familiarized with the machismo/marianismo value system. Machismo and marianismo refer to an ideal model of female submission and male dominance. Marianismo is a term for the submissive female role, which is a traditionally idealized behavior in which the women are expected to be submissive and kind; it is tied to references to “the Virgin Mary in Christian theology and usually denotes an attitude of saintliness, passivity, and suffering in silence.” Machismo refers to a “male superiority complex that promotes men as virile, husbands as kings, and homes as their castles” (Ward 107). Stemming from the word macho, or “animal,” machismo offers an image of male superiority over the female. Machismo also assumes that men should have public sphere occupations: “a man of means is expected to spend freely and thus to support his community” (Gilmore 53) and, therefore, is to be placed in the public eye. The combination of ideas such as public sphere occupation and male superiority encourages men to commit to an image of manliness in which sexual aggression, family honor, and strength are admired.

Over time, the machismo/marianismo value system has changed, particularly with the introduction of women’s organizations in the 1930’s (The Argentine Association for Women’s Suffrage and the Argentine Union of Women, to name a few).

In addition, Eva Perón, wife of President Juan Perón, was an Argentine feminist icon in the 1940s (Hines and Fry 217). Regardless of the apparent progress made during the Perónist years, women still live in a relatively male-dominated society in Buenos Aires, and their subjugation is reflected in Porteño speech patterns, one aspect of which is observed through studying Argentine humor.

When discussing the history of Argentine culture and humor, it is important to note that while much of Argentine humor has had clearly marked examples of the machismo/marianismo gender dichotomy, there are still examples of humor icons that have proven to be gender-neutral (in terms of target audience) and popular. One of the earliest found sources of the constitution of modern Argentine humor and identity is a comic strip known as *Mafalda*. Arguably the most popular and iconic comic strip of Argentina, *Mafalda* was a series written by Joaquín Salvador Lavado, under the pen name Quino. The socio-political comic strip featured a precocious young girl named Mafalda who was concerned with world issues and daily life in the late 1960s to early 1970s. *Mafalda* provided invaluable commentary on the day-to-day life of many men and women in Argentina throughout the 1970s. Inquiring about local and international politics to her parents (who are often left speechless and prefer her to behave more “childlike”), she is portrayed as a young girl who questions everything in a naïve yet pessimistic way.

*Mafalda* has many fans to this day, with books and collections of the comic strip still being published and passed down to younger generations. “*Mafalda* is wonderful. Everyone should read it sometime just so they can know how wonderful it is. I love it and it is still popular because the humor is simple and educated. My children are reading it now!” said one informant in a social media survey. Another explained, “I grew up with *Mafalda*, I know all of the stories practically by memory. You can read any of the strips today, and whatever it is, it is probably still true.” While *Mafalda* is one classic example of humor in popular Argentine media, it is much less concerned with explicit issues of gender than much of the humor expressed there.

One classic example of how gender and humor work together to shape early Argentine humor lies with Alberto Olmedo, a comedian and actor known for his slapstick, nonsensical, and adult-oriented humor throughout the 1970s. Although Olmedo was originally from Rosario, his work resonated with Rio Platanese male audiences on a large scale. Movies, such as the “*Olmedo y Porcel*” series, caught the attention of many and were considered the height of the “sexploitation” genre in Argentine film. Several of the informants interviewed cited Olmedo as one of

the most important comedians in Argentine culture, regardless of whether or not they personally enjoyed his work. One informant revealed to me, “[I don’t like him] mainly because he was popular before my time, so I never had a chance to actually enjoy him... I haven’t seen so much of him nowadays to be able to say that he is the best. His humor is different from what I like. I don’t care that much for naked girls and the kind of comedy you can do with that.” However, others find that Olmedo’s humor is not only important to the history of Argentine culture, but also find that his humor still resonates with Argentines today. Of the sketches done with Javier Portales in *No Toca Botón*, one YouTube commentator says that the two are “Geniuses. I don’t have words to flatter this unmatched duo. They are the Gardels<sup>2</sup> of humor. I can watch these videos millions of times and every time I’ll laugh more.” (YouTube 2012, *NO TOCA BOTÓN: ALVAREZ Y BORGES (1985)*)

Much of the subject matter that Olmedo exemplified had to do with Argentine mannerisms, particularly from a male perspective. Among those who have watched Olmedo clips on YouTube, one commentator (Lowrider409ss) does seem to like Olmedo and argues in his defense, saying, “90% of Argentinean television today is trash,” he believes that Olmedo never used bad language and instead relied on “subtleties” for his humor<sup>3</sup> (“Alberto Olmedo - El Manosanta”). While some agree with the notion that Olmedo was more conservative and subtle than current male comedians, there are still others who would challenge that idea and instead argue that Olmedo was indeed hypersexist, even when compared to more current standards of gender in humor.

One example that illustrates the typical humor from Olmedo is found in the series, *No Toca Botón!* (Don’t Touch the Button!), which aired throughout the 1980s. In one particular sketch, “¡Que raro que soy!” Olmedo bursts through the door leading to an office and approaches a woman there (portrayed by Silvia Perez), exclaiming to her, “I like my job! I pay my taxes! I don’t drink alcohol! Oh! How weird I am!” Perez then berates him by telling him he is not weird, and that he is a rather ordinary man, and goes further, declaring that he is more ordinary than a toothpick stuck with mozzarella from a pizza. He tells her that he laments that and thinks that she is as beautiful as a flower. She begins to feel flattered as he continues, and then shows her a gift, saying, “I even got you a gift!” Perez, flattered, says, “What is it?” and he replies, “Half a kilo of manure,” to which she responds by hitting him with it. He teases her by saying, “Hey, I gathered it myself with a stick!” and she responds, “Well I thought so, it smells just like you!” He is oblivious to this statement (“Alberto Olmedo - Borges y Alvarez”).

A third character, Javier Portales, then joins him shortly after, and they begin teasing the woman while she passively stands by. When Portales makes a joke about her appearance, Olmedo literally congratulates him on his subtlety. Then Olmedo takes his turn, saying, that “they” (it is never made clear who they are speaking of) call Perez “Red Espadrilles”<sup>4</sup> and, some call her “Pink Espadrilles.” When Portales asks why one would call her that, Olmedo says, “They call her Pink Espadrilles sometimes... because there is not a gaucho that would put that on!”<sup>5</sup> (“Alberto Olmedo - El Manosanta”).

It is important to note that Olmedo’s humor generally pokes fun at the characteristics of what he would consider the “stereotypical Argentine” in much of his work. In this particular case, he begins the sketch by proclaiming, “¡Que raro que soy!” (“How weird I am!”). The focus on Olmedo’s portrayal of narcissism and feelings of uniqueness are apparent; Perez’s response to Olmedo’s declarations is that he is not in fact unique, but rather boring. The subject matter of Perez’s teasing itself lends some insight as to the value system that Olmedo is attempting to portray.

While the interplay that ensues between him and Perez can be seen as friendly banter, it seems that there is a predominant bias in favor of Olmedo. One way that intended audience favor, either authentic or artificial (through the use of laughter tracks or cuing a live audience), could be measured is in audible laughter. It is unknown whether or not *No Toca Botón!* utilizes any form of audible laughter manipulation. However, due to the studio set up, the show appears to have been filmed live and with an authentic audience. Regardless, the audible levels of laughter in this show, authentic or not, offer insights as to the intended bias of the show, as crafted actively by both a cast and crew, or by a group of passive participants.

In the case of *No Toca Botón!*, Perez’s joke in this scenario is generally well received in that the audience does audibly laugh with her. However, it is Olmedo that has the last word –and receives the last laugh— before he continues onto the next subject. This is exemplified in his jokes of gift giving to Perez: when Perez quips back at Olmedo, there is little audible laughter compared to the levels of audience laughter that occur after one of Olmedo’s responses. This suggests that the audience finds Olmedo more comical due to the element of surprise in his public declarations: he is behaving contrary to the ideals that many male Argentines publicly value (in this case, having a more guarded humor when in the presence of women than they would if they were with their other male friends), and, instead he is expressing his inner thoughts. This is most likely meant to target male audiences in that Olmedo’s expressed inner dialogue is granted more attention, whereas Perez’s

female-focused dialogue is more or less overlooked.

Lastly, Olmedo's humor exemplifies how the value placed on manipulation (through the utilization of confidence tricks or pranks) is a way to assert dominance. The act of intentionally raising her expectations (with a nice gift), when he only intends to trick her by giving her a gift she would not like, serves as a way to ensure that the audience is aware that he can exercise control in that particular relationship by eliciting actions that only he can predict. Olmedo and Portelo's behaviors between one another when joking about Perez are explicit displays of dominance over her. Furthermore, the stereotype of Argentines taking part in scams is reflected and encouraged by normalizing the deception that takes effect here. Their aggressive male role, coupled with her passive female role, are exemplary of the style of Argentine humor that was prevalent throughout the 1960s and 1970s and that reflected a domineering machista culture that is willing to cater to a primarily male audience.

While the early comedic style of Argentina often employed subtleties targeted towards male viewers, the comedic style of more recent years has been shifting, in that it has either been largely neutralized for a general audience within the Argentine culture, or in some cases, it caters to a female audience. Perhaps one of the most well received comedians since Olmedo, Diego Capusotto has gained the attention of both male and female audiences in recent years. Capusotto's comedic style developed while working in a popular comedic troupe known as "Cha Cha Cha," and it took off from there.

Filmed in an improvisational style, Capusotto's humor was labeled as "bizarre." His jokes exaggerate everyday Argentine life by employing parodies and short sketches as illustrating tools. For example, one sketch starring Capusotto satirizes the Argentine food service industry by creating a fictional ad for a fictional restaurant known as "Una Parrilla<sup>6</sup> Con Años de Tradición: Parrilla el Nono!"<sup>7</sup> ("A Parrilla with Years of Tradition: The Nono Parrilla!") ("Parrillo el Nono"). The sketch then cuts to a man attempting to order food at a typical Argentine restaurant (signified in particular by the wall décor, which includes an Argentine flag and photos of Argentine icons, including Alberto Olmedo). The customer asks various times about the availability of several different items that would typically appear on a Parrilla menu. The server, who is casually leaning on the customer's table, only responds, "no, no." After several failed attempts to order food, the customer is cut off mid-sentence with a final "no, no." The sketch then cuts to the same advertisement screen, which now says, "Parilla 'El Nono': Solo Tira de Asado y Chorizo," ("The

‘Nono Parilla’: Only Ribs and Pork Sausage”) signifying that the restaurant has run out of any and all other menu offerings.

This kind of humor emphasizes an overall Argentine identity as opposed to a specific male or female gender identity. Argentine restaurants tend to focus less on speed of service than countries such as the United States do, and it is expected of customers to spend relatively long periods of time sitting and chatting with a lunch mate in an Argentine restaurant, undisturbed by servers. Further, the issue of food running out has been a theme in many of my own personal experiences when eating in small restaurants away from the normal tourist-heavy areas in Buenos Aires. In my earliest experiences with this subject, I remember leaving restaurants frustrated at the lack of helpfulness that the front-of-house staff would offer when the time came to order food. However, with time, I grew accustomed to their more relaxed approach to wait service and accepted it as a normal occurrence. For this reason, it seems that the quality of service in Argentine restaurants are more focused on functioning as primarily social meeting points rather than restaurants with fast, efficient service. Because the function of a restaurant is different for Argentines than it would be for other cultures, this sketch excludes those who are not a part of the social group. In this case the butt of the joke is not anyone but Argentine identity as a whole, which serves to help those identifying as Argentine bond with one another by laughing at one another collectively.

This humor, on the whole, does not single out males or females. Many of the jokes that comedians such as Capusotto employ involve sexual conduct that does not necessarily single the female gender out, but rather draws attention to circumstantial situations that could be applied to either male or female experiences. For instance, “Noemí Gifts” (“Peter Capusotto”) is a fake commercial sketch advertising a romantic musical compilation; the music gathered for the compilation, however, is such that one would not associate it with sexuality. It begins with a woman in lingerie and a fully dressed man sharing a bottle of champagne on a bed. The woman asks him if “he is ready,” as she wants “their first night of lovemaking to be perfect.” The man responds, saying, “of course, what else could I need? [I have] Champagne, you, myself, your breath, and your hair.” The woman then says, “Also, a little bit of music.” She then begins to play music that sounds much like a vintage recording and begins to sway with it, as he looks quizzically towards the camera, as he was expecting a different type of music. The ad announcer introduces the product, a compilation known as “Let’s See If You Can Do It To This: a collection of good music that is totally inadequate for a romantic moment.” She

attempts to give him a back massage, and he asks for a change of music, and she changes it to another song he finds inappropriate for the situation. He then explains, “Oof. I don’t think I can do this,” to which she changes the song again, this time to one featuring a yodeler. The man begins to lose his temper, asking in a frustrated tone, “But how am I going to do this?” This scenario continues, each time becoming more and more absurd, until the advertisement ends with the announcer saying, “Let’s See If You Can Do It To This: all of the hits from great artists for a night dedicated to sexual failure” (“Peter Capusotto”). The joke at hand is not so much placing women at the butt of the joke as it is providing a commentary as to what kind of music would be appropriate for situations in which one is attempting to seduce another.

When there are distinguishing gender differences in Capusotto’s jokes, the joke target is oftentimes neither explicitly female (as would be the case in earlier comedic styles) nor viewed as oppressive by audiences. As a result, this indicates a large departure from the previous style of humor. The cause for this is not clear, although the weakening of the machista image is suggested. This does not go without saying that the existence of male-centered comedy that works to generally exclude women is a thing of the past; rather, it is still there, however it now co-exists in a milieu of various comedic strategies that appeals to a variety of audience demographics.

There are increasing examples of humor in the media that employ relatively gender-neutral humor, paving the way for the emergence of a more female-centered comedy. Much of the growing female-centered comedy serves to call attention to a largely ignored demographic, without actually promoting a change in perception of that demographic. One notable example of female-centered humor that has become popular in recent years is that of Malena Pichot’s online video series, *La Loca de Mierda* (“The Fucking Crazy Woman”<sup>8</sup>) (Pichot, “LocaDMierdaparatos’s channel”). Her most famous video, after which the series is named, involves her impersonation of a woman who is waiting to hear back from a man on a Saturday night. Watching time go by, she talks about how she was going to study and read instead, that time isn’t a big deal, how she is “okay”—then she begins to sob while listening to jazz, and immediately cuts to talking on the telephone to (what is presumably) the man she is awaiting, and talks casually about how she’s not up to do anything in particular, just ‘listening to music,’ then goes to smoke marijuana. The camera then cuts to her dancing around, wailing alone, proclaiming that she misses her boyfriend, and so on. Then it cuts out, and says, “La loca de mierda (exista en todas nosotras)” (“The Fucking Crazy Woman (Exists in All of Us)”)



(Pichot, “La Loca”).

Using primarily explicit self-denigrating humor to express her feelings about being a female, Pichot caters to a primarily female crowd by addressing realities that exist only in the Argentine female paradigm, as opposed to the male paradigm. While the theme of a self-denigrating humor in the female paradigm can be seen as more widespread, there is little room for humor in Argentina that also serves to explicitly empower women. Citing foreign comedians as her main influence, Pichot does not identify with contemporary, local comedians such as Capusotto, suggesting that her approach is different and may inadvertently promote the reinforcement of male-centered, dominant machismo ideals (Gonzalez). When asked in a private interview if she is a feminist, Pichot replies, “I don’t think so. I shave.” While Pichot’s response is interpreted as sarcastic, she does not seem to take a firm position in terms of where she lies on a marianismo-feminist spectrum. Pichot’s primary method of comedic expression is in identifying the commonalities in Argentine female thought, regardless of whether or not they serve to change the perception of the female gender role for either men or women. In essence, she is merely pointing out to other women how women think while straddling the line between questioning female behaviors and accepting them. Her use of putting either herself or other women down through impersonations is reminiscent of work done by women in the United States between the 1950s-1970s<sup>9</sup>, when Alberto Olmedo was just then gaining popularity in Argentina.

Although Pichot’s humor on the whole does not resonate with a male audience, there are comedic trends, like that of Capusotto’s, that work to refocus Argentine humor onto a more gender-neutral path. As noted before, this does not mean that sexism is not being used in humor; it is still displayed in much of Argentine media. There are many examples of humor in more recent days that have not only targeted a primarily male-audience, but have also exacerbated the gender gap through the objectification of females. Television shows such as ShowMatch, one of the most commonly watched television shows in the country, are an example of this. ShowMatch is a variety show with a history of extreme and overt hypersexualization of women, showcasing nudity, profanity, and lots of male-targeted humor. However, there have been strides in new directions in which the popularization of gender-neutral and/or female-centered comedy has begun to emerge. These trends could lead to a change in overall gender roles and as a result change or weaken the current male machismo image.

## **PART II: Fieldwork –Conceptions of Gender for Men in Conversational Humor**

While there are many available sources in regards to current theories of verbally expressed humor and gender roles<sup>10</sup>, the application of them to the Argentine culture only yields a handful of information. Due to the scarcity of data directly related to this subject, the necessity to conduct interviews became evident. The interviews revealed that while many have varying opinions on the presence of machismo (some find this value to be more pervasive and unchanging than others), there appears to be an undeniable trend moving towards an acceptance of a new, more feminine-oriented humor in both the linguistic patterns taken in conversational humor, as well as in the media. It is important to emphasize that machismo is still widely practiced and acknowledged—it is the emergence of female-oriented humor and its effect on how those view machismo's future in relation to gender roles that I found to be evident in these interviews.

In December of 2012, I conducted nine interviews in an effort to better understand the relationship between humor and the male gender role in Argentina. Interviews were arranged through a popular backpacker and travel website, Couchsurfing.org. Of the interviewees, all nine of them were male. All considered themselves to be Porteños in one way or another. Additionally, they considered themselves somewhere within the middle-class spectrum. Two out of nine interviewees were between 18 to 25 years of age, six were between 25 to 40, and one was over 40. The relatively uneven dispersal of age groups may have had some correlation with the fact that the interviewees were connected to Couchsurfing.org, which targets a more or less younger user age group.

Seven of the interviewees resided in the capital of Buenos Aires, and two of the interviewees resided in the province of Buenos Aires. Each interview was conducted within the capital city of Buenos Aires; however, due to the fact that informants were allowed to choose where they wanted to meet, interviews were held in various neighborhoods of the city, all with their own individual characteristics. At least one of the interviewees expressed views on sexism that may have a connection with where one resides, as neighborhoods generally dictate social status, income, and lifestyle. Due to the fact that not all interviews took place in the interviewee's place of residence, there were few direct signs to indicate these factors in this particular study. However, there were some interviews in which a correlation could be found; interviews with informants who described themselves as upper middle class or as holding a high position in their work also chose to meet in locations that

were generally regarded as more wealthy and trendy. Those who did not explicitly comment on satisfying careers or financial success chose to meet in places that were most convenient for them in terms of proximity to either their jobs or homes; however there was one interview that overlapped with both categories of implied financial success and location convenience. Subtle hints such as these are telling in that choice in interview meeting points may have had some correlation with social status, income and lifestyle, and by extension, with individual comedic style preferences.

When asked about whether or not men thought that machismo was still a central value to their daily lives, the interviewees had similar opinions about the present; however they had mixed opinions about the future. Some of the differences in opinion can be accounted for based on occupation. For instance, those working in fields that called for interactions with non-Argentines (such as customer service, tourism, media, etc.) tended to view machismo as archaic and fading, whereas those working in fields that involved more homogenous cultural group interactions largely rejected the notion of machismo being outdated, and instead asserted that machismo was very much a part of the Argentine identity and could not be weakened. Machismo and the ideal “Argentine man” are very much tied together, regardless of personal opinions on the subject. For example, when one informant was asked about what manliness meant to him, he said, “I guess it [manliness] means to be proud, not willing to show a weakness like asking for help, to show confidence especially toward women. A real man is supposed to be able to solve any problem without any help, and if he should ever need help, he’ll seek it out with his buddies, and not any external source. To me that’s all rubbish, but it’s what I understand people consider ‘manly behavior’. It’s the whole ‘macho’ thing.”

To make it clear, all informants agreed that machismo is still very much present to some degree in Argentina—the difference lies mostly in whether or not those interviewed viewed the machismo tradition as static and unchanging, or moving and malleable.

In terms of the utilization of humor to create bonds in relationships, males used varying degrees of what linguists Diana Boxer and Florencia Cortés-Conde call relational identity display/development (RID). While Boxer and Conde, who studied both Argentine and U.S. humor in a conversational joking setting, do not address the media in their study of conversational joking and identity display, one can imagine how the media may be influencing the rules of RID among Argentine society. According to Boxer and Cortes-Conde, RID refers to the “negotiation of

a relational identity with others and through others.” They continue, saying, “we believe that it is in situational humor that one can observe with most clarity the RID (relational identity display/development), because in joking and teasing we can display the intimacy of our identities as friends, family members, and members of an in-group” (Boxer and Conde 282, emphasis added). For instance, all of the interviewees for this study mentioned there being some kind of difference between the way they talk with their intimate friends and the way they talk with recent acquaintances. Further, they all expressed, to varying degrees, some differentiation in the manner that they speak with men and women.

Traditional machismo roles incite aggressive male-male interactions, reflected in certain kinds of jokes that are meant to draw boundaries in relationships between men. For instance, jokes about a man’s virility, or lack thereof, are more readily tolerated by those who have already established a bond. All but one of the interviewees expressed that they would often tease their closest friends because they know that their friends would not take offense, and would rather ensure their bond. The single interviewee that did not share this perspective, however, was in a higher age group bracket than the other informants and found teasing to be “crude and without education.” While this particular informant never commented on socioeconomic status, the location he chose to meet for the interview was in a neighborhood that he implied that he resided in. This neighborhood is considered more expensive to live in, tranquil, and far away enough from the center of the city to be considered “off the beaten path.” For this reason, one might think to correlate potential socioeconomic status with his perspective on humor between males.

Informants reported initiating jokes having to deal more with situational humor, word play, and an absent target, provided that the jokes did not involve taboo subjects such as politics. Once a relational identity display has been established, male-male interactions tend to include jokes in which the active participant (that is, the individual telling the joke) makes references to sexual experiences. One common example is through catcalling; oftentimes when a woman walks by a group of males, at least one of the males will comment on the woman’s appearance. As a female, I personally experienced being on the receiving end of catcalling and found that it was a common theme that seems to be highly accepted. Six of the nine informants openly admitted to this kind of joking between other men, although most were shy to explain to me in more detail any examples during the interview; this discomfort could be attributed to the sole fact that I am a female. Other competitive jokes involving sports or strength are also sought in such close male-male interac-

tions.

When it comes to subject matter in intimate male-male relationships, teasing does not have as many boundaries, compared to other kinds of joking relationships, such as those found in non-intimate male-male relationships, or male-female relationships. Further, teasing takes on a very different role in terms of joke targeting when the dynamics of a relationship do not fit the intimate male-male model. The first model would be that of non-intimate male-male or male-female interactions. “Teasing runs along a continuum, of bonding to nipping to biting. Because this is a continuum, these constructs are not mutually exclusive and the boundaries are not always clear” (Boxer and Conde 279). Later, Boxer and Conde assert that “it is with intimacy that we see the bite, not with interlocutors on the other extreme of social distance” (288). When placed in a situation in which one is trying to establish a bond with another, the active male participants will generally choose between establishing an absent target to denigrate so that they may bond with the passive participant, or elect themselves as a target, thus creating a form of self-denigrating humor.

Creating an absent target is usually the most common form of establishing a bond between Argentine men. All informants expressed some form of absent target joking as a way to form bonds with others. One interviewee expressed that conservative jokes about sports could be appropriate, given that the active participant has enough knowledge of the passive participant’s sports preferences. On the other hand, talking about sports can be taboo. For instance, sports like soccer are very important to Argentine culture, and it is not uncommon for violent outbreaks to occur between individuals due to team preferences. Negotiating common ground with another through low-risk jokes—such as topics that refer to public transport, food, or stereotypes that do not apply to either participant— help create a basis on which male-male relationships can bond.

In addition to sports, another taboo subject is that of politics. Due to Argentina’s recent political history of instability, this is a subject that has still not found its way into humor. One informant said, “People absolutely never talk about politics, never. Which is something that doesn’t happen—here you won’t find humor about that.” This being said, expressing a shared knowledge as a basis upon which to create a play frame in bonding is not uncommon (Boxer and Conde 283). When asked about how his new friendships are different from established friendships, one of the informants asserted, “I guess I am much more honest with my friends. I usually try to be nice and educated with people I don’t know, but there is a difference. It’s more

formal, more careful or fearful.” The trepidation this informant expressed refers to lack of established common knowledge; identifying boundaries at the appropriate time is crucial when establishing bonds.

Sometimes boundaries can be misidentified between those who have already established a bond. One informant, who works as a street magician in neighborhoods with dense amounts of tourism, was exchanging emails with an old friend with whom he shares common professional interests.

I asked him a question about the supposed end of the world on [December] 21st<sup>11</sup>, and he said to me, ‘Oh, now you are worried! But I told you so long ago to watch out!’ So I made fun of him and said, ‘I am not worried, you ridiculous person, I am just asking because I know you are the expert paranoid [sic]. Good luck removing your tin foil hat.’ He responded to me saying, ‘Oh you motherfucker! I treated you with respect and now you say that!’ I knew he would get mad because we tend to piss each other off easily, but not that mad. He showed me he was furious, but then let me know that he knew it was a joke and things are okay now.

This informant’s story was particularly telling of how subjects such as beliefs can be taboo, and to what extent. The informant intended to nip at his friend in a way that enforced their bond; however his misidentification of the boundaries between them (in this case, commentary on personal beliefs) marked a clear line in taboo subjects. Thankfully for the informant, his friend was able to forgive him and continue their friendship.

All informants asserted that jokes are different in male-male interactions and male-female interactions, primarily in terms of subject matter. One of the main differences is found in intimate male-female interactions, as all informants exercised some kind of filtering in terms of subject matter when speaking about issues that they found either “gross” or “too sexual.” If the selection of subject matter is dependent on shared knowledge, it is suggested that men, including those who claim to reject machista notions and ideals, fail to acknowledge women’s potential to understand the same sexual content as they do. This could have something to do with the fact that traditional marianismo roles portray women as having an “attitude of saintliness, passivity, and suffering in silence.” (Ward 107: 2009) If a man who is heavily influenced by the machismo/marianismo gender dichotomy fails to recognize a woman’s capacity to understand subject matter that they would normally associate with “gross” or sinful behavior (as women in this value system are associated with religious figures such as the Virgin Mary), then searching for common ground through those subjects would prove a failure in terms of bonding.

When addressing other shared knowledge (such as gender-neutral, day-to-day occurrences), however, the interactions of intimate male-female relationships are very similar to non-intimate male-male participants. Only two of the interviewees reported occasionally utilizing teasing as a bonding mechanism between themselves and intimate females; coincidentally, these two interviewees fell towards the less-machista end of the traditional Argentine machista spectrum, compared to the other interviewees.

With interactions dealing with non-intimate male-female relationships, the interviewees provided a variety of responses, again, all within the absent target spectrum. There are some suggested reasons as to why Argentine men, for the most part, employ the same kind of humor with women they are not as close to as the men they are close to; one informant reported, “male-female friendship doesn’t exist. If she is a girl, something can happen. And if there is a possibility, there is no friendship. Some part [of you] wants something else, so [they are] not really friends.” Here, the informant asserts that friendships between males and females cannot actually surpass the initial non-intimate male-female relationship style of humor, and females that men consider close friends still are widely treated with an air of non-intimate absent joke-targeted humor.

The final form of humor to be considered is known as self-denigrating, or self-targeted, humor. While men do not often use it, women use this frequently to diffuse any risks of being perceived as a threat when interacting with other women. Boxer and Conde noted that women “frequently employ verbal self-denigration through irony about their own physical shortcomings” (290-291). When observed specifically through an Argentine lens, it is easy to see how self-denigrating humor could address concerns that exist in the female paradigm, as well as displaying an acceptance—even empowerment—of the machismo image by downplaying the Argentine woman’s own image. However, this viewpoint can be muddled easily when considering the audience that self-denigrating humor employed by females is intended for—why would women choose to appeal to machismo when in the company of other women? Is self-denigrating humor a way to indoctrinate other females to follow the traditional Argentine gender role, as opposed to grant females a forum in which they can begin to exercise agency from the machismo/marianismo belief system? While the answer for this is not yet clear, one can see how the use of self-denigrating humor could work to both allow women to speak up in an environment where they have only recently been given a voice, as well as work in a way that serves to enforce the already-present male power structures.

Women do not exclusively exercise this kind of humor. In fact, two of the interviewees (both males) from the current study claim to actively use self-denigrating humor as a way to interact with others in their field of work. One of the informants, a stand up comedian, frequently utilizes this humor in public settings. The comedian said of his material: "I tend to talk about myself... but not really myself. I talk about things that I find about myself but anyone else can really relate, like I start my routine by telling people that I'm paranoid. Which I'm not really paranoid, but I have little bits of paranoia. I do it so people think, 'I'm not the only one that does that!'" This revelation corroborates the idea that utilizing oneself as a target is a way to deal with a larger number of non-intimate, passive participants, and to be seen as nonthreatening. Both men and women frequently use self-denigrating humor in the Argentine media milieu; however it has not yet been made evident in conversational male-male, or male-female, interactions.

### **Conclusion**

Women's voices in Argentine humor in the media, as well as the shifting positions on masculinity that men have taken, has without a doubt shifted, and continues to do so. Regardless of the apparent progress made during recent years, Argentina still lives in a relatively male-dominated society in Buenos Aires, and this domination is reflected in Argentine speech patterns. A larger sample including both males and females will need to be taken to discern whether or not these trends are occurring on a large scale, and more research regarding self-denigrating humor and other forms of female-female interactions will need to be performed. The linguistic approach adopted by the Porteño speech community draws attention to the shifting dynamics of gender roles. In the past, particularly before and during the height of early "sexploitation" comedy, females were viewed as subordinate to males. However, with the rise of women's independence and emergence into a style of comedy that recognizes woman-centered issues, it appears from this very rudimentary study that men's perception of manliness and machismo is shifting alongside it. These shifts are trending towards an eventual cultural change that could result in a narrowed gender gap and an end to the traditional machismo ideal as we know it.

Whether or not this shifting in humor style and position on masculinity will continue to do so depends on how far the potential whiplash of female-centered humor goes. If women's humor moves towards a less self-denigrating style, it is possible that the old style of machismo/male-centered humor will continue to polar-



ize itself until a breaking point between the male and female boundaries has been made. There is little telling as of now where these roles and styles may lead without taking care to understand the hold that the Argentine machismo role has taken – and continues to take—throughout history.

### Notes

Nicole Pontón is a junior Anthropology student at the College of Charleston. Originally from Los Angeles, CA, she spent time living in Buenos Aires, Argentina and moved to Charleston, SC to continue her academic career. This paper was originally written as part of an independent study under the supervision of Dr. E. M. Quinn. With a particular interest in Latin American cultures, Nicole hopes to continue studying the dynamics of language and gender in future work.

1. Porteño refers to any person that is from a port city. However, it is most commonly used in reference to members of the Argentine population who reside in Buenos Aires and are of European descent.
2. Carlos Gardel is an Argentine icon and musician. Known as one of the most prominent figures in the history of tango, one can easily find his name or face on cafes, streets, or souvenirs.
3. It is important to note that the commentator appeared to be male, and liked other male-targeted videos, such as those of dancing, nude women and fast cars, thus suggesting a male-centered bias towards machismo ideals.
4. Espadrilles, also known as alpargatas, are flat canvas or cotton shoes with a ropelike sole. While they are originally from the Pyrenees, they are commonly worn in Argentina.
5. “Put that on” refers to engaging in sexual activity.
6. Parrillas are a kind of grill that is used for cooking South American style barbecues, which are known as asados. They are extremely popular in Argentina, as well as in neighboring countries such as Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.
7. Observational data suggests that many food establishments in Buenos Aires run out of food yet will still be open for business to sell anything that they may have left.

8. While the literal translation of “La Loca de Mierda” is “The Crazy of Shit,” I have chosen to translate “La Loca de Mierda” as “The Fucking Crazy Woman.” The original title includes a reference as to the gender of the crazy person, which is taken out in the literal translation. Including the implied gender of the person in the title of this video is important, as Pichot is making a comment on behavior of women, not both men and women. The intensifier in the original version is “mierda,” but can be easily interchanged with “fucking,” as Pichot is not literally discussing fecal matter.
9. Comediennes in the United States that were popular during Olmedo’s career peak in Argentina include Phyllis Diller and Betty White. Their oftentimes self-deprecating sense of humor resonates with much of the subject material that Pichot uses as well.
10. See, for instance, Bernadette McCosker and Carmen Moran’s study, “Differential Effects of Self-Esteem and Interpersonal Competence on Humor Styles” (2012); Lili Zhan’s study, “Understanding Humor Based on the Incongruity Theory and the Cooperative Principle” (2012); and Gil Greengross’s *In Search of Homo Humorous: Personality, Health, Humor Styles and Humor as a Mental Fitness Indicator in Stand-Up Comedians and the Rest of Us* (2009).
11. This interview was conducted before December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013. A part of an eschatological belief that there would be an apocalypse or series of cataclysmic events, this date was considered the end of a 5,126 year-long cycle in the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar followed by Ancient Mayans. While quickly dismissed due to a misrepresentation of the Mayan Long Count calendar, there were some who remained skeptical as to whether there would be an end to the world on this date or not.

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